

Aaron, Jane. *Welsh Gothic*

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Jane Aaron's *Welsh Gothic* is an ambitious work whose coverage of a daunting topic is at once broad and deep. Given that Aaron surveys an extensive genre as it develops over more than two centuries across an entire nation, she might well have written an encyclopedia rather than a monograph. The ways in which *Welsh Gothic* balances breadth and depth are particularly impressive and valuable because the book is the first study of its kind. Gothic literature written by and about the Welsh has until this point apparently received no sustained attention, though scholars have explored regional Gothic literatures in England, Ireland, and Scotland. Aaron attributes this oversight to "the general neglect of Welsh writing," combined with the fact that critics "have been more concerned with issues of identity, or with the need to develop a specifically Welsh literary history and canon, than with generic criticism" (9). As she rightly observes however, "a focus on the Gothic by no means precludes explorations of national identity" (9). Indeed, because "many of the fears encoded in Welsh Gothic are specific to the history of Welsh people" (9), the genre provides a unique and compelling perspective on the distinctiveness of the Welsh experience. *Welsh Gothic* thus takes an important place in Gothic Literary Studies, the series produced by the University of Wales Press, alongside volumes devoted to the Gothic literatures of Europe, Canada, the Caribbean, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States.

Although this book is a study of the Welsh, it is haunted by the English. Recognizing that “the primary experience of violation remains alive as a central trauma in the cultural memory of a people” (3), and that the return of the repressed colonial trauma can render texts uncanny, Aaron considers Welsh Gothic as a mode of both oppression by and resistance to English hegemony. In its various permutations, the genre barbarizes both the Welsh and the English, as Welsh writers either internalize or reject English prejudices, and as English ones either embrace their own culture’s dominant ideology or “go native” and sympathize with the Welsh. Demonstrating how conflicts between and within the Welsh and English cultures are Gothicized, Aaron follows critics such as David Punter in viewing the Gothic through a multifaceted theoretical lens comprising postcolonial, psychoanalytic, and historical approaches. Her principal methodology, however, is historicist. Accordingly, she entitles Part I of her book “Haunted by History” and devotes each of its four chapters to a particular era, from the late eighteenth century to the second Welsh devolution referendum in 1997.

Chapter 1, “Cambria Gothica (1780s-1820s),” examines the Romantic period, during which dozens of Gothic novels set in Wales were published, most of them written by British tourists rather than Welsh natives. “Prevented by the wars with France from taking the continental Grand Tour, the British gentry looked for fashionable experiences of the sublime, the picturesque and the horrid closer to home,” as the Celtic revival in general and Gray’s “The Bard” in particular “alerted them to Wales as a location equipped to deliver such affects” (23). “First-contact” Gothic novels such as the Anglo-Scottish writer Isabella Kelly’s *The Abbey of St Asaph* (1795) depict Wales as an alien, primitive land whose people cling to ancient superstitions and an atavistic language. Assimilation into Britain is possible, however. In Kelly’s novel, Jennett, a Welsh peasant, “ends her career not only as Rodolpha Trevallion, heiress to the abbey

and educated in the ways of the English gentry by her patroness Lady Douglas, but also wedded in a love match to Lady Douglas's son Lionel, thus emblemizing the happy marriage of Wales to England" (24). Gothic novels written by the Welsh depict relations with the British quite differently. Those terrorized and persecuted are not English but Welsh, and their trials typically take place not in Wales but in England—"or, if the trauma occurs in Wales, then their virtue is assailed not by Welsh spectres or villains but by unscrupulous incoming marauders" (24). In these works, "the shock of the encounter with the 'other' often leaves representatives of both countries fleeing back to the safety of their own habitats rather than embracing any notion of belonging to a Greater British whole" (24-25).

In Chapter 2, "An Underworld of One's Own (1830s-1900s)," Aaron considers how Welsh Gothic engaged with the *Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the State of Education in Wales* (1847), which argued that the Welsh language condemned its speakers "to live in an underworld" (52) of barbarism and immorality. As Welsh was banned from schools and non-Welsh speakers moved into Wales to work, anxiety about the decline of the national language and culture revealed itself in tales of Gothic doom. Narratives of family curses, for example, depict the Welsh as "the living dead, doomed to extinction, and knowing it, while they yet live" (60). The tone and tenor of Welsh Gothic changed after Liberals came to power in an 1868 landslide, and a Welsh Home Rule movement began in the 1880s. By 1895, in Ernest Rhys's *Welsh Ballads and Other Poems*, "historical and mythical figures of Welsh resistance stir in their graves, come alive and walk the earth again to inspire the poet's contemporaries to fight for Wales's freedom" (62). The nationalist movement was accompanied by a literary renaissance and a resurgence of traditional Welsh culture that included *fin-de-siècle* occult stories and novels, in which "immersion in the Welsh underworld becomes the way to sanctification" (83).

