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Representing Wales at the Museum of Welsh Life

Rhiannon Mason

> The very notion of a nation with a fixed 'given' cultural identity is a sign of the success of a whole array of practices in naturalizing that identity. It is also the sign of the success of a particular construction or version of national culture, for all definitions of the national essence selectively ignore competing definitions.
> (Foster 1991: 238)

> …if St Fagans is the Museum of Welsh Life should it also seek to represent Somali, Italian, and Asian heritage and culture as it exists in Wales? Or should it remain an icon and expression of a principally Welsh speaking, white, rural based culture? St Fagans stands at an important crossroads.
> (Houlihan 2005: 6)

Heritage and the past provide an important means of claiming and securing identity positions. Heritage supplies identities with precedent and legitimacy through the invocation of 'tradition' and, in the case of established cultural institutions like museums or heritage sites, by lending those identity-claims the authority which public institutions command. The act of creating an institution like a national museum has been and continues to be an act of assertion: a gesture designed to claim recognition for a given identity and an attempt to translate a set of intangible beliefs about the special quality of a certain cultural group into an identifiable, material and visible presence.

A national museum can be therefore understood performatively in that the nation's citizens are presented with the national story as celebration and affirmation. The museum instructs citizens how to locate themselves in relation to the 'national story'. However, complexities quickly arise when museums try to define the national identities they represent and when they endeavour to construct displays and collecting policies to present and capture such identities. This is particularly acute when they are obliged to deal with the changes to 'the national story' that occur over time, or indeed to acknowledge multiple and competing versions of those national stories. Museums have the added challenge of dealing with the material legacies – in terms of buildings, collections, displays

– bequeathed to them by earlier generations who may have held different ideas about what constituted appropriate national culture for display in museums.

The second branch of Wales's national museum: St. Fagans: National History Museum, which is the subject of this chapter, clearly illustrates all of these difficulties and offers another opportunity to examine the processes involved in the representation of national identities within national museums in Wales. This museum started life as the 'Welsh Folk Museum' but in 1995 became the 'Museum of Welsh Life'. At the time of conducting the research for this chapter the museum was still known by that name; it only received its newest name in late 2005. For the purposes of consistency, this chapter will refer to it with its penultimate name and will restrict the discussion of its new name and future development to the concluding section.

This chapter examines how and why the previous name-change occurred and the challenges this shift in remit and redrawing of representational parameters brought to the museum and its curators. What emerges from this case study is not only the extent to which museums are palimpsests but also the way that any subsequent changes are circumscribed by, and sometimes at odds with, those earlier legacies. The paper also examines the claim that folk museums are inherently conservative in their politics and that they suffer from a form of amnesia over divisions within national stories. Finally, the case study offers two museological insights. Firstly, it illustrates the need to consider not only the historical, macrocosmic reasons for why a museum representation has come to be as it is, but also the effects of practical current factors like marketing, audience development, visitor profiles and visitor surveys. Most studies on national museums tend to privilege the historical and ideological context at the expense of the more diffuse, but equally important, day-to-day practical elements of museum work.

Secondly, while it is certainly possible to identify dominant discourses at work in museum representations, there is a danger of reading museums as too internally coherent, too unitary in their meanings. By contrast, this analysis of the Museum of Welsh Life leads me to concur with Andreas Huyssen's (1995: 15) comment that: 'No matter how much the museum, consciously or unconsciously, produces and affirms the symbolic order, there is always a surplus of meaning that exceeds set ideological boundaries, opening spaces for reflection and counter-hegemonic memory'. Tony Bennett makes a similar point when he observes that museums which make universalising statements – that is to say those which claim to represent a whole way of life or a whole people – always open themselves up for

criticism and accusations of misrepresentation. They are always already internally flawed because of the inevitable inadequacy of their over-reaching representational claims (Bennett 1995: 102-3). This means that museums can function as both a catalyst for debate and a public forum within which debates over the accepted nature of national identities and histories can occur. The Museum of Welsh Life enables us to see the above in action because it accommodates competing discourses of Welsh identity and because it makes visible the processes by which dominant representations are created but equally challenged and revised. This chapter also enables us to see how the museological approach adopted has shaped the way that national identities, cultures, and histories, are represented. Whereas, the very first National Museum of Wales followed the 'universal-survey museum' approach, this second branch is much closer to the idea of the museum as 'nation-in-miniature' (Mason 2007). The original intention underpinning the creation of the folk museum was to capture a holistic view of the nation and be explicitly representative of Wales's vernacular national culture as recognised at that time.

The creation of the Welsh Folk Museum
The first National Museum of Wales based in Cardiff is reminiscent of the archetypal nineteenth-century museum, with its neo-classical, temple-like architecture and European 'high art' collections (figure 1). The Museum of Welsh Life, or Amgueddfa Werin Cymru to give it its Welsh name, is its opposite – museologically speaking. The first National Museum of Wales was originally intended to show that Wales was a fully-fledged nation with the requisite institutions: a national museum, a national library and a national university. By contrast, the Museum of Welsh Life – or the Welsh Folk Museum as it was first called – was, and still remains, about valuing the vernacular culture of Wales. Its 2001 guidebook stated that, 'The Museum shows how the people of Wales lived, worked and spent their leisure time over the last five hundred years' (National Museum of Wales 2001: 3). The emphasis at the Museum of Welsh Life is thus intended to be on the 'people of Wales' and their lives. The complex questions of who these people might be, what concept of 'Wales' such a mission statement invokes, and how all this comes to be represented is considered below.

