

‘Praise the Lord! We are a Musical Nation’: The Welsh Working Classes and Religious Singing

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The title quotation from Under Milk Wood encapsulates a widely held belief in the innate musicality of the Welsh and its religious roots. These roots were put down deeply during the nineteenth century, in a huge expansion of choral and congregational singing across Wales and particularly in the industrial communities. This development has been described as ‘a democratic popular choral culture rooted in the lives of ordinary people’, and central to it was the cymmanfa ganu, the mass hymn-singing festival. Choral and congregational singing, typified by the cymmanfa ganu, underpinned the perception of Wales by the Welsh and by many non-Welsh people as ‘the land of song’.

Alongside this phenomenon ran the tradition of the plygain, a Welsh Christmas carol service. While the cymmanfa developed in nonconformist chapels in the mid to late nineteenth century, and on a large – often massive – scale, the plygain is a tradition dating from a period much further back, when Welsh Christianity was Catholic; it belonged to agricultural workers rather than the industrial communities; and the singers sang in much smaller groups – often just twos or threes.

This article describes the nature and origins of these contrasting traditions, and looks at the responses of listeners both Welsh and non-Welsh, and the extent to which they perceived these practices as expressive of a peculiarly Welsh identity. It also considers some of the problems of gathering evidence of working-class responses, and how far the sources give an insight into working-class listening experiences.

When Dylan Thomas wrote the line ‘Praise the Lord! We are a musical nation’ for the Reverend Eli Jenkins, the inept Nonconformist minister in his comic ‘play for voices’ *Under Milk Wood* (1954), he was invoking a long-established myth not only that the Welsh are inherently musical, but that their musicality is somehow inextricably bound to their (Nonconformist) religion. The innate musicality of the Welsh may be a dubious proposition, but the fundamental link between Welsh musical culture and religion is both real and important. The myth that Wales is ‘the land of song’ took hold during the mid-nineteenth century,¹ and so

¹ The origin of the idea that Wales is ‘the land of song’ is obscure – before the 1830s the term appears rather in connection with Italy. An impression of the development of the use of the term in relation to Wales may be gained by a search for it in the historical newspapers digitized in *Welsh Newspapers Online* (a resource containing nearly 120 newspapers and covering the period 1804 to 1919). As Andrew Cusworth has pointed out, the earliest search result in connection with Wales is from *The Cambrian* in 1835; see Cusworth, ‘Towards a Digital Land of Song’ (PhD thesis, The Open University, 2015): 19. The search reveals no other such references during the 1830s or before, but it does show the application of the

deeply entrenched did it become that it did not seem at all excessive, but merely a statement of fact, to claim, as one writer did, that ‘the gift of song in Wales is an inherited tendency: it is a native and resident faculty’.² This was of course a period that saw a flowering of choral and congregational singing in Britain generally, but nowhere more so than in Wales, where such mass cultural practices found fertile ground in the dramatic growth of industrial communities and the strongly Nonconformist religious culture.³ This has been well documented by scholars of Welsh music and its social history.⁴ But are there further insights to be gained by looking at religious singing practices through the perspectives of nineteenth-century listeners, both Welsh and non-Welsh? What, if anything, did those who listened to Welsh religious singing of the period make of the idea of the special musicality of the Welsh people? How far had the myth penetrated their perceptions? Did they detect in religious singing a particular expression of Welsh identity?

This essay does not concern itself with choral concerts, which I take to be intended as entertainment, however ‘improving’ and serious in intent, or with competitive choral singing as practised at the *eisteddfod* and elsewhere. In the latter case particularly, it is predictable that the competitive spirit should have fed feelings of national pride and national identity, as was famously the case with the

phrase to Wales becoming more frequent during the 1840s and 1850s; it is a commonplace thereafter.

² L.J. Roberts, ‘Wales: A Land of Song’, *Welsh Outlook: A Monthly Journal of National Social Progress*, 5/11 (1918): 337. The author was almost certainly Lewis Jones Roberts, a HM Inspector of Schools and music editor of the periodicals *Cymru* and *Cymru'r Plant* (Children’s Wales) – see William Llewelyn Davies, ‘Roberts, Lewis Jones’, in *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*, <http://yba.llgc.org.uk/en/s-ROBE-JON-1866.html> (accessed 11 July 2018).

³ Arguably, the Welsh were widely and devoutly Nonconformist for political reasons perhaps as much as spiritual ones. Nonconformity was closely bound up with Liberal opposition to the Tory Anglican hegemony, and offered a largely disenfranchised people both a means of religious expression in their own language (though the *plygain* is proof that not all Anglican worship in Wales was conducted in English), and democratic or quasi-democratic forms of religious organization within which to exercise a measure of self-determination.

⁴ The scholarship of nineteenth-century Welsh music history is not as extensive as one might think – several much-cited books and articles are now quite dated, and, in the manner of older works, they are often frustratingly lacking in source citations and bibliographical references. More scholarly and recent works include Gareth Williams, *Valleys of Song: Music and Society in Wales 1840–1914* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1998) and *Do You Hear the People Sing?: The Male Voice Choirs of Wales* (Llandysul: Gomer Press, 2015); numerous articles on Welsh traditional music by D. Roy Saer, several of which are cited in the footnotes below; Phyllis Kinney, *Welsh Traditional Music* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011); a number of articles on Welsh choral singing by Rhidian Griffiths, again cited below; E. Wyn James, ‘The Evolution of the Welsh Hymn’, in *Dissenting Praise: Religious Dissent and the Hymn in England and Wales*, ed. Isabel Rivers and David L Wyke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Andy Croll, *Civilizing the Urban: Popular Culture and Public Space in Merthyr, c. 1870–1914* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000); Trevor Herbert, ‘Popular Nationalism: Griffith Rees Jones (“Caradog”) and the Welsh Choral Tradition’, *Music and British Culture, 1785–1914*, ed. in Christina Bashford and Leanne Langley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), and, on a different but related topic, his publications on the Cyfarthfa brass band, including ‘Late Victorian Welsh Bands: Taste, Virtuosity and Cymmrodorion Attitudes’, in *Welsh Music History* 1 (1996): 92–102; and Rachele Barlow, ‘The “Land of Song”: Gender and Identity in Welsh Choral Music’ (PhD thesis, Cardiff University, 2016).

Crystal Palace victories of the 'Côr Mawr' in 1872 and 1873.⁵ Rather, my focus is on two devotional singing practices and their place in the everyday religious lives of the common Welsh people. The topic emerged from a strand of enquiry pursued by several of the Listening Experience Database project team about working-class listening experiences, the challenges of gathering the evidence for them and the importance of making it known, and this is another set of issues with which the essay is concerned. In the interests of revealing the sources as much as possible and letting the voices speak for themselves, I have quoted extensively from primary sources throughout this article. The two practices in question are the *plygain*, a Christmas carol service, and the *cymanfa ganu*, a hymn-singing assembly – both of which were current in the nineteenth century (and survive to this day), and both of which originate as practices of Welsh-speaking and broadly (though not exclusively) working-class communities. Both belong to 'the people', though what that means requires some discussion in both cases. They could hardly be more different in scale or in musical style, but at various times both have been interpreted by those who heard them as showing the Welsh in a reassuring light in the wider context of politically challenging circumstances.

The *Plygain*

In looking at the *plygain*, I have used both published primary sources and interviews from the oral history collection in the National Museum of History at St Fagans, Cardiff,⁶ which were mostly recorded in the 1960s. At that time the museum was called the 'Welsh Folk Museum', and its mission was to capture the traditions and way of life of the 'common people' or 'folk' of rural Wales, or in Welsh, the '*gwerin*' (the Welsh name of the museum is still *Amgueddfa Werin Cymru*⁷), traditions that were perceived to be under threat of obliteration by industrialization. Oral history recording formed an important part of its work, in an effort to capture memories of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries from people still living who were children at that time. Subsequently, as more than one change of its English name suggests,⁸ the museum has had to rethink its interpretation of the term *gwerin* so as to include the country's industrial history.

While *gwerin* translates as 'the common people' (or possibly 'the masses'), it does not necessarily map exactly onto 'working class' – a concept that is more meaningful in an industrial than a rural context. In the pre-industrial, rural context in Wales, the key social distinction was between the *bonedd* – the elite, and the *gwerin* – everyone else, cutting across both the working class(es) and the middle class(es). Further layers of meaning were added to the term when it was taken

⁵ See Herbert, 'Popular Nationalism'.

⁶ The National Museum of History/*Amgueddfa Werin Cymru* is an open-air museum based on Scandinavian precedents. It houses gallery displays of artefacts, but its main draw for visitors lies in the reconstructed historic buildings from around Wales which have been dismantled, moved from their original locations, and rebuilt on the St Fagans site. See <https://museum.wales/stfagans/>.

⁷ '*Gwerin*' becomes '*werin*' here, following a Welsh grammatical rule of mutation.

⁸ It has at various times been the Welsh Folk Museum, the Museum of Welsh Life and the National Museum of History. Throughout, its Welsh name *Amgueddfa Werin Cymru* has remained unchanged. See Rhiannon Mason, 'Nation Building at the Museum of Welsh Life', in *Museum and Society* 3/1 (2005): 18–34; also Douglas Bassett, 'The Making of a National Museum: Part III', in *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion* (1984): 217–316.

up by the Welsh in the second half of the nineteenth century, as the focus of a myth or ideal of the common Welsh person – Welsh-speaking, devoutly Nonconformist, innately interested in learning and Welsh culture, and with a deep spiritual bond with the land and landscape of Wales:

it was a term of cultural nationalism and not of class conflict or class struggle. It was an optimistic term referring to the progress of the common folk of Wales coming to the fore in the 1840s and 1850s, after centuries of passivity and mute obedience to Welsh squire and parson. It excluded the Tory squirearchy and Anglican clergy ... from the Welsh people, but included the middle and lower classes.⁹

However, as the nineteenth century wore on that optimism was tinged with anxiety about a decline in Welsh rural traditions and the use of the Welsh language, in the face of both an influx of English speakers from the rest of Britain and Ireland into the booming heavy industries of the south Wales valleys, and the introduction in 1870 of compulsory education in the English language.¹⁰ Concern persisted during the twentieth century, and it forms the context for the foundation of the Welsh Folk Museum in 1948 and its mission to collect oral history accounts of rural practices and customs, including accounts of the *plygain*.

The *plygain* service is neither a midnight mass nor a carol service in the anglicized, modern sense.¹¹ It originated as a Matins service followed by carols in the early hours of Christmas morning¹² (though by the end of the nineteenth century it had widely become an evening service and did not necessarily take place on Christmas Day itself¹³). It is thus a tradition deriving from medieval Welsh Catholicism, passed down through the Anglican Church, and it has been described in a publication of the Church in Wales¹⁴ as ‘a distinctive Welsh liturgy’.¹⁵ The

⁹ Prys Morgan, ‘The *Gwerin* of Wales – Myth and Reality’, in *The Welsh and Their Country*, ed. I. Hume and W.T.R. Pryce (Llandysul: Gomer Press, 1986): 135.

¹⁰ Morgan, ‘The *Gwerin* of Wales’, 146.

¹¹ While distinct from English-language Christmas carol services, several authors have noticed family resemblances with other Celtic Christmas traditions in, for example, Cornwall and the Isle of Man. See A. Stanley Davies, *The Christmas Morn Carol Service of Celtic Countries* (Iver Heath: A. Stanley Davies, 1950), and Rev. Chancellor J. Fisher, ‘Two Welsh-Manx Christmas Customs’, *Archaeologia Cambrensis* 84 (1929): 308–16.

