

Ifor Part 5



Doing O level Welsh was a big step for me, because I'd had no formal education in the Welsh language... in truth, till I was fourteen, fifteen, I'd say that my Welsh was almost entirely... spoken. That is to say, I had very little knowledge of the written language. I knew enough to be able to read the hymns we sang in chapel... but of course they were written in a register that was beyond my Welsh, that is to say, they were in quite an old-fashioned language, so I would be singing them, without properly understanding exactly what I was singing.

But I'm not sure what my motivation was, to try the exam, there were a number of factors, but gradually, I kind of...I dunno... awoke, and felt that I wanted to understand more about this language that I spoke. And to be able to write it, too.

And that was an eyeopener – to realise that I said things in one way, but I was supposed to write them in another. Even though the Welsh language in general is quite a phonetic language... but there we were, and I set to it, I did the O level exam, and then as I said, these feelings had been building up more and more within me and I felt that... well, I'd maybe like to go to college in Wales and to study Welsh and Welsh history.

Well, there was a small problem with that of course, because if you want to study a subject at university, they usually expect that you'll have an A level in that subject, to prove that you're a suitable student.

So, after leaving school, I took a year off, working in a kind of... 'industrial temping' they called it, we'd be moving furniture, doing the kind of 'roll-your-sleeves-up' jobs that the office workers in the City of London didn't want to do themselves! ... and some of them were night-time jobs, I worked for a time as a night watchman in the Barbican, so I'd be sitting there at a desk, with very little to do all night, but I was able to revise for my Welsh A level exam, and I managed to pass, somehow! ...given that I'd taught myself, and on I went, to college in Cardiff...and in the long run, I'm sure that's the main reason why I moved back to Wales, because up to that point, I don't think that I'd decided yet that that was what I wanted to do, but then I met my wife whilst I was in college in Cardiff. I was enjoying living in Wales for the first time in my life, and then, a few years later, we got married and went to live, first of all in Denbigh, and then we came here about... it's getting on for forty years ago now... to Caernarfon... well, it's probably the Welshest place on the planet, where nearly 90% speak the language and most of the rest understand it.

Of course the linguistic pattern varies hugely between different parts of Wales... that is to say, there are areas in Wales where only some 5 or 10% speak the language and you're unlikely to hear it spoken on the street; unless you know where to look for it, you're probably not going to

encounter the language at all... and then there are areas that are somewhere in the middle linguistically... and then in the west and in the north you'll find most of the strongholds... even though they have been affected to an extent by the recent pattern of immigration, which ironically in a way, has occurred at exactly the same time that the Welsh language has won greater status and more rights, that's when we've seen this demographic shift...

But I like to be optimistic about this situation... we saw huge demographic changes in south east Wales at the time of the Industrial Revolution... and that now is the area with the highest levels of people who identify as Welsh - now some of them may speak the language and a lot of them won't - but they identify as Welsh, although many of their forefathers weren't from Wales at all... so, it's possible for us ... (how does the phrase go? 'thesis, antithesis, synthesis') - there's a means for us to create something... to create a new Wales... if we want to, as historian Gwyn Alf Williams once said: 'Wales is an artefact that we make and remake in every generation -if we want to' Well, I'm certainly in the 'want to' camp, and my feeling is, that that's the desire of the majority here too.