

The Representation of the Welsh Nation in the Louie Knight Series

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Abstract

A state normally has a clear geographical border and is ruled by a single government. A nation is united on the basis of culture, and often, ethnicity. The factors determining the identity of a state tend to be more objective than those determining the identity of a nation. All states do not naturally have a nation and all nations do not have states. It is when the characteristics of a state and a nation coincide that we call an entity a nation-state. But often nation-state is only an ideal and not a reality.

In her work *La Création des Identités Nationales*, Anne-Marie Thiesse, an expert in the field of national and regional cultural identities, suggests that national identity is a construct, and not something that naturally and inevitably came to existence. She shows how the national identity of each European country was carefully constructed during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries using various methods such as the making of a national language and effecting its widespread use, and the development of heritage symbols. This process took over a century and the methods that really worked in most European countries are largely the same.

In her lecture *The Cultural Construction of National Identities in Europe*, delivered at Brigham Young University, she points out eight elements that were used in the process of building the national identity of most European countries: Founding ancestors, a continuous history, heroes, historical monuments, a language, cultural achievements, folk traditions and specific landscapes. My research studies the popular detective novel series by Malcolm Pryce featuring Aberystwyth's best and only private eye Louie Knight, to find how the author uses these eight elements to present Wales as a nation. I would argue that the use of an alternate universe set in the geographical Wales, rather than the actual Wales, helps to bring out a stronger sense of nation in the fictional world.

Keywords: National identity, folk traditions, national heroes, historical monuments

A state normally has a clear geographical border and is ruled by a single government. A nation is united on the basis of culture, and often, ethnicity. The factors determining the identity of a state tend to be more objective than those determining the identity of a nation. All states do not naturally have a nation and all nations do not have states. It is when the characteristics of a state and a nation coincide that we call an entity a nation-state. But often nation-state is only an ideal and not a reality.

Joseph Renan in his 1882 discourse, *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?* or "What is a Nation?" defined nation in a new way without using any objective criteria. Nation is a group of people, in his

words in French, “avoir fait de grandes choses ensemble, vouloir en faire encore”, translated to English as “having done great things together and wishing to do more”. In Renan’s view the existence of a nation is based on a “daily plebiscite” or daily referendum, with each person in a nation choosing to be part of the nation each day. Another characteristic of nation, in Renan’s view, is that it must have forgotten many things, such as violent and unpleasant things it has done in the past. It sounds very close to Karl Deutsh’s view as expressed in his work *Nationalism and Its Alternatives*: A nation is a group of people united by a mistaken view about the past and a hatred of their neighbours.

In her work *La Création des Identités Nationales*, Anne-Marie Thiesse, an expert in the field of national and regional cultural identities, suggests that national identity is a construct, and not something that naturally and inevitably came to existence. She shows how the national identity of each European country was carefully constructed during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries using various methods such as the identification of a language among the many languages and dialects spoken in a country, as the national language and effecting its widespread use through schools and by developing a feeling of duty in the citizens to know the national language.

When the concept of nation came into being, people of a country did not share the same culture. For instance, there were huge differences in the cultures of people belonging to different social classes. The borders of countries were also often altering, making it difficult to define nations in terms of geographical areas. National cultures were consciously created and instilled in the people by artists, literary persons and intellectuals, encouraging the population to be aware of a common national culture and develop a certain loyalty towards the culture. This also meant that people of one nation were supposed to feel different from the people of other nations.

This process of indoctrination took over a century and the methods that really worked in most European countries are largely the same. In the lecture *The Cultural Construction of National Identities in Europe*, delivered at Brigham Young University, Anne-Marie Thiesse points out eight elements that were used in the process of building the national identity of most European countries: Founding ancestors, a continuous history, heroes, historical monuments, a language, cultural achievements, folk traditions and specific landscapes. Children are taught these in school from a young age, and people are exposed to these elements in everyday life through means such as pictures on currency notes.

In this research paper, I attempt to show that the same eight elements have been used by Malcolm Pryce, the author of the detective series featuring Louie Knight and set in the small Welsh town of Aberystwyth, to create a sense of Welsh identity that permeates his work. The Louie Knight Series comprising six books, each a pastiche not just in style and content, but even in its title, is set in an alternative universe of Aberystwyth. The calm, peaceful, small university and tourist town of real-life Aberystwyth takes the shades of the Los Angeles of

Raymond Chandler with popular haunts hiding mysteries and casual violence being a common feature.

