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Paul Robeson, Carnival, and the 2018 National Eisteddfod

By Dr. Mark Rhodes

Following my discussion of Welsh-American folk music connections at the National Eisteddfod in the previous issue of *Ninnau*, I turn to two specific events during the 2018 National Eisteddfod in Cardiff Bay: a musical in tribute to the African American Paul Robeson and an Afro-Caribbean inspired carnival parade. I reflect on how the National Eisteddfod, as one of the national institutions guiding culture and heritage in Wales, can offer unique possibilities into what and who is included in the Welsh nation. One inclusion is Paul Robeson. While certainly not surprising for those in Wales who routinely encounter Robeson's memory in places such as the National Waterfront Museum or the Manic Street Preachers hit song "Let Robeson Sing!", Americans may find this continued celebrity perplexing. After all, this All-American athlete, Hollywood Star, Grammy Award-winning artist, Broadway actor, and pre-Civil Rights activist is all-but-forgotten today. None-the-less, the National Eisteddfod commissioned the musical *Hwn yw fy Mrawd* [This is our Brother] in tribute to Robeson for the opening two nights of the festival.

The sold-out musical tells the story of a student who's asked to write about a Welsh hero. Mr. Jones, the music teacher played by the opera star Bryn Terfel, sees the student struggling with personal issues and the assignment, so he introduces the student to Paul Robeson. Starting with Robeson's parents and going into his time playing football and as a lawyer, the musical builds up to Robeson's Welsh connections - singing for striking miners, researching folk music, etc...

Hwn yw fy Mrawd symbolizes the slow transformation within Wales from a supposed toleration of difference to a true celebration. Bringing Robeson into the halls of the Millennium Centre commits Wales to the progressive politics of Robeson. After all, it houses the Welsh National Opera, and this was the opening of the *National Eisteddfod* in the national capital, Cardiff.

This all took place in the electoral district of Butetown where Middle Eastern, African, Afro-Caribbean, and African American immigrant workers settled alongside Welsh, English, and Irish to work the docks. Cardiff was, in fact, one of the largest coal ports in the world. In this context, performing a tribute to Robeson brings Robeson and all he represents "Codi o'r Cysgodion" ("From the Shadows," a song in the musical).

Using color, music, and poetry, *Hwn yw fy Mrawd* further made American connections through a student choir forcing the House Unamerican Activities Committee off stage, a jig to Langston Hughes's "Freedom Train," and African-American/Welsh artistry fighting against fascism for the return of Robeson's passport. The final and title number of the musical sees Matthew Gough's Robeson character overlooking the stage appearing to not only enjoy the performance but join in singing. "Robeson's" acknowledgement and approval of the musical here, placed the audience in a unique position. Beyond the many other symbols



The facade of the Wales Millennium Centre during the 2018 National Eisteddfod.

at work in the musical, they witnessed Robeson himself reinforcing the authenticity, power, and work which went into the production/memorialization of Paul Robeson in Wales.

This was a two-hour dialogue about Robeson's life and why Wales (and the world) should care about it. Using a combination of Welsh language, powerful music, and the context of the opening night(s) of the National Eisteddfod, this heroic narrative places Robeson at the center of Welsh nationalism. There was no need to state how Robeson may or may not have supported the Welsh language campaign, Welsh culture, or Welsh political autonomy, as these are already cornerstones of the National Eisteddfod and the national spaces in Cardiff where the performances took place: justification by association.

The second Celtic-American connection was the *Carnifal y Môr* [Carnival of the Sea]. I attended the *Carnifal* on its first night - the second evening of the eisteddfod - and was taken aback by the scope and intricacy of the parade. Comprised of a Welsh dragon, Dixieland, Afro-Caribbean, African, and Cuban music groups, and heavily-costumed dancers, much of the parade and its props were sea-themed. The procession slowly weaved its way from the Millennium Centre down to the Bay (again, we're still in Butetown, so the above observations also apply to this performance), but not without stopping while the Treorchy Male Voice Choir sang. Together - 200 parade performers, 50 choir members, 1500+ people from the evening outdoor concert and LGBTQ event, and 2000 attendees from the just-concluded *Hwn yw fy Mrawd* - they made their way down to the Bay. Everything ended with a music video composed and sung by Gruff Rhys of Super Furry Animals projected onto walls of water erupting out of Cardiff bay.

Carnifal y Môr - coupled with *Hwn yw fy Mrawd* and the open concept of the Eisteddfod itself [no walls and no entrance fees] - symbolized an unprecedented shift in the National Eisteddfod. It opens the idea of who and what is Welsh, as well as the role of colonialism both by and upon Wales in that discussion. The performances of the *carnifal* and musical, such as the song "Alaw Werin y Byd" ["The Folksong of the World" compiling Welsh, Russian, German, and African American folk music], channel the historic anti-colonial activism of Robeson and contemporary ongoing activism in Wales. They simultaneously seek redress for the colonial extraction of wealth and

resources from Wales, as well as the deeply imbedded ethnic and racial ideas of who can claim Welshness.

Overall, the influx of American influence, whether that is from Argentina, Canada, Jamaica, or the United States, strengthens rather than weakens Welsh identity. The continuation of these impacts from the Welsh diaspora reveal themselves at the Eisteddfod in the form of North and South American pavilions and music. Welsh music takes elements of strength and protest from Canadian, Argentinian, Caribbean, and U.S. counter-culture-turned-culture. Woody Guthrie's original lyrics from "This Land is Your Land" or Paul Robeson's own progressive rendition of "Old Man River" made their impact, and Welsh cultural movements over the past one hundred years have continually used those labor-oriented and anti-imperial elements of American pop culture to counter their own colonial



Carnifal y Môr lining up to begin on its opening night at the 2018 National Eisteddfod in Cardiff.



The 2018 National Eisteddfod ticket office. Paul Robeson and an advert for *Hwn yw fy Mrawd* on full display

cousins. The popularity of the North American Festival of Wales or the Trevelin Eisteddfod in Argentina harnesses the international energy Wales seeks in its continual struggle to remain a unique geopolitical and linguistic landscape.

Renewed interest in making these same global connections with Caribbean-Welsh immigrants and diaspora seeks to

accomplish similar goals of using anti-colonial or decolonial counter-culture and popular culture to not only continue countering English identity and influence, but transform a nation that has been tolerant thus far in word but not deed.

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16th ANNUAL MALAD VALLEY WELSH FESTIVAL June 26 - 27, 2020 Malad City, Idaho

- Presentations on Welsh heroes and history of Wales
- Poetry competitions and readings; chairing of the Bard of the Festival
- Fiction competition (must have Welsh or Welsh pioneer theme)
- Family choral and harp concert, youth concert, and piano ensemble concert
- Outdoor music by Celtic performers
- Wagon rides along historic streets of Malad City
- Quilt show and bake sale by the Oneida Quilters
- Art Walk and youth art competition and displays
- Malad Valley pioneer family displays of pedigree charts, census data, and artifacts (lots of Evanses, Joneses, Williamses, Prices, and Thomases)
- Displays about life in Wales, past and present
- Self-guided tours of Samaria, where the Welsh first settled in Oneida County
- Lots of kids' activities (pioneer-era games; bouncy castle; color-the-dragon contest; face painting, etc.)
- Food and craft booths, including "Taste of Wales" booth

For more information, see www.welshfestival.com
or call Malad City Office (208-766-4010).

