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# *Ancient Bards, Welsh Gipsies, and Celtic Folklore in the Cauldron of Regeneration<sup>1</sup>*

ROSLYN BLYN-LADREW

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On August 22, 1861 the antiquarian Edward Woolley visited Aberystwyth, attended a Welsh harp concert, and shortly afterwards wrote a glowing account of this event, describing it as “the only legitimate performance we now have of the style in which the ancient bards must have played...” (quoted in E.E. Roberts 1981:46).<sup>2</sup> An examination of the time period in which Woolley wrote sheds light on what he might have meant by “ancient bards.” An understanding of the context shows how he could so easily but mistakenly juxtapose two widely separated periods (the time of the “ancient bards” and his own Victorian Britain of the 1860s) and reveals that the performers, far from embodying links to the ancient bardic past through heredity or reconstructing ancient styles through careful research, were relative newcomers to the tradition, and in fact, early participants in the folklore revival.

By 1861, the revival of the *eisteddfod*, originally a convention of bards, was well underway in Wales (Morgan 1983).<sup>3</sup> The “Celtic Twilight” would soon descend, created by antiquarian, aesthetic, nationalistic and anti-industrial interests (cf. Yeats 1902). “Celtic” culture would be rediscovered and all the Celtic regions would see a limited but enthusiastic revival of music, dance, language, and costume, and the development of new literary genres for the Irish, Scottish Gaelic, Manx, Welsh, Breton and Cornish languages. While these Celtic-speaking peoples had been colonized or subjugated by their dominant neighbor (England or France) and were the subject of much social critique and caricature, aspects of their culture did appeal, at least to a select few, and generated a sophisticated literary

movement. Although the Irish may have been parodied by the Victorians as apes (Curtis 1971), Irish folklore provided inspiration that eventually led to a Nobel Prize for one of its refashioners, William Butler Yeats (1865-1939). Wales on the other hand had long been maligned, being described in such terms as a "Country in the World's back-side, where every Man is born a Gentleman, and a Genealogist" (Sir John Vanbrugh, in *Aesop*, ca. 1697, quoted in Morgan 1983: 45). Following several centuries of similar English parody and satire, Welsh traditional culture was now threatened by more pragmatic issues such as industrialization, religious condemnation, assimilation to English culture, and language loss, although revivalists secured a safe niche for a re-created Welsh culture in the eisteddfod.<sup>4</sup>

The 1789 eisteddfod is generally considered the first of the new eisteddfodau, although lesser events, known as "almanack" eisteddfodau, had been held in taverns for about a century prior to the revival. The earliest documentation is from 1176, far later than the period of pre-Roman Celtic antiquity evoked by the neo-druidic artists and writers such as Edward Williams ("Iolo Morgannwg," 1747-1826), William Blake (1757-1827)<sup>5</sup> and S. R. Meyrick and C.H. Smith, whose 1815 illustration of "An Archdruid in His Judicial Habit" provided the basis for revival bardic costume and accessories though it actually combined Celtic (Iron Age) and pre-Celtic (Bronze Age) imagery in an anachronistic collage (Piggott 1968: 226).<sup>6</sup> For his part, Williams contributed to the romantic illusion through publications such as the seemingly historic *Myvyrian Archaiology* [sic], which appeared between 1801 and 1807 and was later shown to contain much work of Williams's own composition. In 1819 Williams enlarged the eisteddfod format by adding the ceremony of the *Gorsedd* [Chairing] of the Bards of the Island of Britain.

At the same time as Celtic heritage was regaining cultural status, albeit in a remodeled and sometimes newly created format, Gypsies in Britain were the subject of scathing social critique. While a small group of mid-century idealists glamorized Gypsy life, the majority opinion of it was negative, as shown by extensive legal restrictions and by reform movements intent on homogenizing and cleaning up Gypsy society (Crabb 1832). Among those who did value Gypsy culture were Francis Hindes Groome (1851-1902) and George Borrow (1803-81). Groome became interested in Gypsies as a youth, and by age 20 was attending fairs and races to meet Gypsies and collect their folklore and language. His efforts led to the creation of the Gypsy Lore Society in 1888. Groome's *In Gypsy Tents* (1880) was an early example of the first-hand ethnographic escape memoir, a genre which continues to this day. Borrow also popularized the Gypsy image

through his own escapist literature, such as *Lavengro* (1851), *Romany Rye* (1857), and *Wild Wales* (1862).

But Groome and Borrow represented an intellectual minority willing to appreciate alternative lifestyles. Most considered Gipsies an awkward social burden that they both feared and maligned. This view was no milder in areas where the Irish or Welsh were themselves struggling against prejudice and economic disadvantage. In this negative context, it is surprising to note that the musicians to whom Woolley referred were half Gipsy. They belonged to a family which had been in Wales for only about 110 years and had only been playing the harp since about 1770.

