Kayaking and hiking are some of the eco-friendly activities possible along the Pembrokeshire coast near St. Davids. Photo by Paul Villecourt

WALES

by Jan Morris

Wales is a wonder, and a fascinating one: tantalizing, often ambiguous, sometimes maddening, inspirational to many, inexplicable to some, but never, even to its sternest critics, never for a moment *dull*.

It is a peninsula, largely mountainous, protruding into the Irish Sea from the English mainland of Britain, and even this definition needs clarification. England is part of the British State, and so is Wales, sharing a monarchy and a government. But Wales is distinctly a separate nation, half-way to self-rule, with its own language, its own history, its own customs, styles, and preferences. For centuries, on and off, the Welsh and the English fought each other. Although since 1535 their two countries have been constitutionally united, still their peoples generally feel themselves separate and different, and the age-long antipathy has been refined into a kind of humorous love-hate.

Of course the English far outnumber the Welsh, but so far Wales has successfully maintained its identity against all the odds. Its population is about three million (much the same as Iowa's), inhabiting a seagirt country of about 8,000 square miles (roughly the same size as Massachusetts). Some of it is fertile lowland, much of it heroic highland, and it is not only the Welsh themselves who consider it one of the most beautiful places on earth.

Iwan Bala, *Hon IV*, 2004. Ink, acrylic, and charcoal on Khadi paper. This fanciful map of Wales plays on the form of the traditional Welsh costume. Courtesy of Iwan Bala

It is also one of the dampest, at least in Europe, and it is partly this demanding climate, partly challenging circumstances, and partly native bloody-mindedness that has made the Welsh a distinctive sort of people. Their lot in history has seldom been easy. They have been up against mighty enemies—first Saxons and Vikings, then Normans, then the English from next door—and for centuries they were plagued too by incessant rivalries among their own native princes. When for brief periods they seemed to be achieving some sort of united sovereignty, it was soon broken by the English kings, in their long and eventually successful campaigns to control such troublesome neighbors. The military heroes of old Wales were all losers in the end, however epically they had fought for their causes. But they are honored still in the country because of a Welsh predilection for the occult and the surreal, which encourages the people to portray their champions as more than ordinarily human.

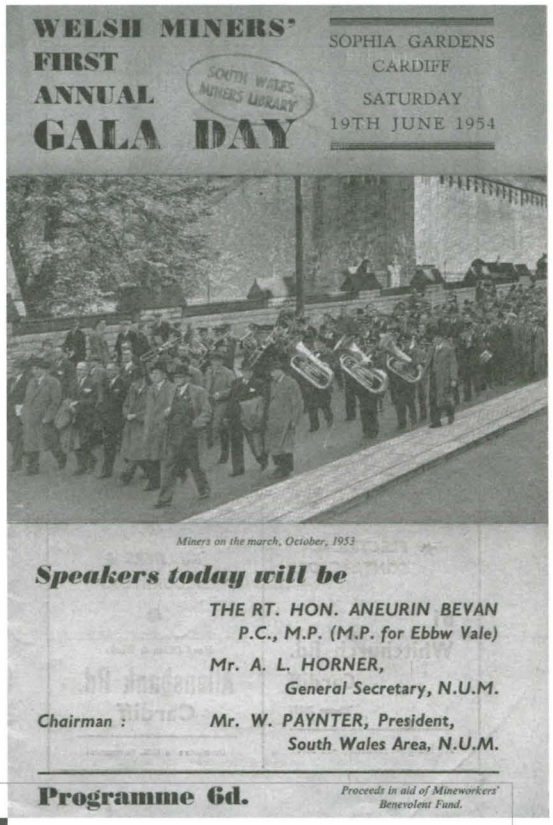
Over the centuries the Welsh veiled their past in splendid fable. Their visionary tendencies were given strength by a mystic Christianity, derived from the indigenous Celtic church of long before, and by the Welsh passion for poetry, which is vibrant still. It flourishes alike in the ancient Welsh language, one of the oldest literary tongues in the world, in English which is the lingua franca of the majority, and in a creative Anglo-Welsh sort of hybrid. And with a gift for poetry and drama goes a profound love of music. From celebrated male voice choirs to internationally famous opera singers, from folk ensembles to rock groups, from a myriad of amateur harpers to enormous sporting crowds belting out the national anthem—through the very meaning of Wales has reverberated music in all its forms. Nowhere in Europe have music and poetry been more exuberantly celebrated than in the Welsh folk-festivals called Eisteddfodau, climaxing still in the peripatetic national Eisteddfod which happens once a year, and for a few days sets a locality afire with flags and singing and declamatory verse.