The six books in the Louie Knight Series were published at an interval of two years from 2001 till 2011.

Aberystwyth Mon Amour (2001)

Myfanwy, the music sensation of Aberystwyth wants the help of Mr Knight to find her missing cousin and violent thug Evans the Boot. This investigation leads to the discovery of a plan to reclaim the legendary land of Cantref-y-Gwaelod which was lost under the sea and to organise a mass exodus to settle in this land expected to be a land of milk and honey.

Last Tango in Aberystwyth (2003)

Louis Knight is in search of the missing Dean of the University of Lampeter, who is a murder target for having accidentally received a case meant for a type of professional assassinator called Raven. During the process he finds out that his love and singer Myfanwy is back in Aberystwyth kept captive by her mad-lover Dai Brainbocs.

The Unbearable Lightness of Being in Aberystwyth (2005)

In the third book, Myfanwy is kidnapped. Louie's partner Calamity investigates a burglary that happened in May 1849. Myfanwy is found in a place Brainbocs creates for her based on her idea of heaven as described in a school essay she wrote as a nine year old. Brainbocs is dejected that he has still failed to win her love, but Myfanwy's health improves considerably.

Don't Cry for Me Aberystwyth (2007)

In Don't Cry for Me Aberystwyth, Louie investigates the murder of a man dressed as Santa. Louie encounters a division of Welsh Intelligence aimed at hiding the mistakes made by the Welsh in the Patagonian War.

From Aberystwyth with Love (2009)

Louie's client is a man wearing a Soviet museum curator's uniform. Louie sets on a mission to find a girl who went missing 30 years back. The adventures of this investigation include visiting a castle in Transylvania and meeting a descendent of Vlad the Impaler.

The Day Aberystwyth Stood Still (2011)

Louie's client is someone called Raspiwtin who wants him to find a man who was hanged but later spotted alive. Not surprisingly, as the title suggests, alien involvement is suspected. *The Day the Earth Stood Still* is a 1951 movie featuring a humanoid alien.

Establishment of a Nationality

All the eight factors proposed by Anne-Marie Thiesse as used in nation building and confirmation of views put forward by scholars such as Joseph Renan and Karl Deutch, occur recurrently in the series. To limit the length of this research paper, only a few instances sufficient to illustrate the point will be discussed here.

Founding Ancestors:

Cantref-y-Gwaelod is a legendary kingdom that lay between Wales and Ireland, but went under the sea ten thousand years ago. The factual basis of this story is the remains of an ancient forest visible at the Borth beach during low tide. This is not a fiction created by Pryce for his detective series, but something that is part of the Welsh culture. The sunken forest at Borth is estimated to be 6000 years old. In the first book, *Aberystwyth Mon Amour*, Louie Knight is told that the Welsh originally came from Cantref-y-Gwaelod. He is told,

“Everyone did. Don't you know the story? When the place was flooded everyone who escaped went east. We're all descended from them. Even you.”

So it is believed that the Welsh are the descendants of the people who escaped from the flood that swallowed the lost land of Cantref-y-Gwaelod and the core theme of the first book is an attempt by a group of people to reclaim the land, and carry out a mass exodus of the people who wish to return to their homeland.

A Continuous History:

History in the series begins with the ancestors who escaped from Cantref-y-Gwaelod , continues through many war stories and is still being built as the stories progress. One of the important episodes in the history is the Patagonian war. Patagonia is a place in South America settled by the Welsh in the 19th century. It turned out to be a very inhospitable place. Seventy years after the settlement, the Indians turned against the settlers, and the war ended in tragedy.

What actually happened during the Patagonian war and what is taught at schools in the history texts are very different. Rio Caeriog is the most well-known battle of the war. People were told it was a great victory to the Welsh and the soldiers involved in the battle received many medals of honour. For instance, an aviator named Zachariah Lovespoon won the Cross of Asaph for the raid over Rio Caeriog.

The truth about the battle was unpleasant. The Welsh army penetrated the enemy territory disguised as UN peace keepers. The battle involved the amputation of the left arm of a young soldier referred to as ‘Johny’ based on mistaken information, and the victorious bomb raid actually involved the dropping of the bomb over an orphanage killing 27 children. In addition to this, the man who received the medal for Zachariah Lovespoon, a Welsh man, was in fact an English man of the name Arthur Frobisher, who along with the rest of the members of the bomber crew killed the real Lovespoon to share his wealth. The imposter now enjoys an honoured position in the Aberystwyth society.

