Investment Review Discussion Paper

An important part of the Investment Review is to encourage debate and discussion on a range of arts issues.

We've asked 11 authors to prepare discussion papers on 5 different subjects. This is one of these papers. The brief didn't request specific proposals or recommendations, instead the authors were asked to offer their individual and personal views to stimulate and provoke discussions. Any views or opinions expressed in the discussion paper are the author's own and not those of Arts Council of Wales.

Title: **The Lie of the Land**

Author: **John Osmond**

> *What we see and hear every day is part of our culture, but just as important are the invisible, intangible shapes we carry around and bring to bear. Thus we see Wales as a small country, but even standing on the Brecon Beacons, looking south to the valleys and the seaboard where most of us live, looking west and north to the pastoral uplands, remembering beyond the far mountains another crowded coast, it is not smallness we see; it is land and distance, familiarity and strangeness.*
> Raymond Williams[1]

Geography has influenced, not to say determined, Welsh history, culture and identity more than in most countries. It has been commonly observed that the Welsh *Massif Central,* the land over 600 feet that occupies the bulk of Welsh territory, not only continues to frustrate effective communications but has produced the perpetual divisions that so characterise Welsh society (see Map 1).

However, from the point of view of the arts it is the nature of the Welsh lowlands rather than highlands that has been the determining factor. What might be termed the professional 'high' arts largely depend upon the urbanisation of society. This was a feature that arrived so suddenly and chaotically in 19th Century Wales that our culture struggled to keep up. Until our own day the lack of an undisputed urban focus has hindered the maturing of Welsh society. And even today, when Cardiff has emerged finally as a metropolitan centre with the National Assembly at its hub, its role as the undisputed capital of the country remains contested. This is especially the case where the arts are concerned and how they are funded.

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[1] Introduction to Meic Stephens (Ed.), *The Arts in Wales 1950-75*, Welsh Arts Council, 1979.

The competitive nature of our lowlands has been identified by the historian John Davies as a major reason why in the Early Middle Ages Wales failed to create a united, enduring state. As he says, geography played its part:

> "The problem was not so much too many mountains as too many plains. The kingdom of Scotland grew around the lowlands, watered by the rivers Tay and Forth, a region without equal throughout the country in terms of wealth and population. In Wales there were at least four fairly fertile regions capable of being the nucleus of a kingdom – Anglesey for Gwynedd, the Severn valley for Powys, the Vale of Glamorgan and the Tywi valley for Deheubarth – but not one of them had an indubitable superiority over all the others in terms of wealth and population. In ancient kingdoms such as Fife and Moray, there was a deep sense of separatism, but the kingdom of Scotland had sufficient power to bind such regions to it. Gwynedd was the nucleus of Welsh consolidation in the age of Rhodri, and Deheubarth in the age of Hywel, but they were too equal; neither of the territories had the resources or the structures necessary to bind the other kingdoms to it permanently."[2]

Map 1: Wales topography - land over 600 feet (180m)