Conspicuous among these fictions are the works of Arthur Machen, “to date the only generally acknowledged Welsh Gothic writer” (71), with whose writing Aaron concludes the chapter. To maintain the shape of her argument, she devotes to Machen only eleven pages, which are closely focused on developing her thesis. This brief treatment is both understandable and regrettable, as this most celebrated Welsh Gothic author deserves not only a chapter but a monograph of his own.

The Gothicization of Welsh Calvinist Methodist chapel culture, and of the nation’s iron, slate, coal, and steel industries, is the subject of Chapter 3, “Haunted Communities (1900s-1940s),” which “explores the fictional representation of fears specific to the changing communities of Wales during the period when coal became king” (87-88). Here the focus shifts from the direct impact of British colonialism upon Wales to how Welsh Gothic depicts “instances of social injustice” (85) related to religion and industry, which wrongs Aaron argues were exacerbated by the encroachments of the English. She begins the chapter by situating the anti-chapel short-story collections of Caradoc Evans, *My People* (1915) and *Capel Sion* (1917), in the tradition of Gothic-tinged satirical attacks upon Welsh Nonconformity dating from the 1740s. Aaron ends this section, “The Devil in Zion,” with the observation that “by the 1930s not only fictional characters but the mass of the Welsh population were freeing themselves from the grip of a Calvinist God,” as “socialism and the trade movement” came to provide “the motivating drive of a distinctive Welsh culture.” But coal culture, like chapel culture, was haunted. Those who worked underground faced “sudden death from rock fall, explosion, coal-gas or flooding, or of slower death from silicosis” (86). These horrors were familiar to south Wales authors such as Rhys Davies, Glyn Jones, Gwyn Jones, and Gwyn Thomas, who in the 1930s and 1940s employed “the Gothic mode in calling upon readers to recognize what was alien and unjust about

the ordinary, everyday conditions of life in the coalfield townships” (86), departing from their usual realism and crafting what Aaron terms “Coalfield Gothic” (98).

Aaron concludes her history of Welsh Gothic in Chapter 4, “Land of the Living Dead (1940s-1997),” whose concern is “Gothic fictions in which the protagonists are represented as haunted by Welsh history: the princes and warriors of pre-conquest Wales rise from the dead not so much to encourage the modern Welsh as to castigate them for their heedlessness and neglect of their language and culture” (110). In *Chwedlau'r Meini* (*Legends of the Stones*, 1946), by Robert John Rowlands, the narrator encounters the ghost of a prehistoric ancestor who blames him for not defending the family inheritance. *Un Nos Ola Leuad* (*One Moonlit Night*, 1961), by Caradog Prichard, is shadowed by the impending destruction of Capel Celyn, one of the last Welsh-speaking villages, which was drowned in 1965 to create a reservoir for Liverpool. “Night, death and the abandonment of hope pervade the novel” (113), in which the eerie Black Lake talks to the narrator with the voice of a conquered queen. In novels written by English speakers, however, it is “the modern-day Welsh rather than their undead ancestors who shake off their subordination and reclaim their land from English incomers” (115), as Anglophone writers of the 1990s, worried by an “apparent Welsh reawakening,” depict Wales as “a dark vampiric country, ready to suck the blood out of any unwary stranger who crosses its borders” (110). Their anxiety focuses on the border between England and Wales, “a zone which is neither Welsh nor English yet haunted by the two countries’ warring past” (131). In Guy N. Smith’s *The Knighton Vampires* (1993), the border town is plagued by both arsonists seeking to drive out the English and a coven of vampires—though, in a Radcliffean revelation, the apparently supernatural creatures are eventually exposed as “the employees of Glyn Idle, a local Plaid Cymru candidate who is hiring women to act as vampires in order to frighten away potential

English second-home buyers” (131). In Phil Rickman’s *Crybbe* (1993), named after another village on the border, a meddling outsider is destroyed by the town’s vampiric mayor, while in Regan Forest’s *Bridge across Forever*, a young American visitor to Wales is pursued by a ghost and a witch before her boyfriend enables her to cross the bridge back to England and safety.