¹² See Gwynfryn Richards, ‘Y *Plygain*’, *Journal of the Historical Society of the Church in Wales*, 1 (1947): 59, and Trefor Owen, *Welsh Folk Customs*, new edition (Llandysul: Gomer Press, 1987): 31.

¹³ See D. Roy Saer, ‘The Christmas Carol-Singing Tradition in the Tanad Valley’, *Folk Life*, 7/1 (1969): 32. Saer noted in the 1960s that in both the churches and the Nonconformist chapels of mid-Wales and northwest Wales the typical time for the service was 6 p.m. or 7 p.m. (‘Christmas Carol-Singing Tradition’, 19). The Church in Wales’s *Keep the Feast: Plygain* (Penarth: The Board of Mission, the Church in Wales, 2000), sets it within the context of the Evensong liturgy (p. 34), presumably on the basis that Evensong is now a more familiar service to church-goers than Matins, and is held at a more hospitable time of day for present-day congregations. However, as will be noticed in the oral history evidence I cite, several interviewees recalled that their local *plygain* service took place at 6 a.m., so clearly the move to an evening service was not as general as some sources might suggest.

¹⁴ The Church in Wales is the name of the modern Anglican Church as it exists in Wales. It was founded in 1920 on the disestablishment of Anglicanism as the official state religion in Wales. Previously the Anglican dioceses of Wales had been part of the Church of England.

¹⁵ Enid R. Morgan, ‘What is a *plygain*?’, in *Keep the Feast: Plygain* (Penarth: The Board of Mission, the Church in Wales, 2000): 7.

word *plygain* is said to derive from a Latin phrase for cockcrow, *pulli cantus* or *pulli cantio*, and a Latin derivation would of course be in keeping with the Catholic origin of the service.¹⁶

The tradition has its longest continuous history in north and mid-Wales, but there is historical evidence of it throughout the country, suggesting that the massive industrialization of the south – particularly the south east – may indeed have played a significant part (as the scholars of folk tradition feared) in undermining it in more southerly areas. One such area where it was remembered was the district of Mid Glamorgan around Maesteg and Margam; a local history account published in 1912 states that the *plygain*

was held on the old Christmas Day as dated before the correction of the calendar in 1752. This day came twelve days later than the present date for Christmas, and it was the custom for people to meet at the church between four and five o'clock in the morning The service was called by the Welsh "Plygain", and strange to say, when discontinued by the church, it was revived by the Nonconformists in the district.¹⁷

The terms in which it is described make clear that, despite the period of revival by the Nonconformists, the author considered it by now (1912) a thing of the past. An article in *The Transactions of the Aberafan and District Historical Society* for 1928 also remembered that it had been a local custom, known 'in this district as "Pylgain"'.¹⁸ Other instances of it in the southern half of the country are recorded in Pembrokeshire (Tenby),¹⁹ Carmarthenshire (Laugharne)²⁰ and Cardiganshire.²¹

However, the most notable accounts tend to come from further north. *Willis' Survey of St Asaph* (1719) cites a sixteenth-century *plygain* service at Cilcain near Mold, notable for an unfortunate incident in 1532:

the North Ile of Kil-ken Church ... had been burnt down early in the Morning upon Christmas Day in 1532, when the Parishioners were assembled to pray and sing Carols upon the Occasion, in Imitation of High Mass, a Custom peculiar to Wales, and which is called, 'Plygain'.²²

Willis's description of the service as being 'in Imitation of High Mass' underlines the Catholic nature of the service.

¹⁶ In different Welsh dialects it may also be found as *plygein*, *plygien*, *plygen*, *pylgain* and *pylgaint*. See for instance Richards, 'Y Plygain', 53, and Saer, 'The Christmas Carol-Singing Tradition', 19.

¹⁷ Frederic Evans, "Tir Iarll" (*The Earl's Land*): *Comprising the Ancient Parishes of Llangynwyd, Bettws, Margam, and Kenfig* (Cardiff: The Educational Publishing Co., [1912]): 163.

¹⁸ James O'Brien, 'Y Plygain', in *The Transactions of the Aberafan and District Historical Society* (1928) (unpaginated).

¹⁹ Fisher, 'Two Welsh-Manx Christmas Customs', 310.

²⁰ Owen, *Welsh Folk Customs*, 9.

²¹ Jonathan Ceredig Davies, *Folk-Lore in West and Mid-Wales* (Aberystwyth: Welsh Gazette Offices, 1911): 59–60.

²² *Willis' Survey of St Asaph* was originally published in 1719, its author being the antiquary Browne Willis, who wrote a number of diocesan, cathedral and county surveys. The edition consulted here is the revised version by Edward Edwards, entitled *Willis' Survey of St. Asaph, Considerably Enlarged and Brought Down to the Present Time* (London, 1801), Vol. 1, 230.

An eighteenth-century description of the *plygain* near Denbigh, some miles west of Cilcain, appears in Hester Thrale's journal of a tour with Dr Johnson in North Wales in 1774:

In our return from ... [Denbigh] we saw Whitchurch, where, as at all Churches in this valley [the Vale of Clwyd], lights are kindled at 2 in the morning on every Xmas Day, and songs of joy and genuine gratitude are accompanied by the Harp and resound to the cottages below, whose little inhabitants rousing at the call hasten and chuse a convenient place to dance until prayertime, which begins at sunrise and separates the dancers for a while.²³

While it does not refer to a specific event, and despite a somewhat clichéd overlay of Welshness (little people singing to harp accompaniment), this account is probably based on childhood memory, since Hester Thrale was born Hester Salusbury near Pwllheli in 1741, and thus belonged to an historically significant north Wales family.²⁴ She spent her childhood in north Wales, and it is claimed that in old age, writing to a friend, she described attending a *plygain* service in Tremeirchion church, a little way north of Denbigh and Cilcain, and near St Asaph.²⁵

An account of the *plygain* remembered from the 1830s or 1840s appears in *A Wandering Scholar: The Life and Opinions of Robert Roberts*, now considered a classic of working-class autobiography.²⁶ The service, held at Roberts's local church at Llangammas, near Llanrwst in the Conwy Valley, took place at six in the morning, and he identified it precisely as a 'Christmas Matins', locating the carol singing within the structure of the Matins liturgy – describing, for example, how 'the parson makes a pause at the end of the Venite for the first batch of carol singers to begin'. The occasion he remembers is one of comic chaos, the carol singers paralysed by:

²³ A.M. Broadley, ed., *Doctor Johnson and Mrs Thrale: Including Mrs Thrale's Unpublished Journal of the Welsh Tour Made in 1774 and Much Hitherto Unpublished Correspondence of the Streatham Coterie* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1910): 186.

²⁴ The Salusburies were descendants of Catrin of Berain, which gave them a long Welsh lineage and related them to many other significant north Wales families. See William Llewelyn Davies, 'Katheryn of Berain', in *The Dictionary of Welsh Biography*, <https://biography.wales/article/s-CATR-BER-1534> (accessed 20 April 2018).

²⁵ Grace Roberts, 'Mrs. Hester Thrale's Connection with the Vale of Clwyd', *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion* (1953): 103. Unfortunately, Roberts does not cite a reference for the letter, which seems to be untraceable.

²⁶ Robert Roberts, *A Wandering Scholar: The Life and Opinions of Robert Roberts*, ed. J.H. Davies, introduced by John Burnett and H.G. Williams (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1991). Robert Roberts (1834–1885) was the child of a tenant farmer who, unable to pay the rent, lost his farm and was reduced to labouring. Roberts did not go to school, but he came from a literate family interested in self-improvement through reading, and he was himself something of a child prodigy, able to read from the family Bible at the age of three. Having initially trained for the Methodist ministry, he was later ordained as an Anglican priest but was dismissed (probably rather harshly) for drunkenness. In the early 1860s he emigrated to Australia, where he wrote his autobiography as well as researching Celtic languages and starting to compile a Welsh–English dictionary. He returned to Wales in 1875, but the last decade of his life was difficult and unhappy, his attempts to find work compromised by his earlier dismissal. See also Thomas Iorwerth Ellis, 'Roberts, Robert', in *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*, <http://yba.llgc.org.uk/en/s-ROBE-ROB-1834.html> (accessed 30 May 2018).

a good deal of hesitation before anyone finds the courage to begin Just as the vicar was giving them up, and turning over the prayer book to the Psalm of the day, two miniature choirs, from different parts of the church, start together, – one singing a lively carol on "Belleisle March" and the other a dismal dirge to the tune of "Cowheel". For a few lines a hideous sort of Dutch chorus was carried on between them; the vicar hid his face in his surplice, and seemed to press it prettily closely round his ears.²⁷

There is little improvement as Robin the Tailor begins a solo carol 'with great confidence but he soon found that he had pitched his tune too high' and has to be helped out by his father, 'a "musicker" of some note, who called out from his seat three or four rows back: "Thee are too high Robin – try it in G, Robin – here's my pitchpipe for thee"'.²⁸ The comedy of the scene is beautifully crafted – so much so, that David Vincent's warning about the susceptibility of autobiography to fictionalization comes to mind,²⁹ and indeed, J.H. Davies, who discovered the autobiography and edited the first edition (1923), acknowledged that the autobiography contained fictionalized elements. Nonetheless, on the basis of his background research, Davies considered it accurate in most points of fact (the description of the integration of the *plygain* into the Matins liturgy is a detail that carries the ring of truth), and described it as 'a correct picture of the life of the district' and an important source for 'the social and religious life of Wales' in the mid-nineteenth century.³⁰ When the book was republished in 1991, John Burnett and H.G. Williams concurred, describing it in their introduction as a valuable first-hand account and a 'minor classic'.³¹ One aspect that is notably absent from Roberts's account of the *plygain* is any hint of recognition of it as a peculiarly Welsh practice – to Roberts, it was significant primarily for reasons of social competition, as 'the service at which aspirants for musical honours exhibited their skill in carol singing to the assembled parish'.³²

A detailed description of a *plygain* service, and one that has arguably become the archetypal account, was published in *The Cambrian Journal* in 1864. It was written by an Englishman, James Kenward,³³ who was an enthusiast for Welsh culture, and it describes a service at Llanymawddwy in northwest Wales, probably during the 1850s. Kenward wrote the piece as part of a commemoration of the vicar who had officiated at the service, and who was also the editor of *The Cambrian Journal*, the Rev. John Williams (1811–1862) – a fact which should give us pause. Williams's bardic name was Ab Ithel, and Kenward knew him as a respected scholar of Welsh literature, but his scholarship was subsequently recognized as hopelessly tainted by the ideas and methods of that arch-inventor of Welsh literary heritage, Iolo Morganwg, and his followers.³⁴ We might be forgiven, then, for wondering

²⁷ Roberts, *A Wandering Scholar*, 66–8.

²⁸ Roberts, *A Wandering Scholar*, 66–8.

²⁹ David Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom: A Study of Nineteenth-Century Working Class Autobiography* (London: Methuen, 1981): 2.

³⁰ J.H. Davies, unpaginated Introduction to the 1923 edition of *A Wandering Scholar*, reprinted in the 1991 edition.