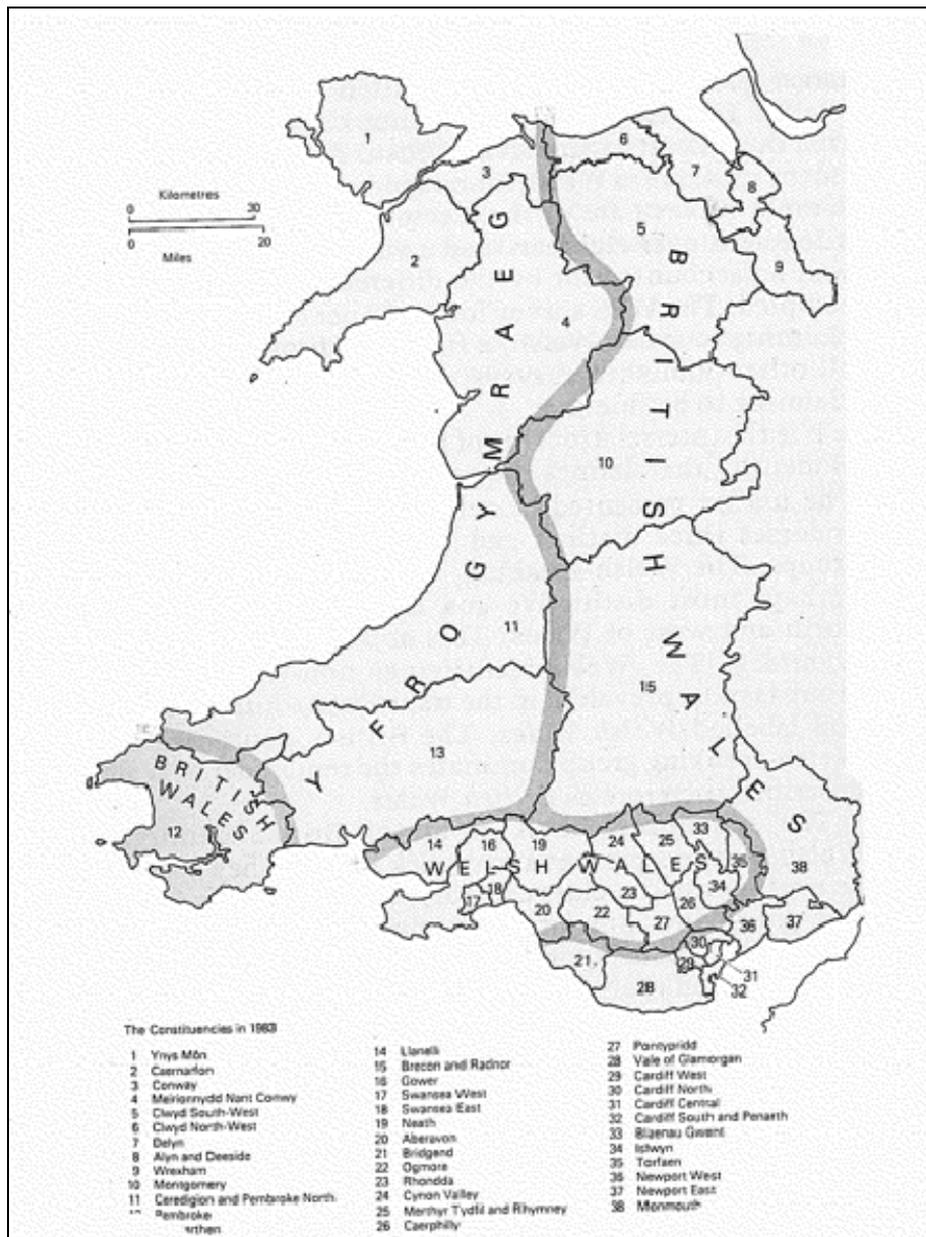[2] John Davies, *A History of Wales*, Allen Lane, 1993, page 97-8.

This geographical reality has persisted and ensured that until the age of devolution divisions rather than unity had the upper hand in Welsh society, in the economy, in our politics and in our imagination. These divisions were so lasting and injurious that it is only now, at the beginning of 21st Century Wales that anything like a widespread Welsh civic infrastructure is being constructed. However, the National Assembly and its politics which reach every part of Wales now provide a ribcage for the nation in which a self-reflective truly indigenous artistic expression can be imagined.

Throughout most of the 20th Century the divisions underlying Welsh politics could be described in terms of what became known as the 'Three-Wales Model'. An analysis of the results of the 1979 general election, carried out by Denis Balsom at Aberystwyth University, found Wales to be divided into three distinct political areas.[3] The divisions were based on responses to two survey questions: 'Do you normally consider yourself to be Welsh, British, English or something else?' and 'Do you speak Welsh?'

A geographical mapping of responses to these questions produced the three areas (shown in Map 2).

The first, which the researchers called *Y Fro Gymraeg*, covered the north-west and west-central heartland. Here Plaid Cymru set the political agenda and, if not winning all the electoral contests, largely determined which party did. The second area was the Valleys, defined by the south Wales coalfield. This was Labour's electoral heartland, from which it spread out to dominate Welsh politics for much of the 20th Century. The third area, described as *British Wales*, was the indistinct remainder of the country -- the south-eastern and north-eastern coastal belts, Pembrokeshire, and the regions of mid Wales bordering England.

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[3] See Denis Balsom, 'The Three-Wales Model' in John Osmond (Ed.), *The National Question Again*, Gomer, 1985.