History is built as the story progresses. The destruction of the town in the first story by the bombing of the dam at Nant-y-moch is a major part of the Aberystwyth history in the following books. Once again, the version that gains popularity through media such as films is not the full truth. The narrator Louie Knight tells what actually happened and says, "It's a scene you won't find in the movie."

Patagonia is a real place in South America. There really was a Welsh settlement in Patagonia in the 19th century, with the first settlers arriving in 1865. It was a barren, windswept land and the native Indians tried to help the settlers learn to survive. But there is no evidence to be found of an actual civil war in 1960 fought between the Welsh and the Indians. In fact, Patagonian cultural life seems to have been thriving during the 1960s with new museums and parks being opened. There are still many first language speakers of Welsh in Patagonia.

Heroes:

Although there are many heroes for the people in the world of Louie Knight Series, their claims for being heroes are questionable. For instance, one of the obvious heroes introduced in the first book of the series is Lovespoon. Aberystwyth of the Series has a leaf-green bronze equestrian statue of Lovespoon, and the Latin inscription at the base records the legendary story of how as a baby he refused to be nursed by his mother during Lent. Text books of history taught at schools portrayed him as a great war hero who won the Cross of Asaph. He was also the Grand Wizard on the Druid Council, head teacher, well-known poet and a scholar. Lovespoon leads the mission to take the people of Wales back to Cantref-y-Gwaelod, the lost kingdom, which is believed to be the homeland of the Welsh. He turns out to be an imposter. He is an English man, which makes him unqualified to lead a Welsh patriotic mission and he has been involved in the death of Zachariah Lovespoon, his fellow-aviator in the Patagonian war, whose identity he stole for his wealth. But we cannot deny that this is also often the case with heroes in real life who are used for the purpose of nation building.

Historical Monuments:

One of the historical monuments referred to in the work is the iron-age hill fort of Pen Dinas. In real life, Pen Dinas is a large hill, South of Aberystwyth and it really has an iron-age Celtic hill fort. The fort encloses an area of 3.8 hectares and is one of the most important hill forts in West Wales.

Another historical monument, recurring in all the novels of the series, is the Castle. In *Last Tango in Aberystwyth*, Dai the Custard Pie is imprisoned in a dungeon deep beneath the Castle. There are no such dungeons below the Aberystwyth Castle of real life. It is a diamond shaped concentric Edwardian fortress built in the 13th century. Most of the castle was destroyed by Oliver Cromwell in 1649, after the English Civil War, for its association with a Royalist regiment.

The Old College in the novel, just as in the real Aberystwyth, used to be a hotel which could not be run in profit, and was later sold to the University of Wales. The Old College is a Gothic style building originally built in 1795 by John Nash as a summer retreat. It has been placed on the Statutory List of Buildings of Special Architectural or Historical Interest.

A Language:

The Welsh language has a prominent presence all through the series. Obviously, most of the locations in the stories have Welsh names, such as Llandudno, Danycoed, Machynlleth, Cwmydy, Ynyslas, Penglais Hill, Clarach and Llanbadarn Road. These are all places that really exist in and around Aberystwyth. Most of the characters also have distinctly Welsh names, examples being Llewellyns, Mrs Llantrisant, Myfanwy, Mrs Abergynolwen and Cadwaladr. The casual greetings, such as ‘good morning’ (bore da) and ‘good afternoon’ (pryhawn da) are always in Welsh. For a series written in English and read by a vast population of English speakers around the world, the Welshness offered by these elements is very significant.

In the third book, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being in Aberystwyth*, Dai Brainbocs who is serving his sentence at the Shrewsbury prison is taken to Royal Salop Infirmary for Glossolalia. Glossolalia means speaking in tongues, which is usually a religious practice. Dai Brainbocs is said to have created his own private language by which means he shuts out others from his world. Experts try to decipher the language. Mrs Prestatyn, from whom Louie obtains the information, says that his case is “attended by intermittent dissociative auditory hallucinations”. Louie visits Dai Brainbocs at the Royal Salop Infirmary with his father, Eeyore who used to be a police officer a long time ago. To their surprise, they find out that the new language the authorities assumed Brainbocs invented is Welsh. The response of the orderly shows the ignorance of the English about Welsh culture and the feeling of difference from other cultures typical of national feelings. He says, “You mean those people have their own language?”

