

WOMEN IN SEARCH OF A WELSH IDENTITY

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In 1986, the historian Deirdre Beddoe announced that 'Welsh women are culturally invisible' (Beddoe 1986, p.227). In an introduction to a recent collection of historical essays on Welsh woman, Angela John also argues that images of Wales and the Welsh have always been largely representative of male views of a masculine Wales; women's perspectives have traditionally had little place in orthodox accounts of Welsh life (John 1991, p.1). Yet, because of a combination of cultural and economic factors, the situation in Wales is changing extremely rapidly at present. In this paper I explore some of the reasons for the absence of positive female images in pre-twentieth century Welsh culture, and then proceed, in the second half of the essay, to investigate in greater detail aspects of the shifts and changes in contemporary Welsh women's sense of identity and its cultural representation.

TAMING THE WILDNESS

In 1847, after centuries of inconspicuousness, women suddenly came under the spotlights in Wales. The English government of the day called for 'an Inquiry to be made into the state of Education in the Principality of Wales, especially into the means afforded to the labouring classes of acquiring a

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knowledge of the English language'. Monoglot English-speaking commissioners were duly sent into Wales to inquire into the levels of education attained by a population still in many parts monoglot Welsh. Not surprisingly, their report, when it appeared in December 1847, found that standards of education in Wales were in general deplorably low. The report connected this lack of educational access to English civilization with what it claimed to be the barbarity and primitive backwardness of the population, and the 'prevailing feeling of disaffection towards the state'. According to the 1847 Commissioners, the education of girls, in particular, was much neglected in the principality, and this was seen as connected with what was claimed to be a shocking degree of sexual promiscuity. One of the Commissioners' witnesses, the Reverend William Jones, rector of Nevin, maintained, for example, that in Wales

Want of chastity is flagrant. This vice is not confined to the poor. In England farmers' daughters are respectable; in Wales they are in the constant habit of being courted in bed.
(Reports 1847, pp.iii,67-8)

Courting in bed, or 'bundling' as the practice was termed, had been acceptable enough behaviour in other parts of rural Europe too, but the Victorian morality of middle-class England, with its stress upon the sanctity of the marriage bed, was by now demanding a change in sexual mores.

Like the Reverend Jones, many of the witnesses who bore testimony to the Commissioners were Anglican clergymen, much concerned about the growth of Welsh Nonconformity; accordingly, they took the opportunity to tar Nonconformist sects with the accusation of complicity in this sexual laxity. An anonymous witness claimed, for example, that:

The great number of nightly [Nonconformist] prayer-meetings ... lead to bad results; they are place at which lovers agree to meet, and from which they return together at late hours.
(Reports 1847, p.i,21)

In order to defend against gross defilement, the honour not only of the Welsh as a race but also of their religion, it became of primary concern to the leaders of Welsh Nonconformity to establish beyond all possibility of doubt the purity of their womenfolk. Women's sexual behaviour was to be very heavily policed by Welsh Nonconformity for the rest of the century, and well into the

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twentieth: any fall from grace resulted in public excommunication from chapel membership.

The need to confound the 'lying tales' of the Report continued to function as a moral imperative throughout the century: much of the material contributed by women to the periodical, **Y Frythones (The Female Briton)**, edited by Cranogwen (Sarah Jane Rees) from 1879 to 1889, demonstrates the writers' burdened sense of their personal responsibility for their nation's good name. In one of **Y Frythones**'s serialized stories, for example, Eveleen, a maid servant in an English household, is surprised one day to discover that a fellow domestic is as Welsh as herself. Lydia explains that she has concealed this fact in order to appear more 'respectable', for 'according to English reckoning' the Welsh are 'low in morals', and she has no desire to share in their shame. Eveleen admonishes her that she should rather have not only acknowledged her race but done all in her power to redeem its reputation: 'is it not our duty,' she says, 'to bear with our own nation, along with doing our best through word and deed, to raise our national character above all insult?' ['onid ein dyledswydd ydyw cyd-ddwyn â'n cenedl ein hunain, yn nghyd a gwneuthur ein goreu drwy air a gweithred, i ddyrchafu ein cymeriad cenedlaethol uwchlaw pob sarhad?'] (Rees 1880, p.362: my translation).