The Museum of Welsh Life today is based in the village of St Fagans situated on the periphery of the city of Cardiff. The museum grew out of a 'Bygones' collection of folk material exhibited at the National Museum in Cardiff first in 1913 and then 1926 and the subsequent establishment of a Department of Folk Culture and Industries there in 1936 (figures 2 and 3) (National Museum of

Wales 1938: 71). It is worth noting that the use of the term 'industries' at this point is somewhat misleading in that it means rural crafts: 'The department deals, in short, with the life of Man in Wales during the last four hundred years, excluding only modern industrial developments' (National Museum of Wales 1938: 71). The collections were relocated into the Welsh Folk Museum at its current St Fagans site following the Earl of Plymouth's 1946 donation of St Fagans castle with its twenty acre grounds and the collection of funds from a public appeal. The museum was the first of its type to be built in Britain, although smaller folk museums did exist in the Isle of Man and the Highlands (Kavanagh 1993). It was the first national open-air museum in Britain and museum documentation from the time of its creation states that: 'The aim will be to form in the Folk Museum as complete a picture of the Welsh past as is possible, to create a 'Wales in miniature'' (National Museum of Wales 1946: 6). The first open-air museum in the UK was on the Isle of Man at Cregneash in 1938 but this does not appear to have been termed 'national' (Kavanagh 1993).

Since its official opening in 1948, over thirty buildings have been taken from around Wales to be rebuilt in a village setting of an extra forty-five acres surrounded by a woodland area of about forty acres. The buildings include:

- farm houses, cottages, barns, hayshed, pigsty
- bakehouse, pottery, tannery, gorse mill, sawmill, smithy, saddler, woollen mill, cider mill, coach house
- Oakdale Working Men's Institute, Rhyd-y-car ironworkers cottages decorated in the styles of 1805, 1855, 1895, 1925, 1955, and 1985
- tollhouse, chapel, school, local stores, cockpit, post office, a cenotaph, church
- Celtic village, St Fagans castle and gardens, boat house, summer house, a post WWII pre-fab, and an ecological experiment: the House for the Future.

The museum also includes a visitor centre with a temporary exhibition space, large permanent galleries of material culture, agriculture and costume, restaurants and a shop. Attractions at the site include story-telling, rides in a horse and cart and a photography studio at which visitors can be photographed in period or national costume. The craftsmen – wood turner, cooper, clog maker, tailor, smithy – offer demonstrations of traditional skills and visitors can purchase the finished products. The museum houses an extensive oral testimony archive created in 1958 of folk tales, folk music, folk customs, and the definitive

national archive of Welsh language and dialect. It also links to local intangible heritage, for example, by commemorating events like the Battle of St Fagans: the last major battle of the 1648 Civil War (Museum of Welsh Life Guidebook 2001: 39). Such events – and other activities like the celebration of St. David's Day – constitute a year round programme of events and are an equally significant part of the museum's representational work.

Between April 2005 and March 2006, the Museum of Welsh Life received 582,798 visits making it the most visited of all National Museum Wales's sites. The National Museum Cardiff, located in the capital's city centre, received 308,714 visitors for the same period making it the second most visited site.[1] The Museum of Welsh Life also saw the biggest increase in visitors following the introduction of free admission in 2001. In 2000-2001 it received 321,810 visits while in 2001-2 visits soared to 694,899 (NMGW 2003: 26).

Existing literature

While there is not a vast literature on the Museum of Welsh Life specifically, a small number of critics, mainly historians but also sociologists and curators, have written about it as part of a larger commentary on heritage or museums within Wales. The one exception is, as previously discussed, Bassett (1982; 1983; 1984; 1990; also 1993) who has written the definitive account of the national museums of Wales to date. Regarding the Museum of Welsh Life specifically, Bassett reports the recorded motivations and factors leading up to its creation but gives less discussion to the content or museological approach.

Peter Lord (1992b) also considered the Museum of Welsh Life as part of his much larger polemic on the treatment of visual culture in Wales and the role he claimed that the National Museums Wales had played in marginalising indigenous visual culture in favour of an Anglicised, Europeanised aesthetic canon. For Lord, the Welsh Folk Museum (as it was still called at the time of his writing) was complicit in this process because its self-identification as the supposedly most Welsh of all Wales's museums had abnegated the National Museum and Galleries, Cardiff from its responsibility to represent Wales in all its facets and, especially, in the realm of visual culture. Criticism also came from within the Museum itself in the form of one of the curators, Geraint Jenkins, who was appointed in 1987 and argued that the collecting policies had been driven by a romantic and highly selective view of Wales (Dicks 2000: 91).

This criticism of the Welsh Folk Museum's tendency to prioritise a single aspect

of Welsh society – that of rural culture – above all others was voiced by a number of other Welsh academics from at least the 1960s but increasingly during the1980s. In her book, *Heritage, Place and Community*, Bella Dicks provides a useful summary of this episode in the museum's history and contextualises the critiques in terms of wider movements relating to the development of urban history in museums and community studies (Dicks 2000: 78-102). Dicks also discusses the accusation made by a number of critics that the folk museum presented a past that was too static, too unified and simplified:

> Dai Smith, for example, whilst welcoming the new direction taken by the museum under Jenkins's curatorship, identifies in it a reluctance to countenance the display of conflict or dissension. Instead, he sees a continuing reliance on visions of 'wholeness, and harmony, and community, and distinctiveness and togetherness, and uniqueness' (Smith 1990-1:5 cited in Dicks 2000: 94).

