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Paul Ward, *Huw T. Edwards: British Labour and Welsh Socialism* (University of Wales Press, 2011)

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This book is the first full-length biography in English of Huw T. Edwards (1929–70), a key figure in the Welsh labour movement who was known in the 1950s as the “unofficial Prime Minister of Wales.” Paul Ward explores Edwards’s working-class origins, his growing involvement with trade unions and other political activities, and his eventual place in the high reaches of the Welsh establishment, which included a role as Welsh representative to the BBC, a seat on the Welsh Tourist Board, and the presidency of the Welsh Language Society.

Introduction

‘Nad oedd yn angenrheidiol iddo gyflwyno y siaradwr, yr Henadur Huw T. Edwards; yr oedd ef yn hysbys i bawb.’

‘There was no need to introduce the next speaker, Alderman Huw T. Edwards; he was known to everyone.’

David Thomas, The Anglesey Workers’ Union Day school, June 1948. ¹

Everyone in Wales in the 1950s knew Huw T. Edwards of Shotton. On 20 May 1957, D.J. Williams was a founding member of Plaid Cymru. He had been jailed for nine months in 1936 in England for the symbolic nationalist act of setting fire to a hut at

the RAF Bombing School at Penyborth near Pwllheli to mark the four-hundredth anniversary of the Act of Union between England and Wales. In 1957 he went into a tobacconist's shop in his home town of Fishguard, about as far away from Shotton as it is possible to get in Wales. He wanted to buy some sweets. The shopkeeper told him that her daughter had overcharged a previous customer for some Havana cigars and after some discussion she had worked out that it must have been Huw T. Edwards. She asked Williams to return the difference to Huw T., which he duly did by post later that evening, enclosing six shillings and tuppence.²

Edwards rose from being born into poverty in the mountains of north Wales to being known in the 1950s as 'the unofficial prime minister of Wales'. His papers at the National Library of Wales are extensive.³ There are about a thousand letters to Edwards but only just over 250 from him, and while some are clearly missing, one gets the impression that much of Edwards's communication and interaction was conducted in personal meetings. Many of his correspondents refer to meeting him in the previous days and are writing to add something to the conversation. Edwards was, without doubt, very affable, full of jokes and conversation. Understanding his sociability is a key part of understanding his life, both personal and political. This naturally results in an anecdotal method to parts of this biography, because some anecdotes, like that relating to the short-changing of Huw T. in Fishguard, express authenticity more than strict empiricism can do. Other sources are provided by Edwards's two volumes of autobiography, written in Welsh and translated into a single English-language volume by his friend Lyn Howell. Additionally, Edwards wrote poems, short stories and radio broadcasts and was reported extensively in the Welsh press. His writing of poetry and drama (though only one play survives in his

papers) emerged from the Welsh democratic cultural tradition associated with the gwerin ('folk') and eisteddfodau and while he drew some relationship between his writing and rebellion, the poems he wrote during and after the First World War fell rather too much within conventional values of the time to see politics as the major inspiration behind his putting pen to paper. Instead, often his poems are about his life and his connection to Wales through the land. The surviving play, on the other hand, written in the 1920s or 1930s, deals much more centrally with Edwards's life as a trade union activist, but is a drama about family relationships as much as it is about class politics.

Apart from his service in France and Belgium in the First World War, Edwards lived the whole of his life in Wales. He lived in rural Conwy for his childhood years, in the Rhondda and Taff Vale in his late teens and early twenties, returning to north Wales after the war, where he lived in and around Penmaenmawr for a decade after which he and his family moved to Flintshire, where he lived for the rest of his life. Edwards' life was almost entirely Welsh. It seems fitting, therefore, that the first full biography, by Gwyn Jenkins, published only in 2007, should have been in Welsh.⁴