³¹ Roberts, *A Wandering Scholar*, xxxvii. Burnett had previously published an extract from it in his *Destiny Obscure: Autobiographies of Childhood, Education and Family from the 1820s to the 1920s* (London: Allen Lane, 1982).

³² Roberts, *A Wandering Scholar*, 66.

³³ See Ray Looker, 'Kenward, James', in *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*, <http://yba.llgc.org.uk/en/s-KENW-JAM-1868.html> (accessed 30 May 2018).

³⁴ See Robert Thomas Jenkins, 'Williams, John (Ab Ithel)', in *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*, <http://yba.llgc.org.uk/en/s-WILL-JOH-1811.html>; see also Griffith John

about the authenticity of any enactment of the *plygain* under Ab Ithel's ministry, but as has been noted by Roy Saer, a later scholar of Welsh cultural traditions, Kenward's description is well corroborated by evidence of other *plygain* services.³⁵ It is worth quoting at some length:

After prayer and praise follows the sermon, a plain setting forth of the blessings of Redemption, a loving exhortation to seize the great opportunity of life which grows more fleeting with each revolving year. And now the benediction is pronounced, and there is a stir among the people The carol-singing is to begin ... And first Ab Ithel, divested of his gown, standing before the congregation, and his two daughters with him, lead off with a carol, doubly their own in music and in words [Then] the old clerk advances, and with him two other singers, a ruddy stripling of twenty, and a weather-bronzed farmer of middle age. They group themselves before the altar-steps. The old man, the central figure, bears in one hand a candle and in the other the manuscript carol. The three bend over the paper. Though the voices are unequal and the tune monotonous, a reality and intensity of purpose stamps the performance with no common interest. Their carol is a long one of old verses connected and completed by original additions. It tells of the Divine dispensation on earth, from the fall of Adam to the Resurrection of the Messiah [T]he singers do not modulate their tone or alter their emphasis. The strain rises and closes throughout stanza after stanza in what seems an interminable equal flow. There is no attempt at effect or self-exhibition. It is a duty and a delight, not a task or entertainment At length it ceases with a long-drawn *Amen* [I]mmediately another singer starts up and bursts into vigorous carol, taking a more joyous note than that of his predecessors, but with as little variety of expression or air. While he sings there is an anxious unfolding of papers and shifting of positions among the audience, and when he subsides satisfied, there is a springing forward of two groups simultaneously, of which one is selected, that of a boy and a girl, and their timid and sweet voices clothe the recurring carol with an interest that checks the longing for the end, inspired sometimes by the male performances [A]nd again a vocalist rises with a book or manuscript, or with only an exuberant memory; and again, and again, until at last the carol culminates in the votive offering of two stalwart mountaineers, who pursue it in mutual excitement through a maze of amplifications, heedless of passing hours and sleepless eyes.³⁶

Williams, 'Williams, Edward (Iolo Morganwg)', in *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*, <http://yba.llgc.org.uk/en/s-WILL-EDW-1747.html> (accessed 30 November 2017).

³⁵ D. Roy Saer, 'A Midnight *Plygain* at Llanymawddwy Church', in *Canu at Iws' ac Ysgrifau Eraill / 'Song for Use' and Other Articles* (Cymdeithas Alawon Gwerin Cymru, 2013): 82. D. Roy Saer was a curator at St Fagans from 1963 to 1995, specializing in Welsh traditional song; he was a member of the research team conducting oral history interviews and recording singers of traditional songs, and his work still represents the most extensive and important research on the *plygain*. Recordings of *plygain* carols made as part of that project were released on the Sain label in 1977; they are now available on CD or digital download (together with recordings of another Welsh singing tradition, the stable-loft song), as *Caneuon Plygain a Llofft-Stabal (Traditional Plygain Carols and Stable-Loft Songs from Wales)* Sain SCD2389.

³⁶ The account appears in James Kenward, 'Ab Ithel', *The Cambrian Journal* (1864): 132–40. Kenward included it as 'The Plygain' in his collected volume *For Cambria: Themes in Verse and Prose, A.D. 1854–1868* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1868): 259–64. It has subsequently been reprinted several times – an indication of the almost canonical status it has acquired as the classic description of the *plygain* – in Saer's 'A Midnight *Plygain*', for example, and in the CD booklet to the Church in Wales's publication *Keep the Feast: Plygain* (Penarth: The Board of Mission, the Church in Wales, 2000).

Kenward then goes on to make the link between music, Welshness, and religion:

it is only in the Principality, where religious feeling acquires an intense development, and where the love of vocal song is ineradicable, that the celebration of the Nativity exhibits the characteristics of the *Plygain*.³⁷

By the 1860s when this account was published, there was a substantial political context to any attempt to insist on the innately harmonious and devout nature of the Welsh people, to support their traditions, and to call for 'Unfettered freedom' for the Welsh language, as Kenward also did, in a poem from the same period entitled significantly 'To Gwenynen Gwent',³⁸ the bardic name of Lady Llanover.³⁹ To do so was, in effect, an explicit criticism of the attitude of the British government towards the Welsh in the previous couple of decades, and specifically of the 1847 inquiry into the state of education in Wales – an inquiry that responded to serious political and social unrest in south Wales throughout the 1820s, 30s and 40s. The report of the inquiry was written by inspectors whose religious affiliation was Anglican and who knew nothing of the language spoken by most of the subjects they examined. It did not simply denounce the state of Welsh education, but also claimed that the Welsh were immoral, intellectually backward, and corrupted by the influence of Nonconformity. The crowning judgment was that the Welsh language itself was the main 'barrier to ... moral progress',⁴⁰ and that the sooner Welsh was replaced by English, the better for everybody and most of all for the Welsh. In Wales it created a sense of profound shock, outrage and distress, not to mention throwing down an inadvertent gauntlet to the Nonconformist denominations that could only result in them redoubling their efforts to shape and direct the development of Welsh culture. Indeed, it was precisely as a defence against this negative image of the Welsh that the term *gwerin* was co-opted and mythologized as a positive ideal.⁴¹ Kenward's response to the *plygain* tradition is thus not without significant context, and it is an example of a tendency found widely in nineteenth-century sources, of the supposed musicality of the Welsh being called into service as a reassuring counterweight to the spectre of Welsh radicalism.

However, that is not to say that Kenward's account is distorted – as has been said, the corroborating evidence suggests that it is faithful and sensitive to what he witnessed. He recognized the character of the *plygain* as a votive practice in which individuals or family groups (*corau aelwyd*, literally 'hearth choirs') stood up, group after group, and sang their choice of carol as an offering to God. Each family group would

³⁷ Kenward, 'Ab Ithel', 133.

³⁸ The poem appears in Kenward's *For Cambria*, 28–32.

³⁹ Though claiming some distant Welsh descent, Augusta Hall, Lady Llanover was, like Kenward, an English champion of the Welsh language and culture who had 'gone native'. See Marion Löffler, 'Hall, Augusta, Lady Llanover ('Gwenynen Gwent')', in *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*, <http://wbo.llgc.org.uk/en/s10-HALL-AUG-1802.html> (accessed 30 May 2018). She is now seen as having instigated various 'invented traditions' including Welsh national costume, but despite the often rather dismissive judgements that have subsequently been passed on her, she was for many years a highly visible and vocal figurehead in the effort to preserve, shape and promote Welsh national consciousness – albeit always in the loyal service of a greater Britain.

⁴⁰ 'Report on the Counties of Brecknock, Cardigan, and Radnor', 66, in *Reports of the Commissioners of Inquiry into the State of Education in Wales, 1847*, Parliament, Command Papers, Vol. 339, <https://parlipapers.proquest.com/parlipapers> (accessed 30 May 2018).

⁴¹ Morgan, 'The *Gwerin* of Wales', 143–6.

have its own personal collection of favourite carols. Secondary source accounts often claim that there was no programme – people just got up and sang the carol they wanted to sing. It is also common for such accounts to characterize the *plygain* service as male-dominated, the typical singing groups being male trios singing unaccompanied, and undoubtedly this was the case in some places, although not necessarily everywhere, as will be seen.⁴² One modern account, written in 2009, describes the typical characteristics of the *plygain*: only the traditional Welsh carols are allowed; it is a ‘free for all’ with ‘no set running order’, and ‘no melody or set of lyrics can be sung more than once’; the singers sing as ‘individuals and small groups – trios being the most common’, in ‘earthy, uninhibited, folky tones’. The writer sympathetically reports the anxieties of contemporary local singers who consider that, amidst a revival of interest in the *plygain*, ‘significant features of the tradition are being compromised elsewhere because of ignorance and, sometimes, lack of effort’.⁴³ In such accounts, features that were surely typical of specific *local* traditions are frequently assumed to be universal (and ideally immutable) throughout Wales. However, the oral history doesn’t always quite tie in with such orthodoxies, and we are left with a sense of later enthusiasts reinventing or defining the tradition to make it consistent with their view of a pure, raw, vernacular practice of the *gwerin*.

One of the oral history accounts is by Thomas Rushforth (b. 1880), a farmer⁴⁴ and the son of a gamekeeper, who was born and lived his entire life in Cilcain, where the church caught fire during the *plygain* in 1532. He reckons he was seven or eight at the time he is recalling.⁴⁵ According to his account, the *plygain* at Cilcain still took place early in the morning at that period. He describes an Anglican practice, but one that had become interdenominational; he tells us that the church was full – as he says, ‘like sardines in tins’⁴⁶ [*fydda ‘na lond yr Eglwys Fel sardines i chi ... mewn tunia’*]⁴⁷; and ‘It’s open for anybody ... Nonconformists too’ [*anghydffurfwyr hefyd*].⁴⁸ The ecumenical nature of many

⁴² For example, Martin Davies, ‘Cofio’r plygain’, *Cambria*, 14/2 (2015): 49: ‘Yn hanesyddol, dynion yn unig fyddai’n canu, a hynny mewn tri llais, sef alaw, tenor a bas’ (‘Historically, only men would sing, in three voices, namely melody, tenor and bass’). Roy Saer observed that *plygain* services in the Tanad Valley in the 1960s were indeed still male-dominated, ‘with a marked preference for mixed quartettes and (an archaic feature in itself perhaps) trios’ (‘Christmas carol-singing tradition’, 20).

⁴³ Arfon Gwilym, ‘Plygain: Local or National?’, *Planet*, 209 (2013): 129–32.

⁴⁴ ‘Farmer’, in the nineteenth-century Welsh context, generally indicates something more like smallholder: ‘in broad terms Wales was characteristically a land of smallholdings of less than 50–100 acres’ many in upland and moorland areas. See Colin Thomas, ‘Rural Settlements in the Modern Period’, in *Settlement and Society in Wales*, ed. D. Huw Owen (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1989): 249–67, and specifically 258 and note 41. Welsh farmers were generally small tenants working in family units. The 1851 census showed that 49 per cent of Welsh farms were smaller than 50 acres, and 73 per cent were smaller than 100 acres.

⁴⁵ National Museum of History, Cardiff, oral history collection, Tape 1390, typed transcript, 2.

⁴⁶ National Museum of History, Cardiff, oral history collection, Tape 1390, transcript, 5 (my translation).

⁴⁷ Welsh speakers reading these quotations should bear in mind that the oral history interviewees speak in their local dialects, and that this is further subject to the quirks of transcription – hence the variations from standard Welsh spellings.

