

# The National Library as the National Records Depository for Wales

By EVAN D. JONES

*Department of Manuscripts and Records,  
National Library of Wales*

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IN the first number of this journal there is a brief note by Mr. L. Herman Smith on the National Library of Wales with special reference to manuscript repair. There the number of documents in the library is given as about 150,000. Today the number is estimated to exceed 3,500,000. By now it is evident that the chief significance of the National Library of Wales in the history of archive preservation is that it is an example of a national library which has virtually become the *de facto* records depository for the nation. There is no fundamental objection to the housing of a nation's books, and literary and historical manuscripts, and the records of its various activities throughout the ages, under the same roof. Indeed, in small states which cannot afford the luxury of a multiplicity of national institutions, there are strong arguments for such an arrangement. The circumstances which led to this development in Wales may not have their parallels anywhere else, but the example of the National Library of Wales may merit attention from librarians and archivists in other parts of the world. The fact of Welsh nationhood may be obscured to many by its lack of political independence. Though this circumstance has an important bearing upon the character of Welsh archives, in that we have no series of records of various branches of a national central government, the foreign observer cannot visit the Principality without soon realising that here is a separate nation, and not a people showing a few peculiarities, which could be explained by their immediate environment. Historically, the strongest single agency in the persistence of Welsh nationhood has been the survival of its Celtic language as an effective spoken and written vehicle for the transmission, from generation to generation, of the essence of nationality, in spite of all the difficulties placed in its way and the efforts made to have it officially exterminated. Had the language disappeared at the close of the Middle Ages, Wales could today have been dismissed as a region or a large peninsula on the western seaboard of England

with no claim to the status of nationality. Then, indeed, the term National Library of Wales would have been a misnomer.

In order to understand the background of the development of the National Library of Wales as a records depository it is necessary to consider briefly some aspects of Welsh history and of the economic condition of the Principality. It is made up of thirteen counties, most of them small and poor. There are at least six counties in England where the rateable value of each single county, or part of a county, exceeds the combined total for the thirteen Welsh counties, and of the total rateable value of Wales, one half is accounted for by the two counties of Glamorgan and Monmouth. In five Welsh counties, the rateable value of each is less than £200,000. This means that, whereas a large number of English counties can establish and maintain efficient county record depositories, it is doubtful whether more than two Welsh counties could do so with any hope of real success. More than two could maintain a small archive staff sufficient to ensure the proper preservation and arrangement of official county records, but the temptation in a small country is to imitate the more powerful neighbour in all things. The archivists are generally trained in England and when they are appointed to posts in Wales they begin to invite the deposit of family muniments, even before they put their own houses in order, simply because they had seen the wealthier English counties setting up well-equipped record offices which attracted the deposit of collections of family papers and local records, without realising that the circumstances are entirely different in Wales, and that the proper care of official county records is as great a burden as any Welsh county can bear. The smaller counties know that they cannot even do that much, and other counties are likely to follow the lead of Cardiganshire and Pembrokeshire in depositing their older official records at the National Library. The National Library of Wales has become a records depository by the driving force of circumstances and not by any *a priori* planning. As a matter of fact, some of the founders of the National Library were also advocates of the establishment of a Public Record Office for Wales as a separate institution, but that was in the spacious days before the 1914-18 war, when a Liberal government, strongly supported in Wales, was able to satisfy a number of Welsh cultural and religious aspirations. Those days were soon to be numbered, and the creation of a separate Record Office for Wales became a remote dream. At the same time, the need for a suitable home for a large number of collections of Welsh records became acute, and they were na-

turally drawn to the most suitable building in the Principality, a modern library planned on liberal lines and equipped for the custody of a nation's literary and historical treasures.

