

# The Spanish Civil War and its (Welsh) Afterlives: Memorialisation as a Political Act

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## Abstract

In this paper, I examine the discourse surrounding the establishment and reception of Spanish Civil War memorials in Wales, and show how they not only attempt to recuperate the memory of the war, but also constitute interventions in the politics, not only of 1930s Spain, but also, and equally importantly, of late-twentieth-century Wales. By examining the *mythology* constructed by these memorials, I question the binary of 'history' and 'mythology', arguing that it is at best misguided to merely attack *mythology* as *faking history*. It is, rather, necessary to analyse the socio-political context within which such *mythology* is constructed. As such, I argue that whatever the historical 'truths' or otherwise in the role played by the people of Wales in the Spanish Civil War, the narrative that has been constructed of the Welsh involvement in Spain plays a definite political role in creating a distinctively Welsh nationhood. Borrowing from the theories of Marianne Hirsch, Pierre Nora, Kristin Ross and James E. Young, I go on to examine the particular role played by history and mythology in the way nations tell stories about themselves.

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The events that led to the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) might have been “essentially Spanish in origin” (Williams et al., 1996, xx) but they very “quickly took on a significance beyond a domestic military rebellion against a constitutionally elected Republican government” (Baxell, 2007a, 13). During a period of extremely polarised international politics, the conflict soon evolved from a civil war to what historian Paul Preston has described as “the great international battleground of fascism and Communism” (Preston, 1996, 6). The opposing sides received what was at times crucial assistance from abroad – government assistance from Germany and Italy in the Nationalist case, and from the Soviet Union in the Republican case, as well as almost 35,000 volunteers from 53 nations, who formed the International Brigades in support of the Republican government (Baxell, 2007a, 17). The motives of these volunteers must necessarily have been many and multi-valent, but it seems that there was a general perception that the Spanish War was “both the military and ideological testing ground and precursor of World War II” (Valis, 2007, 7). With such wide-ranging international significance, it is perhaps not surprising that the events of seventy years ago still have so much currency in so many parts of the world today.

The Welsh contribution to the Spanish Republican cause was by no means insignificant. Of the approximately 2,300 British volunteers, about 6% came from

Wales.<sup>1</sup> The estimates for total number of Welsh volunteers vary from 148 (Stradling, 2004, 128) to “more than 200” (Cope, 2007, 60). Including those who served with other units like medical units and the quasi-Trotskyite *Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista* (POUM, Workers' Party of Marxist Unification), and those who “were turned down for domestic reasons or were caught by the French police and returned to Britain”, Hywel Francis puts the figure at 180 (Francis, 1984, 179). Of the Welsh contingent, 99 were miners from the South Wales Miners’ Federation, and constituted the “largest regional occupation group in the British Battalion” (Mates, 2006, 374-375). Of course, the number of volunteers is only one measure of the Welsh contribution. The “Aid to Spain” movement was very strong throughout Wales as well, where it held some of the most important collection drives in Britain:

In the period up to the founding of the South Wales Council for Spanish Aid in early February 1937, collections were held in almost all the mining valleys by a wide range of working class organisations, including for example, the Maesteg and Nantymoel Councils of Action, a large number of miners’ lodges, the Labour Party, as at Abersychan and Caerau, and Trades Councils, such as Neath and Ebbw Vale (Francis 1984, 117).

In his survey of the “Aid to Spain” movement, Jim Fryth writes that the South Wales Miners’ Federation (SWMF) “gave more than many national unions” and that the money thus raised “went to Medical Aid, the Basque children, the Milk Fund and the International Brigades Dependents” Aid Fund” (Fryth, 1986, 269-270). Harry Pollitt, the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Great Britain, was quoted in the *Daily Worker* saying:

When I think of the appalling poverty that is rampant in these mining valleys and the extent of the sacrifices that this money means, it seems to me to be the outstanding thing that has happened in the whole Spanish campaign (Cited in Francis, 1984, 107).

It is no wonder then that a high level of interest has persisted to the extent that as late as 2004, historian Robert Stradling was able to say: “interest in the Spanish Civil War and the International Brigades remains stronger and more widespread in Wales than in any other country which became involved” (Stradling, 2004, x).