⁴⁸ National Museum of History, Cardiff, oral history collection, Tape 1390, transcript, 11 (my translation).

plygain services is further attested to by an anonymous Methodist minister writing of the period before the First World War:

What a thrill it was to attend the parish church at Llanllyfni for the carol service at five o'clock in the morning! We tramped there in crowds, all denominational pride gone and all arguments forgotten. Were we not on the way to Bethlehem? I remember the shadows lingering in the corners of the old church, and the sons of the sexton singing like the angels of God.⁴⁹

William Owen Roberts (b. 1894), a farmer from Llangwnadl near Pwllheli, recalling the *plygain* from when he was about five years old, also remembered it as an early morning service (six o'clock, which meant that he had to get up at half past four). He suggests a slightly more circumspect attitude towards the involvement of Nonconformists in the *plygain* at the local church, where some of the singing groups or parties (the word used in Welsh is typically *parti*) might include *capelwyr* (chapel-goers) as well as *eglwyswyr* (church-goers), provided that the former were fond of singing and came to church 'fairly regularly'.⁵⁰ From the Nonconformist perspective, an account by E.T. Owen (b. 1906), a farmer near Welshpool who remembered singing in the *plygain* as a small child, suggests that some chapels became anxious about the purity of their religious identity, abandoning ecumenism and appropriating the *plygain* as a Nonconformist service:

My first memory of singing in *plygain* – four boys – or six little boys from the church ... and Canon Roberts taught us ... And then a bass and a tenor would sometimes join us in the chorus ... The *plygain* services were only in the churches in the old days ... I remember three *plygain* services in this area – *plygain* Llan ... and *plygain* Pontrobert and a *plygain* in Cwm Nant-y-Meichiaid church It's not very long since they started in the chapels ... Now there are *plygain* services in Sardis [Chapel] and Braichywaun [Chapel] and Penllys [Chapel] and Penuel [Chapel].

*Cof(f) cynta sy' genna i am cianu mewn plygien – pedwar o fechgyn – ne(u) chwech o fechgyn bach o'r eglwys ... a Canon Roberts yn dysgu ni ... A (we)dyn fuo 'na ryw faswr a tenor efo ni weithie yn y cytgan ... 'Toedd y plygeinie ddim ond yn yr eglwysi (y)m yr hen amser ... Tair blygen dwi'n gofio 'n yr ardal yma: plygen Llan ... a plygen Pontrobot, a phlygen yn – Eglws Cwmnantmeichied ... (R)wan mae 'na plygen yn – Sardis a Braichywaun, a Penllys – A Penuel.*⁵¹

Thomas Rushforth tells us that at Cilcain, some singers sang unaccompanied, but others were accompanied by a small organ ('old fashioned, not those there are now ... another organ ... smaller'). The church choir was always in the gallery, 'in the old fashion', and everyone else went up to the gallery to sing when their name was called (*organ ... oedd. Hen ffashiwn, nid honne sy' ne rwan 'te ... organ arall ... llai a'r lleill yn mynd i fyny bob yn un efo'r ... i ganu ... Ag o'n nhw'n mynd i fyny pan ôddan nhw'n galw'u hentwa nhw*).⁵² Ann Wood Griffiths remembered that in Llanllyfni:

⁴⁹ A.M. Allchin, 'The *Plygain* Carols', *Fairacres Chronicle*, 20/3 (1987): 10.

⁵⁰ National Museum of Wales, oral histories, Tape 809, transcript, 13.

⁵¹ National Museum of Wales, oral histories, tape 979, transcript, 47–9 (my translation).

⁵² National Museum of History, Cardiff, oral history collection, Tape 1390, transcript, 3–4 (my translation).

our fathers used to take their little *corau aelwyd* ... right to the chancel to sing their carols. My father and Mr Jones, Shop yr Hall, Mr John Thomas, watchmaker ... and all the other heads of families used to take part.⁵³

Despite what some secondary sources say, some services do appear to have had a published programme. William Owen Roberts tells us that the *plygain* in his local church started with a short service followed by a congregational hymn, then 'the programme was pulled out, and the singers were called forward in order' (*A wedyn ôdd y rhaglen ei thynnu allan, a gelwid ar y cantorion ymlaen yn 'i trefn*).⁵⁴ Roberts also tells us that the *plygain* congregation in his church was made up of 'women especially. It was easier for them to come ... the men had to feed and go out with the horses and things like that. It was more women than men generally ... Like the usual congregation, it was mostly women ... [and] the children were all there' (*Nenwedig merchaid. Fydda'n haws iddyn nw ddwâd ... ddynion ôdd yn porthi ag 'n calyn cyffyla a petha felna. Fydda 'na fwy o ferchaid nag o ddynion yn gyffredinol ... fel cynulleidfya gyffredinol, merchaid fydda 'no fwy 'ndê ... fydda'r plant yno i gyd*).⁵⁵ He says they would sing solos, then duets, quartets, octets, a party of twelve, a party of sixteen (*unawdau ... deuaudau, pedwarawd, wythawd ... parti deuddeg, parti un ar bymtheg*) – so not necessarily the very tight family groups and exclusively male trios described by the secondary literature.⁵⁶

Traditional *plygain* carols are quite different from the familiar Christmas carols of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English Protestantism.⁵⁷ The texts are closely biblical and often dwell not simply on Christ's birth, but also on man's fall and redemption. E.T. Owen makes a distinction between English carols and the traditional Welsh ones. He says they knew the English ones from carol books, but they 'weren't the same', and he also gestures towards the different nature of the printed mainstream carol books with their musical notation, and the traditional carols, known by heart or written down by hand in family carol books:

We had lots of carol books and so on, you see – and measures, notes on them and so on. But ... more on the lines of 'The First Noël' and 'While Shepherds Watch' [sic] and things like that. They weren't the same ... as what we sang.

⁵³ Allchin, 'Plygain Carols', 10.

⁵⁴ National Museum of History, Cardiff, oral history collection, Tape 809, transcript, 5 (my translation).

⁵⁵ National Museum of History, Cardiff, oral history collection, Tape 809, transcript, 4 (my translation).

⁵⁶ National Museum of History, Cardiff, oral history collection, Tape 809, transcript, 5 (my translation).

⁵⁷ For the Welsh carol tradition, see Chapter 6 of Phyllis Kinney's *Welsh Traditional Music* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press in association with Cymdeithas Alawon Gwerin Cymru, 2011); Saer, 'Christmas Carol-Singing Tradition'; Rhiannon Ifans, 'Folk Poetry and Diversions', in *A Guide to Welsh Literature c.1700–1800*, ed. Branwen Jarvis (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000):187–9; Enid Pierce Roberts, 'Hen Garolau Plygain', *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion* (1954), Session 1952, 51–70, and by the same author a shorter piece in English, 'The Plygain Carols', in the Church in Wales's publication *Keep the Feast: Plygain* (Penarth: The Board of Mission, the Church in Wales, 2000): 18–23.

*'Den ni cael llawer o lyfre carole ac ati welwch chi, a – mesure, notes arnyn nw ac ati. Ond ... mwy ar y lein y 'First Noël' a 'While Shepherds Watch' a r'w bethe fel 'na. 'Den nw (ddi)m 'run un ... â be 'den ni'n ganu, de.*⁵⁸

William Owen Roberts, on the other hand, remembered that there would also be some new carols, and that these would be taken from periodicals such as *Perl y Plant* (*The Children's Pearl*, an Anglican publication subtitled 'a monthly for children of the church', which always featured a 'hymn of the month'), and *Y Cyfaill Eglwysig* (*The Church Companion*), which carried carols in its Christmas issues.⁵⁹

The *plygain* was a specifically Welsh-language practice,⁶⁰ and at least some of its participants recognised it as such – the interviewer asks E.T. Owen if there was a *plygain* service in a neighbouring village, Meifod, and Owen replies, 'I never heard of a *plygain* in Meifod ... More anglicized. They don't do things the same, do they?' (*Clywes i riod sôn am blygen ym Meifod ... Mwy Seisneigedd. 'Den nw ddim yn – mynd 'run fath, nag'den nw?*).⁶¹

So it is not just outsiders like Kenward who identify it as a Welsh thing to do. But the idea that what one is listening to in the *plygain* is an expression of *Welshness* is not typically an explicit perception amongst the local people who experienced it – Owen's 'More anglicized' is an unusual comment amongst the surviving evidence, and although it clearly registers a perception of *Welshness*, it does so obliquely. For the people who routinely heard the *plygain* service, it was its religious and its social and festive significance that was uppermost in their minds. Kenward, an 'outsider' sympathetic to the Welsh and concerned to establish their legitimate and full place within British culture, is perhaps the first to articulate explicitly the idea that it is an expression of *Welshness*, fitting the *plygain* into a rapidly crystallizing stereotype of the musical and hence more broadly harmonious nature of the Welsh; and the idea is also inherent in the writings of later enthusiasts who were keen to characterize the *plygain* as a timeless tradition of the *gwerin*.

The Cymanfa Ganu

The *cymanfa ganu* has been described as 'one of Wales's most distinctive contributions to the world of music',⁶² though it has received rather less scholarly attention than this description might seem to warrant – arguably taking a back seat to the competitive Welsh choral tradition.⁶³ Literally translated it means 'singing

⁵⁸ National Museum of History, Cardiff, oral history collection, Tape 979, transcript, 55 (my translation).

⁵⁹ National Museum of History, Cardiff, oral history collection, Tape 809, transcript, 11.

⁶⁰ However, in recent years the Church in Wales has been keen to widen the appeal of the service, suggesting that, while 'in a largely English-speaking area, it would be magnificent to begin and end with a Welsh carol', *plygain* carols are 'the offering of the people as they are', and hence perfectly acceptable in English. See John Walters, 'Reclaiming a Tradition', in *Keep the Feast: Plygain* (Penarth: The Board of Mission, the Church in Wales, 2000): 35.

⁶¹ National Museum of History, Cardiff, oral history collection, Tape 979, transcript, 55 (my translation).

⁶² Rhidian Griffiths, 'Musical Life in the Nineteenth Century', in *Glamorgan Society 1780–1980*, ed. Prys Morgan, Glamorgan County History 6 (Cardiff: Glamorgan History Trust, 1988): 376.

⁶³ See in particular Williams's *Valleys of Song* and *Do You Hear the People Sing?*.

assembly', but specifically it indicates a hymn-singing assembly in which the whole congregation – not a selected choir – participates, and like the *plygain*, it originates as a Welsh-language singing practice, though in contrast to the *plygain*, its origin is devoutly Nonconformist. It was an annual event, rehearsed for on a weekly basis in the preceding months. In an essay published in 1907, Moses Owen Jones,⁶⁴ a greatly respected choral conductor in South Wales who understood as well as anyone the character of the event, described the typical late nineteenth-century *cymanfa ganu* in these terms:

It commences, as a rule, with a children's service in the morning, when light and suitable tunes are sung and the catechism gone through ...

The afternoon and evening meetings are devoted to adults. A number of congregational tunes are sung at each meeting, interspersed with anthems, chants and choruses. The choir, which is made of those of the several chapels in the Union, ranges from 300 to 800, according to the population of the district, and, after a thorough training, the singing, which is always devotional, is often very majestic and highly impressive In several places the choir is assisted by a small band.

Some years ago we made it our business to enquire as to the number of these meetings held annually in Wales, and found they number over 250. There has been an increase since then.

