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## Locating *Pays de Galles* in the twenty-first century: dynamic model or forgotten world?

Kathryn N. Jones\*

In spite of the increased profile of Welsh national identity in the post-devolutionary age, the role of travellers and in particular travel writers in representing Wales beyond its borders remains largely unstudied. This essay explores the contrasting constructions of Wales, Welsh political structures and cultural landscapes at the dawn of the twenty-first century offered by two francophone travel narratives by Quebecois Dominic Ménard-Bilodeau (2004) and Breton Jean-Yves Le Disez (2006). It investigates how the travellers' divergent discursive axes and respective emphases on heritage and ethnic tourism result in polarised perceptions of contemporary Wales as a romanticised and mysterious forgotten world on the one hand, and a vibrant and dynamic model to be emulated by non-state nations on the other. By examining the extent of the travellers' political awareness of Wales, the essay probes the possible effects of devolution on travellers' evolving perceptions of Wales and its representation in travel literature.

**Keywords:** Wales; 21st century; politics; francophone travel narratives; Dominic Ménard-Bilodeau; Jean-Yves Le Disez

The dramatic events that took place in the early hours of 18 September 1997 heralded arguably the most fundamental change in Wales's political status since the act of union of 1536. The narrow majority of 50.3% in favour of devolution led to the establishment of the National Assembly for Wales in May 1999, which assumed subordinate legislative powers and executive powers in policy areas that were formerly part of the Welsh Office. This paved the way for the restoration of Wales as a democratic political entity, and Wales became "a nation once again" (Johnes 2012, 412). Subsequently, the Welsh population's experience of devolution in practice has led to a noticeable increase in support of the Assembly, as demonstrated by the substantial yes vote of 63.49% from voters all across Wales in the 3 March 2011 referendum, which extended the Assembly's direct law-making powers in the devolved policy areas without requiring the agreement of the UK parliament.<sup>1</sup> In his ground-breaking 2012 study *Wales since 1939*, historian Martin Johnes argues that a "sense of Welsh identity was more obvious in daily life in the post-devolution period than at any other time since the [Second World] war" (427), and Welsh national identity has provided the focus of numerous recent critical studies (see, for example, Curtice 1999; Day 2002; Haesly 2005).

Whereas the role of the tourist industry in the construction of Welsh national identity has been explored in Pitchford's insightful work *Identity Tourism* (2008), the role of travel literature in this process has remained unexplored. Yet as Bassnett (1993, 93) has observed: "Travellers construct

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the cultures they experience.” In their work on early twentieth-century English-language travel literature on Wales, Gruffudd, Herbert, and Piccini (2000, 601) remind us that: “The transcultural nature of guidebooks and travel writing serves to create, as much as reflect, identity.” Moreover, the few previous studies of travel literature on Wales have not considered perceptions of the political structures of Wales, and most recent works on politics and travel have tended to focus on global issues such as terrorism and environmentalism rather than independence movements or nationalism.<sup>2</sup> However, as Brisson (2009) contends in her study of “‘Naked’ Politics in Travel Writing”, “spaces of travel are spaces of *political* agency” (1, emphasis in original), and “as soon as travellers set out, they become embedded in political structures” (5).

This article explores the contrasting constructions of Wales, “Welshness” and Welsh political structures at the dawn of the twenty-first century offered by two recent francophone travel narratives. The travellers under discussion do not travel in a political vacuum, and this article probes the extent of their political awareness of Wales, and the ways in which they negotiate questions of dominance, political authority and governance. It serves as a preliminary investigation into the possible effects of devolution on travellers’ evolving perceptions of Wales and its representation in travel literature. In choosing to focus on travellers from outside the British Isles, in this instance from Quebec and Brittany, this article thereby offers a synchronic analysis of travel narratives which do not perceive Wales through the filter of comparison with its English neighbour. The nature of these non-English travellers’ encounters with Wales is distinctive, as they often travel as observers of the relationship between Wales and its more familiar dominant neighbour, which according to some critics assumed a colonial power relation.<sup>3</sup>

Dominic Ménard-Bilodeau’s travel narrative *Pays de Galles: Séjour dans un monde oublié* [Wales: Sojourn in a Forgotten World] was published in 2004, five years after his eight-month stay in the small rural village of Ffairfach from October 1998 until May 1999.<sup>4</sup> *Une aventure galloise: Portrait d’une petite nation solidaire* [A Welsh Adventure: Portrait of a Small Solidary Nation] by Jean-Yves Le Disez, published in 2006, narrates his journey across Wales from Cardiff to Bangor in July 2005. These travelogues provide insights into key motivations for travel to Wales, highlight contrasting means of engaging with Wales and the Welsh, and illustrate reactions to the new political context of Wales in the aftermath of devolution. Ménard-Bilodeau travels to a Wales on the threshold of devolution at the beginning of October 1998, without any previous knowledge of the country, and his account is mainly focused on heritage tourism. Conversely, Le Disez is a knowledgeable long-term visitor who describes his journey to Wales in July 2005, six years after the official opening of the National Assembly for Wales. His travelogue can be situated within the framework of ethnic tourism, with its emphasis on immersion in contemporary culture.

