

Wmffre, Iwan, *Language and Place-Names in Wales: The Evidence of Toponymy in Cardiganshire*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press. 2003. Pp. xii + 447 (incl. figures and maps). £60. ISBN 0-7083-1796-0.

This book is an important contribution to the study of the history of Welsh phonology. The author's approach is quite new in comparison with previous work, and entirely justified, even if this reviewer must express a number of doubts about the 'ideological' orientation of the work below. The author effectively presents arguments about the dialectal developments of spoken Welsh since the medieval period based on his research into place-names, specifically the place-names of Cardiganshire (Ceredigion).

The work is based on the author's corpus of *c.* 15,000 Cardiganshire place-names, gathered from documentary sources and, most importantly, from over 200 informants. The author explicitly states his aim as being to take the historical phonology of Welsh beyond the thresholds reached by Morris-Jones (1913) and Jackson (1953) (fourteenth and twelfth centuries respectively). On method, he repeatedly emphasizes his view of 'true' phonological developments as opposed to distortions of the 'true' picture brought about by interference from the literary norm; 'the strength of my conclusions [is] aided by the fact that the phonological testimony of place-names is less likely to be warped by literary considerations than texts, so that a truer picture of phonological developments can be expected' (2).

Such statements are repeated frequently throughout the book, particularly in the introductory material. So on p. 51, 'The fact is that the task of a toponymist enquiring place-name pronunciations in Wales is made that much harder by the fact of general literacy in Welsh, and the attendant multiplication and mayhem this has caused by competing with local traditional forms'. This reviewer found such statements tending to a quasi-Rousseauan idealization of the 'pure dialect speaker', the child of linguistic 'nature' unsullied by the corruption of literate civilization. The rhetoric of my last sentence is obviously parodic, but expressions such as 'multiplication and mayhem' in the book are unfortunately open to such attacks.

In a similar vein, the strictures against John Morris-Jones's work on p. 81, that he 'ignored the conspicuous workings of vowel alternation in

the way he did', misrepresent his achievement in formulating a standard Welsh orthography which was simultaneously based on verifiable past practice and capable of achieving consensual acceptance, as if it had been an attempt to produce an accurate description of spoken Welsh. If it had been that, then it would of course have been a failure. But it was not. It was a contribution to the formulation of a standard medium of written expression in Welsh, something which was urgently needed by the beginning of the twentieth century. Isolated complaints that such and such a colloquial or dialectal feature is not accurately reflected in literary Welsh are irrelevant. They fail to recognize the nature of a literary standard as a consciously crafted tool for use rather than an objective description of speech habits. A literary standard language is a piece of technology, not part of a search for a 'true picture' of a language. In all this it is important to remember that a norm or convention can never logically be derived from facts. A norm or convention is created as a result of decisions, not of inferences. As such it may be criticized for many reasons, probably usually political ones; but it is not a valid criticism of a convention that it is not an accurate descriptive representation of a certain set of 'facts'.

The author's pursuit of the pernicious influence of literary Welsh on 'pure' speakers does take a political turn in the extraordinary suggestion that 'It would seem that in the early Modern period, Welsh literature – if we take the rules of poetic assonance called *cynghanedd* as a guide – was stronger in northern Wales than southern Wales' (372). This statement is difficult to understand rigorously, but the argument in the passage as a whole seems to be that literary Welsh has more northern features than southern features because 'literature was stronger' in the north, and that 'literary influence' on southern Welsh is actually, by proxy, northern influence on southern Welsh. There are no doubt many layers of meaning to analyse in this argument, but looking at the specifics mentioned in the quote, it seems apposite to note that in the twenty-five volumes of the Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies 'Beirdd yr Uchelwyr' series ('Poets of the Gentry', late medieval and early modern) published by the time of writing this review, twenty-two poets can be assigned by lineage and work to the north, twenty-one to the south (including Ceredigion) and nine to the midlands (with four poets of unknown

provenance). To these may be added the major figures of Dafydd ap Gwilym from Ceredigion and Lewys Glyn Cothi from Carmarthenshire. A fully reasoned case should go beyond a mere head-count, but it does seem that the suggestion that the literary language of the *cynghanedd* poets is a specifically northern phenomenon is not supported by actual literary history, which rather supports the statement of Rowlands (1979: 320) on the period: '[W]e know that bards from all over the country practised their art and were generously received all over the face of Wales, at centres of patronage from Anglesey to Gwent, from Flintshire to Pembrokeshire, from Aberystwyth to Oswestry.'