Strangers labour under the impression that the best Welsh singing is to be heard at the National Eisteddfod. Picked choirs sing there, but the masses are to be heard at the *Cymanfa Ganu*, and anyone who would make himself acquainted with the musical life of Wales should visit some of our popular *Cymanfaoedd*.⁶⁵

A few years after he published this account, an expanded version of it appeared in evidence in the report of the Royal Commission looking into the question of the disestablishment of the Church of England in Wales, and here Jones's claim for the scale and spread of the *cymanfa* was more precise (though in fact, as R. Tudur Jones points out, his estimate was 'almost certainly too low'⁶⁶):

In the year 1895 there were at least 280 Nonconformist festivals held in Wales, attended by 134,550 choristers, giving an average of 480 to each festival. Thus nearly 9 per cent of the entire population took an active part in the *Cymanfa Ganu*.⁶⁷

The *cymanfa ganu* rapidly gained popularity across Wales, as much in rural as in industrial areas, but it was able to flourish at such scale because it took root in the context of the massive population growth of industrial south Wales and an

⁶⁴ See Robert David Griffith, 'Jones, Moses Owen', in *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*, <http://yba.llgc.org.uk/en/s-JONE-MOS-1842.html> (accessed 30 May 2018).

⁶⁵ Moses Owen Jones, 'The Culture of Music Amongst the Masses in Wales', in *Wales To-day and To-morrow*, ed. T. Stephens (Cardiff: Western Mail, 1907): 334.

⁶⁶ R. Tudur Jones, *Faith and the Crisis of a Nation: Wales 1890–1914* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2004): 108.

⁶⁷ House of Commons Parliamentary Papers, *Royal Commission on the Church of England and Other Religious Bodies in Wales and Monmouthshire* (1910 Parliament), Vol. VII, Appendices to Minutes of Evidence. Nonconformists, Appendix XXXVI, Submitted by the Rev. H. Eynon Lewis (Q. 44903), 'A Sketch of the History of the Growth and Development of Congregational Singing and Choral Music Among Welsh Nonconformist Churches Generally, But More Particular Among the Congregationalists', by Mr. M.O. Jones, of Treherbert, 142, <https://parlipapers.proquest.com/parlipapers> (accessed 11 July 2018).

accompanying period of prolific chapel-building (the latter particularly pronounced in years of religious revival).⁶⁸

As with the *plygain*, the social make-up of the *cymanfa ganu* congregation doesn't necessarily map exactly onto 'the working class'. Particularly in the large, well-appointed chapels of the more prosperous towns like Merthyr Tydfil, Aberdare and Pontypridd, it would include the middle classes – the better-off tradesmen, local professionals and their wives. Moses Owen Jones wisely used the somewhat loose term 'masses' to capture the social base of the *cymanfa*; and in an early (1863) issue of the journal *Y Cerddor Cymreig (The Welsh Musician)*,⁶⁹ it is similarly broadly identified with the 'common people' by the use of the word *gwerin* (a notable, because relatively unusual, use of the term to include industrial society).⁷⁰ However while few congregations can have been exclusively working-class, the *cymanfa* was probably inclusive of a broader spectrum of working-classness than many choral institutions in England. Dave Russell has identified the social base of the English choral society as typically the "'respectable lower classes", the lower middle and the skilled working classes', together with a significant upper middle class presence,⁷¹ and of course Welsh choirs and choral societies were not immune to social exclusiveness – as Andy Croll points out in his study of popular culture in Merthyr Tydfil, with its obligations for members to pay for subs, new music, travel expenses and smart clothes, 'Even choral music, that most inclusive of all genres, could leave a sizeable number outside its clutches'.⁷² Nonetheless, many, if not most, Welsh choirs of the period were 'dominated by working-class singers',⁷³ precisely because of the strength of the congregational singing, nurtured in the *cymanfaoedd* which fed into them. Indeed:

the relationship between these congregational choirs and the large choral societies ... was so close that it may be unwise to distinguish between them: they shared personnel, conductors, sacred music and audiences. Ministers frequently addressed choral societies during rehearsals, wishing them luck in forthcoming competitions and reminding singers of the noble cause in which they were engaged. The compliment was invariably returned with the choral societies turning to the chapels in search of vocal talent.⁷⁴

The singer Megan (also Margaret) Watts Hughes⁷⁵ was born into a working-class family in Dowlais near Merthyr Tydfil, and in his unpublished memoir of

⁶⁸ Christopher B. Turner, 'The Nonconformist Response', in *People and Protest: Wales 1815–1880*, ed. Trevor Herbert and Gareth Elwyn Jones (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1988): 74. Turner also provides evidence from the 1851 Religious Census of the scale of Nonconformist worship in Wales and of the accompanying rates of chapel building – see *ibid.*, Source C2 and Source C4, pp. 86 and 87.

⁶⁹ The journal was founded in 1861 by Rev. John Roberts (Ieuan Gwyllt), of whom more below. He was also its editor, modelling it on the *Musical Times*; Williams, *Valleys of Song*, 29.

⁷⁰ *Y Cerddor Cymreig (The Welsh Musician)*, Rhif. 24, Chwefror 1, 1863, 191.

⁷¹ Dave Russell, *Popular Music in England, 1840–1914: A Social History*, second edition (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997): 253.

⁷² Andy Croll, *Civilizing the Urban: Popular Culture and Public Space in Merthyr, c. 1870–1914* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000): 124, 128.

⁷³ Croll, *Civilizing the Urban*, 116–17.

⁷⁴ Croll, *Civilizing the Urban*, 115.

⁷⁵ She died in 1907, but her birth date is disputed. She gave it as 1847, while Gareth Williams gives it as 1845 (*Valleys of Song*, 64–5), and the *Dictionary of Welsh Biography* gives

her,⁷⁶ her brother John Watts describes the social make-up of the local temperance choir (in which Megan sang from about the age of ten) as being ‘almost entirely’ working-class, remembering the men coming to choir practice in their work clothes:

The members of that choir consisted almost entirely of the working classes, and often would the men engaged in the Iron Works turn in on their way to night duty, to practise, arrayed in their soiled aprons, with moleskin trousers and little jackets with a handkerchief peeking out of their pockets, which they used to wipe the sweat from their brow as they stood in front of the fiery furnace.⁷⁷

Megan Watts Hughes, herself a musical prodigy, remembered numerous other gifted musicians of similar working-class stock who were involved with choral and congregational singing in the Merthyr and Dowlais district: ‘some excellent and indeed noted conductors of these Temperance choirs’ – Davydd Lloyd, ‘a rough, sturdy puddler’;⁷⁸ Thomas Hopkins, a miner; David Rosser, a miner’s son; Evan Samuel, a shoemaker; and one of the most celebrated singers and choral trainers in Wales during that period, ‘a miner of exceptional natural talents, Robert Rees (“Eos Morlais”).⁷⁹

There are various claims to the first *cymanfa ganu* dating as far back as 1830,⁸⁰ but properly it began around 1860, with an attempt to improve the standard of singing amongst Nonconformist congregations, though according to R.D. Griffith, the term *cymanfa ganu* only came into standard use after the initial zeal had flagged somewhat, necessitating a relaunch of the movement around 1875.⁸¹ The central figure in the original movement was the Rev. John Roberts, bardic name Ieuan Gwyllt,⁸² a dauntingly intense and humourless Calvinistic Methodist (and editor of *Y Cerddor Cymreig*), who published a book of congregational hymn tunes, *Llyfr Tonau Cynulleidfaol*, in 1859. From that year, he also started

1842; see Robert David Griffith, ‘Hughes, Megan Watts’ *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*, <http://yba.llgc.org.uk/en/s-HUGH-WAT-1842.html> (accessed 30 November 2017).

⁷⁶ John Watts, ‘Life of Megan Watts Hughes’, National Library of Wales, NLW MS 21457D. In his account of the acquisition of the manuscript by the National Library of Wales, Huw Williams states that John Watts intended the memoir for publication but was unable to afford the publication costs. Williams further says that Watts based the memoir closely on his sister’s diaries (from which he does indeed often quote directly), though the diaries themselves were apparently destroyed – by whom is not clear. See Huw Williams, ‘A Fu Golledig ac a Gafwyd ...’, in *Taro Tant: Detholiad o Ysgrifau ac Erthyglau* (Dinbych: Gwasg Gee, 1994): 67–8.

⁷⁷ Watts, ‘Life of Megan Watts Hughes’, 23.

⁷⁸ An iron puddler’s unenviable job was to stir molten iron in a furnace to turn raw, brittle, pig iron into malleable wrought iron.

⁷⁹ Watts, ‘Life of Megan Watts Hughes’, 25–6.

⁸⁰ Williams, *Valleys of Song*, 26. John Mills also used the word *cymanfa* to describe a similar kind of assembly in his *Gramadeg Cerddoriaeth* [Musical Grammar] (1838), which was an earlier attempt to raise the standard of religious music; see Rhidian Griffiths, ‘Welsh Chapel Music’, *Journal of Welsh Ecclesiastical History* 6 (1989): 38.

⁸¹ R.D. Griffith, *Hanes Canu Cynulleidfaol Cymru* (Caerdydd: Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru, 1948), 94–5. According to Griffith, before 1875, the usual terms were *undeb canu cynulledifaol* (congregational singing union), *cymanfa gerddorol* (musical assembly) and *cyfarfod canu cynulleidfaol* (congregational singing meeting).

⁸² See Robert David Griffith, ‘Roberts, John’, in *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*, <http://yba.llgc.org.uk/en/s-ROBE-JOH-1822.html> (accessed 20 May 2018).

to persuade groups of chapels, not only in south Wales where he was based, but around Wales, to form congregational singing unions (*undebau canu cynulleidfaol*), which met to practice in weekly singing schools (*ysgolion gân*). The importance of these singing schools is hard to overstate – they have been described with considerable justification as:

the most popular and influential instructional institution in the social as well as the musical and religious life of Wales ... [and] as fundamental an aspect of chapel and therefore community life as the prayer meeting, and even more accessible, irrespective of age or gender.⁸³

Thus, between the religious musical institutions he initiated and his various publications, musical and journalistic, Ieuan Gwyllt's influence was profound – he was, as Gareth Williams has rightly said, both 'pioneer and pivotal figure in the reinvigoration of choral and religious music in Wales',⁸⁴ and arguably the most potent influence in the developing myth of the land of song (underlining the symbiosis between Welsh religious devotion and Welsh musicality). Furthermore, his call to action in 1859 would have fallen on particularly fertile ground, since this was also the year of a religious revival which has been described as 'the most powerful and effective awakening of all those which took place in Wales in the nineteenth century'.⁸⁵

Rhidian Griffiths has further linked the origin of the *cymanfa ganu* to the festivals of the temperance movement, which was at its height in Wales at that time,⁸⁶ and which was a particular factor in the 1859 revival, when 'it became fashionable to pronounce total abstinence as outward evidence of inner purification and spiritual re-birth'.⁸⁷ The temperance movement earnestly pursued the idea of 'rational recreation' as a morally improving distraction from drink. A more perfect rational recreation than congregational hymn-singing would be hard to conceive, and it loomed large in all temperance festivals and parades. The relationship of congregational singing to the temperance movement was underpinned by the dissemination of tonic sol-fa as a method of mass musical education for those who could not read staff notation. That the temperance and the tonic sol-fa movements should both have been buoyant at the point when the *cymanfa ganu* emerged is no coincidence. As Charles McGuire argues, John Curwen and his son John Spencer Curwen, the most successful of the propagators of tonic sol-fa, explicitly saw their method as 'a conflation of music and moral reform'⁸⁸ designed to inculcate in the masses the disciplined activity, moral and intellectual improvement and religious commitment that was implied by congregational and choral singing of religious music. Not least amongst their intentions for the method, both were committed supporters of temperance who 'used their control of Tonic Sol-fa to promote music as an important tool – if not the most important tool – in the fight for

⁸³ Williams, *Valleys of Song*, 27.