Woolley was specifically describing the harpists John Roberts (1816-94) and his daughter Mary Ann (1840-ca. 1870). They were just two members of an extended family, the descendants of the English Gipsy fiddler Abram Wood (ca. 1699-1799), which virtually monopolized the revival of traditional Welsh music at a time when the puritanical atmosphere in Wales had condemned secular entertainment as sinful and when many folk traditions were discontinued. The history and musical accomplishments of the Wood and Roberts families have been well documented in recent publications in both English and Welsh, primarily by descendants of the original families (Jarman and Jarman 1979, 1991; E.E. Roberts 1978, 1981). Their importance is indicated by inclusion in reference works such as *The Dictionary of Welsh Biography* (Jones 1959) and *The Oxford Companion to the Literature of Wales* (Stephens 1986a). However, none of these accounts places the phenomenon of Gipsy preservation of non-Gipsy folklore in the broader context of the cycles of inventing and reinventing traditions (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). The contribution of the Wood and Roberts families to Welsh music could be described in terms of a "reinvented" (or "adapted") tradition as much as an "invented" one, as the cultural interests of resident groups and newcomers continually interact and feed upon each other.

### THE ROLE OF THE GIPSIES IN WELSH CULTURE

It is somewhat surprising that Celtic cultural traditions would be maintained by a group which was not only non-Celtic, but which sojourned first in England and whose social status was low in both Wales and England. Gipsies are well known to have traditionally held a pariah status in whatever country they were found, and Hancock (1988) indicates that the problem is far from solved.<sup>7</sup> The Gipsies' actual and perceived disregard for the rules of settled society make them suspect and, in fact, convenient scapegoats for

the ills of society at large. And yet in Wales, John Roberts, half Gipsy and half Welsh, achieved remarkable success as a musician, not simply in terms of his sheer skill but as a link to Wales's newly rediscovered, "ancient bardic" past.

There is no evidence that the Gipsies' first migrations to Britain took them directly to Wales. Rather, they established themselves as English Gipsies (Anglo-Romani) and eventually furthered their territory to include Wales by about 1579. Following closely in time are literary references, such as the description of tax-collecting burgesses as "siapsach a gweflau sipswn" (scabs with Gipsy lips) in a poem from about 1590 by Morris Kyffin (ca.1555-98) of Oswestry. An early reference describing Welsh-speaking Gipsies in St. Asaph, northeast Wales is in a coarse poem allegedly by Siôn Tudur (1530-1602); a rhyme from about the same time by Hityn Grydd (fl. 1567-1606) mentions newly arrived Gipsies in Wrexham, also in northeast Wales (Jarman and Jarman 1991:33-34).

During Tudor, Stuart and Cromwellian times Gipsies were persecuted all over Britain; there is little other account of Gipsies specifically in Wales, literary or historical. One contemporary work, Ellis Wynne's *Gweledigaethau y Bardd Cwsg* (The Visions of the Sleeping Bard, 1703) indicates the prevailing opinion. Wynne says that in a dream he saw fairies dancing, and at first feared they "were a pack of hungry gipsies and that the least they would do, would be to kill me for their supper, and devour me saltless. But gazing steadfastly upon them I perceived that they were of better and fairer complexion than that lying, tawny crew..." (Wynne 1976:6, translation quoted in Jarman and Jarman 1991:36). There is some debate as to whether Wynne actually saw the Gipsies in England or Wales, but either way, his work reinforced the popular perception.

Wynne's second reference, in his *Vision of Hell*, is even more graphic: it first maligns another Celtic group, the Scots (reminding us of the challenges of pan-Celtic cooperation), and then describes the Gipsies as ugly, hell-bound and barbarous: "Shortly there appear twenty demons, like Scotchmen, with packs across their shoulders, which they cast down before the throne of despair, and which turned out to be gipsies. 'Ho there!' cried Lucifer, 'how was it that ye who knew the fortunes of others so well, did not know that your own fortune was leading you hither?' No answer was given, for they were amazed at seeing here beings uglier than themselves. 'Throw the tan-faced loons to the witches,' bade the King, 'there are no cats or rushlight here for them, but divide a frog between them every ten thousand years, if they will be quiet and not deafen us with their barbarous chatter' (Wynne 1976:122, translation in Jarman and

Jarman 1991:36).

Other literary references dating closer to the time of the arrival of the Wood family in Wales (ca. 1750) continue the negative stereotypes. Thomas Edwards (Twm o'r Nant) refers specifically to Abram Wood in a dramatic interlude, *Pleser a Gofid* (Pleasure and Grief, 1787). He describes "Sypsiwns" in general as "stealing very eagerly" (Edwards 1874:87; translation by J. Glyn Davies in Jarman and Jarman 1991:38). In the early nineteenth century, the Rev. Rice Rees (1804-39) described Gipsies as "deceitful vagrants" in his notes to *Cannwyll y Cymry* ('The Welshman's Candle'), written in the seventeenth century by Rhys Prichard (Prichard 1867:25).

