

The Sense of Superiority of Victorian English Travel Writers: A Reflective Reading of George Borrow's *Wild Wales*

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Abstract

This essay will highlight the relationship between the English and the Welsh people. Although, these people share so much in common yet, there are palpable differences between them. Welsh as a language is markedly different from the English language. There are also clear differences in culture. The English believe that they are superior to the Welsh who they view as inferior in race and social class. During the Victorian age this sense of superiority of the English over the Welsh tends to be particularly apparent and heightened. The Victorian age offered English travelers a critical opportunity to visit different parts of the world. They had the rare privilege of relating and observing the cultures, traditions and political set-up of diverse people across the world. In all these places they visited the English travelers tend to exhibit a high sense of superiority and a reinforced sophistication of the British over the local people. They indeed, look down on these cultures. This snobbish attitude was not limited to only those people from other countries but also to British people who are not English specifically, the Welsh. As a result of this unpalatable attitude of the English towards the Welsh there arose during the Victorian age a situation of mutual fear, hatred, and distrust between these two people. These issues were exacerbated by Victorian English writers who usually write unpalatable things concerning peoples who are not English. This study examines George Barrow's book *Wild Wales* depicting the superiority complex and mistrust between the English and Wales people from culture, religion and scientific advancement.

Keywords: English, Welsh, Superiority, Travel Writers, Victorian Age.

Introduction

Victorian travel writing emerged in the era of Queen Victoria's rule as a popular, commercially successful genre, fueled by transport improvements and expanding British global influence (colonialism). Journeys of merchants, missionary's expanded colonial power and domination, while as the British Empire grew in scope, so did the travels of its explorers and soldiers. The Victorian English travelers (2018) remarkably held their own sense of superiority over the people of the countries they travelled to. Most of these travelers depicted those local people as inferior to them based on either their social class or their race. According to Moran (2006) "Travel writing offered exciting access to the unfamiliar, but it also contributed to Victorian self-fashion by reinforcing a sense of British superiority and sophistication. During the Victorian Age however, the English people regarded themselves as superior to other people. Therefore, the English travelers' snobbish

attitudes were not only to those who are not British but also to those who are British people but not English such as the Welsh.

Historically, the relationship of the English and Welsh has specifically been shaped by the political, military, cultural, and economic power being practiced by the more populous English over the Welsh for many years. Although the English-Welsh relationship is generally featured by respect, tolerance, and an intermixing of cultures and people, there are signs of mistrust or a certain degree of explicit disrelish and instances of mutual racism. "Cymrophobia" is a term used to refer to the hatred or fear of the Welsh. Parker (2012) argues that this expression was widespread among the English during the Victorian age. The same hostile attitude has been adopted by the Welsh towards the English. The fear and hatred of the English has thus, been termed as "Anglophobia".

The Victorian English writer's depicted predominantly, undesirable views of the Welsh and Wales as an inaccessible territory and backward nation. This negative image of the Welsh and Wales was inherited since the eighteenth century. According to Brockliss, (1997) "Until 1750s, the Welsh were seen by the English as strange, eccentric neighbors, provincials rather than foreigners, too few, too poor, too weak to be threatening. Such an inferior view of the Welsh was stereotypical in English society. Till the end of the eighteenth century, "in England there was a large market for engravings of comic cartoons of 'Poor Taffy' (and his wife), Welsh men and women who could not afford a horse, shown riding a goat, leeks poking out of their hatbands, cheese bulging from their panniers...". Gradually, some of them recognized the grandeur and beauty of the Welsh landscape. But this was contrasted by their contemporaries with a negative image of the Welsh persons themselves. This image stemmed from the English superior sense over the Welsh which were mainstreamed in Victorian England. Writing in *The Times* newspaper, Parker, wrote in 1866: "Wales... is a small country, unfavorably situated for commercial purposes, with an indifferent soil, and inhabited by unenterprising people. It is true it possesses valuable minerals but these have chiefly been developed by English energy and for the supply of English wants". Such an opinion reflects the extent to which the English view Wales and its people and this goes further to show the arrogance of the English.