Map 2: The Three Wales Model

The Constituencies in 1983

1 Ynys Môn	14 Llanelli	27 Pontypridd
2 Caernarfon	15 Brecon and Radnor	28 Vale of Glamorgan
3 Conwy	16 Gower	29 Cardiff West
4 Meirionnydd Nant Conwy	17 Swansea West	30 Cardiff North
5 Clwyd South-West	18 Swansea East	31 Cardiff Central
6 Clwyd North-West	19 Neath	32 Cardiff South and Penarth
7 Delyn	20 Aberavon	33 Blaenau Gwent
8 Alyn and Deeside	21 Bridgend	34 Islwyn
9 Wrexham	22 Ogmore	35 Torfaen
10 Montgomery	23 Rhondda	36 Newport West
11 Ceredigion and Pembroke North	24 Cynon Valley	37 Newport East
Pembroke ...arthen	25 Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney	38 Monmouth
	26 Caerphilly	

These geographical divisions were very real in terms of underlying attitudes towards Welsh identity, leading to a perception that it was more of a dimension than a category. The 'Welshness' of the people somehow accentuated the further west and north they were located from, say, Chepstow in the south-east corner of the country. For a period this led to pathological, even schizophrenic tendencies. Looking back at the Methodism and educational movements of the late 19th Century Gwyn Alf Williams noted that a mutual alienation between Welsh-speakers and English-speakers Wales produced some dismal results which persisted even to the 1980s, the time he was writing:

> "Large numbers of people, who in fact constituted a majority, were
> perceived as in some basic senses, un-Welsh, and the perception acquired
> retrospective force. The very name which contemporary and official Welshness
> bestows on the huge majority of the Welsh people is negative; they are *di-Gymraeg*
> (Welshless). The more arrogant, extreme or paranoid exponents of Welshness simply

refuse to see any 'culture' at all in English-speaking Wales, or else they dismiss it as 'British' or even 'English'. The victims of this myopia cultivate an equally contemptuous and dismissive response. These attitudes operate within an overall context which is hostile and sometimes actively hostile to any Welshness at all."[4]

These divisions appeared to persist even into the late 1990s. For example, on the face of it the accuracy of the 'Three-Wales Model' was dramatically confirmed by the Assembly referendum result in September 1997 (see Map 3). The eleven counties that voted Yes were all contained within 'Y Fro Gymraeg' and 'Welsh Wales', while the counties that voted No were to be found within the 'British Wales' region of the Three-Wales model. And, indeed, there was a correlation between those people born in Wales and identifying themselves as Welsh and those registering a Yes vote in the referendum. All were concentrated, though not uniformly, in 'Welsh Wales' certainly, and about half of 'Y Fro Gymraeg'. In the referendum it was 'Y Fro Gymraeg' and 'Welsh Wales' that united to deliver the small majority.

However, three important qualifications should be made to this analysis. First, the most remarkable shift towards the Yes vote, compared with 1979, occurred in largely English-speaking 'Welsh Wales', as Table 1 shows.

Table 1: The devolution referendums in the counties of Glamorgan and Gwent

	1979	1997
Yes	119,549 (16.3%)	328,949 (50.5%)
No	612,605 (83.7%)	322,926 (49.5%)

A second qualification is the fact that 39 per cent of the Yes votes were cast in the so-called No counties. Twice as many votes were cast in favour of the Assembly in Powys, for example, as in Merthyr Tydfil, yet Powys is shown as a homogeneous No county on maps depicting the results. Each one of the No counties of Conwy, Wrexham, Pembrokeshire and Powys had larger Yes votes than the Yes counties of Merthyr, Blaenau Gwent, Anglesey and Ceredigion.

In the referendum it was votes and not the geographical areas within which they were counted that mattered. Without the 'British Wales' of the Three-Wales model we would not have the National Assembly today.