Little is known of the history of the Abram Wood family prior to their arrival in Wales. Their lifestyle in Wales conformed to the expected image, at least according to the limited sources available. In addition to their musical impact, the Wood family later contributed greatly to the linguistic study of Welsh-Romani, painstakingly noted by John Sampson (1926), but even here the family's early history is vague. The autobiography of Robert Roberts (not a member of the Gypsy Roberts family) includes a description of the Woods as recalled by its author's great-grandmother. She described Abram Wood's sons as a "wild lot" and says the Woods made baskets and brooms for a living, supplemented by fishing, hunting hares, and hunting (i.e. stealing) sheep. She also noted that their legitimate income would not have sustained them for one month out of twelve (R. Roberts 1923:31-2, in Jarman and Jarman 1991:41). In 1823 Gipsies were described as a "despised people" who were idle, barbarous, woeful and without "the least principle of religion or morality" (Jarman and Jarman 1991:45, quoting an anonymous writer in the February 1823 issue of *Seren Gomer*). Clearly the negative image had not diminished through time but continued through the lifetime of John Roberts the harpist (1816-94), who would eventually be invested as "Telynor Cymru" (Harpist of Wales).

Intermarriage between Gipsies and the Welsh was strongly discouraged. E. E. Roberts' somewhat fictionalized account of the Welshman John Robert Lewis (father of the harpist John Roberts) marrying the Gypsy Sarah emphasizes the degree to which such unions were discouraged. Lewis is described as agonizing over the effect of his decision on his family, who are described as silent, cold and contemptuous at his departure (E.E. Roberts 1981:21-22). Though fictionalized, the author's interpretations accurately reflect what is known of Welsh attitudes toward Gipsies at the time. The Jarman's more objective history presents the same view, describing Lewis's

mother as "very antagonistic," but admits that knowledge of the courtship is based totally on family tradition (1991:104-5). There is, however, no reason to doubt that the Lewis family response was negative, since similar reactions have frequently been noted for marriages linking the Gipsy and the "settled" population. The Gipsies also discouraged such intermarriage, with particular concern that non-Gipsy men who enjoyed experimenting with Gipsy life would eventually tire of it and return to their "settled" environment, abandoning their wives and children. On a practical note, however, non-Gipsy men who could prove the seriousness of their intentions might be welcomed since they brought new blood into a society which knew that too much intermarrying among Gipsy groups would create problems.

Although the descendants of the Wood family would eventually achieve success and respect throughout Wales, the family's early reception was apparently no more favorable than it would have been for any other Gipsies. This is in keeping with the general "settled" response to Gipsies and their image in Welsh literature. The romantic allure of the Gipsy caravan and wandering life had not yet entered the popular imagination, at least not according to the limited accounts available for this time and place. Again, when viewed from today's perspective, it serves as a reminder of how unexpected John Roberts's success was.

As time passed, the Wood family remained in Wales; despite prejudice, there was much intermarriage with the Welsh. Many marriages also took place between both first and second cousins, but there is little mention of extensive interaction with more distant English Gipsies, who would have been an expected source for potential spouses. Although with its many children the family ensured its cohesiveness into the twentieth century, there is little sense of Gipsy identity among current descendants (Jarman and Jarman 1991:141), and many descendants were so aware of "the disapproving society in which they lived" that many of John Roberts's great- and great-great-grandchildren would not know the family history, let alone take pride in it (Roberts 1981:8). Eldra Jarman's own Gipsy background was kept hidden from her until childhood inquiries forced her parents to reveal the truth (Jarman and Jarman 1991:ix).

The distinctive physical appearance has diminished and virtually no descendants speak Romani. With the exception of the harp-playing of John Roberts's son William (1865-ca. 1935) and his great-granddaughter Eldra Roberts Jarman, there is little suggestion of musical continuity, despite the twentieth-century folk music revival which has created a more positive environment for folk music than existed in the nineteenth century. The two

other players who are described as musically active in the mid-twentieth century, grandsons of Ernest (1862-ca. 1962) and William (1865-ca. 1935), are listed as violinists, one in jazz, the other's style being unspecified (Jarman and Jarman 1991:143).

Ironically, the family's musical tradition, especially the triple-harp playing has been kept alive more recently by non-Gipsy performers, most notably Nansi Richards (1888-1979) and current top performers Dafydd and Gwyndaf Roberts and Robin Huw Bowen (Manning 1994), who claim connection to the tradition through Richards. Richards was from the Newtown area, near the Roberts' home, and says that when she was young she heard the Roberts/Wood Gipsy harpists play and learned from them (Martin n.d.). Several recordings of her playing exist, from which younger players continue to learn. The present revival of interest in the Welsh Gipsy harp tradition by non-Gipsies reverses the process by which the Roberts family achieved fame.

### THE DECLINE OF WELSH FOLK TRADITIONS

The decline of Welsh folk music, dancing, storytelling and related traditions following the Welsh religious revivals of the seventeenth to twentieth centuries has often been observed (Blyn-LaDrew 1996, D. Gareth Evans 1989:75-95, 245-70, E. D. Evans 1993:70-97, Gwyndaf 1989:11, Gwynn Williams 1975:119-21, Thomas 1974:80-100). A typical example of the attitude to worldly entertainments was expressed by Rhys Prydderch (ca. 1620-99), a Carmarthenshire minister who listed mixed dancing as the first of twelve sins found in his *Gemmau Doethineb* [Gems of Proverbial Wisdom], a book which discussed the "Foolhardy Age" in which he lived (Prydderch 1714:107-14; translated in Gwynn Williams 1975:119-20). Other sins included sorcery and having long hair! The work was so popular that an extract of conversations between nine sinners (including a dancer and a musician) and a minister was published separately. The dancer claims that the music makes people happy, that it means no harm and that he never heard of it causing harm. The minister replies that any healing by music is like deceitful teaching, that it will not last, that Moses was angry when he saw the dancing associated with the Golden Calf, and that dancing caused the unwise oath of Herod and the beheading of John the Baptist! (Prydderch 1766: 13-14, translated in Gwynn Williams 1975:120-21). Numerous other examples of such warnings exist.