For susceptible romantics like me, all this heritage—historic, artistic, and temperamental—has made the idea of Wales very like a place of dreams: an ideal land of justice and beauty, opaque its past, magnificent its landscapes. The great national game of Wales is rugby football, and there are many people around the world who think of the country chiefly in terms of scrums and goals and muscle-power. Some of us, though, see in the very style of Welsh rugby, too, in its particular subtleties and flashes of grace, symptoms of this people's inherited affinity with marvels.

To others our utopia of the imagination seems more like cloud-cuckoo-land, and in a way they are right. Of course Wales is not all songs, poems, fighting princes, and glorious practitioners of rugby. For all too many of its people, down the centuries, it offered only begrudging livings, scratched from a harsh soil or pursued in unforgiving mountains. It was a rural society of landed estates, parsons, peasantry, quarry-men, and seafaring folk, with hardly a town bigger than a village.

Things fundamentally changed, though, with the Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century. If Wales was rich in anything, it was rich in coal and iron, the fuels of that terrific historical progression. Wales briefly became, in the profoundest sense, a world power, and for the first time big Welsh cities and seaports came into being. Cardiff the capital, Swansea, and Newport, the three largest cities now, are all largely the creations of nineteenth-century industrialization, not so very long ago; and so it is that to this day, side by side with the pristine natural beauties of the place are valleys filled with straggling industrial conurbations. Sometimes a simple drive over a country ridge can take you from one kind of civilization to another—from the immemorially pastoral into the relentlessly materialist.

They are both as Welsh as each other, though, and to another kind of romantic the industrial valleys of the Welsh south are as archetypically Welsh as the magical mountains of the north. In the nineteenth century hundreds of thousands of people, many from other parts of Wales, many more from England and abroad, rushed into the coal and iron fields in search of riches or better living. It was like one of the gold rushes of newer worlds, and it created a vast new Welsh working class—instead of a rural peasantry, an urban proletariat.



(Above) A poster advertises the first South Wales Miners' Gala held on June 19, 1954. Photo courtesy of South Wales Miners' Library, Swansea University

(Left) The mountainous landscape of North Wales is punctuated by fences made of slate, eloquently illustrating this abundant natural resource. Photo by Robert Schneider, Smithsonian Institution

... it says something for the fiber of the national psyche that through all these permutations of history the Welsh identity has remained so recognizable.—Jan Morris

A powerful society came into being there, sustained by the mines, the ironworks, the new railways and the ports that sent the products of Wales to the far corners of the earth. There was much squalor, there were many slums, but there was also a profound sense of social conscience and community. Pub life flourished, political parties were born, literary and musical societies abounded, and above all grand surges of religious feeling, fueled by a thousand non-conformist chapels, brought nobility to the meanest cottages and comfort to the poorest families.

Nowadays those once-blackened coal valleys, with the pit-wheels turning above them, have lost their former occupations. Hardly any coal is mined in Wales today, and most of those multitudinous chapels have closed their doors. The grim coalfield towns of film and legend have been cleaned up and re-painted. Some have found new status as archaeological and tourist specimens, others have energetically turned to modern productive functions —electronics, avionics, technological research, higher education. What they have lost in character they have gained in prosperity, and anyway they remain as manifestly Welsh as ever. If the Welsh language has faded there, along with the chapel sermons, the Anglo-Welsh language thrives in literature and lyric, linking a realist present with a still half-legendary past.

