

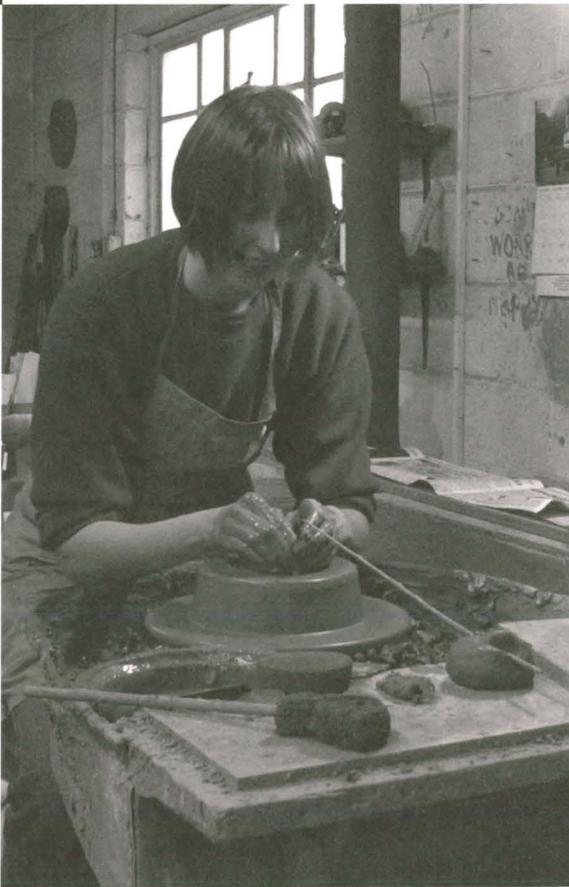
A SUSTAINABLE WALES: Connecting Past, Present, and Future