The impact of such puritanical revivals on folklore was often noted by the collectors themselves. Edward Jones, for example, makes a typical com-

ment in *The Bardic Museum* (1802) that "The sudden decline of the national Minstrelsy, and Customs of Wales, is in a great degree to be attributed to the fanatic imposters, or illiterate plebian preachers, who have too often been suffered to over-run the country, misleading the greater part of the people from their lawful Church; and dissuading them from their innocent amusements, such as Singing, Dancing, and other rural Sports, and Games, which heretofore they had been accustomed to delight in, from the earliest time. In the course of my excursions through the Principality, I have met with several Harpers and Songsters, who actually had been prevailed upon by those erratic strollers to relinquish their profession, from the idea that it was sinful" (Jones 1802:xvi, quoted in Gwynn Williams 1975:52-53).

Similarly, an 1825 letter to William Hone, editor of *The Every-Day Book*, described Welsh May-Day dancing and noted "This ancient custom, like many others among the ancient Britons, is annually growing into disuse. The decline of sports and pastimes is in every age a subject of regret. For in a civil point of view, they denote the general prosperity, natural energy, and happiness of the people, consistent with morality,—and combined with that spirit of true religion, which unlike the howling of the dismal hyaena or ravening wolf, is as a lamb sportive and innocent, and as a lion magnanimous and bold!" ("H.T.B." in Hone 1967, Vol. 1, cols. 562-65).

Most descriptions of this time period are consistent, indicating that secular music and dance were condemned as sinful and rarely practiced. By the mid-nineteenth century, when the musical Roberts family flourished, the folk tradition was perceived as dying out. The aristocratic patronage which had actually supported bards in antiquity had long since disappeared. The remaining Welsh aristocracy, those who had survived centuries of loss of power to England, culminating in the 1536 Act of Union, were notoriously impoverished and often more concerned with assimilating to fashionable English society than with maintaining their former obligations.

Secular Welsh folk traditions appeared doomed even before the Roberts family were formally recognized for their music in such notable events as John Roberts's first prize at the Abergavenny Eisteddfod in 1842 or his 1884 investiture as "Telynor Cymru" ('Harpist of Wales') at the Arwest Glan Geirionydd, a new gorsedd-like ceremony created by printer-publisher Gwilym Cowlyd to counteract the perceived anglicizing influences of the older gorsedd (Jarman and Jarman 1991:133). But there is evidence that at least some rural Welsh continued to enjoy music and dance, largely through the unlikely link with the English Gypsy fiddler Abram Wood and his descendants, especially the Roberts family. Documents written by

John Roberts and Matthew Wood (1845-1929, Wood's great-great-grandson) cite various instances which indicate that even if the Welsh had discontinued playing their own music, they could still dance to it.

A late eighteenth-century account runs: "As soon as ever the country people saw the old Gypsies with their fiddles, they would laugh, and their feet would begin to dance, and their hands to clap" (Matthew Wood, describing Abram Wood's family, in Sampson 1926: Part IV, 138, quoted in Jarman and Jarman 1991:63). Another description from ca. 1825 notes: "There is a great deal of amusement found by those that used to follow barns. They have many country people coming [to] them to hear their music and to dance on the green, or sometimes in the barn, but most oftener in the house in a big kitchen; and the country people would be staring at the Gypsies with all their eyes, and the Gypsies would stare at the people to see them such fools" (letter from John Roberts to Francis Groome, dated November 22, 1877, reprinted in E.E. Roberts 1981:132). And ca.1840 it was recorded that "The people of the neighborhood soon came to know that I came home, and a great many visited our camp, some of the highest; and I had to play my harp for them to dance upon the green, and they made me a very great welcome" (John Roberts's description, printed in Groome 1880:294, and quoted in Jarman and Jarman 1991:113). Such popularity, with Abram on fiddle and his sons on harp or fiddle, is in and of itself sufficient evidence of the family's great talent and their role in preserving Welsh folk music. Had the circumstances differed slightly, we would probably only know of the Woods through scant references to this time period. But this is just the preliminary period of the Wood/Roberts fame.

### THE WOOD AND ROBERTS FAMILIES

Edward Woolley, who was a former member of the Sae. [sic] Harmonic Musical Antiquarian and Other Society,<sup>8</sup> penned his description of John Roberts and his daughter Mary Ann in 1861. His description is a considerable leap in acclaim from the simple appreciation of fiddle music in a country kitchen. Between Abram Wood's lifetime and that of John Roberts, some significant changes occurred which contributed to Roberts's success. The new eisteddfodau were just getting started in Abram's life but were well established in Roberts's time and provided a convenient performance venue. The native traditions were continuing to decline, making Roberts's lifetime even more favorable for his new role as "ancient bard" than Abram's would have been. And of course, Roberts was half Welsh.

