

Institution: University of Oxford
Unit of Assessment: 30
Title of case study: Wales, Scotland, Ireland and the 'first English Empire'
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>Rees Davies (1938-2005) was one of the most significant British medieval historians of the post-war period, the most distinguished historian of medieval Wales, and a leading figure in the movement for British (as opposed to English) history as a staple of undergraduate teaching. While his vision of medieval Wales and Britain evolved over a forty-year career in universities and public service, it entered a distinctive phase in its final decade, when Davies wrote the definitive study of the revolt of Owain Glyn Dŵr and coined the notion of 'the first English Empire'. The research of these years, when Davies was Chichele Professor of Medieval History at the University of Oxford, has had a lasting impact on the public understanding of history in Wales, on the management and presentation of Welsh heritage, and on the teaching of undergraduate history across the British Isles.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>Davies's research in this period focused on three main areas, but a fourth strand running through all his work was a concern with its implications for modern society, particularly in Wales.</p> <p>In the last ten years of his career, when he was Chichele Professor of Medieval History at Oxford, Davies produced a number of overview works dealing with themes in the history of the British Isles: in particular, the routes through which the assertion of English power was conceived, partly accomplished and ultimately thwarted. Davies wrote compellingly about the material and social means that underpinned the English imperial project, but a consistently important feature of his work was his emphasis on ideas and sentiments and their role in forming both identities and solidarities [3.1, 3.2, 3.3]. What Davies called the 'ebb-tide of English lordship' in the fourteenth-century British Isles was as much the result of an ideological and cultural failure as of resource constraints, and growing consciousness of collective identity, culture and history was essential to Welsh, Irish, and Scottish resistance to English assertions of power [3.3].</p> <p>In this same period, Davies returned to a long-standing interest in the revolt of Owain Glyn Dŵr against English authority in Wales (c.1400-9) [3.3, 3.4]. The problem he wished to address was how a wealthy and well-established gentleman, with many English connections, was able to create and lead a mass nationalist revolt in a Wales which had been subjugated more than a century earlier and was, in many ways, accustomed to domination. The answers are subtle – a mixture of economic dislocation, fortuitous disruption of the landed order, the formation of coalitions of interest among different kinds and classes of people, and the salience of narratives of independence. The book which emerged in 1995 (and then in 2002 in a specially-written version for a Welsh readership [3.4]) is thus an unusually textured and sophisticated account of a pre-modern mass political movement [3.3].</p> <p>From around 2000, Davies turned his attention to the study of lordship as a form of political authority which was still vigorous in the later middle ages (and, he would have said, in today's world of press barons, captains of industry and privatised public services). This led to a posthumous book and a highly influential essay challenging the unreflective use of the word 'state' by medieval historians [3.6].</p> <p>Throughout this period, Davies showed a consistent interest in the implications of history for modern society. Partly on the basis of his research into medieval culture, he argued that popular knowledge of, and reflection upon, history were extremely important to the social fabric and the shaping of democratic policy [3.5].</p>

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Rees Davies was the Chichele Professor of Medieval History at the University of Oxford during the period in which the research was undertaken.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

- 3.1 Davies, R. R., 'The Peoples of Britain and Ireland, 1100-1400', presidential lectures, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th series, 4-7 (1994-7) (prestigious journal of the major national organisation of historians), [DOI: 10.1017/S0080440100019691]
- 3.2 Davies, R. R., *The Revolt of Owain Glyn Dŵr* (Oxford: OUP, 1995) (major university press), [Available upon request]
- 3.3 Davies, R. R., *The First English Empire: Power and Identities in the British Isles, 1093-1343*, the Ford Lectures delivered at Oxford University, Hilary Term, 1998 (Oxford: OUP, 2001) (major university press), [Available upon request]
- 3.4 Davies, R. R., *Owain Glyn Dŵr, trwy Ras Duw, Tywysog Cymru* (Talybont: Y Lloffa, 2002) (OGD, by the grace of God, prince of Wales) (Welsh translation of biography of Glyn Dŵr), [Available upon request]
- 3.5 Davies, R. R., 'On Being Welsh: a Historian's Viewpoint', *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion*, (2003 for 2002), 29-40 (learned journal), [<http://welshjournals.llgc.org.uk/browse/viewpage/llgc-id:1386666/llgc-id:1426329/llgc-id:1426358/get650>]
- 3.6 Davies, R. R., 'The Medieval State: the Tyranny of a Concept?', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 16 (2003), 280-300 (peer-reviewed journal). [DOI: 10.1111/1467-6443.00206]

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The contribution of Davies's work outside academia is most obvious in three areas: in improving the public understanding of Welsh history, enhancing the presentation of Welsh heritage, and the revision of undergraduate education in history.

