Claire Cochrane

The Contaminated Audience: Researching Amateur Theatre in Wales before 1939

As concepts of nationhood and national identity become increasingly slippery, so the theatre historian attempting to recover neglected histories submerged within the dominant discourse of the nation state needs to be wary of imposing an ideologically predetermined reading on the surviving evidence of performance practice and audience response. It is also important to acknowledge that theatre practice which represents the majority experience of national audiences does not necessarily conform to the subjective value judgements of the critic-historians who have tended to produce a limited, highly selective historical record. In attempting to re/write the history of twentieth-century British theatre Claire Cochrane has researched the hitherto neglected area of amateur theatre which was a widespread phenomenon across the component nations. Focusing in this article on the cultural importance of amateur theatre in Welsh communities before the Second World War, she explores the religious, socio-political, and topographical roots of its rapid expansion, and the complex national identities played out in the collaboration between actors and audience. Claire Cochrane lectures in drama and performance studies at University College Worcester. Her most recent book is *Birmingham Rep: a City's Theatre, 1962–2002* (Sir Barry Jackson Trust, 2003). She is currently working on a history of twentieth-century British theatre practice for Cambridge University Press.

EDWARD SAID suggests in *Culture and Imperialism* that we 'reread' the cultural archive 'not univocally but *contrapuntally*, with a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts'.[1] That simultaneity of awareness of multiple histories – allied to the fact that not all are constructed in direct opposition to the dominating discourse, but that some actually cooperate with it – seems to me to be crucial to the historiographic endeavour to come to terms with the contradictions which the rereading process inevitably uncovers. Moreover, if a univocal reading predicated on the dominating discourse is to be rejected, so it should be avoided in the reading of others. We inhabit, as the anthropologist James Clifford has said, concurring with Said, 'an ambiguous multivocal world'.[2]

Explicating his dream of 'a liberated anthropology', Victor Turner describes how he became disillusioned with the modernist stress on 'fit and congruence' characteristic of his early training.[3] Putting human performance, in whatever form it manifests itself, at the centre of anthropological observation means that the 'contamination' of the 'flaws, hesitations, personal factors, incomplete, elliptical, context-dependent, situational components of performance'[4] gives vital clues to the nature of human process. One of the challenges of recovering marginalized, parallel histories in theatre, as with any cultural practice, is also to let go of the scholarly convenience of 'fit and congruence' and accept the contamination of context.

The problem of 'contaminated' research data is compounded when the theatre practice itself has been traditionally regarded as 'impure'. I have argued elsewhere that the historian has a responsibility to what I called 'the pervasiveness of the commonplace': that is theatre – in this case amateur theatre – experienced by majority audiences which does not fulfil the traditionally accepted criteria of artistic excellence or innovation.

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The record of twentieth-century theatre has been dictated by historians whose highly selective narratives of the past derive from their own cultural and critical preferences. The experience of the past has effectively been filtered through the perspective of the critic-historian sitting as audience in her own favoured performance environment.[5]

As Susan Bennett points out, acknowledging that 'higher discourses can restrict our understanding of theatre by limiting the codes which are used to recognize and interpret the theatrical event. . . . Within cultural boundaries, there are . . . obviously different viewing publics.'[6] In the case of amateur theatre the viewing public may well have entirely different expectations of performance predicated on entirely different relations with the performers.

The 'Play' of Theatre

In Wales, in the early 1930s, performances by a professional touring company, the Welsh National Theatre Players, met with meagre support from local audiences. What made the failure all the more bitter was the extraordinary appetite for amateur performance as evinced by the hundreds of small drama groups which operated across the country. Many regularly took part in local festivals and competitions known as eisteddfodau, attracting in the case of the annual National Eisteddfod audiences running into thousands.

In exasperation, in 1934, one spurned professional demanded whether these audiences were really interested in plays or 'whether they go *merely* [my emphasis] to see their friends or their sisters or their sweethearts or brothers, performing in varying stages of perfection or imperfection'.[7] The answer to the question may not be as obvious as the speaker's rhetoric implied, and that pejorative 'merely' is significant. For the professionals who wanted Welsh theatre to speak both to and on behalf of the Welsh nation, the artistic excellence of the representation was of vital importance. For the individuals who lived through the economic and demographic turbulence that shaped and reshaped life in Welsh communities in the first half of the twentieth century, the 'play' of theatre fulfilled different kinds of cultural need.