Abram Wood, the fiddler, had left England and began traveling through Wales around 1750, during the peak of folk music repression in Wales. He had four children and it was his granddaughter Sarah (1796-1869), daughter of William Wood and Mary Stanley, who challenged family tradition and married out of the Gipsy network. About 1815 she married John Robert Lewis (1786-ca. 1868) of Pentrefoelas, in then Denbighshire, a non-Gipsy Welshman who, having recently returned from military service, saw her and fell in love with her. Although the marriage was not initially approved by either family, it was successful and long-lasting. Sarah and John Robert Lewis had eight children, including John Roberts, who adopted his father's middle name as his own surname. Musical talent was strong on both sides of the family. John Robert Lewis's father and oldest brother were both ballad-singers and composers of popular verse. The Wood side of the family was very musical. Abram's son William (dates unknown) played fiddle, and Valentine (ca. 1742-1818) was the family's first harpist, known more for his pioneering role than for actual virtuosity. William's son Archelaus (dates unknown) was a proficient harpist and may have given John Roberts his first lessons. Valentine's son Adam (ca. 1762/7-ca. 1852/7) was also a good harpist and Adam's son John (1800-1844) achieved harp fame under the name "John Wood Jones" (Jarman and Jarman 1991:64-66, 102).

John Roberts (1816-94) was baptised at Llanrhaeadr-yng-Nghinmeirch, near Denbigh. His early life appears to have been spent in traditional Gipsy style, on the road, sleeping in tents and barns. He was trilingual, knowing Welsh, English and Romani, and, unlike most of the Wood family at the time, he was literate, presumably learning from his Welsh father. He also learned to read music and, according to Robert Griffith, became "very skilled at arranging old Welsh airs for different instruments" (quoted in E.E. Roberts 1981:42). From age 14 to about 23 (1829-38), he served in the Army, where he had already developed his musical talents, and he said he had played for Princess Victoria on the triple harp in 1834 and 1835 when she visited the Royal Welch Fusiliers.

Marriages to cousins were common in Gipsy society and John Roberts married his second cousin, Ellinor, in 1839, listing his occupation as "harpist." He had actually deserted from the army and was chased and imprisoned before he was able to purchase his discharge. In 1842 Roberts won the Tredegar Prize Harp at the Abergavenny Eisteddfod, just one example of the great acclaim he achieved during his musical career.

He and Ellinor settled in Newtown and had thirteen children, including nine sons who played music with their father, and three daughters, of

whom at least one, the oldest, Mary Ann, was also musical and performed with her father from age 10 onwards as harpist and singer, dressed in Welsh costume. Unfortunately she died young, at about 30. The other children were Lloyd Wynn (b. 1844), Abraham (b. ca. 1848, d. 1850), Madoc (b. 1850), Sarah (b. 1852), John (b. 1853), twins James and Reuben (b. 1855), Albert (b. 1858), Ann (b. 1860), twins Ernest and Charles (b. 1862), and William (b. 1865). Since their mother was also half Gipsy, the children maintained half-Gipsy status.

Mary Ann's use of costume in performance further illustrates the degree to which this family came to embody the new supposedly authentic Welsh traditions. Although none of the publicity material reproduced by E.E. Roberts or the Jarmanes shows men wearing anything other than standard nineteenth-century formal attire, Mary Ann sometimes wore the "orthodox Welsh costume" as noted in a review of her performance at the Llangollen Eisteddfod (*The Cambrian Journal* 1858:273, quoted in Jarman and Jarman 1991:117). As students of Welsh folk costume know, this "orthodox Welsh costume" had been recently concocted by an aristocrat, Mrs. Augusta Hall, later Lady Llanover, based on seventeenth and eighteenth century pan-British fashions.<sup>9</sup> At the 1853 Abergavenny Eisteddfod, she offered prizes for "real National checks and stripes" but apparently no such thing actually existed and there was no winner (Payne 1964:50). Nevertheless, Lady Llanover's own portrait was painted in Welsh costume in 1862, and the image of red and black flannel, checks, stripes, and tall black hat has remained as an icon of Welsh culture to the present day. It is interesting that although no prize was awarded in 1853 for the costume, Mary Ann Roberts, half Gipsy, was sporting it just a few years later.

The details of John Roberts's career are too voluminous to discuss further here. Suffice it to say that his long career began shortly after a Welsh cultural revival had begun. The movement included such developments as the 1789 revival of eisteddfodau by the Gwyneddigion in Corwen and the 1792 bardic gorsedd on Primrose Hill, London. The interest begun by this revival continues today, as can be seen by the many local, regional and national eisteddfodau, and their North American offspring. Although some of the traditions which were seemingly "revived" were actually "invented" as pointed out by Morgan (1983), the traditions are now firmly embedded in contemporary Welsh culture and their authenticity unquestioned by many.