For anyway the powerful abstraction that is Welshness has long since been fertilized by change and alien strains. The roots of the Welsh were Celtic, but over the centuries any number of other races has contributed to the national mix, from the English who first infiltrated the peninsula to the many Asians, Africans, and continental Europeans who have settled in the country in our own times. The African and Chinese settlements in Wales were some of the earliest

The Centre for Alternative Technology's original pioneers pose in front of one of its first buildings, ca. 1970. The Centre began with utopian ideals of living off the land. Photo courtesy of Centre for Alternative Technology

in all Britain, and by now much of Wales thinks of itself as multi-ethnic (not every part of it, for there are rural regions where to this day hardly a foreigner has ever settled, unless you count the inescapable English).

By and large it has happened without much friction, and it says something for the fiber of the national psyche that through all these permutations of history the Welsh identity has remained so recognizable. Pride has something to do with this resilience. Many Welsh people are caustically critical of their country, but hardly a one of them, I venture to guess, is not proud of being Welsh. Some are proud of their rugby teams, or their actors, writers, musicians, and comedians. Some are proud of their ancient and apparently inexpungible language. Some are simply proud of their incomparable landscapes.

And some, like me, are proud of the dream, that old Welsh-utopian dream, and proud of the age-long determination of the Welsh people, whether through conflict, religion, or politics, to turn it into reality. The Welsh wars of survival have ended now, the power of religion has faded, but in peaceful politics the Welsh nation is gradually achieving fulfillment as a small, modern, technically advanced and artistically gifted corner of Europe. Since 1997 a National Assembly for Wales in Cardiff has assumed many of the powers of self-government, and little by little, year by year, its responsibilities are growing. Whether in the end Wales will be fulfilled as a truly sovereign state within the community of Europe, or as a constituent unit of a federal Britain, we are entitled to hope that its diverse Welshness will only be enriched as the new centuries pass, and that with luck one day the cloud-cuckoo-land of our fantasies will turn out to be true.

Jan Morris is the author of more than forty books of history, travel, biography, and fiction, including the Pax Britannica *trilogy about the climax and decline of the British Empire,* The World of Venice, Trieste and the Meaning of Nowhere, The Matter of Wales, *two autobiographical volumes, and five books of collected travel essays. An Honorary Litt.D. of the Universities of Wales and Glamorgan, an honorary Fellow of Christ Church, Oxford, a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, and a Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE), she lives in Wales.*

Anita Pearce (née Busuttil) and her daughters Leanne and Sara participated in the Mothers and Daughters project. Their family combines Maltese, Afro-Caribbean, and Welsh ancestry, thus exemplifying the multi-ethnic heritage of contemporary Wales. Photo by Glenn Jordan, courtesy of Butetown History & Arts Centre

IMAGES AND STORIES FROM MULTI-ETHNIC WALES: BUTETOWN HISTORY & ARTS CENTRE

by Glenn Jordan

Like most European nations, Wales is an ethnically diverse society. Especially in the old seaport areas of Cardiff and Newport, people of different ethnic and racial backgrounds have lived among one another for many years. Today, the city of Cardiff is said to have the highest percentage of mixed-race relationships of any city in Europe. Its Butetown community, often known as "Tiger Bay," has been seen for generations as a mecca of racial harmony.

Butetown History & Arts Centre is committed to promoting people's history and cultural democracy. Since 1987, BHAC has been collecting, preserving, and interpreting the history of immigrants and minorities in Wales from the Victorian period to the present. The Centre includes a gallery and spaces for education, and holds a unique collection of photographs, films, and audiotaped life stories. It also produces exhibitions and publishes scholarly materials.

The Centre's current major project is Mothers and Daughters: Portraits from Multi-Ethnic Wales. Consisting of more than sixty large, full-color photographic portraits and edited life stories, Mothers and Daughters will be a major touring exhibition and book by 2010.

Glenn Jordan, an activist, curator, and photographer, is founding director of Butetown History & Arts Centre and reader in cultural studies and creative practice at the University of Glamorgan. Born and raised in California, Glenn has lived in Cardiff since 1987, where he has been researching, photographing, and curating exhibitions on immigrants and minorities in Wales. He has published widely on race, identity, and visual culture.