As a product of his society and its culture, a man reflects the ideas, attitudes and behaviors of that society and cultural context he lives in and belongs to. Consequently, it can be said that George Borrow represents a personality which was produced within the Victorian society. As it was mentioned earlier, a Victorian personality, generally, is featured with a high superiority complex over others. Taking this into consideration, this article intends to demonstrate that George Borrow's attitudes towards the Welsh during his journey to Wales are a reflection of the mainstream attitude of the Victorian period. In other words, the Victorian travel writers maintain their sense of superiority even when they were away from England and this is what we are going to examine through discussing George Borrow's book *Wild Wales*. The article will also consider some important issues that are closely related to the times and specific conditions of the Victorian age at the time Borrow travelled through Wales. The scientific advancement of Victorian England will be highlighted through the

locomotive train engines. There is also the issue of religion in the age particularly, the Welsh Revival Movement. George Borrow's language skill was a critical virtue which had facilitated his smooth journey through Welsh. Barrow's journey also shows that Wales like England also suffers issues of poverty, corruption, and exploitation which was quite common during the Victorian period despite the advancements recorded in the age. Borrow also talked about the Rebecca riots. Wales is reputed to be quite a picturesque country with lush green hills and valleys which travelers to the country would delightfully want to visit. Thus, Borrow chose to visit this country due to its abundance of beautiful scenery. There are also historical monuments such as ancient Cathedrals and the Roman and Anglo-Saxon past. He also wanted to visit the birth place of the great English Poet, Gronwy Owen. All these Borrow wanted to see. This study explores Borrow's travel book to experience firsthand knowledge on Wales and his sense of superiority towards the underdeveloped country.

Research Question

How has Barrow depicted Wales in his book *Wild Wales*?

Statement of the Problem

Travel writing has been largely neglected in contemporary times. The history, culture of nations can be gleaned from the description of the writers who have explored these countries. The Victorian period saw a close relationship between travel writing and the successful colonial adventure stories of writers. Increased interest in travel writing has shown that colonial nations show their superiority over other nations.

This study examines George Barrows *Wild Wales* (2016) to find out the mindset of the English explorer towards the Welsh during the reign of Queen Victoria.

Aim and Objective

This study examines the text *Wild Wales* as a perception and depiction of nations through the eyes of the explorer. The objective is;

1. To find out how Barrow's depicted Wales in his book *Wild Wales*.

Literature Review

The Victorian period (2012) is regarded as a high point in literary history, generating a wealth of material that is still seen as canonical as well as a diverse range of literary genre. This period encompasses the reign of Victoria from 1837 to 1901 which produced a large amount of literary works such as Charles Dickens, the Bronte sisters and Oscar Wilde. The age was highly conscious of its own relation to the past-its heritage or place in history, but it also sensed its role in shaping the future. Victorian literature represents the literary past and the beginnings of modernity as we experience it today. George Barrows (2016) is one such writer that has through his travel explored the Welsh people and their culture, taking a stand from his perspective of an English man.

The Relationship between English and Welsh in the Victorian Age: Culture and Class

Barrow's view of Wales and the Welsh is considered to have been sympathetic by comparison with what was prevalent in England at the time. Generally, the relationship between the Welsh and English is characterized by tolerance, respect, and an intermixing of people and cultures. There are however, traces of mistrust or outright dislike and instances of open racism and xenophobia. The fear or hatred of the Welsh by the English has been called "Cymrophobia", and the same attitude towards the English by the Welsh and others is called "Anglophobia". The relationship between the Welsh and English has its roots in the history of the two nations. It has specifically, been shaped by the military, political, economic and cultural power being exercised by the more populous English over the Welsh for many years. This is also heightened by the two languages – Welsh and English both of which are spoken and written. There is also the high level of cultural importance that many people in Wales accord to signifiers of national identity such as language, literature, history, tradition and even more recently, Rugby. In the following quotation Parker (2007) one can see the extent to which the English view Wales and its people and this goes further to show the arrogance of the English:

"Wales...is a small country, unfavorably situated for commercial purposes, with an indifferent soil, and inhabited by an unenterprising people. It is true it possesses valuable minerals but these have chiefly been developed by English energy and for the supply of English wants."

