

Archival Review: The Welsh Political Archive at the National Library of Wales

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Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru or The National Library of Wales (NLW) in Aberystwyth was established in 1909, to collect and provide access to the documentary history of the nation. It is a legal deposit library and is therefore entitled to receive a copy of all books, magazines, newspapers etc. as well as copies of e-publications published in the United Kingdom and Ireland. Published material is however only part of the NLW's remit, as holdings also include archives, manuscripts, maps, visual images and audio and audio-visual material.

The Welsh Political Archive (WPA) is a dedicated programme within the NLW, established in 1983, to collect, catalogue and promote archival material which reflects the political life of Wales. Organising and cataloguing archives is undertaken by staff in the NLW's Archives and Manuscripts Section. But as the political collections include tapes of radio and television programmes, photographs, works of art, electronic files and websites, the WPA works across departments within the NLW.

Collections

Many of the political archives the NLW holds are personal collections of well-known political figures (Members of Parliament, Lords, Members of the European Parliament and Members of the Senedd); the formal



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records of a large number of political organisations – including the main political parties, campaign groups, referendum campaigns – and business and labour groups constitute another important part. The WPA has also created certain thematic collections such as collections of ephemera related to elections, specific campaigns, and referenda.

The NLW concentrates on nationally significant figures and organisations. Although the NLW does hold some legacy material of a local nature, since the establishment of a network of local record offices across Wales, such material can often be found in these offices.¹



**LLYFRGELL GENEDLAETHOL CYMRU
THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF WALES**

**Archif Wleidyddol Gymraeg
Welsh Political Archive**

Public Records, created by government departments, agencies and the judiciary including those of the Welsh Government are kept at the National Archives in Kew. The

records of the Senedd (Welsh Parliament, formerly known as the National Assembly for Wales/*Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru*) are Parliamentary Records and are deposited at the NLW along with the archive of legislation passed by the Senedd.

The language of the NLW's catalogue is English, though in some cases collections are catalogued in Welsh or bi-lingually. The name of the organisation is usually given in its original language but in this article, I have provided an English version alongside the first instance of any organisation where the original title is not in English. In some cases, where there is no recognised English name, I have provided a close translation.

The Welsh national movement

The NLW is home to the archives of the Welsh Conservatives, Welsh Liberal Democrats, Welsh Labour and Plaid Cymru as well as the archives of a number of constituencies and branches. These all contain valuable material on the development of Wales as a political nation, debates around political devolution to Wales, national institutions and the political dimension and official attitudes to the Welsh language and wider Welsh culture.

The Plaid Cymru Archive is amongst the largest political archives held in the NLW. Plaid Cymru was established in 1925 and was initially known as *Plaid Genedlaethol Cymru* (Welsh National Party), but later changed its name to Plaid Cymru (Party of Wales). Three of its leading figures were jailed for arson after burning the Royal Air Force (RAF) Bombing School at Penyberth in 1936 in protest at the location of the facility in a Welsh-speaking community. The party won a historic by-election in Carmarthen in 1966 and had elected representatives at all levels since then.

The Plaid Cymru Archive includes the papers of the National Executive Committee, conferences, the National Council, various party sections, papers relating to referenda, elections, research and summer schools, as well as the archives of regional committees and local branches. It also contains a large amount of correspondence and campaign material. The NLW also hold the archives of the Hydro Group, which was established to oppose the socialist stance adopted by the party in the 1970s and those of *Chwith Genedlaethol* (National Left) which campaigned for socialism within the party.

In addition, the NLW also holds the papers of many prominent Plaid Cymru politicians including those of party leaders and presidents such as Saunders Lewis, Gwynfor Evans, Dafydd Elis-Thomas, Dafydd Wigley

and Ieuan Wyn Jones as well as a number of its Members of Parliament (MPs), Members of the Senedd (MS – formerly Assembly Members (AMs)), and leading thinkers. These include the papers of Lewis Valentine, Cynog Dafis, Elfyn Llwyd, Simon Thomas, and Phil Williams.

The NLW's holdings also include papers from a number of prominent figures from other parties including Secretaries of State for Wales, MPs, AMs/MSs and Lords. In some cases, these are people who have campaigned for devolution to Wales or, campaigned vociferously against devolution to Wales and were fiercely opposed to the national movement.

Outside of the parliamentary parties, the NLW holds records of the 1979, 1997 and 2011 Welsh devolution referenda as well as the archives of the Parliament for Wales Campaign, the Council for Wales and Monmouthshire, *Undeb Cymru Fydd* (Young Wales Movement) and *Cymru Yfory* (Tomorrow Wales).

