

Retelling the history of Wales

As the BBC prepares to commission a new television history of Wales, historians, programme makers and media academics gathered on June 9th, 2010 at the University of Glamorgan's Atrium campus in Cardiff to discuss the challenge and possible ways to meet it.

It's 25 years since the broadcasting of two major histories of Wales – the BBC series *Wales! Wales?* presented by Dai Smith and the HTV/Channel 4 series *The Dragon Has Two Tongues* in which Gwyn A Williams and Wynford Vaughan Thomas debated the interpretation of the historical record.

Colin Thomas, director of *The Dragon Has Two Tongues* opened proceedings with an extract from his series and a challenge to anyone setting out to retell the contested history of Wales. He set out five key points to be addressed by programme makers and commissioners.

First, he stressed the importance of programme makers engaging with the current issues in historiography – when making his series he asked the question “What is history?” and made sure that debates about that issue were reflected in every programme.

Secondly, Thomas highlighted the importance of the independence of the programme makers and warned that the concentration of decision making ‘inwards and upwards’ – in Channel 4, S4C and the BBC has led to an assumption that ‘the centre always knows best’ As this is proposed to be a network series, he predicted ‘lots of intervention from on high’.

Thirdly, he said the decision to go for two perspectives wasn't simply a presentational device; it was also a way of ensuring that the series, whatever its weaknesses on the issue of gender, maintained throughout an awareness of the importance of class and social history.

Fourthly, said Thomas, ‘all of those involved in the *Dragon* thought we were doing something of national significance, that telling the story of our nation's past was of huge importance to Wales today. A key part of that was the production of document packs of primary sources that accompanied the series. These went out to the 150 or so discussion groups set up by the education officers at HTV and Channel 4.

Colin Thomas's final point was that the makers of *The Dragon* were determined to put out a series that was accessible and entertaining to the whole of the UK. But that did not mean they would drop a point if it was hard to cover – ‘we would somehow find a way of illustrating it – animation, re-enactment, crane and helicopter shots – whatever was necessary to cover the point and to keep the audience watching.’

The 'contested' nature of the history of Wales – given life by the two debating presenters - was the basis for the approach taken by Colin Thomas and his team in the 1980s. Some of those discussing the challenge in 2010 believed that approach must still be at the heart of any new series. One historian summed it up: 'Debate must be central – this is contested ground.'

While no-one attempted to suggest that there are no disagreements over the interpretation of the evidence, there was another school of thought amongst the professional historians. As one put it: 'Welsh history has a great story to tell, that's what will hold the audience. Catch the excitement and adventure – argument can be a switch-off!'

Even with a big series and £1million budget, it won't be possible to fit everything in. Another leading historian warned of the dangers of leaving out of the story events or developments of great significance. He cited the omission of the Evan Roberts Revival of 1904 from two big histories of Wales.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, the professionals agreed that only a historian would be qualified to present such a series. The BBC have indicated that – in their view – there are only a few people who would be capable of doing the job, but one historian warned of the pitfalls of employing well-known newsreaders to tell such a story. An audience who see them as the purveyors of impartial 'truth' might be inclined to accept what they say about (contested) history in the same way.

Where do you begin? The BBC have said they favour a story told in chronological order, but a strong case was made for a more thematic approach – or even for regional angles. In all this, the challenge will be to engage and hold an audience in a media age very different from the one in which *The Dragon Has Two Tongues* was broadcast.

Twenty-five years ago, as Colin Thomas recalled, discussion groups were established across Wales and beyond, supplied with copies of original historical documents to enable participants to enter the debate begun on screen by Gwyn Williams and Wynford Vaughan Thomas. It was clear from the discussion that many of the programme-makers are keen to explore the possibilities offered by the internet to broaden the impact of the new series. As one put it: 'Our job is to create a gateway rather than a definitive series'.

BBC Wales will select two proposals for development before commissioning the series later this year.