The Roberts family's repertoire is primarily Welsh, with occasional English and operatic pieces, not Hungarian or some other "exotic" eastern European strain popularly perceived as being the musical repertoire of

"Gipsies." Rather they achieved epithets such as "Royal Welsh Harpist" or "Telynor Cymru" by playing such tunes as "Llwyn Onn" (The Ash Grove), "Ar Hyd y Nos" (All Through the Night) and "Hen Wlad fy Nhadau" (Land of My Fathers, the national anthem), "Rhyfelgyrch Gwŷr Harlech" (Men of Harlech) and "The Bells of Aberdovey."<sup>10</sup> They excelled in the art of *pennillion* singing to harp accompaniment, one of the most challenging competitive styles in the eisteddfodau. "Pennill" simply means "stanza," and in this spontaneous singing style the voice must accommodate the phrasing of the stanzas to the harp's melody and rhythm. In competitions the singer does not know in advance what tune the harpist will play. Pennillion singers are not judged so much for vocal quality as such as for their ability to combine pleasingly the words with the harp and to end the vocal stanza as the harp melody ends. Success in pennillion was a pinnacle of achievement, demonstrating vocal dexterity and fluency in Welsh; the high regard in which it was held is similar to the respect commanded by tellers of Gaelic hero-tales.

As an ensemble, the Roberts family were known as "The Original Cambrian Minstrels," suggesting a link to the Welsh tribal past through the latinized term "Cambrian" based on Old Celtic *combrogos* (compatriots), from which "Cymru," the Welsh name for Wales, also derives. John Roberts, the father, was described as "the oldest living Welsh harpist" in the program of a performance for Queen Victoria on August 24, 1889. His son Albert won at least nineteen harp prizes at the national eisteddfodau and "According to the Ancient Right and Priveleges of the British Bards" (admittedly an antiquarian invention, but a prestigious one), was designated "Chief Harpist on the Welsh Triple Harp" (E.E. Roberts 1981:56-60). Much of their repertoire, as indicated from the publicity materials reproduced, is of clear eighteenth- or nineteenth-century origin, with known composers and poets. Although new compositions could possibly be played in an "ancient bardic" style, if such a style were truly known, it is unlikely that recent tunes, being played on relatively new instruments by relative newcomers to Wales, could represent the "ancient" bard.

The Roberts family's accomplishments on the triple harp are especially interesting in regard to the perception that they were playing "ancient bardic" music. Woolley was not the only critic to suggest the antiquity of their music. Such phrasing appears on their own publicity material (reproduced in E. E. Roberts 1981:54-60), which contains several references to the Welsh triple-stringed harp as an "ancient" instrument. In fact, the triple-string harp dates to about 1600 and first appeared in Italy (Griffiths

and Rimmer 1980:201).<sup>11</sup>

As for the family's use of the fiddle or violin, that instrument is also of relatively recent origin, sixteenth-century Italy, according to Boyden (1980:823), and no more indigenous to Wales than the triple harp. For a presentation of "ancient" music, revivalists might better have looked to the *crwth* or "crowd," a medieval Welsh six-stringed instrument which could be bowed like a fiddle or plucked like a lyre. The *crwth*, at least, dates to the twelfth century or earlier (Rimmer 1980:76), and is a somewhat closer candidate for consideration as "ancient" or "bardic." It survived into the eighteenth century and there is currently a resurgence of interest in it. But it was conspicuously absent for about the first two hundred years of the Welsh revival and the available sources do not mention its use by the Roberts or Wood families. Even the date of the *crwth* may be too recent for consideration as "ancient"; indeed, the lack of documentation from the early Celtic period, in terms of surviving instruments or musical transcriptions, precludes the possibility of ever recreating an "ancient bardic" style.<sup>12</sup>

The Roberts family's rise to fame as Welsh musicians may have been assisted by the fact that, with their Welsh surname, their names blended into the general pool of Welsh names. Although the surname Roberts today may be associated with the large and prolific family which resulted from the Gipsy-Welsh marriage of Sarah Wood and John Roberts, it bears no definitive linguistic stamp of Romani language or heritage. Other typically Anglo-Gipsy names include Wood, Boswell and Young, none of which would overtly indicate Gipsy background. Of course, a name could readily be changed anyway, to suit publicity purposes, but in the Roberts family case, there was no need.

While some of the first or given names in the Roberts family, such as Alabaina or Saiforella, do reflect Gipsy heritage, the majority of the performers in this family had typical English names such as John, Ernest, Edward, Jeremiah or William, or intensely Welsh ones such as Lloyd Wynn, Howel, or Madoc, despite the existence of typically Romani given names such as Soraya and Lavendi (Great Britain, Ministry of Housing and Local Government, Welsh Office 1967:29). The Roberts family, although they did not hide their Gipsy heritage, did not use names, costume, or repertoire to enhance the exotic appeal of their Gipsy background. None of the publicity materials examined for this paper describe the Roberts family as Welsh Gipsy musicians, or Gipsy Welsh musicians, or any other such compound; admittedly the amount of such material which has survived and been published is limited, but is presumably representative.

