

Wales from Within

An appreciation of the people, landscape and culture of Wales.

A Continent in a Country Wales is tiny, but it is one of the most fascinating places on Earth! Its history is a near miraculous story of survival against the odds. Even though its most remote corners are less than 120 miles away from its mighty neighbour - England, Wales has managed to retain an unique cultural and linguistic identity. Why 'A Continent in a Country'? Firstly, The Landscape. When you travel the length of Wales, the thing that most strikes the visitor, is the quite astonishing variety of its landscape. From the, now sad, valleys of the south through the rolling hills of Mid-Wales to the majestic mountains of the north, no two scenes are the same. Every view, every valley, every town and village, has its own unique character and atmosphere. All are clearly Welsh ,yet all are different. From the modern city of Cardiff, to the elegance of Aberystwyth, the bustle of Carmarthen, the charm of Llanidloes, the historic town of Harlech and the grandiose pomp and splendour of Llandudno; where else could you find such contrasting places in so few square miles? Then there are its people. Wales is populated by fiercely proud small communities, each with its own history, its own particular story.

The once thriving mining areas of the industrial English speaking south, where the spirit remains strong and optimistic. The farming heartland of Carmarthenshire and Ceredigion, inhabited by Welsh speaking farming communities who in many cases go back generation after generation. Then on to the north, a place of mystery, a harsh and often hostile environment whose inhabitants have long carved a difficult living, one way or another, out of the hills.

All these people, no matter what their particular experiences and heritage, are all bound together by their Welshness, and a sense of common identity.

Unusually, this sense of nation seldom manifests itself in a narrow nationalistic way. The Welsh have always been extraordinarily tolerant and welcoming to the many English people who have come to live amongst them. The Welsh have traditionally embraced the world and all its challenges. Indeed their contribution to British History is incalculable, particularly in the fields of politics, religion and the arts.

Now, Wales is taking a leap forward towards a political nationhood, which will, I am sure, become another inspirational chapter in its long and varied history. What is Wales and why is it special? As you travel from England into Wales, there comes a particular point in the journey where you know that you are in a different place. Whether one arrives in the north, south or middle, this is always the case. This point is somewhere near the actual geographic boundary but not always precisely at it. All of a sudden, the whole feel of the surrounding countryside changes. Romance and mystery take over. Un-pronounceable, to the stranger, and evocative road signs inform the traveller that he has arrived in a living enigma. How is it possible that England and Englishness stops so abruptly? Somehow, as if by magic, the traveller is subconsciously ensnared by Wales. Many visitors never leave, almost all return, again and again.

Yet as soon as one tries to define Wales and The Welsh, it is like trying to keep hold of a bar of wet soap. The qualities that add up to Wales are illusive. No two definitions are exactly the same. In my experience, like nowhere else on earth, the Welsh are continually exercised as to their identity. Each Welshman and Welsh Woman defines himself and herself individually, and it is this individuality that lies at the heart of being Welsh.

Wales, the land of the individual! Non-conformist tradition Non-conformity lies at the root of Welsh life and history. Roman Catholicism underpins most European History. Even in Protestant England, if you scratch the surface the Catholic root is laid bare. In Wales the story is quite different. Scratch its surface and you find the old Celtic Church, Catholicism is nowhere to be found. Even in St. Davids, the feeling is not the same as it is in other historic religious sites in England and Europe. This absence of an obvious Catholic history makes Wales unique amongst the Celtic nations.

Wales was never 'priest -ridden' in the way that Ireland was/is, and yet, religion is part of the very fabric of Welsh History.

Travel through Wales and you see Chapels: each village, each hamlet, each settlement boasting one or more. Read the names. So many versions of Protestantism : Methodists, Presbeterians, Baptists, etc. etc., almost as if each village had its own denomination! Even now in today's secular world, religion and religious observance is a very important, fundamental, part of Welsh life.

It is this variety of religious experience that underlies this nation of individuals. Each and every Welsh person has a sense of their own value and worth. The 'class system' never took root here in Wales.

Traditionally people in Wales are valued for their personal qualities and not for their material status. This still, in my experience, holds true today. Wales can, therefore, be defined as a country which has better values than other places. It is these shared values that define The Welsh. The Eisteddfod: the glory of Wales The Eisteddfodau (plural) are the glory of Wales. They offer an almost unique (in this day and age) opportunity for artistic activity and participation. All the people of Wales are able to take part in the whole range of artistic disciplines: literature, drama, music and dance. From the smallest junior school and smallest community to the impressive national gatherings, the Eisteddfod is, for many people,

the highlight of their year.

Where in other societies the youth are inclined toward the cynical and philistine, here in Wales one sees young people taking part, without inhibition, in poetry recitations, literary contests, plays, concerts and the like.

It is at The Eisteddfod that The Welsh Language and Culture are celebrated, honoured and renewed. A disparate nation coming together, on a national level; a community coming together at the level of the village.

It is a genuinely "grass roots" affair. Indeed during the national Eisteddfod, which is located in a different region every year (a kind of travelling road show), televisions the length and breadth of the country are continually tuned in.