Lord (1992) made a similar criticism of the Welsh Folk Museum as devoid of politics and as a static, closed version of history. Writing about the presentation of Wales in the museum, Lord commented: 'Wales has come to an end at some indeterminate point in the nineteenth century, a passive nation existing in a time warp. It is a concluded story'(40). This criticism is not unique to the Museum of Welsh Life; it is commonly levelled at folk and open-air museums as a genre and is echoed in Tony Bennett's (1995: 111-112) criticism of an 'institutionalised mode of amnesia' levelled at Beamish open-air museum in the North of England. A similar accusation of political amnesia can also be found in Richard Kirkland's (1996) discussion of the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum. Kirkland is critical of this museum, founded not long after the Welsh Folk Museum in 1958, because it avoids any discussion of the histories of post-partition Ireland. The extent to which such criticism holds true for the Museum of Welsh Life will be discussed below.

A key point here is that much of the literature – while extremely informative – does tend to attribute the causes of representational choices and changes within the museum to predominantly historical, macrocosmic change or to shifts in ideological positions held by curators and academics. A particularly clear example of this can be found in Adamson (1999) who discusses the Welsh Folk Museum as a vehicle for in the dissemination of the ideas and values of Welsh intellectuals. This chapter argues that there were equally important internal, microcosmic reasons why the 'text' of this museum shifted as, and when, it did. Contrary to Lord, Bennett, and Kirkland's critique of folk-museums as frozen in

time or as presenting history as a 'story concluded', I want to argue that the text of this museum is far more organic, open-ended and internally contradictory. My argument is that it operates as a space in which it is possible to identify competing definitions of Welshness and that close examination reveals evidence of the on-going process of remembering and the remaking of cultural memory in response to the demands of the present.

Formative factors

Accounts of the history of the Museum of Welsh Life often attribute the form adopted at the time of its establishment in the 1940's to the personal experiences of the museum's first curator, Dr Iorwerth Peate (NMGW 1998; *Western Mail* 1998: 8). Peate joined the National Museum of Wales in 1927 and was head of the Welsh Folk Museum from 1948 – 1971. Brought up in Montgomeryshire, mid-Wales, he was a well-known Welsh poet and literary figure, a member of Plaid Cymru (the Welsh nationalist party) and a conscientious objector in the Second World War. While Peate did clearly exercise a formative influence over the development of the Museum of Welsh Life and its public profile, other individuals were equally instrumental as were wider cultural factors. National Museum Director Cyril Fox was extremely supportive of the idea of a Welsh folk museum particularly after visiting open-air museums in Scandinavia in 1930 with two members of the museum's Council. Evans Hoyle, a previous director, had also declared support for the idea of a Welsh Folk Museum, (Bassett 1982-3: 26). Other curators similarly influenced the museum's development over the years: it would be impossible and inappropriate to list all of these. However, Haycock's (2004) article on Ffransis Payne illustrates his role in the early years of the museum.

A major influence on the Welsh Folk Museum was the open-air folk-museum tradition pioneered at Skansen, near Stockholm in 1891, and subsequently repeated across Europe during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (Bennett 1995 115; Loveluck 2003; Bassett 1982-83, Lord 1992b: 37). In its own time, this folk museum movement was considered a radical move in museological terms because of its valorisation of ordinary people and their lives and also, according to Dicks, because of its return to spectacle; something which other museums were consciously rejecting as unscientific and outmoded (2000: 86). The debt to Skansen is made explicit by Peate in various early texts about the Welsh Folk Museum:

> A folk museum represents the life and culture of a nation,

illustrating the arts and the crafts, and in particular the building crafts, of the complete community, and including in its illustration the activities of the mind and spirit – ceremonial, drama, dance and music – as well as of the hand. … This is no imaginary picture: it has been fully achieved on several sites in the Scandinavian countries, where the influence of the folk museum in improving the standard of taste and maintaining the pride of the people in the best of traditions of their past has been remarkable (National Museum of Wales 1958: 5).

As indicated by the language of this passage, writers such as Peate conceived of folk culture as a holistic and authentic representation of the 'true' character of a nation. Bjarne Stoklund (1983: 8) writes: 'while the culture of the higher classes was subject to changing foreign fashions, the popular culture, with its deep roots, was supposed to represent the true national culture'. This interest in European folk culture was a response to the dramatic socio-economic shifts produced by industrialisation (Morgan 1982: 126; Smith 1984: 14-15). As elsewhere in Britain, the effects of industrialisation were extremely far-reaching within Wales during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The transition from rural crafts to mechanized industrial and urban life equally prompted a shift in how culture was conceptualised and also supported the romantic idea of folk culture. The correlation between support for the growth of folk culture and anxiety over the growth of urban industry underpins both Iorwerth Peate's and Cyril Fox's writings on the need for a Museum of Folk Life in Wales. For example, in his introduction to the 1929 collection of Welsh Bygones, Fox wrote:

It may be urged that the change in the organization of society to which I have referred is a continuous and orderly process, and that our case to-day differs only in degree from that manifest in past centuries. This is, I venture to think, a mistaken view of the situation. … The fruitful interaction thus developed, century after century, has now, however, come to an end. The growth of centralized industry and of rapid transport is flooding the Welsh countryside with machine-made goods, of a class hitherto produced locally, exported from the great towns (National Museum of Wales 1929: xvi).

Peate similarly expressed alarm over the social impact of the demise in the rural

crafts industry and the loss of 'real Wales'.

> Anyone who knows the real Wales well can estimate the importance of these craftsmen in the life of their communities, and with the decline of the demand for their services comes the disintegration of small societies of folk which are of real value in a civilised state. … The mass-production resulting from the Industrial Revolution in squeezing the rural craftsman out of existence has also, it is more than probable, impoverished the spiritual life of the people (National Museum of Wales 1929: 1, 2).