As far the English are concerned both Wales as a geographical entity and the people who reside there are way below them and their very existence is to serve the whims and caprices of the more advanced English people. Another instance of anti – Welsh sentiments that the English exhibit can be seen in the following nursery rhyme:

Taffy was a Welshman, Taffy was a thief;
Taffy came to my house and stole a leg of beef;
I went to Taffy's house and Taffy was in bed;
So, I picked up the Gerry pot and hit him on the head.

"Taffy was a Welshman" is an English language nursery rhyme with anti – Welsh lyrics, which was popular in England between the eighteenth and twentieth century. This indicates that the rhyme was sung during the Victorian age. This version seems to have been particularly popular in the English counties that bordered Wales, where it was sung on Saint David's Day (1 March) complete with leek – wearing effigies of Welshmen. The image of thieving Welshmen seems to have begun to die down by the mid-twentieth century, although the insulting rhyme was still sometimes used along with the name "Taffy" for any Welshman. In Borrow's *Wild Wales* in the second page of chapter one this insulting label was used by Borrow's fellow workers to taunt Llyud, a simple groom who was a Welshman from a low class. These men who hurl insults at the groom did so because he spoke a different language which was Welsh and not English. To them any language that is not English is to be derided. The Victorian age also had made the English to have a high opinion of them and thus, looking down on other people. The nursery rhyme as it appeared in

Borrow's accounts lends credence to this: "Taffy was a Welshman, Taffy was a thief: Taffy came to my house and stole a piece of beef".

George Borrow also shows that he was also a typical Victorian age Englishman when he remarks as follows:

But it is not deemed a matter of good taste to write about such low people as grooms, I shall therefore dismiss him with no observation further than that after he had visited me on Sunday afternoons for about a year he departed for his own country with his wife, who was an Englishwoman... (1, 9-10).

In Victorian England, the snobbish high class society looks down on people of low class such as the humble groom. As a consequence, they also regard all other races as inferior to them. Galton (1970) focuses on the superiority of the English man as largely heredity which would ultimately result in new patterns of behavior. The relationship between outstanding men had led him to conclude that mental traits are inherited and society would take advantage of this fact. He examined at great length the antecedents, environment, education and hereditary features of the most prominent man of science in order to establish certain laws relating to heredity. Galton proposes that the English man is superior due to his knowledge and capacity to achieve his goals in the Victorian age.

Religion in the Victorian Age and the Welsh Methodist Revival Movement

The Victorian Age witnessed a steady decline in religious dogma especially, Christian religious beliefs due to the new advancement in science and technology. The writings of prominent figures of the age also contributed significantly to this decline in religious piety. As a result of this, the Age views religion with suspicion. The conflict between Anglicanism and Catholicism was also quite prominent within the period. Borrow made this clear when he said: "May all Monasteries be converted into farmhouses...and May they still retain their original names in mockery of popery" (p.192). Being an Englishman and an Anglican Christian, Borrow has no respect for the pope or Catholicism. To him, converting a Monastery into a farmhouse and still calling it a Monastery is an insult to the Pope. This underscores the tensions that existed between the two branches of Christianity in Victorian England.

Unlike the English who are no longer keen on Christianity as a result of their advances in science and the questioning of the absolutism of religion; the Welsh according to Borrow's accounts in *Wild Wales* on the other hand are hankering after religion especially, in the wake of the Methodist Revival Movement. The Welsh Methodist Revival began in 1859 and it reached its height between the years 1904 to 1905. At the time Borrow travelled through Wales, the Welsh Methodist Revival was in full swing. The Methodist organizes open air camp meetings. At these meetings preachers talk to the people about Christianity:

"I found two thousand people gathered together in a field near the railroad station; a wagon stood under some green elms at one end of the field, in which ten or a dozen men with the look of Methodist preachers; one of these was holding forth to the multitude when I arrived, but he presently sat down, I having, as I suppose, only came in time to hear the fag

end of his sermon...All the discourses were vulgar and fanatical, and in some instances unintelligible at least to my ears." (p. 18).