The custody of records in Wales had been sadly neglected until the present century. We have seen that the nation has never experienced the discipline of a unified national state, and that there was no long unbroken series of national archives to demand proper accommodation. The princes of North Wales did attempt the creation of a single state, under the overlordship of their house, in the thirteenth century. Llewelyn ab Iorwerth and Llewelyn ap Griffith, his grandson, were able for short periods to extend their power over a considerable proportion of the land, but their writs did not run throughout the entire territory. The local loyalties of a society emerging from a tribal organisation were strong, and much of the march land was in the hands of the Norman feudal lords and their descendants. The power of the princes of Gwynedd, or North Wales, was shortlived, and the records of their households and chanceries have disappeared. For a short period, in the early years of the fifteenth century, Owain Glyndwr held the greater part of Wales under his sceptre, but his reign was even shorter than that of the Llewelyns, and the archives of his administration have also vanished. There never was a capital city nor a central depository for records in Wales, and during the middle ages buildings which could protect archives from the hazards of fire, damp, and war, were very few. After the fall of Llewelyn ap Griffith in 1282, Edward I took over the Principality, and introduced the shire system. Administration was centered in Caernarvon for the three counties of Gwynedd, in Chester for Flint, and in Carmarthen for the two counties of West Wales. The remainder of the country was left in its state of division into palatinates and marcher lordships of varying sizes. Some of the records of the exchequers of Caernarvon and Carmarthen have been preserved and are in the Public Record Office. Records of fiscal administration have survived in greater number than the records of judicial proceedings, but the body of records preserved from medieval times from the feudal lordships is exceedingly small. The Edwardian settlement of Wales lasted with little change until the so-called "Act of Union" of 1536. The chief innovation of the intervening period, from the point of view of record making, was the establishment of the Court of the President and Council in Wales and the Marches. Unfortunately, the records of this court have been dispersed and are largely lost. The shire system was extended to the marches, in 1536, under an Act

of Parliament entitled "An Act for Laws and Justice to be ministered in Wales in like form as it is in this Realm." This very-badly-drafted measure, full of contradictions, hardly conceals the evil intent of the unscrupulous henchmen of Henry VIII to reduce Wales into a geographical expression. They succeeded in depriving the Welsh language of its official status and in giving rise to that hideous expression "Wales and Monmouthshire" by linking that newly-created county with the English assize system, whereby writs touching Monmouthshire issued out of Westminster. Four other counties were created by the same Act. They were those of Denbigh, Montgomery, Brecknock, and Radnor. For the convenience of suitors and officers of the Crown, chanceries and exchequers were established in the castle of Brecknock for Brecknockshire and Radnorshire, and in the castle and town of Denbigh, for Montgomeryshire and Denbighshire. The distance of the new shires from London is the reason given for these establishments. The King's Great Sessions in Wales appear in 1541, and it is clear that the constitution of the four Welsh circuits of these Courts had been established some time before Parliamentary sanction was obtained by the passing of the "Act for certain ordinances in the King's Dominion and Principality of Wales" in 1543. The twelve shires (Monmouthshire had been separated from the thirteen) were grouped in four circuits, (1) Denbighshire, Flintshire, and Montgomeryshire; (2) Caernarvonshire, Merionethshire, and Anglesey; (3) Radnorshire; Brecknockshire, and Glamorganshire; and (4) Caermarthenshire, Pembrokeshire, and Cardiganshire. Each circuit had its own prothonotary "for the making of all judicial process, and for the entering of all pleas, process, and matters of record." The records for each county were separately filed, but there were certain books and papers which related to each circuit as a whole. The records of the Courts of Great Sessions, which later developed an equity side, throw valuable light on the history of Wales for nearly three centuries. The prothonotaries were charged with the preservation of the records, and it must be said that they carried out their responsibilities in this respect better than any other class of custodians of Welsh records.

In 1830, by "An Act for the more effectual administration of Justice in England and Wales," the Courts of Great Sessions were abolished in spite of the opposition of all but one of the Welsh Members of Parliament, the majority of the judges, counsel, attorneys, and suitors, whose evidence had been called by Royal Commission, and against the tenor of all but one petition received by

Parliament. Henceforward, the twelve counties judicially joined Monmouthshire within the orbit of the English circuit system. The Act directed that the records of the dissolved Courts, until otherwise provided by law, should be kept by the same persons and in the same places as before the abolition of the Welsh courts, but that in the event of the death of custodians, custody was to be with the Clerks of the Peace of the several counties to which the records should respectively belong. So did Wales lose what was practically a national institution, and its records were left scattered between the offices of prothonotaries, whose functions had come to an end, and the shire halls, which had no good record for archive preservation.