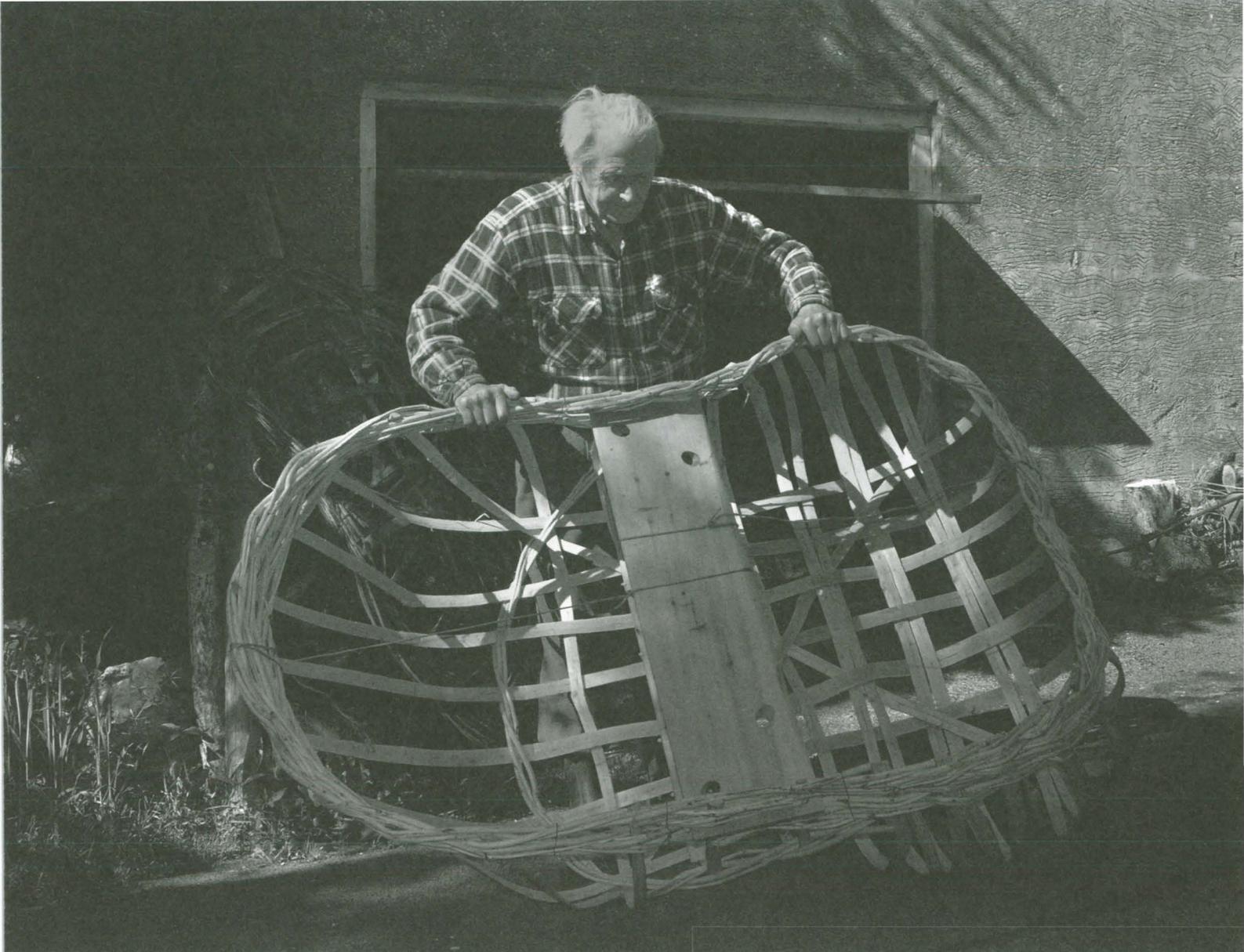


by Betty J. Belanus

(Right) Caitlin Jenkins, ninth-generation potter, builds an Ewenny vase. When time allows she also makes award-winning art pottery. Photo by Betty J. Belanus, Smithsonian Institution

(Far right) In this 1960s photo, Caitlin's grandfather, Thomas Arthur Jenkins, teaches the family craft to his children—Caitlin's Uncle David and Aunt Sïan. Ewenny Pottery in South Wales has been run by the same family since 1610. Photo courtesy of Ewenny Pottery





To Bernard Thomas, sustainability is a way of life. Thomas builds his own small boats called coracles, and he fishes for local salmon on the Teifi River near his home in rural West Wales. The coracle, which is still made using simple hand tools and natural materials such as split ash and pitch, dates back to prehistoric times when it was shaped from cowhide. Thomas, 85, is considered “the keeper of the river,” and today is visited regularly by people from as far away as New Zealand who wish to learn the secrets of building their own coracle.

To Doncasters, a large multinational corporation, sustainability is smart business. The Blaenavon, Wales, branch of the company, which manufactures metal parts for the high-tech aerospace, automotive, and petrochemical industries, won a prestigious prize at the Wales Business and Sustainability Awards in 2007 for its energy-reduction initiatives. Producing metal work in South Wales links Doncasters to a local iron industry that may date back to pre-Roman times, reaching its zenith in the early nineteenth century. Blaenavon was designated a

Bernard Thomas is a coracle maker and salmon fisherman from West Wales who carries an ancient practice into the twenty-first century. Photo by Tony Hadland, courtesy of St. Fagans: National History Museum

World Heritage Site in 2000, and the historic Blaenavon Ironworks is one of the town’s cultural destinations.

The small country of Wales sets an example of sustainable culture that links history and tradition to the latest alternative technologies, thereby providing a focus for the 2009 Smithsonian Folklife Festival program, *Wales Smithsonian Cymru*. Bernard Thomas and Doncasters are two ends of a spectrum of sustainability stretching throughout the history of Wales and into the future—continuing, preserving, and reviving older environmental practices as well as creating new ones. This continuum connects people within communities, regions, and nations, starting at the local level and radiating out around the globe.

The Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) is one of the few institutions in the world to have sustainable development included as one of the core principles within its statute. Written into the Government of Wales Act 1998 is a duty to promote sustainable development in the exercise of all the Government's functions. WAG aims to "promote development that meets the needs of the present . . . without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own social, economic, environmental and cultural needs."