The implicit assumption that place-names 'unwarped' by 'literary' influence are 'true' reflections of phonological developments begs the question as to whether the 'unwarped' developments are not rather to be regarded as developments specific to place-names, and the 'warped' developments seen in other sources to be thought of as 'truer'. In the end it is the rhetoric of the 'truer' picture that is misleading (or 'warping' perhaps). Ultimately, there is only a fuller or less full picture of specific changes operating on specific forms in specific contexts, and there is no 'truer' or 'less true' picture of this, only thorough research into as many different changes in as many different forms or sets of forms in as many different contexts as possible.

It may be the case that there has been a certain historical context in Welsh linguistics in which dialects and colloquial forms of place-names have not been accorded the degree of attention that they deserve, and it may be the case that in the past, linguistics in Wales has been seen in some quarters as having the aim merely of clarifying the 'correct' way of expressing things. If this is so, then a book such as the one under review has the important effect of drawing attention to the rewards to be gained in understanding and knowledge by paying attention to such things. As the author puts it, 'My contention is that *all* place-name pronunciations are of interest' (37–8; original emphasis). Quite right! But that cannot be allowed to result in an ideological swing in the opposite direction to regard *only* dialectal forms as 'true', 'pure' or 'traditional'.

The methodological preliminaries are divided into chapters on: 1 Phonetic representation; 2 Phonetics and place-name studies; 3 The nature of linguistic boundaries; 4 Dialects; 5 Features of pronunciation; 6 Vowel

quality. The chapter on phonetic representation provides a useful survey of the methods and pitfalls of phonetic transcription, and its past applications in Welsh linguistics. The individual practice of the author leaves open the question as to whether it is phonetics or phonology which is being transcribed – he *generally* does not enclose his transcriptions in either square brackets or slashes (but exceptionally does; he consistently encloses citations of orthographic practice in angled brackets as per convention). Some readers may find this theoretically disturbing. The author writes, ‘It is hoped that . . . neither the *phonetic* nor the *phonemic* poles of notation will be neglected, but will be synthesized as much as is practically possible’ (5, original emphasis). It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that this formulation implies a serious misunderstanding of the nature of phonetic and phonemic transcription and analysis, in its suggestion that they are two ‘poles’ on a continuum that can be ‘synthesized’. Since phonetics has to do with acoustic and physiological patterns of sound and articulation, phonemics (staying with theories of segmental phonology) with cognitive patterns of knowledge and understanding, the two analyses have to do with ontologically very different aspects of the world. No continuum links them as its poles, and they must be meaningfully juxtaposed, but cannot be synthesized. So the author’s refusal to commit to either phonetic or phonemic notation is certainly theoretically questionable. On the other hand, though I cannot rule it out in some individual cases, it did not appear to me that the author’s historical arguments were thereby compromised. If that is really the case, it might be significant in itself. This is a matter that must be considered in further research.

The strengths of the book are its extensive and well-documented database and the clarity of the arguments the author derives from it, illustrated and supported throughout by clear and apposite maps of the distribution of features discussed. These strengths are seen most clearly in the eighteen chapters arranged in the section entitled overall ‘Individual Phonetic Features’. I reproduce the chapter titles (starting at chapter 7) to indicate the range of the discussion: 7 The <oe> grapheme, 8 The <ae> grapheme, 9 The <au/eu> graphemes, 10 Jod-initial suffixes, 11 Long <a>, 12 Palatalization, 13 Anomalous [ə] in penultimate syllables, 14 Anomalous //i// (the double-slash convention is explained by the author

on p. 7, and requires no special comment here), 15 Anomalous //u//, 16 Anomalous [ə] in monosyllables, 17 Conclusions on anomalous [ə] and //i//, 18 Initial <h> and <chw>, 19 Final <-dd>, 20. Final <-f>, 21 Consonant metathesis, 22 The <-d-> clusters, 23 Assorted vocalic features, 24 Welsh English. The author's results from the analysis of these features represent a significant addition to our knowledge and understanding of the history of Welsh phonology, and the way there are different 'histories of Welsh phonology' in different dialectal areas, and different registers of the language.

I shall comment in detail here on only one of the features discussed, where it appears to me that the author may have missed an important point in his argument. In his discussion of the 'grapheme <oe>', e.g. in *coed*, *mynyddoedd*, *coegni*, he surveys the modern geographical distribution of different pronunciations, in different positions within the word, of the diphthong that is written <oe>. A very important new result of his historical argumentation is that the vocalic cluster in question went through a period of disyllabic articulation, approximately [o·ɛ], in some regions. I shall not present his argument in detail, and the correctness of his general results must be reviewed in greater detail than here. But there is one issue in this connection which can be aired briefly. In the face of Middle Welsh orthographical variation in the spelling of the diphthong in question between <oe> and <oy> (OW <oi>), the author traces this variation to a difference in *pronunciation* between northern Middle Welsh [oɨ] and southern Middle Welsh [o·ɛ] (149). Whether the actual manuscript distribution of the variant spellings finally supports this hypothesis would be a simple matter to test by a survey of the extant material. In fact I suspect it would not support it. A full quantified survey must be done, but on the basis of a cursory examination of the two undoubtedly northern thirteenth-century manuscripts NLW Peniarth 29 (Black Book of Chirk) and BL Add. 14931, I am satisfied that while both <oy> spellings and <oe> spellings can be found in them, in words of the relevant structure, both manuscripts, against the author's suggestion, overwhelmingly favour spellings with <oe>. In fact, it does not appear to me that *any* of the thirteenth-century texts included on the CD-ROM (Isaac and Rodway 2002) do favour <oy> over <oe>. The only manuscript I have been able to check where <oy> predominates over <oe> is the