One of the forms this interest has taken is the continuing drive to erect memorials to the people who were killed while fighting in Spain. The first memorial to be erected in Wales was in Aberdare. Funded by “the Aberdare Labour Party, Trades Council and the miners” (Lewis and Davies, 2005, 25), the plaque was placed in 1967 in the local offices of the Labour party.<sup>2</sup> This was followed in 1976 by the unveiling of the memorial plaque in the South Wales Miners’ Library in Swansea. Another national memorial was unveiled in Alexandra Gardens, Cardiff in October 1992. The total number of Welsh memorials stands currently at eighteen, including Abertridwr (2003), Ammanford (2004), Bedwas (2004), Blackwood (2004), Blaenavon (2006), Blaenau Gwent (2005), Burry Port (1986), Caerphilly (2003), Llanelli (2000), Maerdy (2000), Merthyr Tydfil (1999), Neath (1996), Penygroes (1991), Porthcawl (1999), and

<sup>1</sup>This percentage is only indicative, however, as it does not take into consideration the relative populations of the British nations. For purposes of comparison, the proportion of the Welsh contribution to the First World War has been estimated to be 3.7% (Gaffney, 1998, 152).

<sup>2</sup>In 1986, the Labour Party rooms were sold, and the plaque was removed and re-sited “in the foyer of the Aberdare Central Library, where it is to be found today” (Williams et al., 1996, 63). There was a second unveiling ceremony attended by the former Labour leader Michael Foot.

Rhondda (2004) (Diez, 2004; Lewis and Davies, 2005, p. 9). In addition, there is a blue plaque on Pendragon House, Caerleon to commemorate the Basque refugee children who were housed there.

In 2004, the International Brigades Memorial Trust held its Annual General Meeting at the Temple of Peace in Cardiff, which IBMT President and former brigadier Jack Jones hoped would “be a tribute to the splendid contribution made by Welsh members of the International Brigade” (Lewis and Davies, 2005, p. 4). The AGM provided an added impetus for memorial activities, as is evident from the number of memorials unveiled in the same year. This impetus was further strengthened in 2007 with the launch of the *Wise and Foolish Dreamers* exhibition (organised by the Welsh Centre for International Affairs, and funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund), which is currently on tour around various venues throughout Wales, and with the first major academic conference in Wales on the history and memory of the Spanish Civil War, also organised by the Welsh Centre for International Affairs, and held in the Temple of Peace in February 2008.

The *Wise and Foolish Dreamers* project was conceived as consisting of “a touring exhibition, video, full colour booklet, interactive educational materials and schools” workshops on the Welsh participation in the Spanish Civil War 1936-39 and its relevance to young people today”<sup>3</sup>. The project is based on a conviction that “the story of the part people from Wales played in the Spanish Civil War” is not just “a crucially-important story for Wales” but is “of great contemporary relevance”. As “a heritage education project”, the chief remit of the organisers was “to create permanent new education tools” to educate the children about “the inspiring story of the role of people from Wales within the Spanish Civil War”. To this end, “important oral history interviews” were conducted in order to “conserve for all time memories which would otherwise be lost forever from ageing individuals”.

The memorial activities that have been outlined above can be seen to constitute what Pierre Nora has termed a *lieu de mémoire* (site of memory): “a *lieu de mémoire* is any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community” (Nora, 1996, xvii). The organisation that has been most closely associated with the construction of these memorials is the International Brigades Memorial Trust which was established in 2002 in order to “keep alive the memory of the men and women who volunteered to join the legendary International Brigades or who went to Spain to help in other ways to defend the Spanish Republic against fascism from 1936 to 1939”. It achieves this, in part, “by preserving, maintaining and assisting in the construction of war memorials” and “by preserving and cataloguing valuable historical material relating” to the Spanish Civil War (Baxell, 2007b).

There is, of course, an undeniable paradox in this injunction to remember, an “ambiguity of memory” as James E. Young has put it. Young argues that perhaps the more memory comes to rest in its exteriorized forms, the less it is experienced internally... there seems to be an inverse proportion between the memorialisation of the past and its contemplation and study... In shouldering the memory-work, monuments may relieve viewers of their memory burden (Young, 1993, 5).

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<sup>3</sup> My acknowledgements are due to Mr. Stephen Thomas, Director of the Welsh Centre for International Affairs for allowing me access to the internal archive of documents pertaining to their links with the Spanish Civil War, and the conception and creation of the *Wise and Foolish Dreamers* project. The quotations are from the application for Heritage Lottery Funding.