Yet to see Edwards as a figure only in Welsh life does not do justice to his contribution to British history, nor indeed does it do justice to the substantial advances in historiography made possible by the 'new British history' since the 1970s. The rise of demands for devolution in the 1970s encouraged historians to approach British history from the perspective of the 'four nations' within the British Isles, rather than the frequently Anglo-centric predisposition of many (English) historians prior to that. It took a New Zealander – an imperial Briton – J.G.A. Pocock, to formalise this 'plea

for a new subject' as he urged full consideration of the plural nature of Britain, its Empire and its global relationships.⁵ This new form of history took two directions. Many historians preferred to look outwards, connecting the Empire and the metropolis in historical enquiry, recognizing that the United Kingdom in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries existed at the centre of a global world of its own making. Such explorations entailed a discussion of the 'British' nature of the British Empire, so the distinctive contribution of the Scottish in particular to the Empire has been widely recognized.⁶ Hence by globalising the study of British history it has become possible to cast new light on the relationships inside the United Kingdom. As it is essential to see Britain's history also as imperial history, it is essential to recognize that Welsh history is also part of British history (and that Wales contributed extensively to British history). Much work has been done in this field of the 'new British history' and I owe a methodological debt to historians like Keith Robbins and Hugh Kearney who have influenced my thinking enormously.⁷ Both see British history as the product of the interrelationships between nations and regions inside the British Isles.

Edwards's life, while it was chiefly Welsh, provides a clear example of the 'British' nature of Welsh history. The structures of economy, society, politics and culture within which he operated were British even while they too were also Welsh. His life was lived out in a multi-national context. Understanding this enables a more rounded understanding of his life, yet probably more importantly it means that British history is fleshed out. It means that British history is more than what happened in London and England but is instead the sum of the lives of those residing within the British Isles.⁸ This book is therefore about the way in which Edwards contributed to both British Labour *and* Welsh socialism. Such an approach allows for the recognition of the

inevitable diversity within the unity of the United Kingdom. Kearney uses the notion of a multi-cultural British Isles, so that within a single nation a variety of cultures can co-exist and interact. This approach works especially well when trying to understand the rootedness of Edwards within particular localities even while he interacted with other areas – whether he lived in them temporarily or whether his communications were less concrete, such as letters and phone calls from the head office of his trade union, for example. This approach allows differences to be explored yet does not overlook commonalities. It allows consideration of the forces that united those such as Edwards who had no real desire to leave Wales, and more specifically north Wales, for a career in ‘national’ politics, while recognising that such people saw themselves as distinctive. Edwards recognized the shared interests of the members of the Transport and General Workers Union in his district with those in other districts, yet it also mattered to him that he spoke Welsh and he used his public position to encourage others to continue to speak and learn in Welsh. British history cannot be understood fully without awareness of such relationships. Elsewhere I have argued that Britishness has been constructed both from the bottom up as well as from the top downwards, and this is a reflection of my belief that British history is similarly made through constant interactions between the personal, local, regional and national.⁹

There has been some criticism that ‘British history’ in this form allows the continuing subordination of Welsh, Scottish and Irish history to the concerns of the dominant Britons – the English and indeed its ruling class – who seek to avoid recognition of the changed present in which the ‘Celtic’ nations have asserted their autonomy by reference to the unity of the past.¹⁰ There are obvious risks in taking a primarily British perspective to Welsh history and to the life of Huw T. Edwards. Particularities

may be missed and the mentalities in which he operated may be misunderstood. Yet to neglect recognition that Edwards himself viewed Wales in a British context, and, more importantly, saw Britain from Wales would be to fall short of a rounded perspective of his life.

While this book is a biography of Edwards and considers his life on its own terms, it is also an exercise in a broader historical enquiry. Examining a single life allows quite precise mapping of the impact of national, indeed, world events on to the experience of one individual, which in turn throws light on the way in which society as a whole responded to what was going on in the world around it. To do this effectively, it is necessary to make comparisons with other people – those with whom Edwards can usefully be compared. Generally these are other Welsh Labour figures, because Edwards located himself in such terms. He got on with everyone yet shared an affinity with others like himself who had come from humble backgrounds and who had sought to represent people like themselves in order to shift the balance of power and wealth within Welsh and British society. The response of the Labour Party was not as one. There were as many differences of opinion in the party and movement as there were agreements. Within Labour, people differed over what socialism was and how to achieve it. They differed about how Wales ought to be governed within the United Kingdom (all those within Labour were agreed that Wales should remain in the United Kingdom). They differed at various times on strategic and tactical decisions. An examination of such difference and disagreement will also bring into focus the common sets of values and ideas that Edwards shared with many others in Wales.

