



Undergraduate assignment feedback form

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Using one of the establishments visited how easy is it to gain a sense of what constitutes Welsh culture?

To gain an in-depth understanding of what constitutes Welsh culture, certain heritage establishments should be examined thoroughly to discover the reasons why and how they present aspects of Welsh life. It can be said that these establishments should present all aspects of Welsh life, not only the positives but the 'difficult' heritage that is undoubtedly embedded in Welsh culture, this idea is an important one and will be discussed thoroughly throughout this essay. One heritage institution that explores aspects of Welsh culture is the national open-air museum of St Fagan's located in Cardiff. By exploring what features of Welsh culture this particular museum presents to the public and their moral behind them, we should then be able to discuss how well this museum has portrayed Welsh life and what implications they could face if it is deemed not up to standard.

Geraint Jenkins in his book *'Getting Yesterday Right: Interpreting the Heritage of Wales'* (Jenkins 1992) notes that the so called 'welsh way of life' had been disappearing at a rapid rate; the welsh language, he notes, was decaying alongside issues such as degradation of the countryside, poverty and issues of unemployment. All of these matters had led to the Welsh government to introduce organizations to help combat these issues, for example Cadw, the Welsh government's historic environment service that focuses to conserve Welsh heritage and to help people understand about their own history, (Cadw n.d.) was introduced alongside the Welsh Language Board (Jenkins 1992). Due to these reactions by the Welsh government, there has been a remarkable growth in institutions being created in order to preserve certain heritage aspects of Wales including standard museums, folk museums and open-air museums such as St Fagan's. By the government creating these organizations and funding new museums to open, a new wave of tourism has undoubtedly been made and Jenkin's even goes as far to suggest that 'tourism has fueled a new heritage movement' (Jenkins 1992:2). Indeed, by opening establishments that wish to express Welsh culture that will no doubt create masses of individuals, Welsh and non-Welsh, not only will this help get Welsh people more involved and interested in their culture but it will also help other to understand this culture too.

Before delving into a discussion focusing around a specific museum, it is important to discuss aspects of the heritage of Wales to gain an understanding of what museums and heritage organizations choose to display and if it is easy to fathom what Welsh culture is. The nation of Wales was heavily dependent on agriculture in terms of economics until the late 18th century when the expansion of industrialization came. Farmers were noted to be dependent on a range of hand tools, large pieces of agricultural equipment such as ploughs and horse-drawn carts, and would have performed tasks including milking cattle, sheep shearing and winnowing grain (Jenkins 1992). Although it is probable that many museums display the agricultural aspects, it should be noted that some museums can have a tendency to cover up the truth and disregard the authentic way in which a culture truly lives, and this is perhaps true when thinking about Welsh culture. Many farmers lived hard lives and would face an endless battle against the elements, but Jenkins's notes that this is hardly ever shown in museum or heritage establishments (Jenkins 1992). For museums to present to the public a truthful and accurate representation of the history of Welsh culture, it is important that they showcase *all* characteristics even if it can be seen as difficult heritage.

Another aspect of Welsh culture that should perhaps be represented in Welsh museums is the mining business, including the history of coal mining which was noted that have been developed in the 15th century but did not flourish until the industrial revolution. Other mineral based productions

were also flourishing in the 18th century, examples of these including copper, iron and slate production which undoubtedly became a great help in the expansion of industrialization of Wales. Towards the end of the 19th century it was noted that Wales became one of the world's leading mineral producer (Nguyen 2015), no easy feat for a small country such as Wales.

It is important to define what exactly a national museum is and what their purpose is in terms of presenting heritage before discussing the establishment of St Fagan's. Mason (2007) notes that although there is more than one true definition of what constitutes a national museum, broadly speaking national museums are referred to as many different types of museums that focus on having diverse and distinct purpose's, styles and collections (Mason 2007). Defining the role of these museums can come with issues due to the fact that no single national museum is an exact copy, and to suggest that all national museums have the same purpose comes with issues of its own. However, it can be said that in broad terms national museums play a significant role in expressing, challenging and reacting to the general public's opinion of a certain nation's history, culture and identity and one of the main roles of a national museums can be said to deliver the said nation with an 'origin' story. (Mason 2007). Indeed, to provide the Welsh nation, or any nation, with a backstory can be seen as a smart one but careful consideration has to be taken in order to present this story correctly as doing it incorrectly can cause issues not only for the public but for how the museum is portrayed.