The assumption that this commonplace phenomenon is 'not-theatre' has, I have suggested, led to the virtual silencing of half a century of extensive theatrical activity. 'Real' theatre in Wales only begins to emerge in the 1960s with more sustained and state-funded attempts to stabilize professional initiatives.[8] Even in 1949, not long after the founding of the Arts Council of Great Britain, Arts Council officers directing policy from London for 'the theatreless areas' had difficulty establishing a viable building-based professional company in the large industrial town of Swansea, although there was already a strong network of amateur companies in that community.[9]

The effect on the record of theatre practice in Wales demonstrates what Said has called a 'striking asymmetry' of parallel discourses. 'In one instance, we assume that the better part of history in colonial territories was a function of the imperial intervention; in the other, there is an equally obstinate assumption that colonial undertakings were marginal and perhaps even eccentric to the central activities of the great metropolitan cultures.' The theatre historian becomes like Said's 'western super-subject whose historicizing and disciplinary rigour either takes away or, in the post-colonial period, restores history to people and cultures "without" history'.[10]

What made Wales seem even more marginal and eccentric within the British state is that Welsh was a vigorous, living language serving as a medium of identity and exclusivity even when the majority were bilingual. Large numbers of pre-Second World War amateur drama groups were of Welsh-speakers (although rarely monoglot Welsh) who inhabited the typically small, scattered rural communities created by a topography dominated by vast, barren mountain uplands. As the groups were both dependent on the productivity of local Welsh-language dramatists and often unable to pay even modest authors' fees, the play-producing industry remained hand-to-mouth and was inevitably little known. Of the limited contemporary accounts, most are written in Welsh. The

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small, bilingual Gomer Press has recently published a slim, Welsh-language account of the movement, consisting mostly of photographs, and appearing to assume a relatively small and local constituency of interest.[11]

A univocal reading of this parallel history suggests defiant resistance to cultural colonialism mounted from within tightly-knit communities bound together by a shared local and national identity. This may suit the desire for fit and congruence, but a truly contrapuntal reading reveals a context-derived contamination which emphasizes the problematics associated with Said's juxtaposition of 'against which' and 'together with which' as well as questions about national identity.

Imperialism best achieves its objectives in colonized territories not by direct oppression but through negotiated mutual interests. At the height of British imperial power at the end of the nineteenth century, the huge industrial resources provided by each of the component nations of the United Kingdom created constantly shifting, diverse, transnational communities not only dependent on but actually eager to participate in the imperial project. There were large communities of Welsh in English urban areas, especially in cities like Liverpool and Birmingham relatively close to the Welsh border, and of course in London. Inside Wales, in a pattern of economic migration that was replicated in Scotland and Northern Ireland, there was much internal movement from the increasingly impoverished rural areas to the booming coalfields in industrial south Wales. Equally, the indigenous English-speaking population was augmented by a substantial influx of English speakers from outside Wales drawn by the demand for labour.

Linguistically, while the industrial areas were thus heavily anglicized, there were still significant Welsh-speaking communities sustained by the internal migration. In terms of everyday social intercourse, Welsh remained strong. However, in education through from elementary schools to higher education in the federated colleges of the University of Wales, English remained the authorized language of instruction and so of opportunity.[12] The Welsh actor and dramatist Emlyn Williams, who achieved major success in the London theatre in the 1930s, described being taken as a child in 1915 to see 'one of those homely pieces written about "village folk"', performed in the local town hall. The play featured a blacksmith together with a real anvil which threw out real sparks, but it was performed in Welsh 'and so to me, as dull as real life, without having me in the middle of it'. Even if the play had been a brilliant translation of *Romeo and Juliet* he would, he claimed, 'have resisted the sound of my own language'.[13]

Audience as Site of Ideological Contest

One surely incontrovertible fact about twentieth-century theatre is that the audience was (and continues to be in the new century) a site of ideological contest. No audience in history has been so variously entertained/dazzled/exploited, educated/enlightened/reformed/challenged/invited to interact/participate, and wooed. At the same time, while the contempt for audiences who refuse to respond as required has remained a continuous theme of theatre discourse for centuries, it was only in the twentieth that it became exponentially more vociferous.