It is arguable that there is a degree of awareness of this paradox within the very process of memorialisation, an anxiety that the attempts to preserve a memory that is already lost cannot but be futile. As poet, International Brigader and founding member of the IBMT, David Marshall wrote:

In unremembered graves they lie  
Untrumpeted, their songs forgotten  
Our children are not taught their history  
And you forget them at your peril. (Jump, 2006, 107)

In spite of the deep-seated urge to remind the reader, the poet is only too aware that the “graves” are already “unremembered” and the “songs forgotten”. In Nora’s formulation, “*lieux de mémoire* exist because there are no longer any *milieux de mémoire*, settings in which memory is a real part of everyday experience” (Nora, 1996, 1). In other words, the memory that is produced through these memorial activities is, as Nora puts it, “wilful and deliberate, experienced as a duty rather than as spontaneous...[and] relies entirely on the specificity of the trace, the materiality of the vestige, the concreteness of the recording, the visibility of the image” (8). One of the aspects of this brand of collective memory that is highlighted through Nora’s analysis is that it is performative in nature. In other words, a *lieu de mémoire* can only come into existence as such through human agency. The “memorial heritage” needs to be constructed and preserved through acts of memorialisation, such as those listed above. The implication behind this is not just that the memorials are there to remind us of something that deserves to be remembered, that there is an ethical and political injunction to remember, but that memorialisation is only possible through a deliberate public and private investment. One needs to perform the memorial heritage in order to create and preserve it.

Indeed, the very establishment of the IBMT was predicated on a tacit acceptance of this need to actively construct a memorial heritage. According to the IBMT website, the trust was founded by “the veterans of the International Brigade Association, the Friends of the I.B.A., representatives of the Marx Memorial Library, and historians specialising in the Spanish Civil War” (Baxell, 2007b). In other words, there is a recognition that, with the last of the brigaders dying out, the direct memories of the war are disappearing and that it is up to the next generation to keep alive the legacy of a war they never saw, and therefore memories which they never had. The memorial mythology that is being constructed here is an example of what Marianne Hirsch has called “postmemory”, which is “distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection. Postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation” (Hirsch, 1997, 22). In the particular case of Wales, this public investment in memorialisation takes the form of reinforcing “the idea of an ongoing special relationship” between Wales and Spain (Stradling, 2004, 169). This relationship is depicted in many forms, not least through the repeated mentions, in various forms of “the image of the Rhondda collier as “volunteer for liberty” in Spain” (Stradling, 2004, 170). The perceived links between the miners of South Wales and the miners of the Asturias have been mentioned variously and repeatedly as a reason for the Welsh contribution to the Republican cause. Jack Roberts, a miner and brigader from the

mining village of Tonypany said in 1970 that: “There is a feeling between miners never mind what country you come from. Only a miner can tell you that” (cited in Francis, 1984, 139). In his novel *We Live* (1939), Lewis Jones has his hero Len (himself a collier-volunteer) articulate similar ideas: “I could swear sometimes I was still in Cwmardy and that the Fascists are not far away in a strange land, but are actually destroying our birth-place and all that it means to us...The faces I see about me are the same faces as those in Cwmardy” (Jones, 1939, 324). While the insistence on the figure of the collier-volunteer might indicate that the basis of this relationship was class-consciousness (and that indeed played a part), other writers have suggested that it was by no means the only ingredient. In 2007, Phil Cope in the book to accompany the *Wise and Foolish Dreamers* exhibition cited unlikely “recent research published by Professor Stephen Oppenheimer of Oxford University” which claimed that “the DNA of 81% of the Welsh has its origins in the Basque region of Northern Spain” (Cope, 2007, 27), suggesting that there might almost be a biological basis for this special relationship. Revolutionary Welsh poet and founding member of the Communist Party of Great Britain, Niclas y Glais (T.E. Nicholas) played a big part both in gathering support for the Republican cause and simultaneously perpetuating the mythology of a special relationship. In a work called *In Memory of a Welshman Who Fell in Spain*, T. E. Nicholas poetically renders this close special relationship between Wales and Spain:

...and now  
amid  
Those nameless ones who  
shared that dream  
He lies, who died for Wales  
outside Madrid (cited in Cope, 2007, 24).

The point is, of course, that the people who fought and died in Spain were not fighting in a foreign war that did not concern them. Rather, to use the words that appeared in one of the earliest fund-raising campaigns for a Cardiff memorial to the brigaders, “these sons of Wales...died that we might live.”<sup>45</sup> In an extreme if inevitable extension to this myth-making, Labour MEP David Morris was quoted as saying that “Neath, more than any other area in Britain, provided support for the fight against Franco” (Stradling, 2004, 168).