⁸⁴ Williams, *Valleys of Song*, 31.

⁸⁵ Christopher B. Turner, 'Religious Revivalism and Welsh Industrial Society: Aberdare in 1859', *Llafur: The Journal of Welsh People's History* 4/1 (1984): 4.

⁸⁶ Griffiths, 'Musical Life in the Nineteenth Century', 374.

⁸⁷ Turner, 'Religious Revivalism', 11.

⁸⁸ Charles Edward McGuire, *Music and Victorian Philanthropy: The Tonic Sol-fa Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009): 7.

total national abstinence from alcohol'.⁸⁹ The connection between tonic sol-fa and temperance was thus strongly rooted, and indeed, numerous singing unions and choirs like the one in which the young Megan Watts's musical talent was nurtured, were established explicitly under the temperance banner. Ieuan Gwyllt's *Llyfr Tonau Cynulleidfaol* appeared in a tonic sol-fa edition in 1863. While the use of tonic sol-fa was not universal (there are plenty of examples of booklets for *cymanfaoedd ganu* being printed in both tonic sol-fa and staff notation⁹⁰), it was crucial to the mass musical participation of the Victorian period, and nowhere more so than in the south Wales industrial communities, where it 'had a great democratizing influence and did much to foster choral activity characterized by almost universal participation'.⁹¹

John Spencer Curwen, attending a *cymanfa ganu* (he called it a 'psalmody festival') at Cwmafan near Port Talbot (probably in the 1870s or early 1880s), must have felt that he was in part witnessing the fruits of his and his father's mission. It prompted him to write a detailed and sensitive description of the event and of the character of the singing:

While other singing makes its appeal to the taste, this Welsh singing makes straight for the heart, and plays upon the spirit like the sound of storm or cataract. It calls up the class of emotions which we associate with the word 'grand' This Welsh singing was in parts, and the exceptional power of the bass voices gave a richness to the harmony which nothing else can give. Our English choirs, both in church and out, are generally deficient in basses, and their singing sounds in consequence thin and unsubstantial. These Welsh basses have voices that make the furniture vibrate as they sound, just as do the pedal stops of an organ. While they were singing, especially in the loud passages, I could see the sheet of paper I held in my hand tremble, and feel that the pen on which my hand rested was shaking too. One has often to complain in England that the organ drowns the voices of the congregation, but an organ amid singing of this kind would have a very small chance of being heard. The singing has, nevertheless, in some respects an organ-like effect. In our English psalmody the notes of three beats' length which occur at the end of lines are generally cut short by the singers, but the Welsh have a way of not only holding them on, but swelling upon them and running them without break into the next line. Their capacious lungs seem to need no pause for breath. The soft passages are as impressive as the loud.⁹²

Curwen perfectly understood the profoundly spiritual experience that could be stirred by the *cymanfa ganu*, and which, indeed, had been at the heart of Ieuan Gwyllt's original intention. As he noted, 'The promoters of these festivals are very careful to prevent their assuming the character of concerts. They are religious services not only in origin and intent, but in fact.'⁹³ In what might appear a paradox (but clearly wasn't to him), he emphasizes the deeply meaningful character of the experience by drawing attention to his *inability* to understand Welsh – the experience is profound precisely *because* it is non-verbal and emotional.⁹⁴ It is conveyed

⁸⁹ McGuire, *Music and Victorian Philanthropy*, 68–9.

⁹⁰ Numerous examples are found in the archives of the National Museum of History, St Fagans.

⁹¹ Griffiths, 'Musical Life in the Nineteenth Century', 370.

⁹² John Spencer Curwen, *Studies in Worship Music, Second Series* (London, [1885]): 20–21.

⁹³ Curwen, *Studies in Worship Music*, 19.

⁹⁴ This echoes a point that Martin Clarke makes in his article in this journal issue (pp. 390–391), when he suggests that the reaction of Serena Thorne to the singing of a

particularly by 'one custom which used to obtain among the Methodists in England, and which the Welsh still preserve' – the intensifying religious fervour, or in Welsh, *hwyl*,⁹⁵ that built up in the singing:

When the end of a hymn is reached, if the temper of the congregation is rising, some one will start the last four lines again, and they will be repeated with growing fervour three, four, six or even eight times. Then it is that the strong emotional nature of the Celt is stirred. Women sing with eyes fixed upon vacancy, wholly lost in spiritual ecstasy, the tears filling their eyes, the rocking to and fro of their bodies betraying the inward tension. The men, though they conceal it, are no less deeply touched It is at times like this, that a foreigner, ignorant of the language he is hearing, feels that worship is not verbal, but spiritual, that words are a means only, and can be dispensed with. Communion in this way may be as real as if every word were understood.⁹⁶

Curwen's experience of *hwyl* is echoed in a short, unpublished eye-witness account of the Calvinistic Methodist *cymanfa cerddorol*⁹⁷ (musical assembly) in Montgomeryshire written by Thomas Breese.⁹⁸ Breese almost certainly belonged to a farming family at Llanbrynmair – an earlier Thomas Breese, who was indeed a farmer from Llanbrynmair, appears in the St Asaph Probate Records in 1812.⁹⁹ The memoir was written at the request of the Montgomery Upper Presbytery, as an address to the 1919 Newtown *cymanfa*; perhaps Breese was an elder of his chapel and was thus invited as a respected figure to write an account, or perhaps he was simply one of the few whose memory stretched back to the founding of the *cymanfa*. Whatever the reason, he is a convincing witness, specific in details and impressive in his account of religious devotion. Although he doesn't use the word, Breese emphasizes the 'democratic' nature of the *cymanfa* – organized by a committee of local men and with a ballot to choose the hymns. He explains that the decision to start a local *cymanfa* was inspired by a meeting at Cemaes in 1864 where Ieuan Gwyllt spoke about congregational singing, though it apparently took a number of committee meetings to get it off the ground, since the first *cymanfa* didn't take place until 1871.

Breese had clearly kept the inaugural 1871 *cymanfa* programme, as he transcribes the front page, which states amongst other things the expected attendance of between four and five hundred, and basic performance directions clearly aimed

Welsh congregation 'could not have been entirely rational' because she did not understand the language, but that 'the importance of actually hearing the music is crucial'. However, while Curwen refers to the 'strong emotional nature of the Celt', he is not entirely succumbing to an idea of what constitutes Welshness in religious singing, as he recognizes in *hwyl* a more general, if now-defunct, phenomenon that had once pertained in Methodist singing.

⁹⁵ The word *hwyl* has a range of meanings, from the slight (in the sense of 'fun') to the profound. In the latter register, it refers to a style of oratory adopted by Welsh preachers, and more broadly to emotional or religious fervour, and is thus also applicable to the kind of ecstatic expression often achieved in *cymanfa* singing.

⁹⁶ Curwen, *Studies in Worship Music*, 21–22.

⁹⁷ See note 81. The terms *cerddorol/gerddorol* and *canu/ganu* distinguish the gathering from other kinds of *cymanfaeoedd*, such as the *cymanfa bwnc*, a catechizing or Bible recitation assembly, and the annual general assemblies of the Calvinistic Methodists.

⁹⁸ Thomas Breese, 'Cymanfa Cerddorol M. C. Trefaldwyn Uchaf' (1919), National Library of Wales, Calvinistic Methodist Archives CZ2/8/21.

⁹⁹ See National Library of Wales, <http://hdl.handle.net/10107/928484>.

at singers who would not be familiar with musical dynamic markings: 'The words in italics to be sung softly, and the words in bigger letters strongly and powerfully' (*Caner y geiriau sydd mewn llythyrenau italaidd yn wan, a'r rhai sydd yn y llythyrenau mwyaf yn gryfa nerthol*).¹⁰⁰ There are several passages where he describes the effect of the singing:

'In God we put our trust' was attempted two or three times before the leader and the congregation came to understand each other, but it went smoothly before the end. The Halleluiah [Chorus] also went smoothly and powerfully. The late Mr Richard Humphreys Llanbrynmair said that he heard it so powerfully that he thought the place was shaking.

*fe fuwyd yn cynig Duw sydd Noddfa ddwy a thair gwaith cyn ir Arweinydd a Gynulleidfa ddod i ddeall eu gilidd. Ond aeth yn hwylus cyn y diwedd. Yr Haleluwia aeth hi yn hwylus a nerthol. Yr oedd y diweddar Mr Richard Humphreys Llanbrynmair yn deud ei fod yn ei chlywed hi mor nerthol yr oedd yn meddwl fod y lle yn crynu.*¹⁰¹

The last sentence would be more elegantly translated as 'it sounded so powerful that he thought the place was shaking', but what Breese actually writes is 'he heard it so powerfully', using the Welsh verb *clywed*, to hear, emphasizing the direct link with 'he', the listener, and thus with the intensity of the effect upon Mr Humphreys.

The most vivid description, however, comes with the singing of the hymn 'Mae ffrydiau 'ngorfoledd yn tarddu' ('The source of my joy'):

But what raised the singing highest was singing the old tune Llanarmon to the words 'The Source of My Joy'. And especially when it came to 'Let us look on storms and fears' ... [illegible] The tears doubled and trebled and every minute [we were] expecting them to break out in rejoicing, we had never witnessed such feeling through singing.

*Ond y fan y cododd y canu uchaf oedd wrth ganu yr hen Dôn Llanarmon ar y Geiriau Mae ffrydiaw ngorfoledd. Ac yn enwedig pan y dowd at Cawn Edrych ar Stormydd ac ofnau. [illegible] Dyblu ar treblu ar dagrau ar disgwyl iddi dori allan yn orfoledd bob munud, ni bym yn Dyst or fath deimlad wrth ganu erioed.*¹⁰²

Martin Clarke makes the point that while singing and listening to hymns would have been a thoroughly familiar experience, a special event such as the *cymanfa* (looked forward to with enormous anticipation for months) would be likely to generate particularly intense responses,¹⁰³ and in that light it is worth noting that the hymn that seems to provoke the strongest emotional response in this instance is one that was particularly familiar to and well-loved by Welsh congregations.¹⁰⁴

Breese's account is not without its practical challenges to the researcher as it is handwritten and thus difficult to read, and furthermore it is written by a man

¹⁰⁰ Breese, 'Cymanfa Cerddorol', iv (my translation).

¹⁰¹ Breese, 'Cymanfa Cerddorol', 8v (my translation).

¹⁰² Breese, 'Cymanfa Cerddorol', 12 (my translation).

¹⁰³ Martin Clarke, 'Hearing and Believing: Listening Experiences as Religious Experiences in Nineteenth-Century British Methodism' in this issue, p. 399.