Up till the 1960s, Welsh audience exposure to home-produced professional theatre was very limited. The reasons for this are complicated. Standard (and usually very short) historical surveys of Welsh theatre emphasize the fact that there was no tradition of indigenous drama in either language.[14] This has been attributed to the repressive effect of extreme protestantism and also (arguably primarily) because the topography restricted the growth of large urban areas and urban culture conducive to the development of theatre. Travel by road from north to south of the country was difficult, creating a longstanding cultural division between North Walians and South Walians.

The railway system was designed to facilitate movement between Wales and England rather than across Wales. This meant that the metropolitan and commercial theatre culture could in a limited way reach Welsh audiences.[15] London-based artists could travel to

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virtually every corner of the British Isles to be welcomed and indeed celebrated by local audiences. What alarmed some commentators, more anxious to develop an indigenous drama, however, was the way in which the audience celebration of metropolitan theatre and mainstream English drama turned into the enjoyment of actively performing mainstream English drama (wanting a piece of imperial prestige, if you like), even when the necessary technical skills and resources were clearly absent.

Across the British Isles, however, relations with metropolitan culture were made more complex by what were effectively cultural missionaries from outside the local context (Annie Horniman and Alfred Wareing being the best-known examples[16]), who attempted to develop national theatres and audiences. In Wales, the Welsh-speaking English aristocrat Lord Howard de Walden, equally at home in his castle in North Wales and the London establishment milieu, devoted a sizeable proportion of his fortune to promoting and nurturing Welsh drama and theatre, including the various doomed attempts at establishing a touring national company.[17]

His most ambitious single project was to commission the Russian director Theodore Komisarjevsky to stage a Welsh translation of Ibsen's *The Pretenders* with a huge cast of amateur actors for the National Eisteddfod at Holyhead, off North Wales, in 1927.[18] Ibsen's own nationalist concerns, together with his preoccupation with flawed moral codes and hypocrisy, could be linked directly to the thematic content of far less well-known Welsh drama. But, more importantly, a community-based Welsh experience of theatre was to be seen as part of a much wider movement which transcended national boundaries while simultaneously enabling the imagined nation to be reified through language and in the context of a peculiarly Welsh festival event.

Social Engineering and Invented Traditions

In surveying the generalized scepticism, even hostility, with which many historians have sought to understand the phenomenon of nation and nationalism, the historian Anthony D. Smith cites Eric Hobsbawm's view of the nation as the most important of the lasting 'invented traditions' bolstered by 'national symbols, histories, and the rest' which can be reduced to 'exercises in social engineering which are often deliberate and always innovative'.[19] Hobsbawm's argument is backed by amongst others Hugh Trevor-Roper in an essay which describes the invention of a pseudo-medieval Scottish Highlands tradition which enhanced the English landowner/tourist's enjoyment of Scotch mist and mountains and influenced the development of the Kailyard School of sentimental rural Scottish fiction and drama.[20]

In the same collection of essays, Prys Morgan gives a detailed account of largely eighteenth- and nineteenth-century attempts to excavate, and in some cases actually counterfeit, fragments of the Welsh past in order to represent ideas of 'Welshness' in invented traditions which would rescue Wales from complete cultural assimilation into England.[21] The irony was that attempts to imagine a Wales of rich cultural traditions – a land of poets and musicians – was not just about reaffirming national consciousness: it was also about redressing long-held metropolitan prejudice derived from past Welsh adherence to older popular customs which had been eradicated by 'civilizing' English control.

The other 'imagined nation' of Godfearing sobriety imposed by nonconformist protestantism (especially Calvinist Methodism, which exercised the greatest control over Welsh Christian communities and regarded theatre as the source of all licentiousness) was then revisioned by an increasingly liberal chapel culture bent on safeguarding 'all that was best in Welsh life'.[22] However, that it was the anti-theatrical prejudice of an austere theocracy which was solely responsible for blocking the development of drama in Wales is as unstable an assertion as the suggestion that the chapel somehow authorized the explosion in participatory theatre in the first decade of the twentieth century. Although the Welsh landscape was littered with chapels and churches, statistically by

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the mid-nineteenth century half the population did not attend Christian worship at all.