Stories of individuals and groups illustrate the continuum of sustainability in Wales. While doing research for the *Wales Smithsonian Cymru* program, fieldworkers sought four types of sustainability relating to traditional culture in Wales: 1] keeping the best of traditional practices; 2] recycling in the broadest sense; 3] thinking globally, acting locally; and 4] planning for a sustainable future. They documented music and dance; storytelling; occupational skills such as farming and mining; the building arts; industrial heritage; outdoor pursuits; maritime arts; textile, ceramics, and wood crafts; and cooking, gardening, and traditional medicine. The four core sustainability concepts helped the fieldworkers make connections between genres, regions, and the skills and talents of potential participants, informing the program throughout its development.

### 1 | Keeping the Best of Traditional Practices

Traditional practices in Wales, as elsewhere, continue over generations into the modern world because they fulfill a personal or community need. For instance, the Welsh dresser, as described by Moira Vincentelli (right), still serves as a marker of identity as well as a functional display and storage space in many homes. Whether through the legacies of language, occupational skills, or stories, people in Wales find ways to keep the best of old customs while updating them to fit new uses and meet new challenges.

This Welsh dresser displays a well-organized collection of colorful china, drawing upon older traditions of home decoration.

Photo by Moira Vincentelli



## THE WELSH DRESSER

Moira Vincentelli

"The other dresser was a wedding present to my mother and father. I have not changed anything on it and it is still in the way my mother had it. It's easy to do because she had a list of all the wedding presents. . . . I always think of that as my mum and dad's dresser but this is my dresser. . . . This one is for me."—E.

In an interview in the early 1990s, E. contrasted her living-room dresser, preserved almost as a family shrine, with the one in the parlor that was her dresser. This latter piece was a hybrid of recently constructed shelves atop an older sideboard, but the furniture's quality was of no particular importance; it was the display that counted. Although created quite recently, E.'s display drew on older traditions with blue-and-white china and luster jugs. It also incorporated arrangements of natural objects and decorations made from wood, cones, and moss.

By age sixty-five, E. had spent much of her life looking after other people. Her father, who had always lived with her, had recently died and her children had grown up. She felt very strongly that the parlor was her domain and thus lavished her decorative and creative skills and attention on it. Sitting in this room, she reminisced about her life, her great-grandmother, and the dresser just a few feet away.

An icon of Welsh identity, the dresser gained its symbolic status in the late nineteenth century along with Welsh hats and spinning wheels. Combining storage and display, the dresser became a repository for distinctive arrays of colorful, mass-produced pottery.

During the twentieth century, as mass-produced furniture became available and fitted kitchens more fashionable, the dresser was sometimes consigned to the outhouse and the barn. However, interest revived after the 1960s, a period that also saw an improved fortune for the Welsh language. The Welsh people were again valuing dressers, both sentimentally and financially. By the early 1990s, women were using dressers to express their relationship with Wales and to adapt the decorative display to their own creative ends. The dresser is thus a dynamic piece of house decoration, both a touchstone for family memories and a vehicle for creative expression.

*Moira Vincentelli is senior lecturer in art history and curator of the Ceramic Collection at Aberystwyth University. She has published widely in the field of gender and ceramics and has made a particular study of women's collecting and Welsh dresser display.*



Laden with personal memorabilia and functional objects, this Welsh dresser is more than a piece of furniture. It symbolizes Welsh identity and creative expression. Photo by Moira Vincentelli

*Language isn't just for communication, it's about ideas and how ideas and thoughts are released. . . . Language is more than just the words.*—Iwan Bala

One of the most striking and wide-reaching examples of continuing cultural tradition in Wales is the Welsh language. West and North Wales have long acted as the strongholds of Welsh, which is currently spoken by about twenty percent of the country's 2.9 million people. Because of migration into Cardiff from other parts of Wales, as well as growing numbers of adult learners, the concentration of Welsh speakers in the capital continues to rise, numbering over 31,000 in the census of 2001.

Why encourage a language that is spoken only in a tiny corner of the world, and that many say is “dying”? One reason is that many people in Wales see an advantage in having the ability to speak a second language, be it Welsh, Urdu, or Chinese. A mandate of the Welsh Assembly Government is, in fact, to “strengthen Wales’ cultural identity and help to create a bilingual country, while looking confidently outwards and welcoming new cultural influences.” Additionally, Welsh speakers consider their language as part of their very being. As artist Iwan Bala puts it, losing one’s native language is “like giving up a part of yourself. Language isn’t just for communication, it’s about ideas and how ideas and thoughts are released. . . . Language is more than just the words.”

