

Welsh-language reactions to the Anglo-Zulu War

By Dr M. Paul Bryant-Quinn

1879 was a significant year for many reasons. For those interested in the study of the four Celtic languages spoken in the British Isles, for example, the publication in that year of E.G. Ravenstein's pioneering statistical and geographical study is something of a milestone.¹ In his analysis of the linguistic situation in Wales, Ravenstein concluded that while accurate statistics were not available, it was certain that there were then considerably in excess of a million native speakers of the Welsh language. Of those, a high proportion would have been monoglot. There was, of course, no way of assessing the numbers of Welsh-speakers who had settled in cities such as London, Liverpool and Manchester, let alone those who had emigrated; these, however, would have increased the actual number by some hundreds of thousands.² In the second half of the 19th century, attitudes toward Welsh-speakers varied from the amused to the downright hostile; but for all they were a people 'without a voice that authority would listen to,'³ in the decade before the Anglo-Zulu War Henry Richard, political reformer and member for Merthyr Tydfil, could draw attention to their statistical significance and call for change:

[These are] the people who speak this language (the Welsh), who read this literature, who own this history, who inherit those traditions, who venerate those names, who have created and sustained and worked those marvellous organisations - the people forming three-fourths of the people of Wales [...] and therefore we claim the right to have our principles and sentiments and feelings represented in the Commons House of Parliament.⁴

These language statistics are perhaps not without their significance for studies of the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879 and repay a closer look. While the actual number of Welshmen serving in the British Army in South Africa at the time was undoubtedly less than myth would have it, they were there nonetheless, and constituted an appreciable element of some units. Many of these men were Welsh-speakers; Welsh was the medium in which they communicated with their families and friends; and a number of their letters were published in the Welsh-language press of the time. This should, in fact, come as no surprise. The second half of the 19th century was the golden age of the periodical press in Welsh: it was well-informed, often politically radical, and what it lacked in resources it made up for in a comprehensive attempt to provide accurate reports and comment for its Welsh readers from as many sources as possible. To letters from soldiers and colonists in South Africa can be added comment by Welsh-speaking politicians, religious leaders and other public figures; there were translations of accounts of the war given in English and South African newspapers; digests of proceedings in parliament; and a vigorous and sophisticated analysis of what had led to war and its significance. In letters home, Welsh-speaking soldiers often ask their families to send them copies of these newspapers and periodicals, and tell of how much they meant to the men who were on active service in South Africa.

And yet little or no scholarly account has been taken of these documents. Like Alan Conway before him, Frank Emery, who also conducted research in the National Library of Wales, was aware of their existence but understandably lacked the linguistic expertise which would have enabled him to make full use of them.⁵ Translations and paraphrases of letters from Welsh-speaking soldiers, published in the English-language Welsh press of the time in an often partial and unsatisfactory form, have frequently been recycled in the scholarly literature without comment. As an example of this we may consider the correspondence from Pte. Owen Ellis, 1/24th Regt. to his family in Caernarfon and cited by Emery as letters which were 'models of their kind.'⁶ Prior to their use in a truncated version in *The North Wales Express*, however, they had in fact already been published in Welsh in another Caernarfon-based newspaper, *Y Genedl Gymreig*. We find that the dual-language publication of letters from Welsh soldiers is a regular phenomenon in the press of the time and their linguistic origin is not always evident.⁷