Historians like Robert Stradling have criticised the construction of the above mythology as “faking history”. In Stradling’s view, for most of twentieth century Welsh history the idea of the special relationship “is difficult to maintain at all” (Stradling, 2004, 169-170). Stradling discusses how the mythology outlined above was comparatively late to flourish (as evidenced by the fact that the first Welsh memorial to the Spanish Civil War was not erected until the 1970s) and that, in any case the Welsh response was never as strong as that of Scotland or Ireland where (unlike in Wales) Stradling argues that “there was no need to manufacture a history of popular struggle and armed resistance” (177). As for the stereotypic image of the Rhondda collier volunteering in support of his Asturian comrades, Stradling’s contention is that “the 1930s connection between the Welsh and Asturian miners seems too flimsy to bear the

<sup>4</sup> My thanks are again due to Mr. Stephen Thomas for drawing my attention to this undated leaflet, also from the archives of the Welsh Centre for International Affairs.

grand hypothesis of a pioneering south Wales version of “internationalism” which has been placed upon it” ( 100).

One may or may not accept Stradling’s version of history, and it is significant that even he admits “that interest in the plight of the Spanish Republic, and even the commitment to do something about it, was widespread in Wales” (170-171). Moreover, as Tom Buchanan has pointed out, one does not have to accept the constructed mythology “to accept that something remarkable happened in Wales, above all in the mining valleys, between 1936 and 1938” (Buchanan, 2006, p. 1147). In any case, to merely argue (rightly or wrongly) that the mythology of the Welsh response to the Spanish Civil War is a cultural (by implication, artificial) construction is, according to this writer, to miss the point. Stradling has demonstrated how this myth-making has been carried out through literature, art, and even rock music and various other outlets of Welsh cultural life since the 1960s, but he neglects to ask what role this mythology plays in the Welsh national psyche. He declares that his “problems are not with the realities...as with the myths, insofar as they were assuredly made in Wales” (Stradling, 2004, p. 179), but does not apparently feel the need to ask the more fundamental question: Why did the myths have to be made in the first place?

In order to attempt to answer this question, this article will look at the process of memorialisation that has served to construct the Welsh mythology as an example of what Kristin Ross has called an “afterlife”. Writing about the events of Paris in May 1968, Ross uses this term:

...to mean simply that what has become known as “the events of May ‘68” cannot now be considered separately from the social memory and forgetting that surround them...The management of May’s memory – the way in which the political dimensions of the event have been, for the most part, dissolved or dissipated by commentary and interpretations – is now, thirty years later, at the center of the historical problem of 1968 itself (Ross, 2002, 1).

In the Wales of the last third of the twentieth century then, the afterlife of the Spanish Civil War is an essentially Welsh one – constructed to meet essentially Welsh needs. Of course, that is not to say, that the meanings produced by these memorials are uncontested and monovalent. On the contrary, as this article will hopefully show, they constitute serious political divisions – conflicts based on a multiplicity of interpretations. In other words, the Spanish Civil War in Wales can be said to have had many afterlives. To return to Pierre Nora’s definition of a *lieu de mémoire* cited above, the memory of the Spanish Civil War becomes part of the memorial heritage of the Welsh community precisely because it is used to construct a version of contemporary Welsh identity and is, as Hywel Francis described in his book *Miners Against Fascism: Wales and the Spanish Civil War*: “more...about Wales than about Spain” (Francis, 1984, 23). Put yet another way, the postmemorial legacy of the Welsh response to the Spanish Civil War has been culturally constructed to meet the needs not of 1930s Spain but of mid-to-late twentieth century Wales. The afterlives may be many and various, but they are all intrinsically Welsh.

In 2005, the year after the International Brigades Memorial Trust held its AGM in Cardiff, Ray Davies and Wendy Lewis compiled a booklet called *In the Footsteps of the Spanish Civil War: A Guide to South Wales Monuments to the International Brigades*, which both utilised and extended the earlier *Memorials of the Spanish Civil War* by Colin Williams, Bill Alexander and John Gorman. What is most noticeable about the booklet about South Wales, unsurprisingly, is how careful it is to create a distinctively