This notion of the craftsman being free from the curse of alienation from the fruits of his labour has a long precedent in Pugin, Marx, Ruskin, Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement. Indeed, Peate often echoed or directly quoted from Morris in his writings. However, as Tony Bennett (1995: 115) has observed, support for folk culture contained both progressive and reactionary elements and was bound up with class relations. Bennett cites Michael Wallace on Skansen:

> The Skansen movement blended romantic nostalgia with display at the emergence of capitalist social relations. As the new order had introduced mechanised mass production, a burgeoning working class, and class conflict, these museums, often organised by aristocrats and professionals, set out to preserve and celebrate fast disappearing craft and rural traditions. What they commemorated, and in some degree fabricated, was the life 'of the folk', visualised as a harmonious population of peasants and craft workers (Wallace 1981: 72 cited in Bennett 1995: 115).

This concurs with what Antony Smith (1999: 18) calls: 'a route of vernacular mobilization whereby an indigenous intelligentsia uses folk culture to mobilize middle and lower strata and create ethnic nations'. This can be seen in Peate's writings:

> It is, therefore, natural to find that Welsh social life had the village as the centre of a self-sufficing community where work and leisure, individual enterprise and mutual co-operation were combined to produce a rural polity where poverty was never extreme nor wealth out of proportion to the needs of those who enjoyed it… the outlook of the people of the Welsh countryside has always postulated a natural courtesy and a willing kindness engendered

and fostered by the combination of labour and leisure for the benefit of the community (National Museum of Wales 1929: 2).

The important point here, as far as the current Museum of Welsh Life is concerned, is that while the Welsh Folk Museum did not open its gates to the public until 1948, its roots – both in the ideological and material sense – extend back to the nineteenth century and were closely entwined with, and responding to, the form adopted by the first National Museum in Cardiff from 1927.

Repeated calls were made by museum staff and other interested museum professionals from the 1930s onwards for the relocation of the early Bygones collections into a self-contained, Swedish-style open-air, folk-museum (Bassett 1982-3: 29). However, it was not until after the Second World War that various factors combined to boost and finally realise the museum's cause (*Western Mail* 1998: 3; Bassett 1982-83). At the UK level, the Museum was undoubtedly helped by the post-war interest in the 'daily lives, customs, rituals, and traditions of non-elite social strata' which prompted a 'flurry of new museum initiatives' (Bennett 1995: 109). In Wales, the display of folk culture was thought of by museum professionals as a powerful tool for rebuilding cultural pride and a cohesive national identity (National Museum of Wales 1958). A 1998 *Western Mail* newspaper supplement – '50 years at St Fagans', noted that: 'In 1943, during some of the darkest days of World War II, the museum council reiterated its belief that part of the post-war reconstruction of facilities in Wales should be the establishment of such a museum' (*Western Mail* 1998: 3; see also Kavanagh 1993). This concurred with the reopening of museums generally across post-war Europe and the symbolic importance attached to this gesture of post-war restoration. Most importantly, the Earl of Plymouth's 1946 gift of St. Fagans Castle and gardens provided a physical home for the project, while a public appeal for £100,000 and a Treasury contribution towards the maintenance cost for the new site, albeit not for its capital development, gave the necessary financial support (Bassett 1982-3: 47).

Collecting Wales
From its outset the Welsh Folk Museum set out to collect predominantly rural rather than modern industrial material culture. Although curators at the Welsh Folk Museum had been actively collecting oral testimony from the industrial areas since the late 1960s – particularly regarding domestic life, coal mining vocabulary and folklore, as well as information about lead mining in mid-Wales, and the tinplate industry – industrial material culture remained seriously under-represented. It was not until the 1980s that curators decided to: 'yield to urban

and industrial Wales' and to represent the area where as Loveluck puts it, 'the majority of Welsh people had lived since 1841' (Museum of Welsh Life 1998; Loveluck 2003: 9). This reorientation entailed taking in firstly a row of ironworkers' cottages (Rhyd-y-car) in 1987, the Gwalia Stores in 1991, the Oakdale Miners' Institute in 1995, and most recently, a post-war pre-fab from a suburb of Cardiff (2001). Ironically, it is the ironworkers' cottages which are reportedly the most popular aspect of the site today possibly because they relate to recent memory and the local knowledge of many visitors who come from the South Wales area (figure 4).

The museum's initial tendency to privilege rural culture as more 'authentically' Welsh than its supposedly alien, and Anglicised industrial counterpart follows an extremely well-established precedent within Welsh culture and Welsh nationalism. As I have discussed elsewhere, it was not until the 1980s that the balance of national discourse as represented in museums began to shift decisively away from the predominance of rural, Welsh speaking Wales towards an increasing recognition of the contribution and legitimacy of industrial, Anglophone Wales and an acceptance of a more pluralistic understanding of national identities within Wales (Mason 2007; Dicks 2000: 78-102).