Although the travellers under discussion are highly divergent in terms of their background, narrative/travelling personae and previous experience of Wales, both offer descriptions of decelerated journeys, as they rely mainly on public transport in order to travel across Wales. The travelogues offer portrayals of contemporary Wales as a remote and isolated country, and this constitutes an unexpected element of continuity with much earlier accounts of travel to Wales. To some extent, the works challenge the notion of Wales’s “accessible Otherness” identified by Gramich (2012, 147) in her examination of travellers’ constructions of Wales between 1844 and 1913. The seasoned visitor Le Disez chooses to travel only by public transport, such as the cross-Wales *Trawscambria* bus, as part of a deliberate strategy of defamiliarisation and a search for alternative means of perception. Conversely, Ménard-Bilodeau’s enforced reliance on public transport leads to highly critical descriptions of protracted journeys along winding narrow roads and the timetable deficiencies of rural buses and trains, with the narrator depicting the “ancient” trains of the Heart of Wales line as “breadbins” (33).

The notion of “invisibility” has often been ascribed to the Welsh context,<sup>5</sup> which stems partly from the tendency of most European languages to use the term for England in order to describe

Wales. Although France provides a significant proportion of overseas visitors to present-day Wales,<sup>6</sup> few prominent twentieth- and twenty-first century francophone travel writers have ventured to *Pays de Galles*.<sup>7</sup> Wales has not been as prominent a destination amongst European travellers as her Celtic neighbours in Scotland and Ireland,<sup>8</sup> and this is reflected in travellers' difficulties in attempting to define Wales. In the works under discussion here, the travellers characterise Wales as a region, nation, land and country that constitutes unexplored territory for their readers. This article will begin to explore the question of the extent to which devolution has also had an impact on these issues of visibility and definitional difficulties in the Welsh context.

### Wales: a forgotten world

Dominic Ménard-Bilodeau's travel narrative *Pays de Galles: Séjour dans un monde oublié* narrates the adventures of the twenty-two-year-old geography student from Montreal as he works as a French language assistant in Tregib Welsh-medium secondary school. He has subsequently published a second travelogue focusing specifically on England (Ménard-Bilodeau 2006). As well as a self-deprecating and light-hearted narration of his travels throughout Wales, the text offers a humorous and fairly affectionate portrayal of Ffairfach, the neighbouring town of Llandeilo, and their "indomitable" inhabitants, for whom he becomes an object of intense curiosity.

Nevertheless, Ménard-Bilodeau does not travel to Wales of his own volition, and his travelogue is written from the fairly unusual contemporary perspective of an initially unwilling visitor, who does not arrive in Wales as an economic migrant, refugee or exile. The young Quebecois urbanite is non-plussed and disappointed when he discovers the location of his placement for the year: "Wales? My brain searched in vain for a bit of information ... The Prince of Wales? The Princess of Wales? My memory could not recall any other information" (16).<sup>9</sup> Ménard-Bilodeau thereby epitomises the figure of the innocent abroad. As he arrives in Wales for the first time, he notes: "I get the impression that I'm travelling to a region that has been forgotten by the rest of the world. No-one was really able to give me information about my adoptive region, and information was scarce on the internet" (18).<sup>10</sup> His travel narrative is aimed primarily at a Quebecois readership deemed to be equally unfamiliar with Wales, as suggested by the publisher's blurb: "Who is able to boast that they know Wales, this isolated region of the United Kingdom where ghosts and sheep are kings?"<sup>11</sup> After finally managing to locate Ffairfach on the map, the narrator protests: "Could I possibly be any more isolated?" (16).<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the notion of an invisible Wales is also reflected in the description of his first impressions of the Welsh landscape: "The region is shrouded in a fairly gloomy mystical atmosphere. A mysterious mist covers the bottom of the valleys, into which the entire population of Wales seems to be crammed" (20).<sup>13</sup> This mysterious mist or fog – both literal and metaphorical – remains as he bids farewell to Wales eight months later.

Wales is thus portrayed as a remote, isolated and forgotten region, vastly inferior to Canada in terms of the size of its population and geographical terrain: "The region only has three million indomitable Welsh people and only covers around 7720 square miles, which is the equivalent of the area of Lake Ontario in Canada" (16).<sup>14</sup> His first conversation with the secondary school's head of modern languages assuages his curiosity about the diverse designations of the British Isles: "To my great joy, I finally discovered the difference between England, Great Britain and the United Kingdom" (21).<sup>15</sup> Satisfied with these initial terminological explanations, the issue of Wales's present-day political status is not probed by the narrator until the final two pages of the travelogue. The term "une région" is used throughout in order to designate the four countries of the UK, including England, suggesting parity in terms of their political status, but also eliding the existence and specificity of Welsh nationhood.