That said, when drama groups became part of the extensive communal activities promoted by the chapels, the fact that the nonconformist homiletic tradition had prioritized flamboyantly histrionic preaching skills – the art of the *hwyl*[23] which transfixed the congregation/audience – made it possible for the ministers, who often led and wrote for the groups, to claim that the Welsh were *naturally* theatrical.

The historian Tim Williams insists that 'the dominant shaping force' in Welsh society was industrialization, which brought (along with the benefits of increased opportunity, income, and more diverse leisure pursuits) fragmentation, alienation, labour conflict, and other previously unimaginable pressures.[24] Chapel culture, while frequently utilizing the energies of the same dynamic individuals, operated in parallel with the labour organizations, friendly societies, and trade unions. If the chapel culture extended beyond worship and the highly influential network of Sunday schools into literary and debating groups, choirs, and play-producing societies, so the spirit of self-education and creative leisure was also fostered by miners' halls and mechanics' institutes.

A crucial factor was what Williams calls 'control from below'.[25] In chapel culture this meant the power which congregations or 'vestries' had over their ministers, and their ability to dictate and organize their own interests. The same applied in workers' organizations which resisted attempts to impose educational opportunity from above. The Independent Working-Class Education Movement formed in the early 1900s produced a whole new generation of trade union and political leaders. Many of the chapels and workers' halls and institutes which architecturally dominated small communities were built by the community users out of their own incomes. Play-producing activities provided enjoyable communal recreation, especially in the long dark winter evenings, but the funds raised from packed public performances also helped sustain the fabric of community life.

The permanent effects of the physical landscape itself imposed conditions of existence which shaped social and cultural practice. The mountains and valleys, whether surrounding the northern slate quarries, the rural hill farms, or the industrialized south, generated a peculiarly intense environment. The coalfield valleys in the south were extremely narrow, so that the characteristic mining village was a long, thin strip wedged between the mountains. If the rural communities were very small and enclosed, in the mining valleys the density of population was extraordinarily high. Elsewhere in England and Wales there was an average of 618 people per square mile. In the Rhondda mining valleys in 1911 the average was 23,680 per square mile.[26]

Cultural Effects of the Depression

In 1934 during the Depression, which hit Wales very badly because of its disastrous dependency on a few key industries, the Anglo-Welsh dramatist Richard Hughes described a packed audience of some two thousand, mostly miners and school teachers:

> It was hard for him to remind himself that outside these walls lay not a large city but only one blob in that clotted string of dwellings which winds its length up the Rhondda Valley – a town only one street thick where coal-grimed sheep come down at night from the hills, and bleat among tramlines in search of garbage.[27]

The American anthropologist Carol Trosset whose book *Welshness Performed* is based on her research living in the Welsh-speaking communities of north-west Wales during the 1980s, has argued that Welsh regional identities are based on:

> sectarian principles of organization. . . . Each principle according to which social identities can be differentiated gives rise to a set of rival affiliations, each member focused on the boundaries that separate it from its fellows.[28]

Personal identity, she claims, is strongly tied to an individual's *bro*, or small geographical area of origin. Extrapolating a national characteristic from a relatively small sample of Welsh speakers who now only make up some

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20 per cent of the total population is clearly problematic, but it is tempting to project this theory back to the particular circumstances, experiences, and expectations of Welsh audiences in the 1920s and 1930s.

During the Depression, those communities, locked together in hardship – or at the very least, consciousness of hardship – could use cultural performance as 'a way of scrutinizing the quotidian world',[29] as Victor Turner put it. They could present themselves to themselves through the medium of dramatic genres, 'playing' in separate time and place away from everyday social concerns, work, or the agony of not having work. Turner suggested that:

> the performances and their settings may be likened to loops in a linear progression, when the social flow bends back on itself, in a way does violence to its own development, meanders, inverts, perhaps lies to itself, and puts everything so to speak into the subjunctive mood as well as the reflexive voice.[30]

If the product of this is *communitas* as Turner explained it in 1974, then anti-structural bonds – 'undifferentiated, equalitarian, direct, extant, nonrational, existential' – are forged between the participants.[31]

The Welsh communities which engaged in this activity were clearly highly organized but forced to function within an overall state economic structure which was in deep trauma. The movement into subjunctive mood via the transportation of performance, while obviously therapeutic, was also anti-structural in the sense that there was a different set of cultural values which could temporarily blot out societal divisions based on class, economic or professional power, and distance.[32] Indeed, as we have already seen, the division between amateur and professional could be almost wilfully rejected even to the extent of the irrationality, the *lying to itself*, associated with the selection of dramatic genres.

