

CAMPAGNING FOR THE LANGUAGE

The census figures cast a shadow over attempts at reviving the language during the second half of the twentieth century. In 1951 the number of speakers had fallen to 714,868, which was 28.9% of the population; in 1971, 542,425 or 20.9% claimed to be competent in Welsh and by 1991 there had been a further drop to 508,098 or 18.6%. Certain trends were also becoming more and more evident. By the 1960s, very few monolingual Welsh speakers remained; bilingualism was becoming the norm; and the concept of 'Y Fro Gymraeg' (Welsh-speaking Wales), as a swathe of heartland extending from the north-west to the south-west, where daily life could be carried on wholly through the medium of Welsh, was rapidly eroding. A new linguistic landscape was being forged. Although only 13.3% of the population of the Rhondda valley could speak Welsh in 1971, they numbered 11,295 speakers – a third of the population of Welsh-speaking Merionethshire.

It is hardly surprising then that morale and the status of the Welsh language were at



Protest by Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg, the Welsh language society, at Aberystwyth Post Office, 1963

a low ebb during the 1950s. There was a general feeling of crisis but little idea of how to respond to it. And yet the seeds of the later revival were sown during this decade.

It was the greed of Liverpool corporation and other English conurbations for Welsh water that galvanised a sense of outrage among Welsh people throughout the country. The drowning of Cwm Tryweryn, near Y Bala, awoke a very strong reaction among almost all the local authorities and Welsh MPs and the drowned village of Cwm Celyn became a symbol of the political helplessness of the Welsh people. They had failed to defend a Welsh-speaking community from being annihilated.

In the meantime in industrial west Wales, Eileen and Trevor Beasley had begun their lonely but truly heroic campaign of civil disobedience by refusing to pay their rates to Llanelli Rural District Council until they were sent bilingual forms. Between 1952 and 1960 they appeared before the courts sixteen times and bailiffs seized goods from their home on six occasions,



Famous graffiti, 'Remember Tryweryn', at Llanrhystud

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Above: Trevor and
Eileen Beasley and
family

Right: Saunders Lewis



one time leaving only a pot of jam on an empty bookshelf.

The Beasleys' unwavering stand for their rights as Welsh speakers was the inspiration behind Saunders Lewis's radio lecture, *Tynged yr Iaith* (The Fate of the Language) broadcast on February 13, 1962. Lewis was Honorary President of Plaid Cymru (the Welsh nationalist party), but that did not prevent him from expressing the frustrations felt by many in its ranks, and especially amongst the young, that the party was more concerned with winning parliamentary seats than with the fate of the Welsh language. In his lecture, Lewis used the Beasleys' example to show how unconstitutional actions could bring about important changes. His gloomy prediction that unless such uncompromising, indeed revolutionary, action was taken immediately, the Welsh language would not survive into the twenty-first century. His main call was for the Welsh language to become an official language of local and national government in Wales. This should be Plaid Cymru's priority, 'for without the Welsh language any kind of self-government would be of little value to Wales'.

Saunders Lewis's lecture was the main stimulus for a group of young intellectuals, based mainly around Aberystwyth, to establish *Cymdeithas yr Iaith*

Gymraeg (the Welsh language society) in the summer of 1962. It was to be a single-issue protest movement, dedicated to restoring the official status of the language, through unconstitutional means if necessary. Thus began a long and sustained campaign, conducted on many fronts, and employing many different tactics to attain this aim. The members emulated civil disobedience movements world wide, especially those of the peace movements and civil rights campaigns in the USA. Initially the emphasis was on securing Welsh language forms: court summons, vehicle licences and birth certificates. To draw attention to their

Rali Glyndwr 2002 Rheoli'r Farchnad Dai

2pm - Medi 14

Neuadd Cyngor Ceredigion

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Meredydd Evans & Emyr Llywelyn



DEDDF EIDDO I GYMRU!

Rally for a Property Act for Wales

campaigns they sought to be arrested and brought before the courts. This led to the iconic but slightly comical sit-down protest on Trefechan Bridge in Aberystwyth in 1963 which brought a great deal of much-needed publicity to the cause. In 1967 a Welsh Language Act was passed, which went some of the way towards addressing some of the issues, but which also illustrated the need for far stronger legislation.

The society turned its attention next to the lack of Welsh on road signs, a campaign which was both highly popular with supporters and unpopular among other Welsh-speakers at the time. Initially they daubed the signs with green paint, and then removed them and delivered them to police stations. Other campaigns called for a Property Act and control of housing and second homes in Wales; positive local and central education policies; a Welsh-language television channel, and a more comprehensive Welsh Language Act.

Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg was, and is, primarily a young people / students' movement, with no more than 2,000 members at a time, but drawing upon the tacit and sometimes active support of mature, respectable, law-abiding sympathizers. Among the most influential

of these in the early years was Alwyn D. Rees whose monthly editorials in the periodical *Barn* ensured that the authorities could not afford to ignore the youthful protests. During the many campaigns, hundreds of members and supporters were fined and around 200 were imprisoned. Since the mid-sixties the society had adopted a 'non-violence towards persons' policy as the cornerstone of its direct action campaigning. One

important feature of the

membership was the active involvement of young women. Among them were Meri Huws, Meg Ellis and Branwen Nicholas, who became chairpersons of the movement and served jail sentences for their convictions. As the campaigning evolved, it became more and more obvious that securing the linguistic rights of Welsh-speakers was not a sufficient goal. The emphasis had to shift to bolstering and securing the future of the Welsh-speaking communities themselves – in political, economic and social terms – and to urge the people of Wales themselves to embrace the language as their own. The achievements of *Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg* have been truly amazing and in many ways the Wales we know today would be a very different place but for the relentless, principled and often selfless actions of its members.

Dafydd Iwan and the road signs campaign



Merched y

In 1966-7 members of the Institute in Y Parc, Y Bala, rebelled against the movement's direction of official activities set out in English. From the new national Welsh women, *Merched y* about 280 branches in Wales, which organize meetings throughout every year.



Dafydd Iwan

Dafydd Iwan was chairman during perhaps the most controversial road signs. He was able to fire the campaign.

We'll paint the
Paint the words
We'll fire up
And paint the

His satirical song about
Charles as Prince
particularly popular

NOTEWORTHY PROTESTERS

Merched y Wawr

In 1966-7 members of the Women's Institute in Y Parc, a hamlet near Y Bala, rebelled against that movement's directive that all its official activities should be carried out in English. From this local protest a new national Welsh-medium movement for women, Merched y Wawr, evolved. Today it has about 280 branches and clubs throughout Wales, which organise over 2,250 social events and meetings through the medium of Welsh every year.



Angharad Thomas

As chair of *Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg* in the early eighties, Angharad Thomas was imprisoned several times. These jail sentences inspired her novel *Yma o Hyd* (Still Here) in which she reflects upon the responsibilities thrust upon her as a Welsh-speaker at such a crucial time in the language's history:



I'm afraid... It's **awful** being afraid of the future, I'm not so afraid of seeing the demise of Wales as I am of having to live through the process. Because having to watch someone die is a dreadful experience. What a pity I wasn't born a generation earlier. What a pity I wasn't born a generation later. Any time but the present...

translated extract from *Yma o Hyd*

Dafydd Iwan

Dafydd Iwan was *Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg*'s chairman during the society's most visual and perhaps controversial campaign – for bilingual road signs. He was also a popular singer who could fire the campaigns with his protest songs:

We'll paint the world green, boys,
Paint the world green;
We'll fire up the Welsh, boys
And paint the world green!

His satirical songs about the investiture of Charles as Prince of Wales in 1969 were particularly popular