## 2 | Recycling in the Broadest Sense

The term “recycling” usually connotes the reuse of objects and materials such as glass bottles or worn clothing. Peter Harper’s article about the Centre for Alternative Technology describes how an abandoned slate quarry has been reused as an award-winning educational destination (see page 74). Not all recycling in Wales is done on such a grand scale; Siân Williams reports on the restoration efforts that bring new life to miners’ banners (see page 78). From music to craft materials to building complexes, Wales offers many lessons in creative reuse.

Welsh traditional musicians Gareth Westacott and Guto Dafis play together as Toreth, performing songs that have

gone from popular dance tunes to Methodist hymns and now back into secular tunes. The process, as they explain it, is more “reimagining” than recycling: “No one has played [these tunes] like we’re playing them for a couple of centuries. . . . So, there’s that combination of taking the traditional tune that you find in a book [with] the fun of bringing it back to life, giving it your own personality. We can listen to traditional music and be inspired, but we can do what we like with it.” A new Smithsonian Folkways recording, described by Ceri Rhys Matthews, also reflects this “reimagining” process brilliantly (see page 82).

## 3 | Thinking Globally, Acting Locally

Wales, once the leader in the very unsustainable practice of mining coal and shipping it around the globe, is now working toward a “zero-carbon” future. As Andy Middleton explains, the West Wales city of St. Davids is at the forefront of this effort (see page 73).

Throughout history, as Jan Morris observes in her introductory essay, Wales has always looked outward as well as inward. The country has been influenced by many cultures, from Roman invaders to the newest immigrants from South Asia and Eastern Europe. Glenn Jordan, director of the Butetown History & Arts Centre, describes in words and photographs how the multi-ethnic community around the shipping docks of Cardiff Bay came together to create a new culture (see page 65). The Black Environmental Network, based in North Wales, matches older and newer Welsh ethnic and immigrant communities with projects that help these groups experience and save Wales’s natural and urban environments. Muslim children from Newport in South Wales are taken for a day out to the Brecon Beacons National Park; a group of senior citizens from Swansea’s Chinese community embark on clean-up projects in their neighborhood; broken but serviceable bicycles are refurbished and used as environmentally friendly methods for getting to work or school.



## FIRST WORDS/DYSGU'R IAITH

by Gillian Clarke, translated by Elin ap Hywel

## First Words

The alphabet of a house—air,  
breath, the creak of the stair.  
Downstairs the grown-ups' hullabaloo,  
or their hush as you fall asleep.

You're learning the language: the steel slab  
of a syllable dropped at the docks; the two-beat word  
of the Breaksea lightship; the golden sentence  
of a train crossing the viaduct.

Later, at Fforest, all the words are new.  
You are your grandmother's Cariad, not Darling.  
Tide and current are llanw, lli.  
The waves repeat their ell-ell-ell on sand.

Over the sea the starlings come in paragraphs.  
She tells you a tale of a girl and a bird,  
reading it off the tide in lines of longhand  
that scatter to bits on the shore.

The sea turns its pages, speaking in tongues.  
The stories are yours, and you are the story.  
And before you know it you'll know what comes  
from air and breath and off the page is all

you'll want, like the sea's jewels in your hand  
and the sound of ell-ell-ell on sand.

*Gillian Clarke is a poet, playwright, editor, translator, and president of Ty Newydd, the writers' center in North Wales that she co-founded in 1990. In 2008, Clarke became Wales's third National Poet. Her work has been translated into more than ten languages. She has a daughter and two sons, and now lives with her husband on a small-holding in Ceredigion, where they raise a small flock of sheep.*

## Dysgu'r iaith

Dyma wyddor dy dŷ—aer,  
baldorodd dy anadl, conan y grisiau.  
Twrw'r oedolion lawr staer.  
Eu gosteg wrth iti glwydo.

Dysgu'r iaith wyt ti: dant dur  
y sillaf sy'n disgyn yn y dociau; curiad deusill  
goleulong Breaksea; brawddeg aur  
y trê'n sy'n croesi'r draphont.