The portrayal of Wales as “this mysterious and unknown region” (16)<sup>16</sup> results partly not only from the traveller’s previous ignorance, but also from his mode of engagement with Wales and the Welsh. As is the case with numerous visitors from North America and Europe, he is mainly attracted to the Wales of the past and its natural environment. He rejoices upon realising that his home for the year in Ffairfach will be Cawdor Farmhouse, dating from 1720, and he states that the building “breathes history” (22). Wales is also constructed as a country of ghosts and the supernatural, and he is both terrified and thrilled upon hearing suspicions that an elderly woman haunts the farmhouse. However, the main focus of his travels and his chief delight are the Middle Ages. He is amazed when he comes across nearby Dinefwr Castle, an “astounding” “treasure” “from fairytales” (27) which he implies is amongst a wealth of mediaeval structures and natural wonders underappreciated by local inhabitants (33). Ménard-Bilodeau’s interest in the Welsh landscape and enthusiasm for physical traces of Wales’s rich mediaeval heritage thereby correspond closely to the overseas marketing campaign of the Welsh Tourist Board from the end of the 1990s, which deployed the slogan “Land of Nature and Legend” (Morgan and Pritchard 2005, 26).

This travelogue attempts to construct an eternal, timeless Wales. As a result, present-day Wales, its purpose-built touristic developments and industry-scarred landscape, is at times an incongruous and intrusive presence for this traveller. A visit to Snowdonia evidences his romanticisation of Wales and recourse to Celtic mysticism:

Large slate mines disfigure the vicinity of the village [of Llanberis], but at its heart you find the magnificent ruin of Dolbadarn Castle, painted by numerous artists from the Romantic period including Turner. [...] It is in the magic of this landscape that the Welsh legends seem to come to life. The druids, bards and Celtic gods are still alive in the heart of these mountains. (167)<sup>17</sup>

Although he grudgingly admits that such touristic developments may be necessary in order to help boost the Welsh tourism industry in a period of economic decline, Ménard-Bilodeau is highly critical of the modern architecture of the National Botanic Garden of Wales near Carmarthen:

In any case, it seemed to me that this dome was out of place here. A large glass cupola resembling a spaceship which had come to land close to the river Towy jarred with the scenery presented to me by the mediaeval castles on a daily basis. (52)<sup>18</sup>

This tendency to attempt to distance himself from the present can also be detected in his means of engaging with the Welsh. The traveller seeks out encounters with Welsh travellers, who are described as “warm people” (55), yet also views them with some suspicion. During one visit to nearby Carreg Cennan Castle he suspects that a local farmer with an “unintelligible” accent tricks him, by advising him to take a shortcut to the castle which leads him through a field full of cow dung and an angry bull (48). This encounter illustrates his ambiguous relationship with Welsh travellers, oscillating between enthusiastic immersion and alienation. Ménard-Bilodeau is ill at ease and resentful when roles are reversed and he becomes the object of travellers’ curiosity and close scrutiny, particularly in the case of the local police sergeant. The fact that every one of the local inhabitants of Ffairfach and its surrounding area, including his landlady and her family, remain anonymous figures, whilst his foreign language assistant friends are named, suggests a desire to create a rather unreal or fantastical portrayal of the mysterious Wales of the past.

In this travelogue, Wales is often perceived as exotic, strange and wild, and this is particularly evident in the depiction of the Welsh language and the climate. Although he is accustomed to the extreme cold of harsh Canadian winters, Ménard-Bilodeau is often floored by the rough Welsh weather and a hostile natural environment, as he struggles through sand storms in Swansea, is

attacked by seagulls in Llandudno and trudges through a hazardous terrain in the unending rain on the Pembrokeshire coastal path: "This Welsh cold always penetrates right inside your bones and stays there. It is impossible to shake it off, to warm yourself up; and I'm a Canadian, and I know the true cold of winter" (59).<sup>19</sup>

Before his arrival in Wales, the Welsh language is a source of amusement, bemusement and even fear, a strange incomprehensible language which is impossible to pronounce. Such exoticisation and depoliticisation of the Welsh language stand in marked contrast with the highly charged landscape of Quebecois language politics, and suggests a desire to escape from the latter. He mockingly describes a brief lesson in basic Welsh as "how to speak Welsh without spluttering [or] choking" (57).<sup>20</sup> Linguistic difference is depicted as a cultural barrier in his work at a Welsh-medium school, and he does not dare to approach the "Welsh-speaking clan" on the other side of the staffroom (134). His derision of "thick" Welsh accents and construction of linguistic alterity do not extend to self-awareness regarding mainland French perceptions of his own linguistic exoticism and outsider status due to his Quebecois accent. On meeting up with a group of nine French assistant teachers, he observes resentfully:

After hearing that I came from Quebec, as soon as I arrived they assailed me and asked me to speak so that they could hear my accent! I had the impression that I was a monkey in a circus, who is thrown peanuts so that it will put on a good show. "Speak, go on, speak!" Hey! (57)<sup>21</sup>