The Welsh language has long been a political issue. The campaigns for the Welsh language, including calls for a Welsh language television service, are well represented in the NLW with collections including the archives of *Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg*, *Urdd Gobaith Cymru Mudiad Ysgol Meithrin* (a voluntary group providing Welsh medium nursery schools), *Fforwm Iaith Genedlaethol* (National Language Forum), *Adfer* (a movement which worked to strengthen Welsh-speaking areas) and *Cefn* (a civil rights groups for Welsh speakers), as well as those of prominent individuals such as Saunders Lewis and Kate Roberts. The archive of *Ymddiriedolaeth Nant Gwrtheyrn*, an organisation established to transform an abandoned quarry village in north west Wales into a residential language centre is also held at the NLW.

The control of water resources has long been at the heart of Welsh politics, no more so than following the announcement of plans to flood

the village of Capel Celyn to supply water to the city of Liverpool. Several archives, including those of Plaid Cymru, Cymru Fydd, Ednyfed Hudson Davies and Dr Noelle Davies contain material on this topic.

There have been several instances where elements of the national movement in Wales have used violence in order to further their aims. Understandably there is very little in the way of official records of these organisations, but their activities feature in correspondence and other papers of politicians and political movements, as well as being recorded in the press and television programmes and in the Papurau Ty Cenedl Papers. Other organisations were involved in non-violent direct action coupled with electoral activity; an example is *Cymru Goch* and the NLW holds a small archive which gives a fascinating insight into the aims and operations of this organisation.



One of the most important collections in the NLW is the collection of electoral and other political ephemera comprising election addresses, flyers, letters etc. from 1837 to the present. Although older holdings are patchy the collection since 1983 is extensive and covers European elections, general elections and by-elections to the UK Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales/Senedd Cymru.

As part of the work of collecting campaign ephemera, the NLW makes archival copies of the websites of the main parties, MPs, AMs/MSs, pressure groups and candidates several times a year, and more frequently at election time including internal party elections

Many archives relating to the primary Welsh language cultural festival, *Eisteddfod Genedlaethol Cymru* (National Eisteddfod of Wales) are also held in the NLW.

In addition to the archival collections, the development of the national movement in Wales is captured in paintings, photographs, and film. The Geoff Charles photograph collection contains coverage of elections, the flooding of Capel Celyn, protests by *Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg* and the activities of the Parliament for Wales Campaign from the 1930s to the 1970s. Much of this collection has been digitised and can be searched and viewed freely on the NLW's website. The NLW's Framed Works of Art collection also contains portraits of leading figures in the national movement such as Gwynfor Evans and Dafydd Wigley and the NLW holds a substantial collection of cartoons by the Welsh artist Mal Humphreys (Mumph) focussing on Welsh politics dating from the mid-1990s through the early years of devolution. Work is underway to digitise this collection.

There is a broad variety of material in the audio-visual and music collections. This ranges from folk songs with overtly nationalist messages by artists such as Dafydd Iwan, movies such as the 1992 anti-

war biopic *Hedd Wyn*, news, current affairs, and history programmes in both Welsh and English. The NLW holds the ITV Wales and the BBC Cymru Wales archives and is running a multi-million pound project to create a National Broadcast Archive for Wales² which will give access to a selection of programmes over the world wide web, with full access in Clip centres located in the NLW and at other locations across Wales. The NLW's off-air recordings of BBC Wales, ITV Wales and S4C's output are available to consult.

Other national movements

The national movement in Wales developed many connections with similar political, cultural and language movements in the other Celtic nations including Ireland, Brittany, Scotland, and Cornwall. Much of this material held at the NLW stems from correspondence between leading figures in the national movement in Wales and the other Celtic nations, co-operation between nationalist organisations and the establishment of pan-Celtic organisations.

The NLW holds the papers of the Breton nationalist Louis Feutren together with two fellow nationalists' papers he accumulated, Neven Henaff (Célestin Lainé) and Alan Heusaff. All three were prominent members of the Breton collaborationist force *Bezen Perrot* (Perrot Militia) formed in December 1943. The birth of the Irish Free State is chronicled in the Thomas Jones CH Papers amongst others.

The Plaid Cymru Archive contains material on Breton, Scottish and Cornish nationalism, arranged into various subject files and the NLW holds the archives related to the Celtic League and the European Bureau of Lesser Used Languages.

Public services

Anyone is welcome to use the material in the NLW. The original material can be consulted in the reading rooms, open from Monday to Saturday, while much of the digitised material is available freely on the NLW's website. Visitors can register as a reader in advance or on the day of their visit.³ Information on most of the archives is available by searching the collections at the online catalogue, but the staff is happy to offer help or answer search queries.

Guides to the major archives by theme and party can be found at www.library.wales/welshpoliticalarchive



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Endnotes

¹ Contact details for Local Record Offices in Wales can be found at <https://archives.wales>

² <https://www.library.wales/collections/learn-more/screen-sound-archive/audio-visual-collections/national-broadcast-archive-project>

³ Services at the NLW have been seriously affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and anyone planning to use the collections should check the NLW website at <https://www.library.wales/>