When initiatives to develop Welsh drama had first begun tentatively in the 1880s, with amateur productions of new Welsh history plays, and then moved via the bilingual, so-called 'Aberystwyth Group'[33] to produce work comparable on a minor scale with the 'New Drama' staged in England, each event could be constructed as liminal/liminoid. Existing constraints, both ideological and economic, were challenged by a movement posed on the threshold of future possibilities. That existing structures (apart from extreme doctrinal opposition) remained in place, absorbing and regularizing potential radicalism, was mainly due, as we have seen, to much bigger, essentially imperial, economic and political contingencies. But those existing structures had also developed mechanisms which could contain cultural innovation by validating it in ways which helped stabilize communal self-esteem.

Legitimization of the new Welsh drama came with the chance to submit productions for assessment in the National Eisteddfodau, with a prize first awarded in 1915 at the Bangor National Eisteddfod.[34] The framework of such a festival at local, regional, or national level was obviously inherently conservative, with participants, performers, and writers striving to achieve the approbation of the festival adjudicators. It is unlikely that the more individualistic, more directly playful liminoid activities that Turner believed to emerge from complex industrial societies could within such a competitive context prove subversive in any substantive way.[35]

The Pyramid of Eisteddfodau

That said, battling to preserve not just an identity but also viability and confirmation of communal values through cultural performance in a society under stress becomes a bulwark against disintegration. Extrapolating from her experience of eisteddfodau, especially the National Eisteddfodau which she witnessed in the 1980s, Carol Trosset has argued that: 'There is a prestige system in Wales . . . one in which people are honoured for the committed performance of ethnically relevant activities and for their demonstrated skill at these pursuits'.[36]

While the developed model of the eisteddfod which emerged in the twentieth century undoubtedly included 'invented' elements – especially the Gorsedd (throne) of Bards,

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introduced in the early nineteenth century – the 'session' (the basic meaning of eisteddfod), which consisted of a set of musical and poetic competitions, had its origins in the twelfth century. By the end of the nineteenth century there was a nationwide pyramid of eisteddfodau.[37] Probably thousands were held at grass roots level in chapels and in working men's halls, then came more prestigious but still numerous regional events, and finally the National Eisteddfod which moved annually between locations in North and South Wales.

These ritual events, which drew on the bank of accumulated play capital at both the micro and macro level, brought together communities to perform to and validate the performance of each other. In her essay on the National Eisteddfod as ritual spectacle published in 1998, which challenges Trosset's view that it represents an idea of single and hegemonic Welshness, the Welsh anthropologist Charlotte Aull Davies discusses the complex role of the audience. She acknowledges the way the spectacle

> is affected by the nature of the audience, both the actual crowds who watch and those who are imagined to be observing. Furthermore, the audience is part of the spectacle, is itself spectacle, and its ways of participating – audience performances – may reconstruct the nature and meaning of the spectacle itself.[38]

Eyewitness accounts of the spectacle of the audience in the 1920s and 1930s testify to its performative nature. Olive Ely Hart, who published in 1928 the single full-length English-language study of early twentieth-century Welsh drama, described the audience for the play competition at the 1925 Pwllheli National Eisteddfod, held not in the main pavilion but in the town hall.[39] There was a mixed audience: old men and 'women who looked even older', boys and girls dressed in their best clothes, 'rowdy-looking boys' perched on windowsills, babies on mothers' laps. Lord Howard de Walden sat with the mayor at the front of the balcony:

> From the moment the curtain went up, however, the entire crowd, mixed though it was, sat in breathless attention. Even the babies looked on with rapt eyes and with hands poised to applaud. The rowdy boys scarcely moved; the whole audience seemed bound by a mutual sympathy and interest which charged the air with emotional tenseness. Great gusts of laughter rolled out, and tears streamed down faces, old and young.[40]

How far this audience was itself imagined in Hart's emotional engagement is a moot point. She felt, she wrote 'very Celtic' just by walking in the crowds. There is plenty of evidence, however, to confirm the seriousness with which audiences contemplated the event, and money would be carefully saved to pay for the same seats for a week's worth of performances.