Nevertheless, Ménard-Bilodeau does begin to undertake a journey of discovery and education, and the closing entries of the travelogue are marked by a growing, albeit limited, political awareness. On visiting Conwy castle, he realises that these imposing edifices were designed as symbols of English domination meant to intimidate the Welsh (161, 163). Conversely, he minimises the extent of opposition to the flooding of mid-Wales valleys to create barrages to supply water to England, referring simply to the "obvious discomfort" of Welsh nationalists (175), and he remains very impressed by the size of the dam at Llyn Brianne.<sup>22</sup> As his stay progresses, Ménard-Bilodeau also begins to present an increasingly romanticised view of the Welsh language, lauding the language's "certain power which enables it to transmit strong emotions in a poetic way" (111),<sup>23</sup> and in the closing entry he expresses admiration for the resurgence of the Welsh language, making it "one of the most successful regional languages of Europe" (187).<sup>24</sup> However, other than oblique references to the rise of nationalism in the past few years (172, 187), the political dimension of this resurgence, and in particular the role played by the pressure group *Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg* [the Welsh Language Society] and the passing of the 1993 Welsh Language Act, remains unexplored, and this is perhaps surprising given the writer's Quebecois origin.<sup>25</sup>

Ménard-Bilodeau leaves Wales on the "historic day" (187) of 30 May 1999, namely the very day of the official inauguration of the National Assembly for Wales. It is highly significant that it is only as he crosses the Severn Bridge for the final time that he refers to the new Welsh political context following devolution. He asserts that "we were really witnessing the arrival of a feeling of national identity in the region" (188).<sup>26</sup> As a reflection of his own changed perception, this is the only instance in the travelogue where he refers to Wales as a nation: "In Cardiff they were busy transforming former industrial sites into magnificent public buildings, symbols of a strong new nation ready to face the future" (188, my emphasis).<sup>27</sup>

The final words of the travelogue suggest a sense of ownership of and belonging to Wales, but there is also something fairly final about the way he bids farewell. "How my region was changing. I was leaving it in good hands" (188);<sup>28</sup> "Farewell, my lovely [*Au revoir, ma belle*]. Good luck and take good care. Perhaps we'll see each other again some day?" (188).<sup>29</sup> Wales is personified and feminised, as if the traveller were bidding a fond final farewell to his beloved. In addition to deploying devolution as a dramatic coda to his travel narrative, it could be argued that he is

bidding a final farewell to his romantic image of the Wales of the past, because it is only as he is leaving that he is able to fully accept and embrace the Wales of the present.

### Wales: a dynamic model

*Une aventure galloise: Portrait d'une petite nation solidaire* offers a striking contrast with Ménard-Bilodeau's portrayal of the Wales of the past, and adopts a very different way of engaging with Wales and the Welsh. The university lecturer Jean-Yves Le Disez can be characterised as an academic practitioner, having also published a critical study of travelogues by nineteenth-century British travellers to Brittany entitled *Étrange Bretagne* (Strange Brittany, 2002). *Une aventure galloise* offers the perspective of a knowledgeable long-term visitor who is keenly aware of the significant scale of recent changes in the Welsh political, social and cultural contexts. Through his numerous familial and personal connections with Wales, this traveller is in the privileged position of being able to offer an outsider's critical perspective, whilst taking advantage of his in-depth knowledge of the country and its culture, and insider information gained through extended periods of residence.<sup>30</sup>

This Breton traveller states his affinity with Wales from the outset, and presents Wales as an integral part of his own identity: "One of the prisms, without a doubt the main one, of my relationship with myself and the world" (11).<sup>31</sup> His journey in July 2005 marks a quarter of a century of his "history with Wales", since arriving at Bangor University as a French tutor. The journey is a means of reflecting on and probing the nature of this relationship with "a country which is like a second country to me" (7).<sup>32</sup> Wales is characterised as a country [*un pays*] throughout the travelogue, with the term *une nation* largely omitted, implying that its status as a nation state and democratic political entity are no longer in question.

As he returns to his second home, Le Disez rejoices as "the long-awaited moment" arrives, and the bus crosses the Severn Bridge, "the magnificent water-green suspension bridge which now links England with the 'Principality'" (18).<sup>33</sup> Through his use of inverted commas, Le Disez, therefore, immediately shows willingness to question and challenge British definitions of Wales. Indeed, despite the lack of a formal border post between England and Wales, Le Disez underlines the way in which geographical alterity marks the traveller's entry into a new country:

As I glimpse the outline of the first foothills of the Brecon Beacons in the distance, I am taken aback for the umpteenth time that Wales, as soon as you have crossed the "border", is physically so different to her English neighbour. (18)<sup>34</sup>

The narrator even implies that characteristic Welsh features have been staged for his arrival, in order to emphasise the distinctiveness of the landscape: "On the Welsh bank [of the Severn], as if placed there deliberately, Welsh blacks [...] are grazing unperturbed" (18).<sup>35</sup> Le Disez emphasises his detailed knowledge of the Welsh landscape and culture from the outset, suggesting: "You might think that you were already in a painting by Kyffin Williams" (18), namely the foremost Welsh landscape painter of the twentieth century.<sup>36</sup> *Une aventure galloise* is aimed at a metropolitan French-speaking readership, in particular from Brittany, for whom the Breton publisher suggests Wales is "a small unrecognised nation" (n.p.) despite their shared "Celtic" connections.<sup>37</sup> Conversely, there is a distinct suggestion that this traveller also wants to prove his credentials to a Welsh readership, and that many of his observations are also addressed to them in this emotive encounter with his "second home".