Welsh memorial. Hywel Francis reinforced this sense of nationalism in his short introduction to the booklet: “Wales” fine tradition of solidarity, of internationalism, of anti-fascism and anti-racism as manifest in the International Brigades is a defining one” (Lewis and Davies, 2005, 6). This nationalism is further evident in the monuments themselves, often through the very material from which they are constructed. The plaque in the South Wales Miners’ Library in Swansea, for example, is “made of Welsh coal, slate and steel” (13) while the memorial in Cardiff is constructed from a traditional Welsh “blue pennant stone...selected from Gelligaer quarry” in Treharris (16). All of the plaques and monuments are bilingual in English and Welsh, and International Brigades Memorial Trust secretary Marlene Sidaway reports that the Cardiff AGM was preceded by “a very moving ceremony in Welsh and English at the International Brigade Memorial in Alexandra Gardens, Cathays Park” (Sidaway, 2005, 1-2). At the unveiling ceremony of the Cardiff memorial, music was provided by Côr Cochion Caerdydd (Cardiff Red Choir), who sang the *Internationale* in Welsh. In the picture of the unveiling ceremony of the plaque in Bedwas, the dignitaries are shown carrying the Welsh flag. All the printed material associated with the *Wise and Foolish Dreamers* project is bilingual, a point which was explicitly made in the funding application forms. Indeed, the memorial activities are often very closely associated with Welsh nationalist politics – on at least one occasion, in Llanelli in 2000, the plaque was paid for by the local branch of Plaid Cymru, the Welsh nationalist party and “was sited on the external wall of the Plaid Cymru offices” (Lewis and Davies, 2005, 11). Stradling has questioned what he sees as “Plaid Cymru”’s recent tendency to adopt the cause of the Welsh brigaders”, comparing it to “the breathtaking opportunism of the Irish Labour Party and its union allies, who stridently took up the cause of the so-called “Connolly Column” in the 1970s, having with almost equal vigour supported the Francoist cause in the 1930s!” (Stradling, 2004, 177). Indeed, it might seem odd that what is emphatically a Left mythology should be so closely associated with nationalist politics. After all, one would not expect to see the Union Jack or the Cross of St. George flying over the unveiling ceremony of a Spanish Civil War memorial in England. Indeed, the wording on the memorial in Jubilee Gardens, London, which comes closest to a British National memorial, is carefully chosen to eschew any notions of British nationalism. The inscription on the front of the plinth reads: “In honour of over 2,100 men and women volunteers who left these shores to fight side by side with the Spanish people in their heroic struggle against fascism” (Williams et al., 1996, 6). This careful wording is surely a result of what is often seen as a right-wing monopoly on British nationalism:

In Britain, perhaps more than most European countries, national identity belongs to the Establishment, and creates effective links between it and the people... The Left will have to confront the issue of creating a “British” identity that is not simply the expression of a centralist, English-based imperial state (Humphreys, 1985, 49).

If claiming a British identity is problematic for the Left, claiming a Welsh identity is much less so. For a small country like Wales, dominated (arguably colonised) by a more powerful neighbour, nationalist politics is always in some sense also oppositional. In the specific case of Wales, nationalist politics has always also had a socialist tradition within it. Admittedly, this tradition comes more from a moderate, non-Conformist trade-union politics rather than the more radically Marxist politics one might associate with the International Brigades, but, as R. O. Humphreys has put it, “the turn of the century saw the national element in Welsh politics which found expression in radical

liberalism begin to give way to the rise of the labour movement and industrial struggle” (Humphreys, 1985, 11). In 1912, Independent Labour Party Leader and former MP for Merthyr Tydfil and Aberdare, Keir Hardie could claim to be both a Welsh nationalist and a socialist internationalist and write:

The people of Wales fighting to repossess the land of Wales; the working class of Wales taking over the ironworks and furnaces, the railways and great public works generally... That is the kind of nationalism I want to see; and when it arrives we shall see the Red Dragon emblazoned on the Red Banner of socialism (Humphreys, 1985, 12.).