While these broader discursive shifts were evidently significant in terms of the context within which the Welsh Folk Museum was operating during the 1980s, the timing of its decision to reorient its collecting policies and representational remit is also bound up with earlier internal museum issues and indicative of the ways in which it responds to external events. In terms of date for the inclusion of the first industrial exhibits, the Rhyd-y-car cottages, it is crucial to know that the Museum of Welsh Life has a policy of waiting until buildings are offered to it.[2] This is because the museum follows a principle of conservation in-situ and would rather see the properties remain in their original place wherever possible. They will therefore only take those which are threatened with demolition; the Rhyd-y-car cottages being a case in point. Following a heavy flood in the Merthyr area of South Wales in 1979, the cottages had fallen into serious disrepair and in 1980 the Merthyr Tudfil Borough Council offered some of the houses to the Museum of Welsh Life (Wiliam 1987: 2). Although it is hard to pinpoint evidence within the Museum's own records for the exact decision to begin collecting industrial heritage at this time, the wider social context of the 1980s in South Wales, and in particular, Britain's Miners' strike of 1984-5 must have been another significant contributing factor. The difficulty is that the Annual Reports has a ten year gap which effectively spans most of the 1980s. It may be that the Welsh Folk Museum was taking account of more interest

generally in the UK in industrial history. According to Eurwyn Wiliam the use of the Rhyd-y-Car cottages to show a chronological narrative of change in living styles was a first among European folk-museums.[3]

Another reason for the exclusion of the influence of industries, such as iron and coal, for over a hundred years right up until the 1980s is quite possibly because these industries were perceived to be still so modern and culturally dominant as to not require representation within a museum. It was only when overtaken by newer technological industries that an anxiety they would disappear from the present sphere of work, and from culture in general, prompted the reappraisal and revaluation of such industrial history throughout Britain. This kind of rescue-mission mentality is common to museums and especially history museums. As Huyssen (1995: 15) puts it the museum is: 'the paradigmatic institution that collects, salvages, and preserves that which has fallen to the ravages of modernization'. In this respect, this museum has been engaged not so much in the representation of what constitutes Welsh Life, but more in the representation of what has disappeared from it. There may be another reason which links specifically to Celtic cultures. Hale (2001), for example, identifies the same reluctance to recognise industrial culture within representations of the Cornish past until the 1980s and Cooke and McLean (2002) observe a long-standing tendency to align Celtic culture with the 'natural', the 'feminine', and the 'ancient' rather than the industrial and the modern.

Some of the above can only remain at the level of speculation because of the absence of accessible documentation detailing the wider discussions informing collecting policy decisions. However, in the libraries and archives of National Museum Wales there is evidence for another reason for the realignment of its representational strategies. This comes in the form of marketing and audience development reports.

Markets and audiences
During the 1980s the predominance of rural culture over and above representations of the industrial in the Welsh Folk Museum became increasingly recognised within the museum itself. This problem was not simply one of representation but was caught up with wider issues of funding, overall visitor trends, and public and media profile. In 1986 local press reported that the National Museums & Galleries of Wales (as it was then) as a whole organisation was experiencing a number of difficulties (Underwood 1986: 10). The then director of the National Museums & Galleries of Wales, Dr David Dykes, was quoted as saying 'We have problems: problems with our buildings, a shortage of

money, and we suffer from staffing problems. I think there has obviously been a loss of morale' (Underwood 1986: 10). In addition, the organisation's public profile had been damaged by a highly-publicised and unresolved dispute over the authenticity of Rubens cartoons purchased by the National Museum & Gallery, Cardiff in 1979 (Underwood 1986: 10).

The Welsh Folk Museum (as it was still called) was equally affected at this time. In response to the funding shortage, the National Museums & Galleries of Wales decided to increase its admission charge at all its sites. A consultancy report by John Brown Tourism Services (Brown 1986) observed that in June 1985 admission prices were increased dramatically in line with findings published in a national report into visitor attitudes at thirty-six National Trust and Department of the Environment heritage sites. This national report had suggested that 'demand was inelastic and relatively constant and would not diminish to any great extent if prices were increased' (Brown 1986: 92). Admission charges at the Museum of Welsh Life were thus increased dramatically (according to Brown's calculations by 1,900% in four-five years, from 10p for an adult admission in the 1980s to £2 in 1985). However, contrary to expectations visitor figures did fall sharply: 'Prior to 1985, visitor figures decreases were in line with other similar attractions but in 1985 they bucked the general trend and dropped by 19.0% while other attractions in South Wales rose by 9.7% aggregate figure' (Brown 1986: 92). The Brown report attributes this to the excessively dramatic price increase which deterred casual, impulse visitors and local visitors and public perception that the museum had decided to pursue a tourist market at the expense of the local one.

By 1991, the situation had improved for the National Museums & Galleries of Wales. Visitor figures for National Museum & Galleries of Wales overall were improving again as were the numbers for the Welsh Folk Museum (Betts 1991: 7). This was attributed in some quarters to a 'redirection of the museum's entire policies and the introduction of a marketing strategy' (Betts 1991: 7). As part of this marketing strategy the Welsh Folk Museum was renamed the Museum of Welsh Life in 1995 and all the National Museums and Galleries of Wales were given a standardised corporate image with a shared logo, colour scheme, and single website. Part of this marketing strategy involved responding to findings regarding the Welsh Folk Museum's audience profile. The Brown report of 1986 had indicated that 55% of the museum's visitors at this time were day visitors and that 85% of these day visitors came from within Wales. Furthermore, the report found that a high proportion of the museum's visitors lived within a one half to one hour radius of the site (Brown 1986: 78). Consequently, it reported that: 'The main market for the Museum will nevertheless remain people living

within South Wales. Policies must at all times recognise the over-riding need for the Museum to maintain, and if possible, increase its appeal within this area'.

