

2011 (Theme: Harvest)

Harvest for the Soul of a Nation by Cytser *

An agricultural harvest at the end of a growing season provides a livelihood for growers and sustenance for the nation that depends upon them. There is another type of harvest, an intellectual and spiritual one, whose yield is an educated populace ready to expand and share the culture that has nourished it. In Wales the support and growth of Welsh-medium education and *Y Cwricwlwm Cymreig* have nurtured the culture of the nation. A harvest rooted in Welsh culture and brought to fruition by dedicated educators is the bounty I shall explore and celebrate. The hardiness of Welsh culture and language despite attempts to drive it into extinction is impressive. During the early 20th century the use of the “Welsh Not” in schools associated speaking Welsh with humiliation and corporal punishment. The climate for Welsh in school improved very slowly until the formulation of the Education Act of 1944. The Act included the “critical clause: ‘children shall be educated in accordance with the wishes of their parents’.” (Williams, p. 11) This simple statement made it possible for schools to be set up to teach pupils all subjects through the medium of Welsh. The seed sown by that statement in the Education Act of 1944 found fertile ground in Wales and Welsh-medium schools sprung up around the nation. Unfortunately there was virtually no special financial support for Welsh-medium schools and the resources they required. Those dedicated to them recognized, of course, that cultural enrichment is not a luxury to be enjoyed only by wealthy nations or privileged students. John Greenleaf Whittier is quoted as stating ***“If thou of fortune be bereft and in thy store there be but left two loaves, sell one and with the dole buy hyacinths to feed they soul.”*** I know this quotation well because my mother, whose grandparents had emigrated from Wales in the 19th century, quoted this whenever she sought to emphasize the importance of learning about science, history, art, languages, or literature. Parents and teachers in Wales worked extraordinarily hard to establish and maintain Welsh-medium schools for all interested children despite financial hardships. Gradually Welsh-medium education became available in more areas and could accommodate more children. Eventually even those children with special educational needs were not forced to give up their native language because special-education programs became part of Welsh-medium education. Evaluations of student learning have shown that children in Welsh-medium schools achieve at levels equivalent to or above those of counterparts in English-medium schools, so enrollments in Welsh-medium schools continue to increase. Reliable public transportation and school choice mean that families often have a variety of available schools available for children to attend. Continuing favorable educational outcomes in Welsh-medium schools promote their popularity. Now all schoolchildren in Wales must study the Welsh language through age 16. In addition to language study, children are also given the opportunity to learn about Welsh culture, history, geography, plants, and animals as part of *Y Cwricwlwm Cymreig*. The philosophy of this curriculum is expressed beautifully in “Y Cwricwlwm Cymreig Policy” of St. Andrews Major Church in Wales Primary School, Dinas Powys. Their policy document states *(at)* ***“St Andrews Major Primary School we are proud of our heritage and through studying the ‘Welsh dimension’ in all areas of the curriculum pupils are made aware of the special nature, culture, history, language and ethos in Wales. When entering our***

school visitors should be aware that ours is a school in Wales. Opportunities for including reference to Wales in all subjects are identified through planning, resources and use of local references. (Y Cwricwlwm Cymreig Polity, p. 2) This curricular advancement in place across Wales is promoting a bountiful cultural harvest of pride. Advances such as Welsh language study in all schools and Y Cwricwlwm Cymreig are likely linked to the increase in the percentage of Welsh speakers from 20.8% in 2001 to 21.7% in 2004 (Wikipedia, "Welsh language", p.1). Instruction in the Welsh language is also offered in many university courses. Bangor University and Aberystwyth University have particularly extensive offerings in areas ranging from education to history and geography. At any age a learners can expand their cultural and linguistic horizons. The establishment of flourishing Welsh-medium education and learning about Wels through Y Cwricwlwm Cymreig were a challenge to all who labored to bring these improvements about. All who treasure Welsh connections rejoice in the bountiful intellectual harvest they given Wales and the world. (742 words)

* Mary Williams-Norton References: Our Children's Language, Iolo Wyn Williams (ed.) (y Lloffa, 2003, p.11) "Y Cwricwlwm Cymreig Policy" from C\St Andrews\Policy Documents Approved\policies.doc\Cwricwlwm Cymreig Policy.doc, p. 2
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Welsh_language , p. 1