General interest in the preservation of Welsh records does not appear to have arisen until the nineteenth century. Indeed, the earliest comprehensive survey of public records in England was not made until the year 1800. Returns by Welsh Clerks of the Peace to the Select Committee on Public Records in that year show the effects of great neglect of custody in earlier centuries. The earliest records said to remain in the custody of the Clerk in the different Welsh counties were dated as follows: Anglesey, 1768; Brecknockshire, 1686; Cardiganshire, 1747; Carmarthenshire, 1729; Caernarvonshire, no date given, but this is by far the best county in Wales from the point of view of record preservation, as it is the only county which can show Quarter Sessions records remaining in official custody from Tudor times; Denbighshire, 1650; Flintshire, 1748; Glamorganshire, 1719; Merionethshire, 1733; Monmouthshire, no date given for sessions books and files, other papers, 1795; Montgomeryshire, 1707; Pembrokeshire, 1783, and Radnorshire, 1770.

The Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion, which had taken a prominent part in advocating the proper preservation of Welsh records, in 1821 reported that "the fruits of their labours . . . are sufficient to encourage the hope that by an earnest perserverance in the scheme on which they have embarked they will lay the foundation of a Depository for Records of no inconsiderable value in elucidating the Antiquities of Britain." The Cymmrodorion at this period, however, were more interested in collecting and preserving literary manuscripts, and their collection was presented to the British Museum in 1843. In 1838, the Public Record Office was established in London, and in the following year an Assistant Record Keeper, William Henry Black, was sent to Wales to examine the records of the Courts of Great Sessions. His report, printed in the

*First Report of the Deputy Keeper of the Public Records*, 1840, suggested four possible courses for the better regulation and custody of the records which he saw at Chester, Welshpool, Ruthin, Caernarvon, Dolgellau, Brecon, Presteign, Cardiff, Carmarthen, Cardigan, and Haverfordwest: to collect the county records to the central or principal places within the late circuits; to deposit all the North Wales records in Chester Castle; to collect the South Wales records into one repository; to let them remain in their present custody but placing them under uniform regulations for custody, and under a strict system of reporting and visitation; or to remove them all to London. He reported strong opposition to the removal of records from North Wales. No action was taken until the year 1854 when the Master of the Rolls signed warrants for their removal to the Public Record Office, in spite of protests from the Welsh counties.

For the next half century there was a steadily-growing agitation for the establishment of a national library, museum, and record office for Wales. The National Library and National Museum were established by royal charter in 1907, the former at Aberystwyth, and the latter at Cardiff. The primary object of the National Library, as defined by its charter, was to be the collection, preservation, and maintenance of manuscripts, printed books, etc., especially manuscripts, printed books, and other works composed in Welsh or any other Celtic language, or which related to the antiquities, language, literature, philology, history, religion, arts, crafts, and industries of the Welsh and other Celtic peoples. It was also to collect all literary works written or printed in whatsoever language, on whatsoever subject, and wheresoever published, which might help to attain the purposes of Welsh educational and cultural institutions. The latter object was aided appreciably by the extension of the copyright privilege to the Library in 1911, a concession which materially strengthened the position of the National Library as an institution for research in Wales.

In 1909, the subsidiary files from the offices of the prothonotaries of the various circuits of the Court of Great Sessions, of date later than 1660, which were condemned as being of insufficient value to be preserved in the Public Record Office were offered to the National Library as an alternative to their destruction. They were readily accepted and became the first fruits of the Library's collection of public records. In October 1910 a commission was appointed to inquire into, and report on, the state of the public records and local records of a public nature of England and Wales.



Between 1912 and 1919 it published three reports which have considerable bearing on the custody of Welsh records. The first report advocated the establishment of a general repository for Welsh records in Wales, and recommended the return to this proposed repository of all Welsh records transferred to London since 1838. A member of the commission, Mr. Llewelyn Williams, M.P., introduced a bill into Parliament to implement this recommendation, and several towns in Wales drew up their cases for the privilege of providing the site for the proposed new national institution. But nothing came of the recommendation, though the commissioners repeated it with greater emphasis in their third report in 1919. They urged that the Public Record Office for Wales should be established without further loss of time, and that certain classes of local records, such as those of town trusts and other statutory authorities, the early records preserved in the district probate registries, early title-deeds and other estate records relating to the Welsh dioceses should be transferred to the Public Record Office for Wales.