Nevertheless, the key impetus for his journey is presented as an attempt to resolve a personal political crisis, and Wales is thereby portrayed as an escape or haven from French political reality:

“You think that you are in an out-of-the-way peninsula of Europe, far from the television, the news, the big problems of our times” (37).<sup>38</sup> France’s “no” vote in the European Union Constitution referendum on 29 May 2005 triggers a sense of political uncertainty, alienation and despair in Le Disez. As the no-campaigners in France had held up Great Britain as a negative example of an “ultra-liberal hell” (11), Le Disez therefore decides to travel to Wales in order to test the arguments of the no-voters and to seek reassurance. Instead of travelling there as a tourist, to visit his family or to practise his English, on this occasion he adopts the role of a “reporter in hell” (11) in order to “conduct an investigation in a lost corner of the European Union” (7).<sup>39</sup> This travelogue offers a rich, multifaceted sociopolitical investigation of contemporary Wales, as Le Disez examines broader issues such as the meaning of “community” and the fate of the welfare state, and these issues serve as leitmotifs throughout the narrative.

Rather than the verdant Welsh landscape and traces of the Wales of the past, the main attractions for Le Disez are the present-day inhabitants of contemporary Wales. Apart from a brief visit to the village of Portmeirion to interview its owner Robin Llywelyn about his work as an author, he avoids the country’s main tourist and heritage attractions, privileging instead a type of political and cultural tourism, and the dark legacies of Wales’s industrial heritage. This is especially evident when he undertakes a “pilgrimage” (36) to the south Wales coal mining town of Aberfan, a central *lieux de mémoire* in Welsh collective memories: “I thought that it was time that I went to the site[s] where this terrible tragedy took place, which has marked the country and consciences so deeply” (37).<sup>40</sup> First of all he visits the graveyard to commemorate the 116 children and 28 adults who died in the 21 October 1966 disaster, when a colliery spoil heap collapsed into homes and a primary school. He then heads for a community centre run by “Communities First”, the flagship Welsh government social justice programme, to hear from the centre’s director about its cultural and sporting activities designed to tackle social deprivation and exclusion. His visit to Aberfan occurs coincidentally on the day of the 7/7 terrorist attacks in London: “Another disaster, nearly just as deadly” (37).<sup>41</sup> The narrator thereby relates this major Welsh industrial and environmental tragedy, which was front-page news across the world, to the salient present-day global political issue of terrorism.

Le Disez’s aim during his journey is to meet Welsh men and women of all ages, from all walks of life and from one end of the country to the other (10). Going beyond the single perspective and personal impressions of the individual traveller, this decentred travelogue offers a polyphonic narrative, as the voices and viewpoints of the Welsh travellers resonate and are placed at the heart of the work. His interviewees have usually been pre-selected and his encounters pre-arranged through his personal contacts, and he often stays in the interviewees’ homes. His journey is thereby constructed in relational rather than spatial terms, and his itinerary is determined by the locations of his interviewees. However, most of the travellers he meets tend to belong to a fairly restricted field of experts on Welsh affairs, members of the Welsh[-speaking] intelligentsia or pioneers in their respective fields, such as the female Congregationalist minister Casi Jones. He succeeds in meeting a number of his Welsh “heroes”, such as the crowned bard and musician Twm Morys, the painter Mary Lloyd Jones and the journalist Ned Thomas, who at the time was attempting to launch a daily Welsh-language newspaper, *Y Byd* [The World]. He stays in the home of Jane Davidson, then (Labour) Minister for Education of the Welsh Assembly Government, who happens to be an old friend. During their lengthy conversation, Davidson emphasises the pragmatic advantages of devolution: “Devolution means four times more opportunities to find the right solution” (58).<sup>42</sup> However, above all others Le Disez endeavours to arrange a meeting with Tyrone O’Sullivan, renowned for leading the coal miners’ buyout of the Tower Colliery in 1995, and this final encounter represents the high point of his journey.<sup>43</sup>

The fact that Tyrone O’Sullivan is his main Welsh hero reflects Le Disez’s emphasis on the new-found confidence and a sense of initiative and entrepreneurship which he portrays as defining



features of contemporary Wales. Although Le Disez ironically characterises himself as “a reporter in hell”, Wales, and especially her vibrant cosmopolitan capital of Cardiff, appears as a type of paradise in this narrative extolling Wales’s progress. There is a clear element of idealisation as he marvels at the new-look modern Wales, and he asserts: “You really get the impression that a new capital, not to say a new country, is rising from the ground” (65).<sup>44</sup> When visiting Cardiff Bay, he describes the Wales Millennium Centre as an “enormous palace of the arts celebrating the country’s new confidence and certainly its bilingualism” (64).<sup>45</sup> The new Welsh Assembly building designed by Richard Rogers, a “futuristic extension facing the sea” (65),<sup>46</sup> is also highly praised.