¹⁰⁴ Alan Luff, *Welsh Hymns and Their Tunes* (Carol Stream, IL: Hope Publishing, 1990): 114–16.

who, while literate and indeed articulate, had received only a basic education, so eccentricities of spelling and grammar abound. And as is common with vernacular sources (oral history interviews are particularly challenging in this respect), it is delivered not in the standard form of the language familiar to the modern Welsh speaker, but in dialect (in this case, the dialect of north Montgomeryshire), which takes some adjustment on the part of anyone used only to standard modern Welsh. It is, however, an especially powerful account, all the more so for its idiosyncrasies of language, which convey better than any more polished prose a sense of the person writing and the strength of his experience.

The musical and spiritual effect to which both Curwen and Breese bear witness is found in other sources. A *cymanfa ganu* held at Penygraig in the Rhondda in 1875 was singled out for attention in a number of Welsh newspapers. Ieuan Gwyllt presided (as he did at many others, being a celebrity in *cymanfa* circles, and much sought-after), and the *South Wales Daily News* reported that he:

raised the congregation to such a pitch that there were but few who had not wet eyes. The singing was good beyond description, and several of the tunes were repeated. When one of the revival songs were sung the vast audience could no longer contain itself, but burst out in one shout of praise. The emotion of the moment will not soon be forgotten. After the singing was over, Mr. Roberts [Ieuan Gwyllt] invited all who felt a desire to give themselves up to Jesus of Nazareth to remain behind, to which invitation 35 responded.¹⁰⁵

The *Western Mail*, a conservative English-language newspaper published in Cardiff and founded by the Marquess of Bute, the leading industrialist in south Wales, also published a detailed report, almost certainly written by one of its foremost journalists, Morien.¹⁰⁶

[Ieuan Gwyllt] stood in the pulpit and led the choirs in an able manner. He repeatedly complimented the singers upon the feeling they displayed, and the singing appeared to make a deep impression upon all present. The reverend chairman stated that he had never attended meetings of this kind where the audience entered more thoroughly 'through the letter to the spirit' of what they sang. The great feature of these meetings was anthem singing and Psalm chanting. The rendering of the Psalms by the choirs was simply grand beyond description. There may have been room for technical [sic], but the volume for melody was superb Ieuan Gwyllt said they were now entering upon a new epoch in Welsh music.¹⁰⁷

The report contains a caveat about technical facility, as well as placing emphasis on the volume of the singing, and indeed the fervour of the *cymanfa* idiom did have a tendency to degenerate into a bombastic style which came to characterize Welsh choral singing at its worst. In fact, by the later part of the century, voices could be heard in Wales and beyond questioning just how musical the Welsh really were. In 1899, in a letter to his local (Aberystwyth) newspaper in which he raised

¹⁰⁵ *South Wales Daily News*, 6 May 1875, quoted in Tom Jones, 'Hanes Cymanfa Ganu', published in *Y Darian*, 26 December 1929.

¹⁰⁶ Morien was the bardic name of Owen Morgan. See Robert Thomas Jenkins 'Morgan, Owen', in *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*, <http://yba.llgc.org.uk/en/s1-MORG-OWE-1836.html> (accessed 30 May 2018)

¹⁰⁷ *Western Mail*, 6 May 1875, quoted in Tom Jones, 'Hanes Cymanfa Ganu Dosbarth Canol Rhondda', published in *Y Darian*, 19 December 1929.

a range of concerns about music in Wales, Jack Edwards,¹⁰⁸ who seems to have made a minor name for himself as a singer and who was at that time conductor of the Aberystwyth town band, complained of the fate that had befallen the old Welsh *hwyl*, as mere volume overtook spiritual and musical meaning:

Even our congregational singing, which we have good reasons to be proud of, is not what it ought to be if we were as musical as is generally supposed. The hymn tunes that become popular amongst us owe their popularity more to the display of lung power than to intrinsic merit as musical compositions. 'Aberystwyth' is unquestionably an excellent tune, but a musical people would hardly tolerate the continual yelling of it in three parts with the tenor part out-shouting the other two, as we are often inflicted all over Wales.¹⁰⁹

Years later, John Lloyd Williams¹¹⁰ would still be pinpointing this as the great flaw of Welsh congregational singing: 'The "hwyllog" singing in our Cymantuoedd. This is so enjoyable, sometimes so thrilling that it makes the singers feel entirely satisfied with it.'¹¹¹

In the 1870s, however, the special musicality of the Welsh, and particularly its embodiment in their congregational singing, was largely beyond question, and certain ulterior motives for this are not hard to understand. It is, for instance, no coincidence that Morien sees fit to set the Penygraig *cymanf*a in the context of a strike that was happening at the time:

The district of Penygraig is a kind of Goshen, where Egyptian plagues, in the shape of strikes, never come, for the masters of the Penygraig collieries manage to be on good terms with their many hundreds of men The highly respectable aspect of this large congregation, in the midst of the present strike ... would have surprised a stranger visiting the valley.¹¹²

This strike was a bitter dispute across south Wales over wage reductions and the proposed introduction of a sliding wage scale. But whether or not the Penygraig colliers were on strike at that precise time, it was somewhat wishful thinking that strikes 'never come' there, because 1875 was the start of decades of intensifying unrest focusing on Penygraig and neighbouring Tonypanddy, which involved several mining disasters, a series of strikes which escalated into the Cambrian Colliery Dispute, and finally the so-called 'Tonypanddy Riots' of 1910, when Winston Churchill, then Home Secretary, notoriously sent in the army. As with James Kenward and the circle of Ab Ithel and Lady Llanover some years earlier, we

¹⁰⁸ Edwards merits a brief entry under that of his better-known father, Edward Edwards (Pencerdd Ceredigion), in *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*, <http://yba.llgc.org.uk/en/s-EDWA-EDW-1816.html> (accessed 20 May 2018).

¹⁰⁹ 'Is the Welsh National Musical?', letter from Jack Edwards to the *Welsh Gazette and West Wales Advertiser*, 27 April 1899.

¹¹⁰ John Lloyd Williams held a lectureship in botany at Bangor University, and was also a choral conductor and adjudicator, and a founder and key figure of the Welsh Folk Song Society. See Robert Alun Roberts, 'Williams, John Lloyd', in *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*, <http://yba.llgc.org.uk/en/s2-WILL-LLO-1854.html> (accessed 30 May 2018).

¹¹¹ National Library of Wales, Dr J Lloyd Williams AD3/3 Music MSS and Papers, AD3/3/1, Typescript of lecture on 'Congregational singing in Nonconformist Wales', dated Harlech, August 1941, 1.

¹¹² *Western Mail*, 6 May 1875.

can again detect the strategy (whether conscious or not matters little) of Welsh musicality being brought into play as a counterweight to the threat of radicalism or militancy. It hardly stretches the bounds of credibility to suggest that the backdrop of industrial unrest goes a long way to explaining why the Penygraig *cymanfa* was the subject of such detailed press reports, with their emphasis on the respectability of the congregation, their musicality and their devout spirituality. As a miner's son born and still living at that time in Penygraig, Morien would have had personal reasons to stress the respectability of the mining community. But he presumably also knew that it was a sentiment that would have reassured his *Western Mail* readers. As Andy Croll puts it in his study of Merthyr Tydfil, 'any town that could be shown to be a musical settlement, was, necessarily, a civilized settlement',¹¹³ and the combination of music and religion only strengthened this impression.

The *cymanfa* is not richly represented in the oral history accounts held at the National Museum of History. While it took hold in rural communities just as in industrial ones, the strong identification of the *cymanfa* with industrial communities, coupled with the fact that it was a relatively recent practice, probably militated against the oral history collectors of the 1960s giving it equal priority with the older rural traditions. It does crop up in some oral history accounts, however. One such account comes from Gwen Davies, born in 1896 in Dowlais. She lived there all her life, working as a washerwoman before she married. Her account tells us quite a lot about the music that was to be heard around the town. But as is often the case with these oral history sources, there is almost nothing in Gwen Davies's interview about either specific repertoire, intentional listening or the *effect* of music on listeners. Interviewees don't tend to reflect on the impact music had on them, presumably because it was just part of the general flow of everyday life; and the interviewers were prioritizing other things, so their questioning tends not to extend in this direction. As with other oral history accounts, there are also some practical difficulties – firstly, while there is a transcript, it is handwritten. It is also of course a literal transcript of speech, so it is full of hesitations and unfinished sentences which often makes the sense difficult to follow; and the interviewee is speaking her local dialect. Perhaps even more so than Thomas Breese's writing, however, this does have the merit of conveying very vividly a sense of the person and her experiences in her own voice. It certainly conveys something of the effect of the *cymanfa* – the build-up to it, the excitement, and its significance as both a religious and a social event. She says that the Dowlais Baptists always had a *cymanfa ganu* at Easter. The children sang in the morning, and some of them sang solos. They rehearsed at the *Ysgol Gâna* (singing school) for several months beforehand. She makes a point of the fact that everyone had new clothes for the *cymanfa* – she says 'new clothes were a big thing with them! The Welsh are like that you know!', and everyone had something new, 'especially the children – the children were always pretty' (*Ôdd dillad newydd yn beth mawr 'da nhw! Ma'r Cymry fel 'na, chi wobod! ... 'newwetic y plant! Y plant wastod yn bert*).¹¹⁴

This more obviously social aspect of the *cymanfa* was not necessarily at the expense of religion, though a perceived lack of proper respect for the occasion was not unknown. Reporting on a *cymanfa* which he had led in Tregaron in June

¹¹³ Croll, *Civilizing the Urban*, 120.

¹¹⁴ National Museum of Wales, oral histories, Tape 3385, transcript, 17–18 (my translation).

1872, for instance, Ieuan Gwyllt complained of the poor singing, and even more strongly that ‘some people came to this Cymanfa not understanding their obligation to behave properly in religious meetings’ (*Yr oedd yn ddrwg genym weled hefyd fod rhai pobl a ddaethent i’r Gymanfa hon heb ddeall eu rhwymedigaeth i iawn ymddwyn mewn cyfarfod crefyddol*), instead fidgeting (*aflonyddu*) and failing to join in the singing, behaviour which he identified as all too common and needing to be addressed across the country (*Mae y mater yn galw am ystyriaeth, nid o fewn yr Undeb hwn yn unig, ond yn ein gwlad yn gyffredinol*).¹¹⁵ He was notoriously strict and uncompromising, so his judgment may well be rather on the harsh side; but there is certainly some truth in the view that, in a period when Wales lacked theatres, concert venues and music halls, the *cymanfa* increasingly became ‘a source of formalized pleasure and entertainment’, quite contrary to his intentions.¹¹⁶ However, it is worth remembering that observance of social codes such as smart dress was a mark of the significance of the event, a sign of respectability, certainly, but also of respect for a religious practice which could be profound in its spiritual impact. For large numbers of people, the *cymanfa* was a religious experience first and a social one a more or less distant second. Even for those well down the social scale, the *cymanfa* carried a sense of obligation, and if the adults could not afford new clothes in honour of the occasion, they made sure their children looked pretty.