The third qualification is perhaps even more significant. The most important factor in determining the way people voted in the referendum was not where they lived, but their age. The Welsh Referendum Survey, again conducted at Aberystwyth University, found that people under 45 were more likely to vote Yes by a margin of three to two, while those over 45 voted No by a similar margin. Polling on the eve of the referendum found a 55 per cent to 45 per cent margin in favour. The reason why the actual result was so desperately close, with a majority of just 6,721 (less than 1 per cent) was simply that, as with electoral contests generally, younger people are less prone to turn out and vote. This was illustrated emphatically in the

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[4] Gwyn A. Williams, *When Was Wales – A History of the Welsh*, Black Raven Press, 1985, page 236.

ensuing Assembly election, in May 1999 when 69 per cent of people aged 18 to 24 did not vote, while 71 per cent of those over 65 did so.[5]

Map 3: Yes and No counties in the 1997 referendum

On the basis of this analysis it is possible to argue that towards the end of the 20th Century the divisions of Wales described by the 'Three-Wales Model' and the linguistic antipathies highlighted by Gwyn Alf Williams were, at the very least, beginning to recede. There is no doubt

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[5] These statistics are reported in Richard Wyn Jones, Roger Scully, and Gwenan Creunant, *Engagement and Voting in Wales*, Institute of Welsh Politics, University of Wales, Aberystwyth, January 2003.

that Williams' perspective was much influenced by the crushing defeat of the Assembly proposals in the 1979 referendum and the subsequent general election when there was a strong swing to the Conservatives in Wales, the largest in Britain outside London. Somewhat apocalyptically, he judged:

> "In a triple series of votes, the Welsh electorate in 1979 wrote finis to nearly two hundred years of Welsh history. They rejected the political traditions to which the modern Welsh had committed themselves. They declared bankrupt the political creeds which the modern Welsh had embraced. They may in the process have warranted the death of Wales itself."[6]

Yet at the very moment in which he was writing, in the midst of the 1984-5 miners strike, a new Wales was being birthed into existence, albeit in the most painful of circumstances. Most who lived through it will recall feeling how even at the time it felt like a momentous event. With hindsight it can be seen as the hinge of a pivotal decade in Welsh history that opened the door between the 1979 and 1997 devolution referendums. In those hot summer months of 1984 and through the cold, grim winter that followed can be seen the stirrings of Wales as a political nation. Although 1984-05 brought a defeat, it was different to 1979. As the swing to the Yes vote in the Valleys in 1997 demonstrated, it persuaded many Welsh people that ultimately they could only rely on their own resources and those of their communities. The strike also saw the stirring of a new kind of politics in Wales, one that connected class and nation and saw collaboration between parties and other groups which in combination represented civil society.

The main expression was the Wales Congress in Support of Mining Communities, an extraordinary network of support groups that sprung up in every village and town in the south, and eventually across the whole of Wales. This became, for a short moment, a powerful national movement, involving Labour and Plaid Cymru, the churches, the Wales TUC, Cymdeithas yr Iaith, peace, women's support, lesbian and gay groups and others. In the immediate aftermath of the strike Kim Howells, a historian and also press spokesman for the South Wales Miners, wrote prophetically of its incipient democratic possibilities:

> "In South Wales we also discovered something else: that we are part of a real nation which extends northwards beyond the coalfield, into the mountains of Powys, Dyfed and Gwynedd. For the first time since the industrial revolution in Wales, the two halves of the nation came together in mutual support. Pickets from the south travelled to the nuclear and hydro stations in the north. Support groups from the north brought food, money and clothes to the south. Friendships and alliances flourished; old differences of attitude and accent withered and out of it grew the most important 'formal' political organisation to emerge during the course of the strike – the Wales Congress in Support of Mining Communities."[7]

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[6] Gwyn A. Williams, *op. cit.,* page 295.
[7] Kim Howells, 'Stopping Out' in Huw Beynon (Ed.), *Digging Deeper: Issues in the Miner's Strike*, verso, 1985, page 147. The quotation also appears in Hywel Francis, *History on our Side – Wales and the 1984-85 Miners' Strike*, Iconau, 2009, page 69. In his book Francis, now MP for Aberavon who chaired the Wales Congress, judges that the strike paved the way for 1997. He says it "created a Welsh unity