Borrows' views are subjective and harsh, reflecting his perspective on religion. His views were also a reflection of the Age and the dominant cultural perspectives of the period. Borrows' observations of the open air camp meetings of the Methodists was coloured by his social background and education. The preachers are usually simple country folk and so their use of language is coarse especially to an educated and cultured person such as Borrow. This further highlights the class distinctions in Victorian England.

Science in the Victorian Age: The Locomotive Trains

During the Victorian Age there was a noticeable advancement in science. This can be seen in the emergence of the railway and locomotive engine which had facilitated easy, smooth and fast transportation for people and goods. The invention of the locomotive engine can perhaps be said to be the greatest achievement of the Victorians. It became the pride of the English: "At Birmingham station I became a modern Englishman, enthusiastically proud of modern England's science and energy; that station alone is enough to make one proud of being a modern Englishman" (p.12). The train indicates modernity and advancement and thus, it marks the height of technological achievement of the Victorians. Borrow was quite proud of it and he went further to give the reader an idea of the lightning speed of this modern invention:

"With dragon speed, and dragon noise, fire, smoke, and fury, the train dashed along its road through beautiful meadows, garnished here and there with pollard willows; over pretty streams, whose waters stole along imperceptibly; by venerable old churches, which I vowed I would take the first opportunity of visiting: stopping now and then to recruit its energies at places, whose old Anglo-Saxon names stared me in the eyes from station boards, as specimens of which, let me only dot down Willy Thorpe, Ringsted, and Yrthling Boro" (p 11-12).

The above was the pride of the Victorians. Borrow carefully describes the speed with which the train he entered at Birmingham station gathered speed to take him and his family to Wales through a picturesque countryside. Borrows' journey through Wales also offers a contrast between England and Wales in the context of development during the Victorian period. In contrast to England, Wales and its peoples are quite underdeveloped. The railroad was not readily available in Wales and thus, most of the places that Borrow visited; the excursion was done on foot. It is also a fact however, that the geographical terrain of Wales would have made it extremely difficult for any form of journey to be carried out using a mechanical means at the time.

George Borrows' Language Skills

George Borrow was an accomplished philologist. He can speak several European languages such as French, Spanish, Welsh, Latin, Greek, Irish, and Russian. This ability stems from his unique interests in literature and languages. His flair for languages to a greater extent, had

made his European and world tours quite successful. He usually, exhibits a deep interest in the country, its people, and their language before he plans his journeys. In the case of his journey to Wales, he took a long time to learn the Welsh language so that he would be able to have a close relationship with the indigenous people. This tends to make his journeys very intriguing. When he started out on his journey his first stop was at an inn where he met a Welsh chambermaid with whom he refreshed his knowledge of the language.

"Upon the whole we found ourselves very comfortable in the old-fashioned inn, which was kept by a nice old-fashioned gentlewoman, with the assistance of three servants...one of which was a Welsh girl, with whom I soon scraped an acquaintance...for the sake of the pretty Welsh tongue which she carried in her mouth..." (p. 14).

Borrows' conversation with the Welsh chambermaid at the inn was smooth due to the fact that he can speak the language skillfully although, not as well as the Welsh girl. At the old town of Chester, Borrow entered into a place called rows which were used in ancient times to guard the town from marauders that come down from the Welsh hills. Here, Borrow exhibits his skills in the Welsh language: "...Can you tell me the name of that hill? ...That hill sir...is called Moel Vamagh... "Moel" said I, "a bald hill; Vamagh, maternal or motherly..." (3, 15). When Borrow met a black man in the town of Chester who claims to speak both Spanish and French he again, proved his skills in languages when he spoke in the two languages which the black cannot speak: "I asked him if he could speak any language besides English, and received for answer...he could speak Spanish and French...I spoke to him in Spanish, but he did not understand me...I spoke to him in French – he did not understand me." (3, 16-17). In the village of Llyn Ceiriog Borrow and his guide John Jones entered an inn to refresh themselves. When Borrow spoke in Welsh he drew surprised stares from the men close by: "Is the gentleman a Welsh?" said one of the men, near the door, to his companion; "he seems to speak Welsh very well." (17)