## CONCLUSION: REGENERATING THINGS WHICH "FALL APART"

Economically disadvantaged, the Celtic regions have been under constant pressure to abandon the native languages which house some of their most characteristic folklore, such as Gaelic hero-tales or Welsh penillion singing. In nineteenth-century Wales and twentieth-century Ireland, despite many attempts at revival, bodies of tradition had passed largely to groups once more maligned than the rural Celts themselves: the Gipsies and Travellers who continue to live in classic "small groups" and exchange goods and stories in open-air markets.

As societies abandon their traditions and folklore, former pariah groups may resurrect the material which has come their way for many reasons: their continued illiteracy or dependence on oral culture, their lack of religious scruples against certain genres, their traveling, isolation, or the suitability of their physical environments (such as the use of campfires or the lack of electricity) to the practice of certain traditions.

The dominant culture may eventually reappropriate the traditions. But in the period between decline and revival, lore of all sorts may be reappropriated by enterprising middlemen such as Gipsies and Travellers. As Kennedy has said of them in Britain, "Generally speaking, they will not make up their own songs and tunes and will concentrate on whatever is most popular in the areas in which they travel" (1975:747). In the late twentieth century, this reappropriation is now assisted by the technology, administration and packaging which surrounds folklore: heritage grants, festivals, web sites, and audio/video recordings, and with these tokens of respect the former pariahs are now esteemed. In the case of the Welsh Gipsies, the family's own heritage has become increasingly diluted as the large numbers of children married further into the Welsh community. But the role of the Wood and Roberts families is clear in having helped maintain a threatened tradition into a new century in which it was treasured once again, albeit in more stylized and controlled format. If, like all the centers implied by W.B. Yeats in his poem "The Second Coming," folklore's center does not "hold," then at least it can re-emerge from a multicultural "Cauldron of Regeneration," today's version of the mythological Celtic cauldron from which "no company ever went away unsatisfied" (Mac Cana 1991:65) and in which food might multiply magically or dead warriors might be revived to fight again (Stephens 1986b:453).

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This is a revised version of a paper read on October 19, 1996 at the annual American Folklore Society meeting in Pittsburgh. The original title of the paper was "The Roberts Family of Montgomeryshire—Gipsy Fiddlers or Royal Welsh Harpists?: The Continuation of a Celtic Folk Tradition by Non-Celts."
- <sup>2</sup> Woolley's original comment is in the "testimonial book" John Roberts kept to track his music career; the scrapbook is now in the R.W. Jones (Erfyl Fychan) Collection of the National Library of Wales and is further described by E. E. Roberts (1981:44-45). Had Woolley been the only critic to describe the Roberts family's musical style as "ancient" and "bardic" his comments might not seem worthy of investigation. His statement serves to represent the indiscriminate eagerness with which audiences of his time embraced the notion of bardic antiquity. My attempts to find other writings by Woolley have failed, and information from the National Library of Wales confirms that the spelling "Woolley" in E. E. Roberts was a typographical mistake and that the signature actually reads "Edward Woolley." I would like to thank David Moore, Assistant Archivist, Manuscripts, National Library of Wales, for checking the spelling in the original testimonial book manuscript and for confirming that his department has no further information on Woolley.
- <sup>3</sup> The word "eisteddfod" consists of two elements, "eistedd" (to sit, sitting) and "bod" (to be, being), and is essentially a "sitting-in" of bards.
- <sup>4</sup> Unlike Gaelic Ireland and Scotland, Wales lost the continuous link to its medieval narrative tradition. Nineteenth-century Welsh storytellers did not recite tales from *The Mabinogi* collection that had been translated by Charlotte Guest between 1836-49, but localized supernatural legends often contained elements of magic (Gwyndaf Jones 1970:14, 23). But unlike Ireland under the impact of Yeats, no single literary figure of the time took Welsh folklore into international acclaim. Instead, the newly rediscovered "ancient bardic" identity was visible more through events (eisteddfodau), poetry, costume, and music than through narrative. The revival focused largely on gowns, crowns, thrones, and ceremonies; the use of the Welsh language was emphasized, with only speakers of the language privy to the ritual.
- <sup>5</sup> In his illustrated poem *Jerusalem*, Blake freely mixes imagery of Celtic druids and Stonehenge as if they were contemporaneous (Piggott 1968:226). Today, Stonehenge (Period I) is dated to about 3000 B.C., and the language and social and religious customs of its builders remain virtually unknown but are generally agreed to predate Celtic culture (Atkinson 1985:20, 29). The beginning of Celtic society is generally dated to about 900-600 B.C., with the Hallstatt culture in central Europe; Celtic presence in Britain is later, the earliest evidence dating to about 500 B.C. (Eluère 1993:13; Mac Cana 1991:6-7).
- <sup>6</sup> Meyrick and Smith's print first appeared in their 1815 book, *The Costumes of the Original Inhabitants of the British Islands*, and is reproduced in Piggott (1968: plate 25).
- <sup>7</sup> While most ethnographic writing today on the Gipsies, particularly from continental Europe, refers to the group as "Romani," the admittedly controversial

use of “Gipsy” is maintained here as it predominates in the British accounts which inform this article. The term “Romani” is based on the Gipsy word for “man,” and suggests a more accurate demographic link with the population’s homeland, generally agreed to be in north India, and a more accurate link with the Sanskrit language, to which Romani is closely connected. The spelling “Gipsy” instead of “gypsy” is sometimes used today partially to minimize the mistaken idea that the group originated in Egypt, an idea that the Gipsies have occasionally used to their advantage, giving themselves titles such as “the Dukes of Upper and Lower Egypt.” The death register for Abram Wood described him as “a traveling Egyptian” (Jarman and Jarman 1991:46).