The Miner's Strike, and the way it brought together previously estranged regions and political forces, was undoubtedly a pivotal experience of the 1980s. But it was only one of a diverse range of events and movements which together created a new Wales in which the civic possibilities around the creation of democratic institutions came into view. The anti-nuclear movement was important, with the march on Greenham Common originating in Wales and led, significantly, by women. However, most of the changes were essentially cultural. New magazines and writers groups appeared. There was a new energy in documentary film making. For some decades there had been an intense application of scholarship to the writing of the history of Wales, but only now was this presented on any scale to the people of Wales, through such popular television series as *The Dragon Has Two Tongues* and *Wales! Wales?*

Above all, attitudes to the Welsh language palpably shifted. Welsh-medium education continued to flourish, especially in the anglicised areas of south-east Wales. A burst of energy surrounded a Welsh youth music culture, with the creation and impact of S4C spreading its influence. The Welsh language came to be seen as a vehicle for modernity and renewal rather than being associated with the past, nonconformity, and decline.

The cumulative impact of all these changes was to solidify the connections between the Wales of the present with a real history of its past and also a sense of future possibilities. Writing at the beginning of the 1980s Raymond Williams put his finger on what was stirring in a review of several new volumes of Welsh history. He commented that they were an example of "industrial South Wales recovering its actual history":

> "Every reader of this new history will find, at some point, a moment when his own memory stirs and becomes that new thing, an historical memory, a new sense of identity and relationships. I can record my own moment. I have always remembered my father, a railwayman, growing potatoes along the edge of a neighbouring farmer's field, and then helping his farmer friend with the harvest. But what I just did not know was the complex history of potato setting, and its formal and informal labour obligations… The personal memory, local and specific, is then suddenly connected with the history of thousands of people, through several generations. As the particular and general, the personal and the social, are at last brought together, each kind of memory and sense of identity is clarified and strengthened. The relations between people and 'a people' begin to move in the mind."[8]

Then, in the 1990s events conspired to open a window of opportunity for the National Assembly to be established and in the process allowed the gains of the period to be consolidated around a novel idea that Welshness could be understood and felt in civic, unifying terms. How swiftly this occurred can by gauged by the way the people of Wales shifted their attitude to the Assembly once it had been established. Broadly speaking, in the decade or so leading up to the 1997 referendum, polling (by BBC Wales and others) showed a consistent 40 per cent of the electorate who were against change. The remaining 60 per cent were split between about 25 per cent that supported Labour's Assembly proposals, 25 per cent that

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[8] Raymond Williams, 'Remaking Welsh history', *Arcade*, December 1980. He was reviewing David Smith (Ed.) *A People and a Proletariat: Essays in the History of Wales*, Pluto Press, 1980; and Hywel Francis and David Smith, *The Fed: A History of the South Wales Miners*, Lawrence and Wishart, 1980.

favoured a Scottish-style Parliament, with the remaining 10 per cent or so opting for independence.

Following the 1997 referendum this pattern shifted fundamentally, and has been shifting ever since. According to the latest survey on these options, carried out in the wake of the May 2007 election, only 16 per cent were opposed to some degree of democratic government for Wales. Twenty per cent supported the current Assembly, and 12 per cent independence. The most striking statistic, however, was that a plurality of 44 per cent favoured moving ahead to achieve a Parliament.

However, from the perspective of the emergent civic identity being discussed here the important finding of these surveys is that the views canvassed are held more or less uniformly across Wales. So, for example, a survey carried out in February 2009 charted Welsh constitutional aspirations by the electoral regions used by the National Assembly to elect its list Members – North Wales, Mid and West Wales, South Wales West, South Wales Central, and South Wales East. The results are shown in Table 2. This survey added a fifth option to the ones discussed above, splitting the status quo between 'There should be no devolved government in Wales' and 'The National Assembly for Wales should have fewer powers' – but the overall difference is marginal.

Table 2: Constitutional Preference by Wales and the Regions of Wales

ANSWER OPTION	WALES	NORTH	M&WW	SWW	SWC	SWE
There should be no devolved government in Wales	7.9	9.7	6.5	5.3	8.7	9.1
The National Assembly for Wales should have fewer powers	6.3	5.8	5.2	4.6	9.7	6.1
We should leave things as they are now	27.1	28.2	23.5	29.8	25.0	28.8
The National Assembly for Wales should have more powers	42.6	39.3	50.3	43.0	42.3	37.9
Wales should become independent, separate from the UK	14.6	16.0	12.4	15.9	11.7	17.2
Don't Know/No Answer	1.1	1.0	2.0	1.3	2.6	1.0
Number of respondents	*901*	*206*	*152*	*151*	*195*	*197*

Source: Citizenship after the nation-state project, undertaken by the Institute of Welsh Politics at Aberystwyth University, which focuses on public attitudes towards governance across several European states, including Spain, Germany, Austria, and France as well as the United Kingdom.