So central to the Welsh sense of their musical and cultural identity was the *cymanfa ganu*, that it officially became a national institution when the National Cymanfa Ganu was constituted at the 1916 National Eisteddfod in Aberystwyth, where it formed a concluding set-piece of audience participation. It was reported triumphally that:

the eight thousand singers rendered hymns and difficult choruses with such complete skill (without any rehearsal) that Sir W. H. Hadow, Mus. Doc., and Dr. H. P. Allen (conductor of the famous London Bach choir and now Professor of Music at Oxford) acknowledged in speeches at the Cymanfa, that they were utterly amazed. They confessed that the singing was unique in their experience. Indeed, their enthusiastic and unbounded appreciation almost astonished (though it pleased) Welshmen who knew this “scratch” choir, drawn mainly from the rural parts of Cardiganshire and the slopes of Plynlimon, was by no means a portent. At the Neath National Eisteddfod Cymanfa Ganu this year [1918] over twenty thousand singers assembled (though among them were many who had come to see and hear Mr. Lloyd George), and many thousands who had prepared for the festival for many months failed to get admitted. The singing of these many thousands, in the evening especially, was of unforgettable excellence.¹¹⁷

As the reference to the Prime Minister Lloyd George hints, *Welsh Outlook: A Monthly Journal of National Social Progress*, in which this piece appeared, had a Welsh Liberal axe to grind. This was a period when Welsh Liberalism, embodied particularly vividly in the figure of Lloyd George, was riding high in the British political landscape. Welsh issues had never had more prominence in British politics, and the Welsh Liberals energetically pursued an agenda of social and cultural progress for Wales after what many perceived as centuries of neglect and

¹¹⁵ *Y Cerddor Cymreig (The Welsh Musician)*, Rhif 137, 1 Gorphenaf 1872, 54 (my translation).

¹¹⁶ Williams, *Valleys of Song*, 26. Williams suggests that ‘there were only four actual entertainment halls in south Wales in 1880’ (p. 28).

¹¹⁷ Roberts, ‘Wales: A Land of Song’, 337.

disrespect from English governments. Music was readily attached to this agenda as an illustration of inherent Welsh cultural prowess. In this context, the reference to the astonished praise from two figures of the English musical establishment, Hadow and Allen, is deliberate and resonant. In 1917, Lloyd George (who, while devoutly Welsh, was in fact rather less devoutly religious despite a deeply religious family background) attended the National Eisteddfod as he always made a point of doing, and having listened to the singing at the National Cymanfa, described it as the 'outpouring of the beautiful hopes and aspirations and faith of the Welsh people' – using good Liberal terms first, and only lastly a religious one, 'faith'.¹¹⁸ This belief that choral and congregational singing could be interpreted as an expression of Welsh cultural aspiration and progress crops up repeatedly in the period – it can be detected even in the deeply religious Ieuan Gwyllt's perception of 'a new epoch in Welsh music', for instance. Indeed, Ieuan Gwyllt was the editor of more than one nationalist periodical, including one entitled *Y Gwladgarwr* (*The Patriot*),¹¹⁹ and it is after all in his journal *Y Cerddor Cymreig* that the loaded concept of the *gwerin* is invoked in relation to the *cymanfa*.

Just as the *plygain*, an Anglican practice, was adopted by the Nonconformists, so the popularity of the Nonconformist *cymanfa ganu* was recognized by the Anglican Church, though as R. Tudur Jones points out, the Anglican version 'had a different feel' from the Nonconformist one.¹²⁰ Mistrusting the emotionalism of the *cymanfa*, the Church adopted an approach intended to maintain emotional and devotional discipline, involving unions of church choirs rather than of congregational singers, placing the singing firmly within a liturgical structure such as evensong, and referring to these events as 'choral festivals'. (The Bishop of Bangor carefully drew a distinction from the Three Choirs type of cathedral choral festival, which, he suggested, risked 'turning the cathedral into a concert room', by insisting that the Welsh version was 'a choral festival for worship'.¹²¹) The desired sense of discipline seems to have been achieved – for, as Moses Owen Jones put it from his partisan standpoint, 'they largely lack the enthusiasm which characterizes the Nonconformist Cymanfa Ganu'.¹²² The Bangor Cathedral festivals were particularly noted for their size, and followed a three-year rotation of Welsh-language festival, children's festival, English-language festival.¹²³ But it seems that the Welsh-language events were not always conducted in pureness of heart. In a mixture of Welsh and English, John Lloyd Williams recorded in his diary the following comic episode of pettiness and mean spirit that he heard at the 1907 festival:

¹¹⁸ *Cambria Daily Leader*, 8 Sept 1917.

¹¹⁹ There were several periodicals of this title around this time – his was published in Aberdare. His editorship began in 1858 – it is not clear for how long it continued. He had also previously edited a nationalist periodical while living in Liverpool, which had a thriving Welsh community.

¹²⁰ R.T. Jones, *Faith and the Crisis of a Nation*, 109–10.

¹²¹ Evidence of the Bishop of Bangor, House of Commons Parliamentary Papers, *Royal Commission on the Church of England and Other Religious Bodies in Wales and Monmouthshire* (1910 Parliament), Vol. IV, Minutes of Evidence, Book III, 534, para. 48462, <https://parlipapers.proquest.com/parlipapers> (accessed 11 July 2018).

¹²² M.O. Jones, 'A Sketch of the History of the Growth and Development of Congregational Singing', 142.

¹²³ Evidence of the Bishop of Bangor, 534, para. 48469.

Cymanfa Ganu yr Eglwys yn y Cathedral [The Church Cymanfa Ganu in the Cathedral]. Cantorion Sir Gaernarfon a Môn [singers from Caernarfonshire and Anglesey]. Good Sops. & Basses Conductor used both hands but failed to keep singers together. He started each v[er]se] himself, cyn i'r cant[orio]n gael eu hanadl [before the singers caught their breath] – so that only a few started, the others scrambled after Organ heavy & clumsy. Hymn tunes shocking – too fast and voices not together – organ behind.

Andalusia [hymn tune] basses found it impossible to fit in their notes. I was astounded to learn from Minor Canon Hughes Williams that Rogers was the organist – he evidently did it intentionally. Maurice told me that Westlake used to boast of always upsetting the singing at the Welsh festivals, but that he worked hard with the English.¹²⁴

As is clear from this account, the Church may have described the event as a 'choral festival', but it was only partially successful in distancing it from its roots: many of the attendees would have been Nonconformists like Lloyd Williams himself, 'since music lovers tended to cross denominational boundaries to enjoy the festivals',¹²⁵ and they knew very well that this was a 'Church *cymanfa ganu*'. And according to Lloyd Williams, it seems that in the Bangor diocese at least, the 'Church *cymanfa ganu*' may have been subject to something of a strategy of Anglican sabotage.

Listening Experiences in Welsh Lives and Welsh History

The *cymanfa ganu* differs more or less diametrically from the *plygain* in terms of musical idiom, but it is clear from some listeners' accounts that they have both been used to characterize the Welsh working classes as a literally and metaphorically harmonious society. By the mid-nineteenth century a yawning gap had opened between the Romantic image of Wales and the Welsh, and the modern reality. The rise of Nonconformity played a significant part in this, alongside industrialization and its social and political consequences. And for those who had reason to wish to disguise the gap, the supposed musicality of the Welsh was a powerful tool. The Welsh people were certainly encouraged to buy into the myth, and there were circumstances – the heightened atmosphere of choral competition, for instance – where feelings of national identity could run high; but *national* feeling seems rarely more than an undercurrent when it comes to music as it was experienced in everyday religious life. Other factors – social, festive, spiritual, indeed *human* – were usually much more immediate. It was for others, usually with some kind of religious and/or political agenda, and often somewhat on the outside looking in, that a distinctively *Welsh* musicality had real resonance.

In terms of the challenges of gathering evidence of Welsh 'working-class' listening, it is quite hard to isolate 'purely' popular or 'purely' working-class responses to music. It is a great deal easier to gain insight into what the higher classes thought they were hearing in Welsh musical practices. This is partly down to education, the aspiration to write for publication and access to the publishing process, but also because, when the responses of the working class are captured, people are not

¹²⁴ John Lloyd Williams, 'Cymanfa Ganu yr Eglwys yn y Cathedral' [The Church Cymanfa Ganu in the Cathedral], National Library of Wales, Dr J Lloyd Williams Papers, MB3/5 (ii) (unpaginated; my translation).

¹²⁵ R.T. Jones, *Faith and the Crisis of a Nation*, 111.

asked the 'right' questions, or perhaps feel that they do not have the 'right' vocabulary to express their response. So do these sources give us any insight into working-class, or 'common', or 'popular' listening experiences? What, if anything, do we learn about what the lower classes heard and how they responded to it? Sometimes, of course, we get lucky and stumble on a source like Thomas Breese's memoir, rich in emotional response to music, and also revealing in the more minute details (such as the way that rudimentary performance directions were given to a largely musically illiterate congregation). But on the whole, the first-hand evidence is thin, both in the sense that there is not as much of it as there is for people further up the social scale, and in the sense that what there is can often be prosaic, undescriptive, lacking the declarations of emotional reaction that we so much want to find. But even from the scantier, more prosaic accounts, I think we often sense that what the common people heard and how they responded to it, was somewhat different than what we might imagine, or what observers and subsequent commentators would like us to think.

Gwen Davies may tell us nothing about the hymns that were sung at the Dowlais *cymanfa ganu*, or the effect that the singing had on her – her testimony may not be a 'listening experience' in the sense of focused, purposeful listening to music. But it is nonetheless *the experience of a listener*, prompted by a musical event, and it clearly conveys the vitality and joyfulness of that event and its importance in the life of the community, in a way that cannot be matched by historians' accounts of what, after all, probably strikes many of us today as a rather dour occasion – a hymn-singing assembly. And though it is hardly an expression of fervent nationalism, I don't think it's over-stretching the point to infer that when E.T. Owen describes the people of the neighbouring village as '*mwyl Seisneigedd*', 'more anglicized', and says that 'they don't do things the same', he is indeed indicating that the *plygain* for him conveyed a sense of cultural difference – a sense of the identity of his community as specifically Welsh. Perhaps even Gwen Davies's observation that 'The Welsh are like that you know!' suggests a similar half-formed awareness.

These accounts have other uses too. They certainly cast a fascinating and arguably unique light on the relationships (and tensions) between Anglicanism and Nonconformity in Wales in the period. Clearly both sides showed a willingness to acknowledge and adopt the popular musical practices of the other, and probably we might be able to discover this from other sources – contemporary newspaper reports, for instance. But the accounts of listeners bring facts to life in a particularly striking way: after the 1851 religious census, the days of the Anglican Church as the established church of Wales were numbered, and the subsequent journey towards disestablishment has been well documented, but an episode like that of the Bangor Cathedral *cymanfa* casts a comic and very human light on the disquiet of the Anglican Church at its diminished status in Welsh life as the ultimate penalty of disestablishment drew ever closer. It is tempting to ask in what sources other than the accounts of listeners we would find these little flashes of insight.

Listening experiences should also warn us to think beyond the accepted orthodoxies and interpretations. I don't mean to suggest that the versions of historians and commentators who come along after the fact are any less real *to them*, or any less important to *their* purposes – indeed, they may have a very specific and legitimate significance, as with the mythologization of the *gwerin* and the way the *plygain* has been woven into it. But the way that listeners experienced that same music may have been different, or perhaps more to the point, it may have had different

meanings to different listeners. Thus, for some the *cymanfa ganu* was an experience of profoundly spiritual 'feeling through singing', for others with a different motivation it was the 'outpouring' of Welsh 'aspiration', for others it was a testament to respectability in troubled times. While these accounts often document what can seem like minor details, and while they may tell us little or nothing specific about repertoire or emotional response, they can nonetheless bring to life past experiences of music in ways that demonstrate that these experiences may not have been quite as we expect or are led to believe by the orthodox interpretations and received opinions.