The public understanding of Welsh history

Davies's concern to interest a wide public in history, particularly in Wales, is a theme of several of the obituaries: he was 'unquestionably the finest and most influential historian of medieval Britain of his generation [...] he put the history of the Welsh nation into a wider British and Irish context in books that were both scholarly and inspiringly thought-provoking. One of the most significant developments in recent decades in the writing and teaching of history in British universities has been the move away from an Anglocentric version of "our island story" - in effect, the discovery that the Irish, Welsh and Scots had cultures and histories of their own which interlocked with, but were also far more than simply responses to, English influence and invasion.' (Daily Telegraph, 25 May 2005) [i-iii]; Brynley Roberts remarks on his ability to connect with 'y darlennydd cyffredin' (the common reader) and notes the immense success of the Glyn Dŵr books in reaching that audience [iii]. In Huw Edwards' recent BBC TV series on *The Story of Wales* (2011), Davies's research underpinned the second episode, 'Power Struggles', and especially the segment on Glyn Dŵr [iv]. At lectures across Wales in the year after the publication of the Glyn Dŵr book, at eisteddfodau, and at sessions of the Hon. Soc. of Cymmrodorion, a club for Welsh speakers in London, Davies drew on his research to explain to public audiences how it had been possible for a Welsh identity to survive the Edwardian conquest, and what that might imply for the re-creation of Welshness in a new era of multiculturalism and Assembly government. The impact of Davies's ideas is recorded in Roberts's obituary [iii] and also in the work of leading analysts of modern Welsh politics. Richard Wyn Jones's concept of a 'colonial legacy' shaping today's Wales, for instance, rests on Davies's 'definitive account' of Glyn Dŵr's revolt, and on the 'brilliant short study of political power in the medieval British Isles' in Davies's *The First English Empire* more generally [v]. Some senior civil servants in Wales, including the leading constitutional adviser to the First Minister, are familiar with

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Davies's notions of the 'English Empire' and his work on Glyn Dŵr and Welsh History more generally: 'R. R. Davies's books, *The Age of Conquest: Wales, 1063-1415* and *The Revolt of Owain Glyn Dŵr*, are now standard works on the period and have been widely read in Wales, shaping the way in which popular contemporary Welsh senses of history post devolution are constructed [...]. Davies has in addition an influence among senior political circles in Wales by informing contemporary analysis of devolution from the Welsh perspective' [1].

The presentation of Welsh heritage

As chairman of the now-defunct Ancient Monuments Board for Wales (1995-2005) and an adviser to Cadw, its successor, Davies 'was instrumental in establishing annual themes [...] drawing on the unrivalled knowledge of the historic environment which underpinned his scholarly writings' [2]. Since his death, Davies's work has led Cadw to seek advice on presenting eight of its north- and mid-Wales sites as locations associated with the revolt of Owain Glyn Dŵr. A 2010 report from Siân Shakespear Associates, which quotes Davies in ten places, recommends this policy as a way to 'maximise the economic value of heritage' and improve public understanding of Glyn Dŵr and Welsh history [vi]. The report has been adopted as one of Cadw's 'interpretation plans'.

Undergraduate education

Noting the near-universal replacement of 'English history' with 'British History' and the new readiness of historians of Wales, Ireland, and Scotland to locate their analyses in an British/archipelagic context, the author of the *Daily Telegraph's* obituary remarks that 'This breaking down of barriers owes more to Rees Davies than to anyone else' [i]. A high proportion of UK and Irish university history departments offer one or more courses on British history in the Davies period of c.1050-1400, and some make their debt to his ideas very clear – for example by citing the concept of an 'English Empire', as at Bristol or St Andrews [vii-viii]. Dr Steve Boardman at Edinburgh University remarks of Davies's course on 'Kings and Kindreds: Scotland, Wales and Ireland in the Later Middle Ages': 'large parts of the Kings and Kindreds course engage with Rees's work, particularly the First English Empire volume, even if occasionally to disagree with some of the ideas!' [3].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

Testimonials

[1] Correspondence with Director of Culture and Sport, Welsh Government.

[2] Correspondence with Emeritus Professor, University of Swansea.

[3] Correspondence with Reader in History, University of Edinburgh.

Other evidence sources

[i] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1490662/Professor-Sir-Rees-Davies.html>

[ii] Ralph Griffiths, 'Sir Rees Davies', *History Today*, 55:9 (2005), pp. 4-6.

[iii] Obituaries: <http://welshjournals.llgc.org.uk/browse/viewpage/llgc-id:1386666/llgc-id:1426735/llgc-id:1426968/get650> (English and Welsh obituaries in Transactions of the Hon Society of Cymmrodorion, the latter by Brynley F. Roberts);

Daily Telegraph, 25 May 2005: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1490662/Professor-Sir-Rees-Davies.html>

[iv] J. Gower, *The Story of Wales* (London: BBC Books, 2012) (book to accompany Huw Edwards series)

[v] R. Wyn Jones, 'The Colonial Legacy in Welsh Politics', in *Post-Colonial Wales*, ed. J. Aaron and C. Williams (Cardiff, 2005), 23-38, pp. 26-7

[vi] http://cadw.wales.gov.uk/docs/cadw/publications/InterpplanOwainGlyndwr_EN.pdf

[vii] <http://www.bris.ac.uk/esu/unitprogcats/UnitDetails.jsa?ayrCode=12%2F13&unitCode=HIST20029>

[viii] <http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/history/undergrad/modules/med/ME1006.html>