What lessons for cultural policy can be derived from this brief survey of the imprinting of a new civic unity upon the persistent and geographically imposed divisions that hitherto have so characterised Wales and Welshness? I suggest two.

The first is not to be afraid of the new civic Wales that is emerging, but to take advantage of it. There is undisputed evidence that this is already happening. The civic culture of any country is most saliently represented in its capital, and there can be no doubt that in the last 20 years Cardiff has developed as an impressive European city. Whatever its architectural shortcomings, Cardiff Bay has changed the city's character fundamentally, symbolised by two iconic buildings, the National Assembly itself and the Wales Millennium Centre across the road.

From the point of view of the arts the Wales Millennium Centre is the most important. Architecturally it makes a statement about Welsh identity. Its materials are largely derived from far-flung corners of Wales, with the gradations of slate work inspired by the sedimented layers of rock of the nearby south Wales coastline. To many people its solidity and scale were at first shocking, even intimidating. Yet they soon found the interior, though large and ambitious, to be warm and intimate. It represents a new kind of Welshness, one that is confident and unafraid. The architect Jonathan Adams once said that in thinking about designing the building he was inspired by Raymond Williams' injunction that "Culture is ordinary – that is where we must begin". So he began with that most ordinary of Welsh materials, slate, but out of it produced an extraordinary structure through which, over time, the entire Welsh nation will flow.

The building houses world class artistic companies, including Welsh National Opera the BBC National Orchestra of Wales, the Academi and the National Dance Company Wales. All these are national institutions and as such tour throughout Wales. But the concentration of their excellence is in the capital. And it is important to remember that without the National Assembly, their home, the Wales Millennium Centre, would never have materialised. There simply would not have been the political will to concentrate so much capital and revenue expenditure to sustain just one building in Cardiff. The Assembly Government contributed £37m of the £106m capital cost. An annual revenue grant, initially set at £750,000 in 2004 when the Millennium Centre opened, was raised to £3.7m in 2008.

A second lesson is that, despite the presence of a new civic consciousness that is providing an overarching and unifying sense of Welshness, this is always likely to be fragile. The depth and longevity of the underlying divisions in Welsh society mean that policy makers should remain ever sensitive to the concerns they represent. It is worth noting in this respect that when the initial grant was made to the Millennium Centre, the Assembly Government ensured that an annual £2m funding increase was made to the Arts Council of Wales's budget, earmarked to be spent outside Cardiff. And despite the constant complaints that Cardiff receives an unfair share of public funding, there is evidence that over the past decade or more, including the first decade of devolution, significant investment in the arts and culture has been made throughout the country.

It is worth listing the achievement: the new Oriel Kyffin Williams at Llangefni in Anglesey; the Galeri arts centre in Caernarfon; the refurbishment of the Mostyn Gallery in Llandudno; the rebuilding of the Craft Centre in Ruthin; the refurbished Oriel Davies art gallery in Newtown; the extension of the Aberystwyth Arts Centre; the expansion of Theatr Mwldan in Cardigan; the

building of Theatr Brycheiniog in Brecon; the new Oriel y Parc in St Davids; the refurbishment of the Torch Theatre in Milford Haven; the National Waterfront Museum in Swansea; the upgrading of the home of Valleys Kids in a converted chapel in the Rhondda; and the new Riverfront Theatre in Newport. A former chairman of the Arts Council, Geraint Talfan Davies, once described these initiatives as the greatest architectural insurgency into Wales since the period when the Normans built their castles.

Of course, the first decade of the National Assembly and the civic Wales it represents lived through a period of relative largesse in terms of public spending. Leaner years lie ahead. But if we retain confidence in our new unifying civic culture of which we can be justly proud, and at the same time remain sensitive to the claims of our essential diversity, we may at last in 21st Century Wales escape from the divisions which our disputatious geography has for so long imposed upon us.