<sup>8</sup> The name of the organization was apparently not clear to E.E. Roberts in the actual manuscript, which reads “Ex-member of the Sae. [sic] Harmonic Musical, Antiquarian & other Society.” Although questioned by E.E. Roberts (1981:47), the abbreviation “Sae.” has been confirmed by the National Library of Wales.

<sup>9</sup> Lady Llanover painted watercolors of the “costumes”, awarded prizes to others for making them, and in 1834 won a prize at the Gwent and Dyfed Royal Eisteddfod for her essay, *The Advantages resulting from the Preservation of the Welsh Language and National Costumes of Wales*. Unfortunately, as Payne points out (1964:49), her research shows little similarity to other sources on costume of the time, such as T. J. Lewelyn Prichard’s 1828 novel, *The Adventures of Twm Shôn Catti*, suggesting that neither of these sources was very accurate since they do not agree.

<sup>10</sup> Most of these tunes have a history of comparatively recent composition and publication: “Llwyn Onn” first published by Edward Jones in *The Bardic Museum* (1802) and the words currently most popular to this air were written by John Jones (“Talhaiarn”) and published in 1860 (Stephens 1986b:372). The air “Ar Hyd y Nos” was first published in Edward Jones’s *Musical and Poetical Relicks of the Welsh Bards* (1784) and the Welsh words were written by John Ceiriog Hughes (1832-87) (Stephens 1986b: 18). The words to the Welsh anthem, “Hen Wlad fy Nhadau,” were written about 1856 by Evan James (1809-78) and the music by his son, James (1833-1902) (Stephens 1986b:266). “Rhyfelgyrch Gwŷr Harlech” also first appeared in Jones’s *Relicks* (Stephens 1986b: 523), and “Clychau Aberdyfi” was first published under that name in Maria Jane Williams’s *Ancient National Airs of Gwent and Morgannwg* (1844) (Stephens 1986b:90). The dating of these tunes presents two main problems. First, music collections of this time, while they must suffice as our main (and tantalizing) glimpse of actual musical practices, are widely viewed as inaccurate representations of what their collectors actually heard—despite the collectors’ frequent claims to the contrary. Since their ultimate market was the middle or upper classes, these editions often used harmonies unlikely in the living tradition, adjusted tonal or rhythmic irregularities, and had lyrics which were either disguised new songs or highly edited and often censored versions of folk material. Second, even if some of these airs or the Roberts’ dance tune repertoire could be proven to be centuries old, and even if one was lenient about the definition of “ancient,” it would be still be a long way from the time period of a flourishing, “authentic” bardic culture.

- <sup>11</sup> Not that this is the first example of overenthusiasm in attributing antiquity to harps. Griffiths and Rimmer include a reproduction of a painting by Domenico Zampieri (1581-1641) showing the biblical King David playing a triple harp (1980:202), an anachronistic error by Zampieri of over 2000 years. Another widely known example of misdating is the so-called "Brian Boru" harp in Trinity College Dublin, which has now been dated to between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, several hundred years after the death of Brian Boru in 1014 (de Breffney 1983: 103; Ó hÓgáin 1991:56).
- <sup>12</sup> A "legitimate" performance of "ancient bardic" music should acknowledge the earliest sources available. Gwynn Williams (1975:12-43), for example, mentions instruments besides the harp, such as pipes and crwth (noted in the *Black Book of Chirk*, ca. 1200) and horns (depicted in the Peniarth Ms. 28). Ideally, such a "legitimate" performance would at least pay tribute to the oldest known manuscript of Welsh music in tablature, the Robert ap Huw Manuscript (British Museum Add. Ms. 14905), written ca. 1625 and purporting to include music from ca. 1100. The ap Huw manuscript was reproduced in 1802 in Edward Williams's *Myvyrian Archaiology of Wales*. From this hypothetical assignment, however, the Roberts family must be excused since the decoding of the ap Huw manuscript has been a scholarly project of the twentieth century, a Linear B-type puzzle for the Welsh harp world; the abstracts for the 1995 Symposium on the ap Huw Manuscript (<http://www.tns.lcs.mit.edu/harp/events/aphuw/ap.toc.html>) clearly indicate that work is still in progress. As for Welsh musical sources from the Roman period or earlier, Gwynn Williams's brief chapter on this era (1975:4-7) confirms that the scant information available from Classical writers is an insufficient basis for a reconstructed "legitimate performance." Relevant written Celtic sources do not exist as the Celts themselves were at that time an oral culture except for brief or fragmentary inscriptions, prayers, and administrative records.

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