Brown's analysis of the audience profile for the Museum of Welsh Life continues to be true according to a 2003 survey by different consultants showing that in 2003, 61% of visitors lived within 30 minutes of the museum, 29% within 30-60 minutes radius, 8% at 1-2 hours and only 1% more than 2 hours (Beaufort Research Ltd 2003). In 2003, 71% of visitors were from Wales, 23% from Other UK and only 6% from Overseas. This means that the majority of the Museum of Welsh Life's potential audience originate precisely from the Anglophone, post-industrial area of south Wales which had for so long been excluded from the museum. Ironically, this means that for reasons of pure geography and visiting behaviour, a tension existed between the representational ideals envisaged by Peate and the other founders – to focus on rural, welsh-speaking, 'Y Fro Gymraeg' – and the contemporary need for the museum to cater for, and engage with its local audience – South, industrial 'Welsh Wales' (Balsom 1985; see Mason 2007). The National Museums & Galleries of Wales have recognised this in the reorientation of its remit since the 1980s to include industrial history and, in particular, with its development of a network-wide Industrial Strategy since 1998. The development of the strategy involved a considered degree of public consultation and was also arguably prompted by the highly contentious closure of the Welsh Industrial and Maritime Museum in Cardiff Bay in 1998. What this clearly demonstrates is that the museum's representations of Welsh national identities are not driven solely by changing in academic and curatorial thought but result from the complex interplay of concrete issues of location, marketing, and audience development with theoretical discourses and debates surrounding national identities.

Displaying Wales
As the name change implies the overall collecting remit was explicitly amended in 1995. This led to an increased interest in acquiring further industrial artefacts and more recent ventures like the House for the Future and the Second World War pre-fabricated house. The result today is a diverse but ultimately quite confusing mix of objects and chronologies. Buildings from different time periods appear to be grouped together according to their functions rather than by date. Agricultural buildings, covering the period 1508-1850s, such as farms, barns and a cider mill, are scattered around the periphery of the site in little glades only accessible by individual paths, thus creating the illusion of rural seclusion and isolation (figures 5 and 6).

By contrast, although they differ radically in time period, the more institutional and social buildings such as the Tollhouse (1771), the Tailor's workshop (1896), the Bakery (1900), and the Post Office (1936), are all closely grouped into a kind of village centre connected by roads. The row of Ironworkers Cottages (1805-1980) the School (1880), the Gwalia stores (built 1880 but displayed in the style of 1920s), and the Miners' Institute (1916), are similarly clustered in the vicinity. Even the Cockpit which dates from the 1700s is placed relatively close to this apparently urban social centre, nestling somewhat incongruously behind the Post Office with its Second World War memorabilia (figures 7). This layout therefore takes as its organizing principle, not the original date of the construction of the building, nor the date of its relocation to the Museum, but rather the exhibit's social purpose. This aspect is foregrounded to create a recognisable pattern albeit with transhistorical continuity. In terms of narrative this arrangement could be read as suggesting that towns and rural areas have always existed in this kind of harmonious proximity.

A practical explanation for this arrangement is that the collection and siting process has been a gradual one carried out over the last fifty years and has been variously influenced by considerations of space and resources. For example, it was self-evident to site the Mill near the river in order to provide it with a water source, while the tollhouse was sited at the crossroads because it was originally situated at the intersection of five roads in Aberystwyth (Jenkins 1990: 167). The Museum of Welsh Life also includes a protected forested area which cannot be altered and this presents another set of constraints to the possibilities for siting and displaying artefacts.

Another pragmatic reason for the museum's current appearance relates to its open-air quality; the Museum of Welsh Life has been useful to the overall National Museums & Galleries of Wales network because it provides room for parts of the national collection which cannot be accommodated elsewhere. A pertinent example here is the Celtic Village which was originally part of an exhibition at the National Museum & Gallery, Cardiff, in May 1991. This exhibit is, in one respect, out of place in the Museum of Welsh Life because it is a reconstruction, not an actual rebuild like the rest of the buildings. It has been 're-created' from excavated remains of buildings not just from modern-day Wales, but also from Warwickshire. This is a joint archaeology /education initiative and both of these departments contribute to its interpretation. The Department of Social and Cultural History which looks after the majority of the rest of the Museum of Welsh Life provides advice and assistance with the maintenance of

the buildings.[4] What is significant about this exhibit is that it came to be sited at the Museum of Welsh Life for a number of reasons – some practical and some intellectual. Thomas suggests that it was felt that it would be better developed and interpreted on a permanent basis in an open-air site. Eurwyn Wiliam who was the curator of the folk museum at the time and had an archaeology background, also remembers that he: '… had always been interested in pushing back the timeframe represented at St Fagans and in experimental archaeology'. It also fitted well with plans afoot at the time to introduce other medieval reconstructions which did not eventually come to fruition.[5] The reasons why the Celtic Village has come to be in the Museum of Welsh Life illustrate the inter-textual nature of networks of museums like National Museum Wales. However, the complex life-history of the Celtic Village is not apparent to the casual visitor to whom it will appear as simply another part of the 'story of Wales'.

In terms of how it fits within the overall narrative of the Museum of Welsh Life, the Celtic Village presents both problems and opportunities. Its addition creates a considerable temporal gap in the museum's timeline which now jumps from the Celts to the medieval period. It also causes a conflict in the Museum of Welsh Life mission statement which is variously described on the current website as: 'A Walk around Wales from Celtic Times to the Present Day' and as: 'its aim is to show how the people of Wales lived, worked and spent their leisure time over the last five hundred years'. At the same time, the Celtic Village is useful to the Museum of Welsh Life in terms of telling the national story because it offers an historical point of origin for the Welsh, fulfils visitor expectations that a story about Wales will include something about the Celts, and links to the national curriculum.