It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a comprehensive account of the complex and at times ambiguous relationship that the Left has enjoyed (and endured) with Welsh Nationalist politics – an account which would obviously have to include an evaluation of Saunders Lewis, founder of Plaid Cymru and his Catholicism –influenced Francoist leanings, among other things. For the purposes of this argument, it is enough to recognise that, for many historians, “the distinctiveness of Welsh politics within the British political system...[is characterised] by the growth of the labor movement and the gradual assumption of political power by the Labour party” (Davies, 1989, 29). This is borne out by analysis of the results of General Elections in Wales throughout most of the twentieth century. Between 1923 and 1979, Labour’s share of the vote in Wales never fell below 42% and rose to its highest level in 1966 of 60.6%. Even in the 1983 election, when the rest of the country was deep in the throes of Thatcherism, Labour still polled 37.6% of the Welsh vote, when across the country it had dropped to merely 27% (Humphreys, 1985, 73-75). The latter half of the twentieth century witnessed the nation-wide implosion of the Communist Party, the Labour Party’s continual shift to the Right, and Plaid Cymru’s shifts to the Left. Indeed the strong left-wing politics of much of Wales has inevitably coloured Welsh nationalist politics in the second half of the twentieth century. In this context it is perhaps not surprising that Plaid should take over as the parliamentary political party most closely associated with the memorial activities of the Spanish Civil War. Recent election results mirror this change with Plaid Cymru (along with Liberal Democrats and the Independents) doing much better in traditional Labour “safe” seats such as Ebbw Vale, Caerphilly and Merthyr Tydfil.

It is partly because of this qualitative difference between Welsh nationalism and British/English nationalism that Welsh memorials to the Spanish Civil War open up a space for an alternative, oppositional memorialisation which is crucial to the persisting presence of the Spanish war in the Welsh national and cultural psyche. In his documentary *Whose History? Whose Legend? Wales and the Spanish Civil War* Rob Stradling features the Cardiff memorial:

Here is a monument to the Spanish Civil War. Now many cities, even some small towns today have memorials to the Spanish Civil War. But only in Cardiff is such a monument placed within the gardens dedicated to war memorials in general. What is it that explains the presence of this monument here? (Stradling, 2005).

While Stradling arguably does not really satisfactorily answer his own question, he has implicitly acknowledged that the memorial to the Spanish Civil War constitutes a qualitatively different entity from that of the other war memorials in the same gardens – principally the Welsh National War Memorial, the Welsh National South African War Memorial and the Cardiff Falklands War Memorial. The precise location of this

difference is, I believe, in the relationship of the monument to the State. James E. Young has cogently analysed what he has described as “the state-sponsored monument’s traditional function as self-aggrandizing locus for national memory” (Young, 1993, 21). In other words, memorials erected by the State will not just “remember the past according to its national myths and ideals” (211) but will also, and more importantly, do so to further the State’s current political needs. Almost inevitably, then, the major role played by state-sponsored memorials is to preserve the status quo. As Young puts it, “in any state’s official use of commemorative spaces, [the] function of monuments [that is] clear most of all to the governments” is the ability of monuments to “propagate the illusion of common memory” (6). As we have already seen, however, the Welsh national identity that is being created through the establishment of distinctively Welsh memorials to the Spanish Civil War is in opposition to the British/English state. With the absence of an independent Welsh state to authorise the erecting of such monuments, the national identity they help construct is also inevitably in opposition to the British/English state.

It is also crucial that this opening of a space to articulate alternative mythologies of Welsh national identity should also entail a commemoration of anti-fascism. The state-sponsored commemoration of anti-fascism in Britain plays a huge role in constructing the British idea of nationhood. As Dawson and West point out, the victory in and commemorations of the Second World War help towards “a particular construction of “the national character” and “our way of life” which connects the customs, values and manners of the British/English people to the institutions of the imperial state” (Dawson and West, 1984, 9). Thatcher’s deliberate use of Churchillian rhetoric during the Falklands/Malvinas War transformed what was at best a controversial military campaign into an almost biblical struggle to preserve the sanctity of the pastoral idyll that was Britain and the British way of life by recreating what is “the central and founding myth of World War II...[that] of a nation *united* [original emphasis] through idolatry for its totemic leader, Churchill” (11). The consequence of this in the short-term, was a marked upsurge in patriotic and nationalist frenzy in support of Britain’s actions against Argentina. In the long-term, it monopolised anti-fascist commemorations for one particular political force. In the period following the Falklands War and Thatcher’s bellicose rhetoric, it became very difficult to memorialise the struggles against fascism without also implicitly endorsing an Anglo-centric, quasi-imperialist notion of celebrating a glorious national past.