The late nineteenth-century Welsh woman seems to have been presented with three possibilities in terms of choosing an identity. Either she abandoned her Welsh allegiances, like Lydia, and adopted the English middle class model of refined femininity, however inappropriate it may have been to her cultural roots and her social position. Or, like Eveleen, she defensively asserted her Welshness in the face of insult, and, to prove its virtues, clad herself in an armour of strict propriety which would inevitably have entailed self-suppression on a larger scale than mere sexual self-control. Or she accepted the English definition of herself as the libidinous hoyden of primitive Wild Wales, thus isolating herself from a contemporary culture bent on demonstrating its respectability. None of these possible identities afforded her a voice of her own: the English model was unauthentic and mismatched in terms of class identity, the Welsh 'respectable' model entailed severe curbs on her freedom and self-assertive capacities, and the 'wild' model had no place in civilized society.

In many of the English-language romantic novels of the period which deal with Wales, potentially wild Welsh women gain status and respectability by marrying Englishmen. Anne Beale, an English woman who settled in Carmarthenshire, presents a characteristic scenario in her novel **Rose Mervyn:**

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A Tale of the Rebecca Riots (1879). Beale came to Wales in the early 1840s, at a time when 'Rebecca' disturbances were widespread throughout the south-west. Rural poverty, and the proliferation of tollgates along country roads, led to rioting in which gangs of men disguised in women's clothes attacked and pulled down the gates; a gang's leader was addressed by his followers as 'Rebecca'. In Beale's novel, Rose Mervyn, who is initially presented to the reader as being 'as wild and romantic as the country in which she was born' (Beale 1879, p.10), has two suitors: a farmer, Alfred Johnnes, who turns out to be the local Rebecca, and an English officer, Major Faithfull, sent into the area to quell the rioters. The English troops succeed in their mission; Johnnes flees, and Rose and the English officer, whom she has always preferred, plight their troth. Yet Beale's heroine does retain some residual local loyalties; Rose aids Johnnes in his escape, and never reveals his identity to the Major.

One of the final scenes of the book tellingly places Rose's romance and her coming marriage in the general context of English/Welsh relations. Major Faithfull is regaling his betrothed and his prospective father-in-law with tales of the English army's exploits in India, but his audience proves less sympathetic to the aims of the imperialists than he expects. Describing a recent encounter with the enemy, he boasts,

'With our 25,000 men we routed the Sikh army of 60,000, and Shere Singh had only 8000 left when he escaped. ... He has been obliged to surrender unconditionally at last.'

'I cannot help feeling sorry for him,' said Rose. 'We call them rebels, but it is their own country after all.'

'Was you mean Rose! Possession is nine points of the law,' said Mervyn. 'We had a king and a country once, but the Saxon got the better of us. Look at old Penllyn with its many ancient memories.'

'And its modern ones of Rebecca, father,' she responded; and both thought of Alfred Johnnes, still a wanderer.

'But the Welsh and English are united now, and live in happy confidence,' said Major Faithfull, looking at Rose. ... 'We will hope that the Punjaub, also, will gradually find peace and contentment under British rule.'
(Beale 1879, p.374)

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Here the message of this text, and that of others like it, becomes unequivocal. Rose has chosen the English officer rather than the Welsh rebel, and her marriage serves as a symbol not only of the happy future relation between Wales and England, but of the contentment which will come to all English colonies once they have peacefully acquiesced to British rule. A potentially wild Welsh woman has chosen anglicization and middle-class respectability, but not without some pain and ambivalence.

CHANGING IDENTITY

Welsh women who - unlike Rose - chose to be loyal to their roots seem, for the most part, to have retained the notion that it was their ethnic duty to be strictly 'respectable' long after behaviour patterns had changed in England. The 'New Woman' of the fin de siècle period, the 'flapper' of the 1920s, might come - and go - in Anglo-American culture, but as late as 1966 a woman could still die of shame in a Welsh novel because she had all unwittingly had an affair with a married man (Rowlands 1966). In colonized and post-colonized societies this type of conservative retention of repressive behaviour patterns inculcated by the colonising culture, after that culture has itself abandoned them, is, apparently, a common trait (see Patton 1992, p.226). It is as if the wounds inflicted on racial self-esteem during the colonizing process can only be healed by a continuing repression and denial of behaviour which the imperial culture once castigated as 'barbaric'.