Apart from Welsh, Runes also has a significant presence in the novels. Runes is an ancient script used by Germanic people. Celts used a script that looks quite similar to the runes called Ogham, which is often referred to as Celtic Runes. In *Aberystwyth Mon Amour*, Louie Knight believes to have got hold of the essay that is critical to the case he was investigating. But he is unable to make out how could it have led to the murder of four students since the essay is written in Runes.

Cultural Achievements:

In the Louie Knight Series we often find references to the Eisteddfod festival which, in the fictional world, used to be run by the Druids who later change their tasks from judging poems and licensing spells to organising criminal activities. Malcolm Pryce calls the head of druid, Grand Wizard. Eisteddfod is a Welsh festival of literature, music and performance, with its

history dating back to the 12th century. After it lost popularity with the decline of bardic tradition it was revived in the 18th century. Gorsedd y Beirdd or The Gorsedd of Bards was an association of people such as poets, writers, musicians, artists and those who have made important contributions to Welsh language, literature, and culture. Its members were called Druids and the head of the association was called the Archdruid. The Archdruid conducted most of the formal ceremonies at Eisteddfod. International, national and local Eisteddfodau are held in different places in Wales and around the world including Patagonia in Argentina. During an Eisteddfod competitions are held on poetry, music, drama and fine-arts.

Folk traditions:

Druids, in the series, are a group of people headed by a Grand Wizard and they organise crimes, but also control the law enforcement powers like the police. It is said that there was a time when their duties comprised judging poetry, licensing application of spells and organising the cultural festival Eisteddfod. There is also a mention of the Grand Wizard coming from the temple to address the students at school. Historically, Druids used to be the educated class of people in the Celtic tradition. Druids included people such as poets, doctors and priests. The position of the Druids declined with the advent of Christianity and they became just sorcerers who could cast spells and perform healing magic. In Irish literature they are predominantly portrayed as wizards or magicians, while in Welsh literature, the term usually refers to prophets.

In *Aberystwyth Mon Amour*, Iolo Davies, the disgraced museum curator scratches a living as a Punch and Judy man as he had done in old days. Punch and Judy is a puppet show associated with the traditional British seaside culture featuring, Pulcinella or Punch and his wife Judy. We find the record of the first appearance of the character Mr Punch in the UK in Samuel Pepys diary of the 17th century. Pepys describes a show by an Italian puppet showman Pietro Gimonde. Although it is traditionally a violent show, the contemporary Punch and Judy shows avoid many aspects of violence, especially those towards a baby which is one of the typical scenes in the traditional version. In the novel, the landlord of the pub Jolly Roger where Iolo Davies is going to do his performance, assures Louie that the show is done the traditional way, with all the old favourites. Louie Knight responds, “When they throw the baby out of the window I expect a visit from the policeman, not the social services.”

Specific Landscapes:

The landscapes that are common in the Series are those of sandy beaches, seaside hills, harbour and caravan parks. A typical example is Ynyslas, a real-life village 8 miles to the north of Aberystwyth. On its one side are the sandy beaches and the other an estuary, and beyond that the hills of Aberdovey. One of the characteristic features of Ynyslas is its sand dunes, which constantly change. From the top of the dunes, you have a commanding view of the ocean. Ynyslas feature as a picnic spot, crime scene, a place for investigation and the location of the

caravan park where Louie sometimes has to take residence. It is where we usually find the homeless war veteran Cadwaladr.

Conclusion

After having identified the eight elements in the Louie Knight Series that contribute to nation building, the main question that arises is whether the nation that is built is the Welsh nation, Aberystwyth nation or a fictional nation. Although places, buildings and characters are charged with mystery and bestowed a darker side that cannot be found in real life, and despite the substantial deviations from facts, much of what contributes to the nation building process seems to be quintessentially Welsh. The use of an alternative universe of Aberystwyth, that is, the fictionalisation of the actual places and lives, allows history and tradition to walk around in everyday life in an obvious way that might have been impossible in a depiction of real life. For instance, the Druids and the Castle are not just elements from the past, but have contemporary relevance and use, making it difficult to neglect them as extraneous. Hence the sense of nation that permeates the work is much stronger than it might have been possible in a work set in the real-life Wales.

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