Wales: Nature and Landscape

Wales is a mountainous and picturesque country. The beauty of the landscape might have attracted Borrow to visit the country. The Welsh hills offer a breathtaking sight to Borrow: "The northern wall abuts upon a frightful ravine, at the bottom of which is a canal. From the western one there is a noble view of the Welsh hills." (p. 15). The landscape of the country is hilly and on top of these mountains one can look down into beautiful valleys: "But for the darkness of evening and a drizzling mist, which, for some time past, had been coming on, we should have enjoyed a glorious prospect into the valley..." (p.84). Another beautiful sight Borrow met was at the village of Pentraeth Goch where it "occupies two sides of a romantic dell...a brook rolls all the way to the bottom of the dell, over which there is a little bridge." (p.185). He continued to provide a picture stamp description of this area: "Before me lay the sea or rather the northern entrance of the Menai straits. To my right was mountain Lidiart projecting some way into the sea; to my left...was a hill. Mountain Lidiart and the Northern Hill formed the headlands of a beautiful bay in which the waters of the Traeth dell...were discharged." (p.186). This description shows the beauty of Wales and the wild nature of its

countryside. All these fascinates Borrow and he further asserts: "Mountain, bay and sandbank were bathed in sunshine; the water was perfectly calm; nothing was moving upon it, nor upon the shore, and I thought I had never beheld a more beautiful and tranquil scene." (p186- 187).

Ishiguro (1989) in his book, *The Remains of the Day* views Steven the central character as he gazes from the hill across the pastoral English landscapes incorporates a process of making sense (sense meaning in connection between view and the greatness of England).the text depicts the importance of England's past and culture. Ishiguro claims that the English landscapes possesses a quality that the other landscapes of other nations do not have, mark it out to any objective observer as the most deeply satisfying in the world, and this is probably best summed up by the term greatness. This assertion indicates a high sense of superiority of the English people, their landscapes, mental alertness and pride in Queen Victoria who brought major developments during her reign. He describes the sensuous appeal of the English countryside and its core place in an imagining of not only nation but the superiority of a nation.

Ralph (1976) argues that landscapes is not merely an aesthetic background to life, rather it is a setting that both expresses and conditions cultural attitudes and activities. Aaron (2010) depicts travel writings and novels located in Wales which Janes Austen (1790) satires issued in substantial numbers from the London press during the romantic period. Travelers participated in the Anglicization of the Celtic countries. The English Government's desire is to incorporate more fully into its establishment the landed gentry of Ireland, Scotland and Wales. This enthusiasm led to the acceptance of all things Celtic reflected in travel books, poetry and drama. There was mass migration of the people of Wales trying to find a name for themselves in England. This also projected the inferiority complex of the Welsh that England was indeed better than Wales.

Conclusion

As a multi-lingual person Borrow has been able to a greater extent, to transcend his ethnocentricity. Learning about other people's cultures through his journeys, he came to the realization that there are other valid ways of doing and seeing things. This perspective permits him to have a deeper interpersonal relationship with people from other cultural contexts. The spirit of the age – the Victorian sense of English superiority - has inevitably, affected his personality. He therefore, exhibits his pride and sense of superiority in many occasions indirectly. It is also critical to take note of the improvements in transportation technology that made Borrow's journey through England smooth and pleasurable in contrast to his journey through Wales. Trains were readily available in England at the time but not so in Wales. The Welsh Methodist Revival Movement took place around the time that Borrow journeyed through Wales. His perspective of the individuals involved such as preachers and the other simple country folk is snobbish. He describes their use of language as coarse and uneducated. His views were derived from his background which was refined and cultured. The beauty and ruggedness of Wales caught the attention of Borrow right at

the beginning of his journey. As he walked through Wales, he experiences its wild beauty and fascination. He sees the hills of Welsh as noble and glorious and the rivers as beautiful and tranquil. In essence, Borrow finds fulfillment in the landscapes of Wales but at the expense of his English pride looks down on the people and their culture evidently described in his journey to wild Wales.

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