In order to break with this pattern, and shed colonially imposed values, a culture needs a resurgence of confidence in its capacity to define itself. When it is also a matter of women's lives being shaped by male-imposed concepts of correct female behaviour, then, to bring about change, women need to acquire a new confidence in the female right to self-definition. During the second half of the twentieth century, a series of developments, some international and some unique to Wales, combined to bring about a situation in which these two requirements for change in Welsh women's sense of identity were, at last, met.

First, the post-69 'second wave' of the feminist movement had, and of course still continues to have, profound effects. During the 1970s, Wales had its share of the movement's characteristic consciousness-raising groups, a few of them Welsh speaking. The members of these early informal groups went on to set up the diverse range of organisations, pressure groups, companies, training societies and educational networks - some short-lived, others more enduring - which together represent the public face of feminism in contemporary Wales.

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Welsh Women's Aid has been one of the longest enduring and most effective of these; women's groups within local councils have also been important; and, in cultural spheres, Red Flannel, the South Wales women's film group, has done some influential work, as has the Welsh feminist press, Honno, which produces books in both Welsh and English.

Women writers who identify primarily as feminists have surfaced in both of the languages of Wales, particularly as poets. Some of their work, though, manifests a stronger sense than is apparent in contemporary English writing of a fear of acting a betraying part when taking on a feminist identity. Gillian Clarke, for example, in her long poem 'Letter from a far country', describes the difficulty of moving away from the traditional female image when the change appears to involve a denial of Welshness. Her Welsh landscape of homesteads and chapels is one which has traditionally imprisoned women:

Bryn Isaf

down there in the crook of the hill
under Calfaria's single eye.
My grandmother might have lived there.
Any farm. Any chapel.
Father and minister, on guard,
close the white gates to hold her.

Escape is a necessity, and yet Clarke expresses some anxiety about embarking too easily on a voyage to freedom. Once the hard, stony ballast of the old way of life is jettisoned, what will remain of a Welsh identity, with which to resist the seductions of a global consumerist culture? Is it a matter of an unappealing choice between

A lap full of pebbles and then
light as a Coca Cola can.
(Clarke 1982, p.8)

The Welsh-language poet Menna Elfyn has a more unequivocally feminist voice; as the language she uses is in itself a marker of identity, she seems freed to dismiss past roles with greater security. By means of such representative poems as the following, she became the recognised spokeswoman of Welsh-language feminist protest:

Bûm wylaidd fenywaidd	I was humbly feminine
bellach rwy'n hy,	now I am bold,

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bûm ddiasgwrn ferchetaidd	I was spinelessly girlish
bellach rwy'n gry',	now I am strong,
bûm ddirym oddefol	I was powerlessly passive
fel fy rhyw di-lais,	like my voiceless sex,
bûm fodlon anniddig	I was contentedly restless
am ganrifoedd y trais.	through the centuries of rape.
Ond,	But,
gwylia	watch
dy gam,	your step,
fy mrawd!	brother!

(Elfyn 1982, p.38; my translation)

Both Clarke and Emlyn are essentially 70s writers, that is, women who began their publishing career in the 1970s, though their work has of course evolved since then. The next generation of women poets of the 80s and 90s are more generally outspoken, particularly when it comes to describing sexual relations, in obvious defiance of the old strictures. I'm thinking here of Welsh-language poets like Elin Llwyd Morgan and Carmel Gahan and their volumes **Duwieslebog** and **Lodes Fach Neis**, both published by the radical Lolfa Press. The English-language performance poet Penny Windsor, whose two collections, **Dangerous Women** and **Like Oranges**, were both published by Honno, the feminist press, produces similarly defiant, 'in your face' material. In her poem 'Climax', for example, a masturbating woman brings herself to a 'traditional family values orgasm' as she listens to a Government Back-to-Basics radio broadcast denouncing single mothers (Windsor 1993, p.45). Windsor's resistance to the Conservative party's attempt to return to 'Victorian values' is by no means unrepresentative of contemporary attitudes in Wales. In 1993, the attacks of the then Secretary of State for Wales, John Redwood, on Welsh single mothers were generally greeted with anger. His attempts to reawaken, in the mothers themselves and in the populace at large, the old bitter idea of illegitimacy as a sign of disgrace and libidinous irresponsibility received very little support. Before launching such a campaign, Redwood must presumably have assumed that the history of the retention of the Victorian double sexual standard into mid-twentieth century life in Wales meant that his project would receive popular support: the fact that it very definitely did not, but rather increased his marked personal unpopularity, constitutes a clear indication of significant social change.