undoubtedly *southern* Book of Llandaf (NLW 17110E; <coy> ~ <coi> *passim*). Since this is a mid-twelfth-century manuscript, as against the thirteenth-century manuscripts referred to above, it seems that the variation of <oy> ~ <oe> should probably be seen in a purely chronological light. All of this can be tested with more rigorous surveys.

But there is a more important theoretical point to be made, regarding the diphthongs written OW <oi>, MW <oy> ~ <oe>, Modern W <oe>. The spelling <oe> arises in Middle Welsh because the diphthong, approximately /oɨ/, say, is the phonological output of the morphophonological process which applies where /o/ and /e/ come together over the boundary of different morphemes, e.g. /tro/ + /es/ → /troɨs/ = <troes> ‘turned’ (3sg. preterite). There are no grounds to suppose that once monophthongized, there was ever any difference in pronunciation between <oe> = /oɨ/ < /o/ + /e/ and inherited <oe> = /oɨ/ as in <coed>, <oes>, etc. (this diphthong has various etymological sources, which are of no importance here). The OW spelling <oi> and MW sporadic <oy> reflect the inherited diphthong, the spelling <oe> reflects the morphophonological process /o/ + /e/ → /oɨ/. The competing spellings MW <oe> and <oy> were two orthographical possibilities of representing a diphthong /oɨ/ with two distinct synchronic sources in the grammar of the language: but there was, phonologically, only one diphthong.

With that *caveat* in mind, regarding the nature of the diphthong and its orthography in Middle Welsh, its subsequent history may have been much as the author proposes. This must be checked in greater detail. Exactly the same is true for the analysis of the diphthong written <ae>, for which the author proposes similar arguments, and to which, with the substitution of /a/ for /o/ in the diphthong onset, the same observations apply as given above for <oe>. The author’s diachronic account appears to this reviewer to be entirely compatible with the synchronic, lexical-phonological account of these diphthongs proposed by Awbery (1986: 147). A confrontation of the two approaches, with analysis of their mutual implications, would be profitable.

The book’s ‘General Conclusions’ are given under five headings, some of which obviously reflect issues mentioned above: 1 Diachronic phonology; 2 Foreign influence on the documentary evidence; 3 The correspondence of writing to speech; 4 Literary interference on spoken

Welsh; 5 The connection between medieval boundaries and prehistoric dialects. On p. 378, the author gives a summary table of post-medieval sound changes for specifically Southern Welsh dialects, which constitutes an important continuation of the previous table of pre- and early-medieval developments in Jackson's *Language and History in Early Britain*.

Some appended material, a bibliography (including a list of informants), and indices of place-names and words close the book.

The author always argues his cases with vigour, which sometimes leads him into startling formulations, some of which will already have been noticed in quotes above. Others follow: 'The phoneme /ə/ is the maverick in the phonemic system of Cardiganshire Welsh' (9); 'It is the unavoidable fate of those interested in dialectology to make mistaken statements upon the spatial, temporal or societal extent of features' (54); 'The coinciding of the pitch- and stress-accent on the same syllable tended to put stronger accentual pressure on monosyllables, the most draconian results of which can be seen in the realization of some diphthongs in southern Welsh' (79); 'dismemberment of the Brittonic people (the parent of Welsh) by the English (Anglo-Saxon) invasions' (379), etc. It will be a matter of taste as to whether such expressions are seen to detract from or enrich the web of argumentation.

The book proposes much that may be found to be controversial, when subjected to the necessary scrutiny. Some may not stand up: much surely will. The book is ideologically loaded in its idealization of the 'traditional speaker'. But it is a very important book, representing a step forward of fundamental importance in our researches into the history of Welsh and its dialects. The difference in aim and evidential basis will mean that it is not guaranteed to be useful to all the same people as those to whom Jackson's *Language and History in Early Britain* is useful. But equally, many who will find Wmffre's book useful and interesting may not have found Jackson's classic so appealing. There is a relationship of complementation between the two books, explicitly reflected in the title of the new one, *Language and Place-Names in Wales*.

References

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