The complexity and idiosyncrasies of the Museum of Welsh Life and its uneven mix of rural and industrial Wales has been recognised by the museum staff and is discussed in various reports commissioned into visitor responses to the site. Indeed in 1986, the John Brown report recommended a return to the earlier remit stating that:

> The National Museum of Wales should reconsider and redefine the objectives of the Welsh Folk Museum. It should be accepted that it is impracticable for it to attempt to cover all aspects of the history of the Welsh people, their way of life and their culture. The aim should perhaps become more limited: to be a museum of traditional Welsh rural life
> (Brown 1986: 13).

Curators and consultants also identify part of the problem as being linked to a lack of orientation for the visitor upon arrival. At present, most visitors are unaware that the museum began life as a folk museum and there is no room to discuss issues of identity within Wales which would contextualise what they will see outside. John Brown's survey found that non-Welsh visitors found it especially difficult to gain a sense of what constituted Welsh culture.

> There was an expectation that the Museum would be 'Welsh' and this was sometimes followed by a feeling of disappointment that the 'Welshness' in a cultural sense did not really come through … it was generally more difficult for overseas visitors to form an impression of Welsh culture and Welsh life
> (Brown 1986: 63).

Moreover, although staff recognise that the museums belong to a network, recent audience research suggested that visitors were not aware of NMGW as a brand. A 2002 'Site Audit Debrief' report suggested that individual sites possessed strong brand identities of their own but in general visitors were unaware of individual museums' relationships to other sites in the network. It was concluded that the National Museums & Galleries of Wales 'brand' is 'remarkable yet confusing: it's difficult to put your finger on what NMGW is as a group' (Golley Slater 2002). Indeed, many visitors continue to call the Museum of Welsh Life simply 'St. Fagans' after the village in which it is situated.

Multi-sited displays of identity

It is crucial to remember that the Museum of Welsh Life is only one part of the network of National Museum Wales. In this respect, it is perhaps inappropriate and unrealistic to criticise the Museum of Welsh Life for not representing all of Wales in one site. As Paul Loveluck (2003: 9), its President, notes industrial history has been collected within the overall National Museum network since the creation of a Department of Industry in the city centre Cathays Park site in 1959. This collection was transferred in 1977 to the Welsh Industrial and Maritime Museum in Cardiff Docks until its closure in 1998. Since this time, the collection was held in the new Collections Centre in Nantgarw, north of Cardiff until the creation of the new National Waterfront Museum, Swansea. Industry has also been represented within National Museum Wales's network at a number of sites elsewhere in the country including the National Slate Museum in the North of

Wales (since 1972), the National Wool Museum in the West (since 1976) in the West of Wales, and most recently at Big Pit National Coal Museum (since 2001) in South Wales. The dates here indicate the adoption of the sites into the NMW network. However, in the case of both the Woollen Museum and Big Pit, the NMGW had some degree of involvement before formally taking over full control of the sites.

Such large scale industry is arguably best displayed in situ. However, the multi-sited nature of National Museum Wales network as it has evolved through the twentieth and twenty-first centuries raises representational problems concerning demarcation between sites, disciplines, and collections. While on paper the range of museums might cumulatively represent a national identity, visitors on the ground may only visit one or two branches because of geography, cost, and perhaps habit. For the inhabitants of Cardiff, for example, the National Museum Cardiff and the Museum of Welsh Life are their most immediately accessible sites. There are practical difficulties too – what happens when one branch is closed for over seven years as was the case with the Welsh Industrial and Maritime Museum? Moreover, with specific titles come specific expectations. In the case of the Museum of Welsh Life which claims to 'illustrate and interpret the daily life and work of the people of Wales from the Middle Ages to the present day' its stated remit sets the parameters against which it is measured.

Conclusions

To summarise, there are two key issues which the Museum of Welsh Life has not addressed. The first is an explicit discussion of the nature of Welsh identities – be they based around class, place, gender, generation, ethnicity, language, or work. The second is a self-reflexive history of the museum itself. The two things are interrelated; unless one is aware of the issues surrounding national identities within Wales the actions of the early museum founders do not make sense. These suggestions echo in part those proposed by the Welsh Assembly and the Wales Tourist Board. In the priority action plan section of its 2002 cultural strategy document, Creative Future, the Welsh Assembly Government nominated NMGW to 'review the options for providing a one-stop venue for an overview of Welsh history (NMGW 2004-5)' (WAG 2002: 4). The Wales Tourist Board similarly identified the need to provide more interpretation and orientation particularly for overseas visitors unfamiliar with Wales. These calls converged initially in the proposal for a new 'Gallery of Welsh Histories' although the challenge of addressing such issues in a limited space would be considerable. It is worth remembering that the (1998) Museum of Scotland deploys six floors to

'present Scotland'.

Such changes also fall in line with new museological thinking which argues for a greater self-reflexivity about museum practice and with the broader trend towards visitor-centred displays (Anderson, 2004). This is not to imply that the museum should either abandon its duty of care to its objects, nor to seek to didactically tell visitors what their identities should be. As James Braeburne (2000) has argued, peoples' identities are too complex and too various for a museum to simply impose a definition top-down upon their visitors. For Braeburne the answer is to move towards a more participatory, 'bottom-up' form of museum work; he cites the Twentieth Century Gallery in the Museum of Scotland as exemplary. However, what is gained in terms of inclusiveness and populism may sometimes be at the expense of a coherent framework and the broader historical perspectives which curators can provide. Instead, the Museum of Welsh Life might function as a jumping-off point to encourage visitors to critically review their ideas of identity and 'Welshness'. This could prompt them to examine what exactly they bring to the museum – in the way of assumptions, beliefs, and ideas about the past. It might begin with a consideration of the nature of national identities. Indeed, the museum might pose Day and Suggett's (1985: 96) questions: 'How many Wales?' are there or 'How many ways [are there] of being Welsh?'. One way to approach this task might be through a discussion of immigration and emigration and its effects on Welsh culture and identity. Given the considerable cross-border traffic between Wales and England this would have the advantage of deconstructing the conventional binaries between Welsh and English and would encourage recognition of the multicultural nature – historic and contemporary – of Welshness which Charlotte Williams so compellingly describes in her work on Welshness and multiculturalism (Williams et al. 2003). This kind of interpretive activity is no small task and placing this amount of emphasis on museum communication can, as Andrea Witcomb (2003) has argued, require the rethinking of traditional museum staff responsibilities and remits. However, this would allow the Museum of Welsh Life, and by implication National Museum Wales, to fulfil both its current aim to 'tell the world about Wales, and Wales about the world' and its other founding aim which was to 'tell the Welsh about themselves'.