Richard Hughes describes the importance of the adjudication process and the effect on the audience. Very few left the theatre, but waited for some twenty minutes for the critic to collect his thoughts. Then they listened for nearly an hour while he discussed the whole range of the week's performances. 'They seemed to take as keen an interest in criticism as in acting, to savour it themselves as critically.'[41]

Victor Turner wrote that ritual and drama involves selves, not self:

> Yet the aggregate of selves in a given community or society is often thought of, metaphorically, as a self. Nevertheless, in practice, the plural reflexivity involved allows free play to a greater variability of action: actors can be subdivided so as to allocate to some the roles of agents of transformation and to others those of persons undergoing transformation.[42]

Can we see in these ambiguous, multi-vocal products of a complex industrial society the overarching frame of ritual practice which permits, however partially, both reflexivity and transformation?

Charlotte Aull Davies argues that the central activity of such public spectacles as it is currently experienced is 'the recognition of individual accomplishments in ways that alter permanently the social status of those so exalted. Furthermore, participants, and more particularly organizers, often regard them as having a serious purpose of collective representation'. However, she also insists that 'the spectacle should be seen as dynamic . . . a site for contesting meaning' which

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will change with time.[43] Certainly what emerges from the desultory, inadequate, hard-to-access records of amateur theatre in this period of Welsh history points to communities of interest at variance with each other. Voices, as it were from the audience, debate fundamental principles as they attempt to construct a representative theatre tradition. But what is also clear, I think, because of the nature of the relationship between all participants, is that we can consider this aggregate of selves 'as a self': theatres functioning – contrapuntally to be sure, but within a national framework which needs to be explored more fully.

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14. For example, the entry on 'Drama' in Meic Stephens, ed., *The New Companion to the Literature of Wales* (University of Wales Press, 1998), p. 185–6.
15. See the short overview by Cecil Price, *The Professional Theatre in Wales* (University College of Swansea, 1984).
16. Annie Horniman financed the founding of the Abbey Theatre in Dublin in 1904 before returning to England to establish the first English repertory theatre company in Manchester in 1908. Alfred Wareing founded the Glasgow Repertory Theatre in 1909.
17. Thomas Evelyn Scott-Ellis (Lord Howard de Walden) has been virtually forgotten, although he was active in community drama throughout the United Kingdom. See the entry in *The New Companion to the Literature of Wales*, p. 669–70.
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30. Ibid., p. 25.
31. Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Cornell University Press, 1974), p. 274.
32. Trosset notes, however, that status structures based on economic and social class are perceived to be relatively weak in Wales. See *Welshness Performed*, p. 80.
33. Olive Ely Hart, *The Drama in Modern Wales: a Brief History of Welsh Playwriting from 1900 to the Present Day* (University of Philadelphia Press, 1928), p. 9–43.
34. Ibid., p. 14–15
35. Prizes were withheld from plays with controversial content despite obvious artistic merit. Also, plays were subject to the English system of censorship.
36. *Welshness Performed*, p. 55.
37. *The Hunt for the Welsh Past*, p. 56–62.
38. Charlotte Aull Davies, '"A oes heddwch?": Contesting Meanings and Identities in the Welsh National Eisteddfod', in Felicia Hughes-Freeland, ed., *Ritual, Performance, Media* (Routledge, 1998), p. 141–59, p. 142.
39. The most prestigious competitions (i.e. in poetry and music) were held in the main pavilion, which was usually a large purpose-built structure which could accommodate very large audiences. As indicative of its lesser status as a Welsh art form, the drama competitions were held at that time elsewhere in the locality.
40. *The Drama in Modern Wales*, p. 71.
41. *The Bookman*, p. 98.
42. *The Anthropology of Performance*, p. 25.
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