This book is not a definitive biography of Edwards. It is an exercise in historical interpretation, based on the extant primary sources relating to Edwards's life and times. Given that my focus as a historian has been so firmly embedded in the discussion of identities of place in the United Kingdom, it is little wonder that my perspective on Edwards is shaped by this approach. This biography gives an account of Edwards's life but brings to the fore his attitude towards identities of place. It asks what Edwards thought about in terms of his attachment to north Wales, to Wales as a whole, and to Britain. It considers how Edwards's attitudes changed during his life, in response to external events and internal feelings. The way in which Edwards's thought of himself depended on the temporal context in which he lived. The context of various identities of class, nation and politics differed across the years of Edwards's life; sometime's one identity had more salience, sometimes another.

Patrick O'Brien has criticised political biography for its two contradictory temptations: to present subjects as extraordinary on the one hand or entirely representative on the other. He warns that the 'temptation is ... becoming strong for certain styles of social history in which a solitary miller, priest or peasant ... is elevated to represent the *mentalité* of an entire social group.'¹¹ Edwards was both extraordinary and representative at the same time. And this was how he was viewed in Wales (and Britain more widely among those who knew him) during his life. It was why his influence grew. In part Edwards was efficient and effective in the roles that he took up, but more importantly he was pushed forward by others to be their representative. He was asked again and again to stand for parliament. Each time he refused, and each refusal added to the sense that he was like ordinary Welsh people, a part of them and not detached by another life outside Wales. As Pauline Croft

responded to O'Brien, “an entire social group” is made up of individuals.’¹² Edwards as a single individual was representative of a number of social groups. Across his life he fulfilled roles in Welsh society that endeared him to different groups. The memorial card at the service after his death described him thus:

Quarryman – Soldier – Coalminer – Trade Union Officer – Unemployed
Leader – Councillor – Alderman – Wales Councils and Boards, Chairman and
Member – Author – Poet.¹³

Such an extraordinary gathering of roles made him unusual but at the same time meant that a cross section saw him as representative of their lives.

Given that Edwards was such an influential individual during the 1940s and 1950s, it is something of a surprise to realise how little has been written about him. I have searched the indexes of numerous books on Welsh history to find only one or two references to Edwards. This was despite his newsworthy nature in the mid-twentieth century. He was the subject of numerous newspaper stories, often because he was frequently rash and impulsive, making surprising outbursts and shocking statements. He threatened to resign from most bodies on which he served. This gives the impression of a superficial character, whose absence from the historical record is explicable. Yet, Edwards gave solid service to all of those bodies from which he was subsequently to resign. He contributed substantially to the success of trade unionism and the Labour Party in north Wales between the 1920s and the 1950s. He pressed for devolution of administrative and executive powers from the early 1930s until his death in 1960. Single-handedly he gave authority to the Council for Wales and

Monmouthshire, a body established by the Attlee Labour government as a powerless sop to nationalist demands. Edwards was the chairman from 1949 until 1958. His resignation from the Council in October 1959 encouraged the British Labour Party to change policy. The party at last gave in to the campaign to establish the office of the Secretary of State for Wales, which it duly did when it won the 1964 general election. Edwards's resignation was widely considered to be an act of patriotism, putting Wales before his political career. He received floods of letters in support of his action. Yet while Edwards left a considerable mark on the historical record, until recently his mark on the historiography on Wales has been slight.¹⁴

There are likely explanations for the historiographical absence of Huw T. Edwards. First, he was never a Member of Parliament. Asked again and again to stand, in winnable seats, he refused, preferring to press for change from within Wales, serving on local and county councils, as Welsh representative on British bodies, and chairing Welsh committees. Because the polity of the United Kingdom favoured centralisation, historians' attention has until recently been drawn away from the regional and national in favour of a British narrative. Second, Labour and nationalist history has too often been partisan history, and Edwards in the end turned out to be a non-partisan figure, despite his deeply held belief in socialism. Edwards left the Labour Party in 1959 to join Plaid Cymru. This alienated many within Labour, as his subsequent resignation from Plaid in 1965 alienated many nationalists. Hence, despite Edwards's success in linking Welshness and socialism, his reputation was a casualty of the rebelliousness which he believed the Welsh possessed as part of their character. Neither Labour nor the Blaid quite knew what to do with his life story after his death in 1970 and Edwards fell outside of the narratives of Welsh history in the twentieth

century that each party wished to tell. Third, while at the centre of Welsh political life in the 1950s, he was outside the fundamental decision-making circles. He did not hold office in the Labour Party at any senior level and as chairman of the Council, he could only make recommendations to government.

