

## BILINGUALISM AND THE SCHOOLS OF WALES

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**I**T is laid down in Section 4(i) of the Education Act 1944 that 'there shall be two Central Advisory Councils for Education, one for England and the other for Wales and Monmouthshire, and it shall be the duty of those Councils to advise the Minister upon such matters connected with educational theory and practice as they think fit and upon any questions referred to them by him'.

The Central Advisory Council for Wales has already published three substantial reports: they deal with the future of secondary education in Wales, with county colleges and with *The place of Welsh and English in the schools of Wales*.<sup>1</sup> This last report, which is the result of two years of hard work, is an impressive volume and its contents merit an extended notice. By nature of its terms of reference, which include 'the problem of bilingualism in Wales generally', it is a document of the greatest importance not only for those who are bound to be concerned with education in Wales but also for all who feel any concern for the future of the Welsh nation.

The historical setting of the problem is presented in the first two sections of the Report. The first gives a comprehensive and valuable account of the place of Welsh and English in the schools between 1650 and 1925: the former date marks the foundation of nearly sixty free schools in Wales under the 'Act for the Better Propagation of the Gospel', and the latter was the year which saw the appointment of the Departmental Committee whose inspiring but as yet, after a quarter of a century, not fully implemented report on *Welsh in Education and Life* was published in 1927. Up to 1925 it is the story of the lengthy and intermittently strenuous efforts made to secure the recognition of Welsh as a subject in the curriculum, let alone as a medium of instruction in schools. Between 1925 and 1949, when the Council began its work on the bilingual problem, Wales and especially the state of the Welsh

<sup>1</sup> London, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1953; 12s. 6d.

language went through many changes. These were caused by various social and economic factors: among them, depopulation, increasing facilities for transport and communications, afforestation plans, war-time evacuation into Wales, and the recurring uncertainties of industrial life with those long years of unemployment when 'poverty, defeat and mounting despair denied to all but the best and the most resilient any possibility of pride in national culture or language'. Throughout this period the Board of Education, mainly through its Welsh Department, was not inactive in endeavouring to formulate a language policy, in putting forward useful suggestions and in trying by diverse ways to restore and direct the 'energy and enthusiasm inspired by *Welsh in Education and Life*'. The Presidents of the Board gently exhorted local authorities to develop a language policy and to ensure adequate teaching. Memoranda and pamphlets were published: the most important of these were Circular (Wales) 182 (1942), Pamphlet No. 1, *Language Teaching in Primary Schools* (1945), and Pamphlet No. 4, *Bilingualism in the Secondary Schools of Wales* (1949). These official suggestions, with their clear hint of what the Board was prepared to support and maintain, went largely unheeded and it is difficult to escape the conclusion that, had local authorities and others put into effect the minimum amount of the Board's proposals over the years, the present tasks would be less complex. It is essential, however, to bear in mind that what would appear to be the 'official' policy is founded on two basic propositions which can be enunciated thus:

- (a) While Wales is a country with a language of its own and a literature which has a history of over a thousand years, it is nevertheless linked to England by geographical, economic and political ties.
- (b) In Wales, the two languages, Welsh and English, exist side by side.'

In the third chapter of its Report, the Council considers 'the present position'. There is no uniform language policy throughout the country. Local policies are generally a reflection of the linguistic pattern of the area; where the Welsh language has receded or is dying, the usual policy is an acceptance 'with varying degrees of reluctance' of that fate. In practice there seem to be four main kinds of language policy for the primary schools: teaching only English with no provision for Welsh; providing for the teaching

of Welsh when a sufficient number of pupils demand it; provision for teaching Welsh with a choice of accepting or refusing instruction in it; aiming at giving equal importance to Welsh and English. Most authorities are now reported to be beginning to show signs of their good intention to adopt the general policy formulated by the Welsh Department, but on the whole pious purpose has not yet taken effective shape.