The national museum of St Fagan's based in Cardiff, although previously known as the museum of Welsh Life, was opened in 1948 where over 30 original buildings were taken from all across the Welsh landscape to be rebuilt brick by brick in a village setting so that the public can gain a sense of what life was really like for the Welsh community. (Mason 2003). The types of buildings include farmhouses, cottages, a working men's institution and bake houses. As well as housing tangible heritage, St Fagan's is also known for providing non-tangible oral heritage including folk tales and traditional Welsh music (Mason 2007). The reasons as to why this museum was opened to begin with and what morals it stands for are seen as being very similar today, St Fagan's notes on their official website that those visiting the open-air museum gain an insight into the rich culture of Wales and their goal is to show how people in Wales lived and worked (St Fagan's n.d.). Founded by Dr Lowerth Peate, who was seen by many as an 'unapologetic propagandist' for traditional Welsh life, it is said that one of the main reasons why this museum was established by Peate was to illustrate and show both the life and culture of Welsh people, which includes both tangible and non-tangible aspects of life (Williams-Davies 1989:216). Another thing that should be noted about Peate is that he was particularly opinionated about the role that craftsmen played in the rural society, perhaps due to the fact that his own father was a carpenter (Williams-Davies 1989). This romanticized view could be the reason why this museum had a large focus on tradition crafts rather than industrial crafts in the first few years after its opening, which he noted as "forces of barbarism" (Williams-Davies 1989:216). Jenkins (1992) suggests that establishments that focus on interpreting the heritage of a certain culture or country are at risk of presenting material that have more of a nostalgic association.

By visiting the open-air museum of St Fagan's it becomes clear that there is still a predominant emphasis on traditional Welsh folk craft and culture, one example of this is Melin Bompren Corn Mill, seen in figure 1 and figure 2, which was originally built in Cross Inn in 1852 but was re-erected in St Fagan's in 1977. The craftspeople here would have ground oats and wheat into flour, and it is even a working mill today with a craftsman being employed to show the process of milling wheat as it would have been done traditionally in rural Wales.



Figure 1 showing inside of mill, after Billington 2018



Figure 2 showing open fire in mill, after Billington 2018

It is not uncommon for St Fagan's to employ craftsmen such as blacksmiths or fabric weavers who physically work in these re-erected buildings with tools that are appropriate to the time that the particular individual building was made (Williams-Davies 1989). By the museum showcasing the real life skills that would have been used by the farmers of agricultural Wales in the late 18th century and early 19th century, they are showcasing the real history and culture of the Welsh community to the public who may otherwise not have known themselves.

Although the eminence of Welsh agriculture and farming life cannot be ignored, there are also other aspects of Welsh life that are explored in St Fagan. Religion was without a doubt a large aspect of Welsh life, and this can perhaps be seen in St Telio's church, seen in figure 3, which originated from Llandelio Tal-y-bont but was moved to St Fagan's due to the threat of vandalism and theft. Other aspects that are represented in this museum include school life which can be seen from St Mary's Board School, originally from Lampeter and life in the Welsh Iron Age as seen through the recreation of Iron Age roundhouses that are based in Byrn Eyr, Anglesey. Although these aspects are seemingly little compared to the representation of Welsh agriculture and industrialization, it is important that they are presented at all.



Figure 3 showing outside of church, after Billington 2018

When discussing if St Fagan's can provide a sense of what constitutes Welsh culture, many give the opinion that this particular museum does not do a particularly sound job at properly presenting Welsh life. One of those scholars is Rhiannon Mason who in her article *Nation Building at the Museum of Welsh Life* discusses the notion that the idiosyncrasies and their 'unusual' mix of both rural, agricultural aspects have been identified by the museum (Mason 2003). Mason goes on further and quotes John Brown who in 1986 stated that 'The National Museum of Wales should reconsider and redefine the objectives of the Welsh Folk Museum' (Mason 2003:27). As mentioned earlier, museums can sometimes present their heritage in a 'romanticized' view, which is perhaps not the correct way forward. As said by Jenkins, when thinking about interpreting and presenting the rich heritage of Wales, it is not enough to only 'preserve the beautiful and discard the ugly, when ugly might have been more representative of the heritage we wish to present' (Jenkins 1992:6). Indeed, many museums are guilty of 'sugar-coating' the truth and instead only focusing on displaying the more public-friendly or interesting aspects, which could perhaps be the case at St Fagan's. This museums, although does promote and showcase varying aspects of Welsh culture, does not have a direct focus on the hardships that Welsh farmers, workers and Welsh people in general would have inevitably gone through. It is certainly impossible for national museums to represent every aspect of a culture, but problems may be brought to light when they claim to represent a nation as a whole but are unavoidably selective in what elements are believed suitable (Mason 2003).

In conclusion, through the use of reconstructed buildings St Fagan's has been able to convey a story of Welsh culture to the public which not only shows how important agriculture and farming were to the Welsh community throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, but also other aspects of daily life. That being said, St Fagan's certainly have room to improve by having a greater focus on of aspect of Welsh culture, including the industrial features.

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