Why then now has Edwards made a reappearance? It is no coincidence that attention has turned to him in the post-devolution United Kingdom. The establishment of the Welsh Assembly has encouraged interest in Welsh history and with that has come a creditable desire to recognize the complexities of the history of devolution. Historians are fully aware that Welsh nationalism has taken many forms, only one variety of which is represented in Plaid Cymru. Two Welsh historians have recently argued that “Nationalists” ... are ... not simply those who formed the Plaid Genedlaethol Cymru, but those who felt that there was a Welsh nation, with a distinctive sense of identity which needed to be fostered and preserved.’¹⁵ So the Labour and Conservative parties have now been recognized as arenas in which Welsh nationhood was discussed. Devolution has made some headway in transforming ‘British’ as well as Welsh history. The immense diversity of the United Kingdom is increasingly being recognized by British historians, who have become interested in the territorial formation of Britain, the United Kingdom and Britishness. This has allowed the regional and the national back into the ‘British story.’ Both these historiographical trends are represented in the renewed interest in Huw T. Edwards. It might be suggested that Gwyn Jenkins’s Welsh-language biography of Edwards published in 2007 represents the first trend, associated with the resurgence of Welsh historiography, while this biography is based on the latter – the desire to see British history remain a pluralist undertaking.

¹ National Library of Wales, Huw T. Edwards Papers, *Yr Herald Cymraeg a'r Genedl*, 22 June 1948. Press cuttings. F2. Welsh.

² NLW, HTE Papers, D.J. Williams to Huw T. Edwards, 20 May 1957, A1/337. Welsh. Edwards replied by telegram on 10 June 1957, telling him that he was framing the cheque, which may indicate Edwards's respect for Williams. NLW, D.J. Williams Papers, P2/8/17. I owe this reference, and many others, to Martin Wright.

³ The papers are well catalogued with summaries of the content of each letter.

⁴ Gwyn Jenkins, *Prif Weinidog Answyddogol Cymru: Cofiant Huw T Edwards* (Talybont: Y Lolfa, 2007).

⁵ See Paul O'Leary, 'Historians and the "new" British history,' in Peter Lambert and Phillipp Schofield (eds), *Making History: An Introduction To The History And Practices Of A Discipline* (London, 2004), pp. 214-26.

⁶ See for example John M. MacKenzie, 'Empire and National Identities: The Case of Scotland', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th series, 8 (1998), 215-31.

⁷ Hugh Kearney, *The British Isles: A History of Four Nations*, second edition (Cambridge, 2006); Keith Robbins, *Nineteenth-Century Britain: England, Scotland, and Wales The Making of a Nation* (Oxford, 1989); Keith Robbins, *Great Britain: Identities, Institutions and the Idea of Britishness* (Harlow, 1998).

⁸ This designation allows for discussion of the continuing influence of the Irish on British history after the political recognition of Irish nationhood between 1916 and 1922.

⁹ Paul Ward, *Britishness since 1870* (London, 2004); Paul Ward, *Unionism in the United Kingdom, 1918-1974* (Basingstoke, 2005).

¹⁰ Geraint H. Jenkins, *A Concise History of Wales* (Cambridge, 2007); Murray G.H. Pittock, *Celtic Identity and the British Image* (Manchester, 1999).

¹¹ Patrick O'Brien, 'Is political biography a good thing?' *Contemporary British History*, 10 (1996), p. 61.

¹² Pauline Croft, 'Political biography: A defence (1),' *Contemporary British History*, 10 (1996), p. 70.

¹³ NLW, Lyn Howell Papers, Huw T Memorial Service.

¹⁴ Edwards is given due attention in Kenneth O. Morgan's, *Rebirth of a Nation: Wales 1880-1980* (Oxford, 1982), in Peter Stead's 'The Labour Party and the claims of Wales,' in John Osmond (ed.) *The National Question Again: Welsh Political Identity in the 1980s* (Llandysul, 1985) and in Andrew Walling's 'The Structure of Power in Labour Wales, 1951-1964,' in Duncan Tanner, Chris Williams and Deian Hopkin (eds), *The Labour Party in Wales 1900-2000* (Cardiff, 2000).

¹⁵ Andrew Edwards and Wil Griffith, 'Welsh national identity and governance, 1918-45,' in Duncan Tanner, Chris Williams, Wil Griffith and Andrew Edwards (eds), *Debating Nationhood and Governance in Britain, 19885-1945* (Manchester, 2006), p. 118.