However, it is not only the modern architecture of Cardiff Bay that is applauded, but also “the birth of a new type of democracy” (65) in the Assembly.<sup>47</sup> The ease of public access to the Assembly buildings, and their popularity amongst visitors, also form part of this “new type of democracy”. In their insightful examination of public engagement with the new Welsh Assembly building, Housely and Wahl-Jorgensen (2008)<sup>48</sup> argue that the Assembly has facilitated a “democratic gaze”, drawing on Urry’s (1990) influential concept of the “tourist gaze”. *Une aventure galloise* thereby highlights the ways in which devolution and in particular its purpose-built new home in Cardiff Bay are becoming tourist attractions in their own right.

Le Disez is full of admiration for “both the extent of this revolution and the seriousness of those who are carrying it out” (65).<sup>49</sup> The travelogue emphasises the different, more socialist priorities of the Welsh Assembly compared to those of the Labour-led British government, such as the abolition of charges for National Health Service prescriptions (25) and the introduction of a free all-Wales bus pass for pensioners (55). Le Disez commends in particular the Assembly’s social justice and education policies which he praises as tailored specifically to the needs of Wales.

*Une aventure galloise* emphasises an inclusive, civic understanding of nationalism, which draws attention to travellers who have learned and adopted Welsh as their first language. One of the travelogue’s main underlying aims is to offer a hopeful message for other lesser used languages such as Breton. After highlighting numerous key differences between the respective situations of the two languages, Le Disez points towards a decisive shift in attitudes towards the desirability of learning Welsh and bilingualism:

And perhaps one comparison can be ventured all the same: the region where Welsh is making the most rapid progress is the south, notably Cardiff. But Cardiff, even ten years ago, was not more Welsh-speaking than today’s Brittany is Breton-speaking. Here, you don’t learn Welsh because it has always been spoken. You learn Welsh because the wind has changed. (165)<sup>50</sup>

Through his choice of mainly Welsh-speaking interlocutors, Le Disez’s travel account privileges an optimistic vision of the revitalisation and resurgence of the Welsh language. This traveller’s interest in ethnic tourism is focused predominantly on the Welsh language and culture, and present-day Wales’s ethnic diversity and multiculturalism are not thematised to the same extent.

Conversely, in stark contrast to Ménard-Bilodeau’s portrayal of Wales as a country forgotten by the outside world, Le Disez positions Wales within a wider European political framework. Due to Wales’s vast experience of bargaining with London for concessions, he contends that Wales is ideally placed to take advantage of the “European game” (66) and to play a leading role in the European Union. His views correspond closely to what Welsh political scientists Jones and Balsom (2000, 283) have characterised as the post-devolution development of a “new civic culture which must be compatible with [Wales’s] position in Europe rather than with Britain’s imperial past”. I would, therefore, argue that the travelogue’s initial description of Wales as “a lost corner of the European Union”, should be read in a playful or ironic light, as it is completely

at odds with the optimistic portrayal of Wales as a dynamic model of collectivism and “the communitarian dream” (236) found in the remainder of the work. The narrator begins and ends his travel account by highlighting Wales’s adventurous and determined attitude, declaring: “Impossible n’est pas gallois” – “the impossible is not Welsh” (10, 238). He implies that Wales is no longer invisible, and that a new broader awareness of its existence and achievements has now emerged: “But everyone has now heard about this great little country” (238).<sup>51</sup> Wales is thereby perceived as a positive role model to be emulated and a source of hope for other small and oppressed nations, such as Brittany, Chechnya and Palestine (238).

## Conclusion

This initial exploration of twenty-first-century francophone constructions of Wales has raised a number of questions and pointed towards future areas of enquiry. These polarised views of Wales as a romanticised forgotten world on the one hand, and an idealised dynamic model on the other, suggest the diversity of contemporary approaches to Wales, the persistence of familiar themes and tropes, as well as the possibility of new, more politically engaged modes of travel to Wales. In spite of their contrasting approaches in terms of political contextualisation and awareness, it could be argued that both authors’ accounts exoticise Wales to some extent. Transcultural comparison and further synchronic analysis are needed in order to investigate whether this polarity, diversity of perception and tendency towards exoticisation are replicated across other cultures, for example German.<sup>52</sup>

To some extent the Quebecois traveller’s strong interest in the Middle Ages and the admiration of the Breton visitor for the comparatively privileged situation of Wales and the Welsh language stem partly from the traveller’s natural instinct towards alterity and what is missing from their own culture. It may be instructive to explore whether the portrayal of Wales’s new political context is especially prominent in works by travellers from non-state as opposed to hegemonic cultures. The travelogues by Ménard-Bilodeau and Le Disez certainly do seem to suggest an evolving perception and new political awareness of Wales in response to devolution, as well as other key factors such as the rapid expansion of the Internet. It would be illuminating to compare travel literature on post-devolution Wales with that on other recently devolved nations such as Scotland or Catalonia. Investigation of these areas will help shed light on the contribution of travel literature towards the construction of Welsh national identity and the process of putting contemporary Wales on the map.