After surveying Welsh Gothic from its origins to the late twentieth century, Aaron devotes “Part II: ‘Things that go bump in the Celtic Twilight’” to “at least a few of the figures drawn from Welsh folklore and superstition which are omnipresent in the genre” (7). Chapter 5 concentrates on “Witches, Druids and the Hounds of Annwn,” while Chapter 6 considers “The Sin-eater.” Aaron notes that “from the early days of the novel genre, in both of Wales’s languages, witches feature significantly” (141) in Welsh Gothic, and she demonstrates how they function as wise women and avengers in texts ranging from *The Witcheries of Craig Isaf* (1805), by William Frederick Williams, to “The School for Witches” (1936), by Dylan Thomas. Across years and works of literature, Welsh witches promote and empower rebellion—against hierarchy, patriarchy, and injustice. Druids are less sympathetic, thanks in part to Julius Caesar’s *De Bello Gallico* (c. 50 BC), which describes their burning sacrificial victims alive. Although in the 1780s, “as part of the movement from classicism to Romanticism which included the Celtic revival, Druids were being portrayed much more approvingly” (156) in works such as William Godwin’s *Imogen* (1784), by the twentieth century they were again associated with human sacrifices and other atrocities by Robert Bloch in “The Dark Isle” (1939) and Phil Rickman in *Candlelight* (1991). Like the Druids, the Hounds of Annwn became more malign over time. They were originally dwellers in Annwn, the paradisiacal Celtic realm, but as “pagan Annwn became associated in the Christian imagination with Hell” they “metamorphosed into hellhounds, hunting the reluctant fleeing souls of the damned to their eternal fiery pit” (164).

Serving this function, they appear in Taliesin Williams's narrative poem *The Doom of Colyn Dolphyn* (1837), Emma Mary Puclieu's *Folk-lore and Folk-stories of Wales* (1909), and James Motley's *Tales of the Cymry* (1848).

The final figure Aaron examines, the sin-eater, consumes the wickedness of the deceased together with food and drink passed over the coffin, thereby becoming a pariah and scapegoat until his services are again required by the community. Sin-eaters appear in a number of Anglophone Welsh Gothic texts, including *Hearts of Wales* (1905), by Allen Raine, *The Forerunner* (1910), by Henry Elwyn Thomas, *Ffynon, the Sin-eater* (1914), by Eleanor Nepean, "The Sins of the Fathers" (1939), by Christianna Brand (which was adapted into an episode of the *Night Gallery* TV series and familiarized Americans with sin-eating), *The Walk Home* (1962), by Gwyn Jones, and *The Sin Eater* (1977), by Alice Thomas Ellis. The deracinated sin-eater also features in novels, plays, short stories, comic books, video games, and films set in England and the United States. Indeed, the character has become so popular outside Wales that, as Aaron wryly observes, "most Welsh people today know nothing about sin-eating, and if they come across the concept in popular culture are likely to think of it as an American export" (172). Aaron analyzes sin-eating within a postcolonial framework, noting that whereas Welsh sin-eaters are abject, their foreign counterparts are not—with the salient exception of the young Native American sin-eaters in Sherman Alexie's "The Sin Eaters" (2000), who are forced to consume the darkness within their white conquerors and thus share the abjection "common to the Welsh sin-eater, from his first appearance in literature in the 1830s to his eventual demise in the second half of the twentieth century," when "a more self-assertive spirit was developing within Welsh culture, as it finally shed itself of its collusion with English rule" (200).

In the epilogue of her book, “Post-devolution Gothic,” Aaron discusses how this spirit manifests itself in Welsh Gothic texts written after devolution was achieved in 1997. No longer do Welsh authors “necessarily concern themselves with any specifically Welsh themes” (201), and even works set in Wales need not “share the characteristic preoccupations of earlier Welsh Gothic” (202). Yet “the re-telling of Welsh myth is as popular as ever,” and “in these more recent tales the way in which the resurrected power of myth can shed light as well as darkness is often emphasized” (202). Aaron closes by reflecting upon how Welsh Gothic has unveiled “specifically Welsh patterns of the uncanny,” thereby enabling critics “to analyse and understand them, dispersing much of their darkness” (210). Certainly *Welsh Gothic* does much to advance such enlightenment—but, fortunately for readers who enjoy the Gothic in all its national incarnations, the darkness Aaron explores will never be fully dispelled.