Wedyn, yn Fforest, mae'r holl eiriau'n newydd.  
Darling dy fam-gu wyt ti, nid cariad.  
Ebb and flow yw'r enwau ar lanw a thrai.  
Mae'r tonnau yn poeri eu ow-ow-ow ar y traeth.

Fesul paragraff mae'r adar yn pontio'r lli.  
A dyma hi, yn adrodd hanes drudwen a merch,  
gan ddarllen y stori yn y penllanw  
sy'n ewynnu'n rhacs ar y traeth.

Troi'r ddalen wna'r môr, a llefaru mewn damhegion.  
Ti biau'r stori. Ti yw y stori,  
ac ar drawiad rwyt ti'n gwybod mai dyma dy gowlaid  
yn berlau'r môr rhwng dy fysedd

aer, ac anadl, a'r cwbl sydd ar ddalen  
fel cwyn yr ow-ow-ow ar y lan.

*Elin ap Hywel is a poet, translator, and editor who works in Welsh and English. She was the Royal Literary Fund's first bilingual fellow at the University of Wales. Formerly a translator for the National Museums and Galleries of Wales, her published work has been widely anthologized and translated into Czech, English, German, Italian, and Japanese.*

Hand-carved letters are still used at Gregynog, a small art press in Mid Wales. Photo courtesy of Gwasg Gregynog



#### 4 | Planning for a Sustainable Future

As the above stories illustrate, sustainability is built upon the rediscovery and reinterpretation of older practices. Traditions inform research and provide inspiration for modern-day solutions. To restore a medieval church, as Gerallt Nash explains in his article, craftsmen researched historic carvings and reimagined lost artworks in the spirit of the originals, creating inspiration for visitors in the present and future (see page 76).

The daffodil is an enduring symbol of Wales. Hundreds of them bloom in the early spring, usually in time for their display as part of the celebration of St. David (*Dewi Sant*), the Welsh patron saint. One Welsh pharmaceutical company, Alzeim Ltd., has found another use for these cheerful yellow flowers. A natural plant substance derived from the daffodil, called Galanthamine, has proven effective in treating Alzheimer's Disease. Alzeim Ltd. is currently expanding its daffodil-growing operation in an upland region of Wales in order to make the drug more available and affordable. For sufferers of this debilitating disease, acres of showy flowers on the Welsh countryside could soon signify more than just the coming of spring.



The archaeological exhibition "Origins," which opened in December 2007 at the Welsh National Museum in Cardiff, incorporates the work of contemporary artists whose interpretations of ancient Welsh artifacts and symbols add new meaning to these findings. One of the most eye-catching parts of the exhibition is an animation by artist Sean Harris from Oswestry in North Wales. Harris is one of the Welsh artists and filmmakers who are redefining the medium of animation. He and the animation company Cinetig frequently collaborate with schoolchildren, tapping into their creativity and boundless imaginations to create amazing pieces reflecting history, community, and culture.

Part of Harris's "Origins" piece features prehistoric (possibly mythical) ancestors who gather around an iron cauldron, the contents of which morph into waves upon which a small, round boat is set afloat. The viewer needs only turn around to see the archaeological artifacts that inspired these and other images in the piece. The small boat also evokes the coracle, the quintessentially Welsh vessel that Bernard Thomas crafts in his corner of West Wales. And the iron cauldron may be seen as the forerunner to the Welsh iron industry, which embraces the future in Doncasters' Blaenavon factory.

And so the ancient connects to the innovative, and all things old are born again. Perhaps the continuum of sustainability in Wales should be seen as more of a circle, bringing the best of traditional culture back around to meet a present-day need and move forward into tomorrow.

*Betty J. Belanus is not Welsh through ancestry, but has adopted Wales as her second home country. As part of curating the Wales Smithsonian Cymru program, she and her family lived in Cardiff during autumn 2007 under the auspices of a research fellowship at the University of Glamorgan's Centre for Media and Culture in Small Nations. She also visited the Welsh communities of Patagonia, Argentina, with the support of a Smithsonian Scholarly Studies grant in October 2008.*

TYF Group guides for the new adventure sport of "coasteering" are ready to walk and swim along the rocky coast line of Pembrokeshire, near St. Davids. Photo by Paul Villecourt