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## Notes

1. On the post-devolution Welsh political context and the construction of national identity, see in particular the excellent study by Jones and Scully (2012).
2. On travel literature and global politics, see in particular Lisle (2006) and Huggan (2009).
3. There is a growing and respected body of scholarship on Wales and postcolonialism within Welsh literary studies and history. See Bohata (2004) and Aaron and Williams (2005) in particular.
4. All translations are my own. All references to the primary texts by Ménard-Bilodeau and Le Disez will be placed in parentheses in the text.
5. Wales has often suffered as a neglected “Celtic” nation, overlooked in the artistic and public imagination in favour of Scotland and Ireland. See, for example, Constantine (2008) and Davies and Pratt (2007).

6. According to the International Passenger Survey of the Office for National Statistics, in 2012 Wales welcomed 130,000 visitors from France and 26,000 from Canada, out of a total of 854,000 (with visitors from the British Isles constituting the vast majority).
7. Most mainstream contemporary travel writers in French tend to undertake ambitious journeys to far-flung depopulated destinations, former French colonies and domestic spaces. On twentieth-century travel literature in French, see Forsdick's seminal study (2005).
8. The foremost examples in French are Michel le Bris's *Dublin* (1986) and *Écosse, Highlands & Islands* (1998), and Nicolas Bouvier's *Journal d'Aran et d'autres lieux* (1990). Both writers are closely associated with the influential travel literature movement *Pour une littérature voyageuse*. See Forsdick (2005, 159–166).
9. "Le pays de Galles? Mon cerveau a vainement cherché un peu d'information... Prince de Galles? Princesse de Galles? Je ne trouvais rien d'autre, dans ma mémoire, comme information" (16).
10. "J'ai l'impression de m'en aller vers une région que le reste du monde a oublié. Personne n'a vraiment su me renseigner sur ma région adoptive et l'Internet s'est révélé plutôt chiche à ce sujet" (18).
11. "Qui peut se vanter de connaître le pays de Galles, cette région isolée du Royaume-Uni où fantômes et moutons sont rois?" (n.p.).
12. "Non mais, aurais-je pu être encore plus isolé?" (16).
13. "La région baigne dans une atmosphère mystique assez lugubre. Un mystérieux brouillard enveloppe le fond des vallées, où semble s'entasser toute la population galloise" (20).
14. "La région ne compte que trois millions d'irréductibles Gallois et ne couvre qu'environ 7 720 miles<sup>2</sup>, ce qui équivaut à la superficie du Lac Ontario au Canada" (16).
15. "À ma grande joie, j'ai enfin découvert la différence entre l'Angleterre, la Grande-Bretagne et le Royaume-Uni" (21).
16. "Cette région mystérieuse et inconnue" (16).
17. "De grandes mines d'ardoise défigurent les environs du village [de Llanberis], mais en son cœur se trouve la magnifique ruine du château Dolbadarn, peint par plusieurs artistes de l'époque romantique dont Turner. [...] C'est dans la magie de ces paysages que les légendes galloises semblent prendre vie. Les druides, bardes et dieux celtes vivent encore au cœur de ces montagnes" (167).
18. "Ici, en tout cas, ce dôme ne m'apparaissait guère avoir sa place. Une grande coupole de verre ressemblant à un engin spatial venu se poser près de la Towy cadrerait peu avec le décor que les châteaux médiévaux m'offraient tous les jours" (52).
19. "Ce froid gallois pénètre toujours jusqu'au plus profond des os et s'y installe pour ne plus vous quitter. Il est impossible de s'en débarrasser, de se réchauffer; et je suis Canadien, je connais pourtant les grands froids" (59). The author refers to himself as "Canadian" (as opposed to Québécois) on several occasions during the travelogue, often in relation to Canada's climate and geographical expanse. I would suggest that this nomination is a further illustration of Ménard-Bilodeau's political naivety rather than a concerted desire to make a controversial political statement.
20. "Comment parler le gallois sans postillonner [ou] s'étouffer?" (57).
21. "Après avoir entendu dire que je venais de Québec, ils m'ont assailli dès mon arrivée et m'ont demandé de parler afin qu'ils puissent entendre mon accent! J'avais l'impression d'être un singe, dans un cirque, auquel on lance des cacahuètes afin qu'il donne une bonne prestation. 'Parle, allez, parle!' Hé!" (57).
22. During the twentieth century, the drowning of Welsh valleys to supply water for English cities became an extremely contentious subject which led to non-violent campaigns and protests, but also an unprecedented period of violence during the 1960s. On occasions, land in rural Wales was bought by English cities through compulsory purchase and there was very little that local people and Welsh members of parliament and political parties could do to prevent this. As occurred in Tryweryn (1965) and Clywedog (1967), Welsh-speaking communities were destroyed when the valleys were drowned. On the militant campaign, see Wyn Thomas's recent study *Hands off Wales – Nationhood and Militancy* (2013).
23. "Une certaine puissance pouvant permettre de transmettre de fortes émotions, de façon poétique" (111).
24. "L'une des langues régionales ayant le plus de succès en Europe" (188).
25. The 1993 Welsh Language Act established that "in the course of public business and the administration of justice, so far as is reasonably practicable, the Welsh and English languages are to be treated on the basis of equality".
26. "On assistait véritablement à l'apparition d'un sentiment d'identité nationale dans la région" (188).
27. "À Cardiff, on s'affairait à transformer les friches industrielles en de magnifiques édifices publics, symboles d'une nouvelle nation forte et prête à affronter le futur" (188).