Culturally, then, the old sexual mores and restrictions do seem to have been successfully displaced. Yet, in terms of women's work and general career opportunities, it could be said that the feminist movement has as yet failed to

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have much effect in Wales. The type of employment available to the majority of Welsh women today, and the social status attached to that work, has not in itself changed radically since the 1960s, for all the efforts of pressure groups like Chwarae Teg/ Fair Play, which were established to try to amend the situation. Welsh women are still largely employed in untrained low-paid jobs, and 45% of them are still only able to find part-time employment. Yet in this sphere too there have been some dramatic changes. Firstly, women's paid work, however fragmentary, is now much more likely to be entered on employment records than it was previously, and is therefore more quantifiable and more noticeable. Secondly, not only are male employment figures relatively low (more women than men are in paid employment in south Wales today) but that icon of labour which featured so largely in Wales's representation of itself to the world - the coal miner - has virtually disappeared. With the notable exception of the worker-owned Tower Colliery at Hirwaun, the deep mines of South Wales have closed, and have left behind them a vacuum, not only in terms of employment prospects but also in the way in which the Welsh see themselves.

Commenting on the changes in male employment in a recent essay, the historian Mervyn Jones emphasises their traumatic suddenness. In Wales during the 1980s 'a whole economic and industrial trajectory, established during the industrial revolution, was dissolved in one decade'. This dissolution, he argues, had far-reaching consequences for the Welsh sense of identity:

The abrupt creation of a Wales without miners devastated far more than the mining communities themselves. It also punctured a whole nexus of images and self-images of the Welsh. ... Paid work in industrial Wales had been men's work, and the Welsh identity ... resonated with masculinity. ... The considerable alteration in employment patterns discernible in Wales meant that ... a Welsh women's identity had now to be allowed for, an identity deeply disruptive of traditional male assumptions.

(Jones 1992, p.349)

The advent of the new era is envisaged with some anxiety in this passage. Aspects of its phraseology - 'a Welsh women's identity had now to be allowed for', for example - sound somewhat begrudging, and some fear is suggested by the notion that when this identity emerges it will necessarily be 'deeply disruptive'. The Welsh woman is apparently about to arise like some traumatic

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return of the repressed, and take vengeance upon the males who have rendered her invisible for so long.

But in fact recent historical events, which probably did more to politicize a greater number of Welsh women than the feminist movement per se, saw them coming out strongly in defence of their menfolk, rather than in opposition to them. During the 1984-5 Miners' Strike and the 1985-6 North Wales slate quarrier's strike, women's participation in the Support Groups which rallied to the strikers' aid constituted for many their first awakening to the possibilities of public political protest. In 1986 the Women's Press published a volume which effectively records the feelings and experiences of the many Welsh women who were mobilised during the strike years. Jill Miller's **You can't kill the spirit: Women in a Welsh mining valley** is a collection of oral records of the strike and its consequences. Its all-female contributors are univocal on the benefits which, paradoxically enough, the strike brought with it. Their strengthened sense of personal identity went hand in hand with a newfound pride in their community's identity, a pride which, for some of the women, was connected with a sharpened sense of Welshness. As Gwyneth expresses it:

The [women's] group gave me a lot more confidence to express my feelings, thoughts and ideals. My ideas became much clearer, and as a result I was more determined than ever that we shouldn't and wouldn't give in to this government which was trying to destroy a community that took generations to build. ... I'm proud to be a miner's wife, I'm proud to be part of that community. I'm proud to be Welsh too.
(Miller 1986, pp.106 and 110)

A bilingual volume put together by the North Wales Quarry Workers' Women's Support Group, **Safwn gyda'n Gilydd/We Stand Together**, expresses a similar sense of identity developing under stress.