Most of the records which the commissioners had in mind in 1919 are now deposited in the National Library of Wales. The Welsh Church Act of 1914, by which the Anglican Church in Wales was disestablished, had provided for the lodging in the National Library of the residue of such books and documents (that is, records relating to the property vested in the Commissioners of the Temporalities of the Church in Wales) when no longer required by them for the execution of their duties under the Act. Now that the Commission has been dissolved since 1947, all these records and those created by the Commission during its thirty-three years' duration have been placed in the National Library. In 1944 the Church in Wales placed on deposit in the National Library all the older episcopal, diocesan, and chapter records hitherto preserved in the cathedrals and diocesan registries of the four old Welsh dioceses of St. David's, Llandaff, St. Asaph, and Bangor. This decision on the part of the Representative Body of the Church in Wales is a landmark in the history of British Archives. The vast collection of historical records accumulated at the ancient centers of the oldest institution in the Principality now became available for the first time at an established and central place of research. These records date from the year 1397, but there are serious gaps until about the year 1660. The conditions of the deposit envisage the collection of church records which have strayed out of official custody, and a development in the centralization of ecclesiastical

records of a local character including the older parish registers, a large percentage of which are in need of repair and rehabilitation. The records of the Church in Wales are now assured of that scientific protection and arrangement which in a poor community can only be provided by a state-maintained institution which is primarily concerned with the preservation and care of parchment and paper. And in this connection should be mentioned the generosity of the Pilgrim Trust which has made substantial grants towards the cost of repairing the damage inflicted by the vicissitudes of time and the natural enemies of paper and parchment upon this important body of records.

The deposit of the Church in Wales records was logically followed by a direction issued by the President of the Probate, Divorce, and Admiralty Division of the High Court of Justice, with the consent of the Lord Chancellor, for the deposit in the National Library of all the Welsh ecclesiastical probate records prior to the year 1858 which were in the muniment rooms of certain district probate registries of the High Court. Until 11 January 1858, jurisdiction over wills or administrations of the estates of deceased persons in Wales had been vested in the episcopal courts, with the one solitary "peculiar" court of Hawarden which was exempt from the jurisdiction of the Bishop of St. Asaph, and the records were kept in the diocesan registries. It is only right to add that the officials in charge of the district probate registries were particularly helpful in this move. They were more conscious than any research worker that the facilities offered by the National Library would make the records much more open to research than their limited space and resources could allow. No district probate registry, for instance, could furnish photostat copies as photostat installations are confined to the Principal Probate Registry. A third class of records once preserved in the diocesan registries has been received into the National Library in the form of instruments of tithe apportionments with maps for all Welsh parishes except those whose tithes had been impropriated. These tithe records were received under a series of directions by the Master of the Rolls in 1945. The Master of the Rolls had placed the National Library on the list of approved depositories for manorial records as early as 1926.

These deposits of local records by official directions have gone far towards the recognition of the National Library as the national records depository for Wales. His Majesty's Treasury has acknowledged the services rendered by the Library as a records repository by the allocation of a proportion of the annual grant-in-aid for



this purpose. The official deposits were the culmination of a process which had been going on for over thirty years. The first large deposit of deeds and documents, over thirty thousand items, was made by a firm of solicitors from Haverfordwest in 1915. By today the roll of depositors of documents and family and institutional records in the National Library numbers two hundred and eighty four. The roll includes names from the highest ranks of the nobility as well as those of owners of more modest estates, firms of solicitors and estate agents, trustees of estates, educational, cultural, social, and industrial institutions, associations, and concerns, ecclesiastical bodies, nonconformist unions and individual churches, and county, urban, rural district, parish and town councils. There is no evidence of slackening in the flow of deposited collections into the National Library, and the current *Annual Report* records a high level of intake. The arrangement whereby owners can deposit their records at the National Library without sacrificing their rights of ownership appeals to custodians having only a life interest in them. The pressure of taxation, resulting in the shutting down or the conversion to other purposes of the old country houses, makes it necessary for many old-established families to look for suitable accommodation for their family papers, and in Wales there is no building comparable with the National Library as a home for evicted records. Each collection is kept separately and its integrity maintained. Typewritten schedules are prepared giving the gist of the purport of each item in the collection. The schedules serve as receipts for the owners and as guides to the contents, thereby making them available for purposes of historical research. In most cases depositors find that the information contained in their collections becomes really available to them for the first time when they receive from the Library the volumes of schedules describing their papers. As six copies are generally prepared, libraries situated in areas covered by the documents are given copies of schedules of those collections which most closely concern their users.