Researching the letters sent by Welsh-speaking soldiers brings unexpected rewards, and also some surprises. In the field of Anglo-Zulu War studies, the name of 1933 Roberts, C., 2/4th, who was stationed near Luneburg, is hardly one which springs to mind. This, however, was the name under which he chose to enlist. He was in fact Ellis Evans of Llandrillo, Merionethshire. His father was a respected minister with the Welsh Calvinistic Methodists.⁸ No less than four detailed and fascinating letters from Ellis to his family were published in *Y Genedl Gymreig*, giving a lively account of life with that column and some of their activities.⁹ Then there is 871 Stephen Reynolds, F Coy. 88th Regt., who writes on 16 March to his mother

telling of his misdemeanours and imprisonment after the conflict with the Ngqika and Gcaleka, and eventual reunion with his battalion upon its return from St Helena. Again, the 91st Highlanders might not be an obvious place to look for Welsh-speaking soldiers, but there we find 2073 Pte. William Davies, who writes to his uncle from Fort Crealock, following the battle of Gingindhlovu, telling of his longing to return to Wales. Personal details frequently accompany the publication of these letters, such that it is possible to gain quite a clear picture of who the authors were and of their communities. Comment and further details are often given in the obituaries of 1879 and later years.

It is undoubtedly the case that considerably more Welsh-language material has been lost to us than has survived the passage of time. What student of the Anglo-Zulu War would not dearly wish that the wartime diaries kept in Welsh and written in copperplate hand by a defender of Rorke's Drift, 25B/963 Pte. David Lewis (whose real name was James Owen), B Coy, 2/24 Regt., had been preserved?¹⁰ Nevertheless, the Welsh documents which we do have are part of the witness to, and comment on, events in 1879 and their aftermath: they deserve our recognition.

References

1. E.G. Ravenstein, 'On the Celtic Languages in the British Isles, a Statistical Survey', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, XLII (1879), 579-636. For an analysis of the census of 1891, see now *The Welsh Language and the 1891 Census*, ed. G. Parry and M.A. Williams (Aberystwyth, 1999).
2. An example would be the scores of thousands who had immigrated to the United States during the 18th- and 19th centuries. Substantial numbers of Welsh-speakers would also settle in Canada, Australia and New Zealand, Patagonia and South Africa itself.
3. G.T. Roberts, *The Language of the Blue Books* (Cardiff, 1998), 217.
4. *Aberdare Times*, 14 November 1868. Richard would go on to oppose the war in Zululand implacably.
5. See Alan Conway, 'Welsh Soldiers in the Zulu War' *Journal of the National Library of Wales*, vol. XI/1, Summer 1959; Frank Emery, *The Red Soldier* (London, 1977). I am grateful to several former employees of the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth, for their comments on this matter. The one curious exception is the short letter in Welsh from Pte. Isaac Morris, 1/24th Regt., quoted in *Y Gwylidydd*, 26 June 1879 and used by Emery in *The Red Soldier*, pp. 217-18. One suspects that Emery's attention had been drawn to this single letter, and that it had been translated for him.
6. *ibid.*, p. 63 (and references).
7. One example of this is the letter from 25B/295 Pte. David Jenkins, G coy, 1/24 Regt. which was published in Alan Baynham Jones and Lee Stevenson, *Rorke's Drift by those who were there* (Brighton, 2003), pp. 242-3. The English version of this letter was printed in *The Merthyr Express* of 22 March 1879; its introduction in the *Express* refers to Jenkins' father, Thomas, and to his 'uncle', W. Davies of Aberdare. However, turning to the version in a Welsh-language newspaper, *Y Gwladgarwr*, which printed Jenkins' letter on 28 March but says that it had been received some days previously, we note that the introduction there makes no reference whatsoever to Jenkins' father. Davies is mentioned, but we are told that Jenkins was Davies' son-in-law. The introduction to the Welsh version also gives the road where Davies lived; and as *Y Gwladgarwr* was itself an Aberdare-based newspaper, the local knowledge may have been more accurate. Problematic references in the English version of this letter can be resolved by reference to the Welsh.
8. See W. Williams, *Methodistiaeth Dwyrain Meirionydd* (Bala, 1902), pp. 289-90.
9. *Y Genedl Gymreig*, 19 June; 3 July; 7 August and 25 September 1879.
10. I owe this information to Alun Baynham-Jones, and am grateful to him and to Lee Stevenson for their help.