The mid-80s strikes have not, however, constituted the only catalysts of attitudinal change, in terms of a specifically Welsh identity, during the second half of this century. For many Welsh-speaking women, and for some of their sympathizers amongst the English-speaking majority too, another political struggle also had profound identity-building consequences. In 1963, spurred into existence by the recognition that, unless it was fought for, the Welsh language would soon be extinct, Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg, the Welsh Language Society, commenced its programme of non-violent direct action, to raise the status and promote the use of Welsh in Wales. Involvement in the movement inevitably has cultural consciousness-raising effects for the

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numerous women who take part in and, in recent years, frequently lead its activities. It can have feminist consciousness-raising consequences too: in her chapter in a recent collection of essays on contemporary Welsh women's lives, Menna Elfyn writes of how she went to prison as a Welsh language activist, and came out, no less of a language campaigner, but now a feminist as well (Elfyn 1994).

A few women also discovered their literary voices in the urge to proselytize the language movement's cause. Meg Elis's first two novels, **I'r Gad (To Battle)** (1975) and **Carchar (Prison)** (1978), constitute fictional accounts of Cymdeithas activities, based on autobiographical experience. Similarly, Angharad Tomos's first novel **Hen Fyd Hurt (Stupid Old World)** (1982) concerns a young woman's awakening to the need for direct action in the Welsh cause, and her second novel **Yma o Hyd (Here Still)** (1985) is a thinly veiled account of her own prison experiences. Galvanized by the pressing need to prick - or rather put the boot into - the Welsh conscience, these political novels eschew any pretences to either literary or feminine decorum. None of them have been translated, but in order to convey some impression of their style, I translate below a passage from **Yma o Hyd**. The passage describes the first-person narrator's response to hearing, while in prison, of the arrival of the nuclear warheads at Greenham Common:

I was sent to the Governor. She couldn't see me for ages, and I had to hang about in the corridor. It was at that moment that I heard the news on the radio - that the missiles had reached Greenham. [...] A most appalling feeling of defeat came over me. [...] A free country? God, so it is, you can say what you like. Devil a one listening, but you say what you like. Christ, it's we who are tame. Me - I'm tame. What on earth am I doing in an Englishman's prison waiting patiently for a punishment? [...] I've turned into a zombie. I'm like a little lamb waiting outside a slaughter house. [...] That's what we Welsh are like by now. [...] Do anything to me so long as I don't have to stand on my own two feet and fight. We've become a nation of masochists. Completely swallowed up. For heaven's sakes, I'm off!

And off I went - full speed down the corridor. [...] My, it was great, running - the moment I started I realized what a fantastic feeling it was. God, I hadn't run for three weeks, just stood and waited and walked and stopped short and hung about and stood in a queue and stood still. [...] I don't like it that the English should keep me in a cage so that I can't get out; I don't like Wales keeping me in a cage of a country either, till I can't

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get out ... that's why I'm running ... running ... running ... running like the wind far away ... flying like a lark because while I'm running I'm freefreefreefree.

[Mi ges i fanfon at y Governor. Doedd honno'n methu 'ngweld i am oes, a disgwyl yn y coridor fues i. 'Radeg yna ar y radio y clywais i'r newyddion - fod y taflegrau wedi cyrraedd Greenham. [...] Daeth y teimlad mwya dychrynlyd o orchfygaeth drosta i. [...] Gwlad rydd? Duwcs, ydi, gewch chi ddeud be fynnoch chi. Diawl o neb yn gwrando, ond deudwch be fynnwch chi. Iechyd, ni sy'n llywaeth. Fi - dwi'n llywaeth. Be gebyst dwi'n 'i wneud mewn carchar Sais yn aros yn amyneddgar am gerydd? [...] Dwi 'di troi yn sombi. Dwi run fath ag oen bach yn disgwyl tu allan i'r lladd-dy. Dyna sut betha ydan ni'r Cymry bellach. [...] Gwnewch rywbeth i mi cyn bellad â bod ddim rhaid i mi sefyll ar fy nhraed fy hun ac ymladd. Hen genedl fasocistaidd ydan ni bellach. Wedi cael ein llyncu'n llwyr. Mam bach, dwi'n rhedag!