Indeed, the strength of the hegemony of patriotism especially during and since World War II cannot be over-estimated. Even writers on the Left like Orwell and Priestley famously wrote in favour of patriotism, leading to a generation of the British Left arguing that it “must somehow “capture” patriotism and make it its own” (8). As we have already seen, however, attempts at a Left re-appropriation of British nationalism is problematic at best. Interestingly, one of the few voices on the Left who managed to articulate an alternative position, a left minority position that supported the war while distancing itself from a Churchill coalition” was Tom Wintringham, who was instrumental in the foundation of the Home Guard. Wintringham argued against both what he saw as Tory appeasement of Fascism and the fallout from the German-Soviet Non-aggression Pact, and attempted to mobilise support against Fascism “on an *anti-fascist* and *democratic*, rather than a *patriotic* platform [original emphasis]” (12). It is no coincidence that Wintringham also happened to be commander of the British Battalion of the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War. The Spanish Civil

War and its commemorations (especially in Wales where the consequent articulation of a distinct Welsh national identity adds an oppositional layer) opens up a space where the struggles against fascism can be commemorated without perpetuating the British/English nationalist myth.

Crucially, the memorials are also perceived to have the potential to represent this oppositional political position. Wendy Lewis and Ray Davies, in their booklet about the South Wales memorials, write that, in Llanelli “the Royal British Legion had objected to a commemorative plaque being put up to honour the International Brigades, on political grounds” (Lewis and Davies, 2005, 11). Phil Cope further elucidates this incident, writing that

in 2000 the local council refused permission to allow a plaque...based upon the objections raised by the Royal British Legion, the Royal Regiment of Wales, the RAF Association and the Royal Marines Association who did not wish to see the International Brigade plaque near the cenotaph to their members who had died “Fighting for King (or Queen) and Country” (Cope, 2007, 125).

In a similar vein, Stradling quotes an anonymous “branch secretary of the local Royal Marines” Association” who objected to a plaque being erected in Neath because “a public monument was inappropriate for political recruits who did not go to Spain in defence of Britain” (Stradling, 2004, 168). The fact that the anti-fascist position of those who fought in the Spanish Civil War was and was seen to be different from that of the majority of soldiers in the Second World War is further evident from a letter written by Lt Col. F.C. Batten, Chairman of the Dyfed/West Wales Branch of the Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Families Association Forces Help to Arnold Owen, brother of Frank Owen from Maerdy who was killed fighting in Brunete in 1937<sup>6</sup>:

the support of the Republicans by Stalin and the recruiting of the International Brigade which was carried out by the Communist Party of Great Britain, on the orders of the Communist international, was part of Stalin’s policy to contain Hitler and buy time for the Soviet Union and not in defence of democracy (cited in Cope, 2007, 125.).

The right to articulate alternative memories is clearly a contested one, and the fight to be able to unveil such memorials implicitly recalls the pledge of the International Brigades to return “to our respective countries...to continue the fight we helped wage in Spain” (Williams et al., 1996, 12). In this context, it is not surprising to see that the political battles over the establishment of Spanish Civil War memorials very easily map on to the most important political battles of the day. Wendy Lewis and Ray Davies, for example, finish their account of the unveiling of the Cardiff memorial by demonstrating the very contemporary nature of this struggle: “The postwar Tories who resisted the efforts to put up a memorial must have turned in their graves” (Lewis and Davies, 2005, 17).

In this context, it is even more surprising that Stradling should criticise memorial activities like the *Wise and Foolish Dreamers* project for displaying an obsessive “notion that “Fascism” is still somehow a very present threat to the wellbeing of our

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<sup>6</sup> In this connection it would be proper to acknowledge the huge role played by Mr. Arnold Owen in helping to preserve the memory of the Welsh involvement in the Spanish Civil War. He is responsible for the establishing of most of the memorials mentioned in this paper and now, in his nineties, continues to play an active role in the “Wise and Foolish Dreamers” project.

communities”, an obsession which he argues is “anachronistic, irrelevant, and potentially harmful” (Stradling, 2007, 123). Stradling’s position seems to be, then, that far from possessing any meaningful political presence, the memorials merely commemorate a struggle against Fascism, a force which “has been defunct for sixty years and is now no more than an historical expression” (123). Whether we agree with Stradling’s analysis of fascism, and is difficult to reconcile it with, among other things, the British National Party having won its first seat in the London Assembly in the recent elections, it has to be said that the political implications of commemorating the Spanish Civil War are not necessarily based on how much (if any) contemporary currency the war itself still might have. Commemoration continues to have resonance precisely because the divisions in play can (as has already been seen) be easily mapped on to current political battles.