28. “C’est qu’elle changeait, ma région. Je la laissais ainsi entre bonnes mains” (188).
29. “Au revoir, ma belle. Bonne chance et prends bien soin de toi. Peut-être nous reverrons-nous un jour?” (188).
30. In collaboration with his former wife, Le Disez has translated numerous works of Welsh literature into French, including the major Welsh-language novel of the twentieth century, Caradog Prichard’s *Un Nos Ola Leuad* ([1961] 1990), and also an anthology of short stories (1999).
31. “L’une des prismes, le principal sans doute, de mon rapport à moi-même et le monde” (11).
32. “Un pays qui est pour moi comme un second pays” (7).
33. “Le moment tant attendu”; “Le magnifique pont suspendu couleur vert d’eau qui relie désormais l’Angleterre à la ‘Principauté’” (18).
34. “Alors que je vois se profiler au loin les premiers contreforts des Brecon Beacons, je m’étonne pour la énième fois que le pays de Galles soit, aussitôt passé la ‘frontière’, physiquement si différent de sa voisine anglaise” (18).
35. “Sur la rive galloise, comme placées là délibérément, des *Welsh blacks* [...] paissent imperturbables” (18).
36. “On se croirait déjà dans un tableau de Kyffin Williams” (18).
37. “Une petite nation meconnue” (n.p.).
38. “On se croit dans une péninsule réculée de l’Europe, loin de la télé, de l’actualité, des grands problèmes de notre temps” (37).
39. “Mener l’enquête dans un coin perdu de l’Union européenne” (7).
40. “Je pensais qu’il était temps que je me rende sur les lieux où s’est déroulée cette épouvantable tragédie qui a si profondément marquée le pays et les consciences” (37).
41. “Une autre désastre, presque aussi meurtrier” (37).
42. “La dévolution, ça veut dire quatre fois plus de chances de trouver la bonne solution” (58).
43. The miners’ buyout of Tower Colliery gained additional renown in France following the release of the ninety-minute documentary *Charbons ardents* in 1998, directed by Jean-Michel Carré. The film is available to view at <http://vimeo.com/23175485>.
44. “On a véritablement l’impression qu’une nouvelle capitale, pour ne pas dire un nouveau pays, est en train de sortir de terre” (65).
45. “Immense palais des arts à la gloire de la confiance retrouvée du pays et certainement de son bilinguisme” (64).
46. “Une extension futuriste, face à la mer” (65).
47. “La naissance d’une démocratie d’un genre nouveau” (65). Some of the notable features of this “new type of democracy” (in particular in the British context) include the introduction of a hybrid electoral system incorporating both first-past-the-post constituency elections and proportional representation; the equal and prominent use of the Welsh language in the written and spoken conduct of official Assembly business; and measures to ensure a high level of representation of women in the Assembly (the 2003 election delivered an exact 50:50 split between female and male Assembly members, leading to the Assembly being hailed as the world leader in equal representation). See Chaney, Hall, and Pit-house (2001).
48. Housely and Wahl-Jorgensen’s article theorises the limits and opportunities of political tourism in the context of post-devolution Wales.
49. “Et l’ampleur de cette révolution en marche et le sérieux de ceux qui la portent” (65).
50. “Et peut-être peut-on quand même oser une comparaison: la région où le gallois progresse le plus est le Sud, et notamment Cardiff. Or Cardiff, il y a encore dix ans, n’était pas plus galloisante que la Bretagne actuelle n’est bretonnante. Ici, on n’apprend pas le gallois parce qu’on l’a toujours parlé. On apprend le gallois parce que le vent a tourné” (165).
51. “Or tout le monde a maintenant entendu parler de ce grand petit pays” (238).
52. Recent German travelogues on Wales include Kasper (1998), Bengel (2006), and Pohl (2010, 135–150).

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