A rhedeg i ffwrdd wnes i - ffwl sbîd i lawr y coridor. [...] Ew, roedd hi'n grêt cael rhedag achos y funud gychwynes i mi sylweddolais teimlad mor ffantastig oedd o. Mam bach, don i ddim wedi rhedag ers tair wythnos, 'mond 'di sefyll ac aros a cherdded a sefyll yn stond a gogordroi a sefyll mewn ciw a sefyll yn llonydd. [...] Dwi'm yn licio i Saeson fy nghadw i mewn caits a finna'n methu dod allan; dwi'm yn licio Cymru'n fy nghadw mewn caits o wlad chwaith, nes dwi'n methu dod allan...dyna pam dwi'n rhedag...rhedag ...rhedag...rhedag fel y gwynt ymhell i ffwrdd...hedfan fel ehedydd achos tra dwi'n rhedag dwi'n rhyddrhyddrhyddrhydd.]
(Tomos 1985, pp.107-8; my translation)

It is not surprising that this novel, essentially a protest novel about the language movement, should refer to Greenham; many of the women involved in both the language movement and the Miners' Strike were also Greenham women. And it was, of course, women from Wales who initially established the Greenham Common protest camp. In September 1981 Anne Pettit, from her smallholding in south Wales, organized the 'Women for Life on Earth' march from Penarth, just outside Cardiff, to the RAF base; when the marchers got to Newbury, they set up a permanent peace picket, to 'be there for as long as it takes' (Jones 1983, p.97). Throughout the 80s the peace camp served as a potent symbol for many Welsh women, English-and Welsh-speaking alike, and became a way of life for some. In 1989, Helen Thomas, a twenty-three year old woman from Castellnewydd Emlyn, and a dedicated proselytizer for the Welsh language cause as well as a peace activist, lost her life at Greenham,

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after being struck by a police vehicle. References to the peace movement, and to green politics generally, are rife in both Welsh-language and English-language women's poetry and prose; a Greenham novel, Meg Elis's **Cyn Daw'r Gaeaf (Before Winter Comes)** won the prose Prize at the National Eisteddfod in 1985 - the Welsh equivalent of the Booker Prize. Fear at the threat to the fragile balance of natural life is an omni-present theme in Welsh women's creative writing. An association of this concern with specifically Welsh, or Celtic, values is also current. Both Welsh and English-language women writers make characteristic use of the old Welsh myths, as inscribed in the Mabinogi cycle, and rewrite these texts to emphasize their pro-earth, Mother Goddess, aspects.

Another emergent voice comes from the long-established, but hitherto culturally under-represented, multi-ethnic communities of Cardiff's Docklands. The short story writer, Leonora Brito, in her recent collection **Dat's Love**, presents in some understated, subtle tales some of the particular pressures and tensions involved in being a Black Welsh woman (Brito 1995).

A reaction against previously imposed stereotypes, as well as previously imposed silences, characterises, then, much of the women's writing currently emerging in Wales. The new Welsh woman is different; she differs not only from Welsh men but also from her own earlier representations as provided within both Welsh and English cultures. But the new voices are also colourfully expressive of the Welsh woman's internal differences: she is green, she is red, she is white, she is black, and she speaks in two tongues. The fact that these differences are not easily assimilable into a single homogenous Welsh female identity is, of course, a positive rather than negative state of affairs; it denotes vitality and a healthy diversity.

At the same time, however, the multiplicity of possible identities seems to make it difficult for Welsh women to work together to assert their rights as a group, as Welsh women per se; they fight on so many different fronts that they tend only to pull together at crisis occasions, like the Miners' Strike or Greenham. At the time of writing, in the spring of 1996, when there is a real likelihood of Wales' at last gaining at least a measure of devolution and more democratic control over its own affairs than it has previously enjoyed, we could be said to be quickly approaching another such crisis scenario: it is currently urgently necessary for Welsh women to work together to insist upon their equal rights to political representation within the proposed new assembly or parliament. But although equal representation appears nominally to feature in both Labour's and Plaid Cymru's plans for the new assembly or parliament,

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there has been virtually no public debate on the ways, means and consequences of realising such a policy in Wales. Before we see further real progress in this area, we may yet have to wait until Welsh women en masse are goaded into action by their recognition of the positive gains for women as a group which, it is to be hoped, will accrue from Scottish women's currently better organized interventions into Scotland's plans for devolution.

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