The radical political potential of Welsh memorials of the Spanish Civil War is not lost either on those who were involved in the periodical attempts to vandalise the Cardiff memorial which has been “regularly daubed in Swastikas” (Cope, 2007, 125) and, particularly in October 1994, when “a concerted effort had been made...to split open the six-foot Welsh granite stone” using acid and fire. The incident is described in *Memorials of the Spanish Civil War* by Colin Williams, Bill Alexander and John Gorman as an attempt by “Fascist cowards under the anonymity of darkness...to wipe out the history of the struggle for democracy and liberty” (Williams et al., 1996, 58). The physical site of the struggle might have been the blue pennant stone, but what the struggle was clearly about was the collective memory of the War and the various authorised and unauthorised ways in which this memory can be articulated. It is surely noteworthy that the memorial to the Second World War, ostensibly another memorial to a war against a similar enemy, was left untouched. The oppositional space of the Welsh memorial to the Spanish Civil War clearly aroused the anger of the vandals in a way that the authorised, legitimate expression of a unified memory of a patriotic British nation fighting a foreign enemy just as clearly did not.

It is not surprising then, that throughout the discourse surrounding these commemorations, reference is made to current political issues from wars in Nicaragua to Vietnam to Iraq. The Heritage Lottery Funding application form for the *Wise and Foolish Dreamers* project mentions explicitly that the stories of the Spanish Civil War would have particular relevance to young people today who were “uncertain about the significance, or otherwise, of wars fought today and throughout history in foreign lands in their name.” The almost subconscious reference to the famous “Not in my Name” slogan of the Anti-Iraq war movement shows how politicised this process of commemoration inevitably becomes. Perhaps the political battle that affected Wales the most in the last half of the twentieth century, though, is the Miners’ Strikes of the 1980s and it is again not surprising to see links being made between “the blood sacrifice of the International Brigaders” and “the desperate and often violent struggle of the NUM” (Stradling, 2004, 172). It was understandably useful to have the Spanish Civil War as an event that marked the zenith of Welsh radical politics, especially as what characterised the Miner’s Strike was that it was a movement “which mobilized the regions against the central [British/English] government” (Humphreys, 1985, 53). In the context of systematic pit closures and Welsh mining communities facing social and economic ruin, the use of material like Welsh stone, slate and steel assumes a political significance beyond that of Welsh nationalism. Even individual acts of commemoration were laden with political implications. In May 2005, the last surviving Welsh brigader

Alun Menai Williams returned to Spain to visit the grave of his comrade, brigadier Harry Dobson who was buried in a communal grave in Catalonia and left some Welsh coal from the Tower colliery as a tribute to Harry Dobson and all the other Welsh brigadiers who lost their lives. In 2005, the Tower colliery was the only remaining working colliery in South Wales, having been bought out by the miners themselves exactly ten years previously. Even in such intensely private, personal acts of commemoration then, political symbolism is never far away.

The protagonists of the Spanish Civil War and even the Miners' Strike have already passed from history into legend, a process that historians often find problematic. It has been the object of this paper, however, to demonstrate that the process of transforming history into legend is the process of commemoration – it constitutes reading the past and finding ways in which it can be applied to today's political concerns and, as such, is perhaps the most important role that memorialisation has to play. Indeed, one could go so far as to say that it is only when the past is memorialised, when history becomes legend that it finds a role to play in the present.

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## Războiul civil în Spania și reprezentările sale postbelice galeze: memorialul ca act politic

### Rezumat

Articolul examinează discursul memorialelor galeze ale războiului civil din Spania, așa cum s-a impus și cum a fost receptat acesta în Țara Galilor și arată modul în care asemenea memoriale nu numai că recuperează memoria războiului, dar și constituie intervenții în politică, atât în Spania anilor '30, cât și în Țara Galilor de la sfârșitul secolului al XX-lea. Examinând *mitologia* construită de aceste memoriale, articolul pune în discuție opoziția binară dintre *istorie* și *mitologie*, punctând faptul că este o greșeală să atacăm *mitologia* pentru că falsifică *istoria*. În loc să pornim de la astfel de premise, este mai degrabă necesar să analizăm contextul social-politic în interiorul căruia s-a construit această *mitologie*. Astfel, indiferent de adevărurile istorice sau de rolul pe care galezii l-au jucat în războiul civil din Spania, narațiunea, construită pe influența galezilor în Spania, joacă un rol politic definitiv în crearea unei națiuni distincte, națiunea galeză. Recurgând la teoriile lui Marianne Hirsch, Pierre Nora, Kristin Ross și James E. Young, articolul examinează rolul particular jucat de istorie și mitologie în felul în care națiunile își spun poveștile proprii.