The above discussion demonstrates that it is impossible to identify one single reading of national identity at the Museum of Welsh Life. There are elements which certainly dominate – for example, rural culture – but there are alternative representations. Visitor attitudes, the degree of their prior knowledge, and their visiting habits complicate the picture further. I would suggest that it is therefore

more accurate to say that the Museum of Welsh Life represents a meeting point for competing ideas about national identities. This has resulted from shifts in the museum's working definition of what counts as 'Welsh'. The change in collecting policy in 1995 is a clear example of this process. In response to Bennett's and Kirkland's charge that such museums exhibit a form of 'institutional amnesia', I would counter that there remain problematic gaps in the account of life in Wales which it presents. Its representations are certainly less politicised and less explicit about the inequalities of social and industrial relations than, for example, at Big Pit: National Coal Museum. However, close examination of the Museum of Welsh Life reveals evidence of the on-going process of remembering and the remaking of public memory in response to the changing demands of the present. It demonstrates how museums function as palimpsests of national identities where the residue of what has gone before conditions what follows.

Postscript

Since the initial writing of this chapter, there have been a number of significant developments at the Museum of Welsh Life. The overall network of museums has changed its name from the National Museums & Galleries of Wales to National Museum Wales. Branches have also been renamed. The Museum of Welsh Life has now been retitled: Sain Ffagan Amgueddfa Werin Cymru / St Fagans: National History Museum. The Welsh version retains its older name 'Amgueddfa Werin Cymru' which corresponds with the previous 'Welsh Folk Museum'. Following a future reorganisation of National Museum Cardiff, St Fagans will eventually house the archaeological collections which are to be moved there from the branch in the centre of Cardiff (Heal 2005, 11). The biggest single change will be the creation of a new gallery – Oriel 1 – which will focus on the theme of 'Belonging' or 'Perthyn' in Welsh. At present it is envisaged that this gallery will focus on themes such as: voices, beliefs, family, and nation with a clear emphasis on the multiplicity and diversity of identities and ways of 'belonging' present within Wales today. The new vision for St Fagans has been publicised as follows:

> With over £3.5 million being invested at the museum over the next few years, St Fagans: National History Museum, will be developed to tell the stories of the peoples of Wales through the ages. The first step in this work is the exciting new exhibition, *Perthyn: Belonging*, in Oriel 1, one of the museum's indoor galleries. Opening in March 2007, Perthyn: Belonging is a totally new way of using Amgueddfa

Cymru – National Museum Wales's social history collections. Oriel 1 is an exciting and experimental exhibition space and a chance for the museum to work hand in hand with visitors. These developments also respond to one of Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales's Vision for the next ten years, developing ideas for a national history museum for Wales in the future, and it is also an integral part of the development of Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales and a world class museum of learning. Beth Thomas, Keeper of Social & Cultural History at St Fagans: National History explains:

'*Perthyn: Belonging* is the first opportunity we've had in years at St Fagans to experiment with new ways of interpreting our collections. Curatorial ideas and visitor expectations have changed considerably, and we're looking forward to being able to interpret Wales's social history in a different way.

'Through Oriel 1 we hope to work with communities from all parts of Wales to create displays which will challenge stereotypes and encourage people to respect each other's languages, beliefs and customs' (National Museum Wales 2006).

Some changes have already begun. For example, the museum's café has been redeveloped along the theme of a Welsh-Italian café. 'Bwyty Bardi Café' opened in July 2006 and is so named in recognition of the Italian-Welsh communities who emigrated to South Wales from the town of Bardi in Italy. Plans are also underway to link the new indoor displays at Oriel 1 with the external buildings. This is crucial as visitors are largely drawn to the open-air aspect of the site rather than specifically to its interior galleries. However, as the comments above make clear, the planned changes are about much more than reorganising the collections. The changes will involve a reinterpretation of the museum's representations of Wales's national cultures, histories, and identities. With its chosen theme of 'belonging', Oriel 1 will explicitly encourage visitors to reflect upon issues of identity and what people think it means to be Welsh. These latest developments in this museum's history clearly demonstrate the processes of re-imagining national identities in which many national museums are engaged.

Nations, Identities: Wales and its National Museums, Cardiff: University of Wales Press. I am grateful to both *Museum and Society* and University of Wales Press for allowing me to republish this material. My thanks also to all those who assisted with this research – see my book (2007) for full details.

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[3] Correspondence with Eurwyn Wiliam, Deputy Director General and former Curator of the National History Museum of Wales, (previously known as the Museum of Welsh Life, and the Welsh Folk Museum), pers. comm. 2004.

[4] Thomas, pers. comm. 2004.

[5] Wiliam, pers. comm. 2004.