The schedules are the primary keys to the deposited collection. Hitherto, and this situation is likely to continue for many years, it has not been possible to print these schedules for a more general distribution. Full calendars of certain collections were published before the volume of accessions had outrun the ability of the manuscripts and records staff, though the number has been increased from seven to fourteen, to catalogue them except in a summary way. Three volumes have been issued in the series of *Calendars of Deeds and Documents*, "The Coleman Deeds" in 1921, "The Crosswood

Deeds" in 1927, and "The Hawarden Deeds" in 1931. In the class of family papers and correspondence a *Calendar of the Wynn (of Gwydir) Papers*, 151-1690, was published in 1926, and a *Calendar of the Clenennau Papers* [1485-1622] in 1947. There are, of course, manuscripts and records of interest to archivists in the National Library's general collection of manuscripts. Reference guides to the first eight thousand of these manuscripts are the *Catalogue of Manuscripts*, Vol. I, 1921, and the *Handlist of Manuscripts* which is issued as a supplement to the *National Library of Wales Journal*, a half yearly publication which is now in its sixth volume of four parts each. Eleven parts of the *Handlist* have been issued to date. The *Journal* itself is planned to particularize the resources of the Library and descriptions of deposited collections form a regular feature of each part. Brief descriptions of accessions are printed in the Library's *Annual Reports* presented to the Court of Governors at its October meetings.

The economic advantages of the concentration of a small nation's records in close proximity to a national copyright library are becoming increasingly more obvious. The copyright privileges together with the other resources of a national library provide the necessary illustrative and reference materials. Modern equipment necessary for the efficient functioning of both library and record office is expensive and it becomes uneconomical to duplicate it. The National Library of Wales is the only library in the Principality which can offer the advantages of a bindery staffed by experts in the repair of fragile documents and in fine binding; a photographic studio which is equipped with a photostat apparatus, photographic cameras, a Recordak Microfilming Unit, and ultra-violet ray cabinets; and a printing shop; in addition to the usual departments of a public library. The processes developed at the National Library's bindery have been described in the first number of THE AMERICAN ARCHIVIST. When that article was written the bindery staff consisted of Mr. C. Hanson and his son and daughter but by now this number has been increased to eight. In addition to repair and binding the staff now produces all the containers used in the Department of Manuscripts and Records, the leatherboard boxes having given way to cloth covered millboards.

The most reasonable archive policy in Wales would be for the different counties to rely still more upon the facilities offered by the National Library and to deposit their more valuable records here, taking advantage of the comparatively cheap processes of microphotography and installing microfilm readers in all their central

buildings and branches in the interest of local research. The well-being of ancient records would be better attended to in a national institution and their availability to the world of scholarship would be increased. This is well exemplified by the action of the British Mission of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in maintaining two of their microfilm cameras in the National Library for the filming of Welsh genealogical records for their library in Salt Lake City.

The provision made by the architect of the National Library in 1909 for the housing of its manuscripts and records in a central block in the building scheme has now been exhausted. The floors below and above the "manuscript bays" mentioned by Mr. L. Herman Smith have been filled to capacity, and suites of rooms on the ground floor of the administration block have been appropriated for the ever expanding records intake. The Library's Council has, however, earmarked land adjoining the main buildings for the erection of a records depository. Private deposit is likely to continue to grow for some years to come, and the recent official deposits point the way for future development on the same lines for preservation of the Welsh records of nationalized industries. Welsh opinion has never accepted as irrevocable the removal of the Courts of Great Sessions records to London, and ever since 1855 historians have deplored the step then taken, and have called for their return. These records have not been used to any appreciable extent, and much valuable material for the history of administration and judicial proceedings in Wales has consequently been withheld from Welsh historians. The return of the records to the National Library of Wales would materially help to stimulate research into general and local Welsh history. There are also other records removed from Caernarvon and Carmarthen to London which could be returned to the advantage of historical research in Wales.

Around the National Library's grounds lies the new campus of the oldest constituent college of the University of Wales, the only one which is styled *The University College of Wales*. It is generally admitted to be one of the finest college sites in the world. It would be a triumph of educational statesmanship in Wales if provincial jealousies could be overcome, and an Institute of Advanced Studies in Celtic subjects and in Welsh History established here alongside the National Library, with its unique collection of Welsh manuscripts and books, its copyright privileges, and its records wing.