The sobering actuality of the linguistic position in 1950 is revealed in a statistical analysis of the numbers of Welsh-speaking children and in a series of maps to show the distribution of these children in the schools of Wales. In the category of 'Welsh-speaking children' there are included not only all those whose first language is Welsh but those, too, whose first language is English and (i) can understand some lessons given in Welsh and are able to sustain an 'elementary conversation' in it, or (ii) can express themselves with 'fair fluency' in Welsh. Of a total number of 329,408 pupils between the ages of five and fifteen in maintained primary and secondary schools, 69,275 were 'able to speak Welsh'—a percentage of 21—and the Council acknowledges that 'there are a number of children included . . . whose command of the Welsh language is slight'; it is also 'aware that these figures err, if anything, on the side of optimism'. Taking, therefore, those whose first language is Welsh and those who with English as their first language can express themselves 'with fair fluency' in Welsh, there is a total of 58,422, showing a percentage of 17.7. 'Two areas in industrial South Wales', says the Report, 'reveal the catastrophic decline in the status of the Welsh language.' At the beginning of this century Merthyr was Welsh-speaking; by 1924, 9 per cent of its school-children spoke the Welsh language, while in 1950 the percentage was 2.5 (including those in the 'second language' category). In the Rhondda valleys, which not very long ago were so thoroughly Welsh-speaking, the decline has also been rapid: in 1928, 15 per cent, in 1950, 4 per cent. What then of Welsh Wales? Anglesey, Caernarvonshire, Cardiganshire and Merioneth show percentages varying from 80 to 89 (or 74 to 83 within the restricted definition of Welsh-speaking). While it is true to say that these counties are still the strongholds of the language, it is doubtful whether the figures indicate more than a bare maintaining of the position in, say, 1936. The position has certainly deteriorated in Carmarthenshire (70 per cent and 62 per

cent), Denbighshire (31 per cent and 25 per cent), Montgomeryshire (27.8 per cent and 24.6 per cent) and Pembrokeshire (22 per cent and 20 per cent).

A significant table shows the numbers of pupils aged 5-15 years in maintained primary and secondary schools classified in age groups and according to the relation of their first language to the language of their parents. Of the total number of pupils who came from homes where both parents spoke Welsh, 70 per cent used Welsh as their first language. On the other hand, of the total coming from homes where the mother alone spoke Welsh, 10.5 per cent had Welsh as their first language; and 6.1 per cent among those whose father alone spoke Welsh. Over the age groups there does not seem to be much percentage variation among those who have a Welsh-speaking father, while there is a noticeable change among those with the mother alone speaking Welsh: 14.8 per cent at five years of age and 8.7 at fourteen years. Furthermore, of the ten age group whose parents are both Welsh-speaking only 67.7 per cent have Welsh as their first language; at five years of age the figure is 75.5 per cent.

Further statistical evidence supports the inference that 'bilingualism' is much more quickly attained by pupils whose first language is Welsh; this 'bilingualism' implies primarily 'the simultaneous learning of, though not necessarily an equally proficient control over, two languages by an individual child'. Of the psychological problems pertaining to 'bilingualism' and the needs of the individual child the Council has a good deal to say, and it says it with judicious restraint. It accepts 'that body of opinion that maintains that bilingualism is neither an advantage nor a disadvantage to the development of the normal child', but it is careful to point out that considerable research is still required in Wales before any definite conclusions can be reached.

In addition to these psychological considerations, however, there are cultural problems, and the Report is constantly concerned with the cultural dichotomy which goes with bilingualism. Thus it maintains that with two languages and two cultures forming part of the inheritance of the Welsh child 'our educational policy must be directed towards exploiting the undoubted advantages of such a situation and towards averting any possible dangers'. And 'these advantages and disadvantages may affect the individual child, personally, or the people as a community'. The Council

would wish to attain an 'advantageous accommodation' of the two cultures, but it has been resolute in its determination not to allow its mind to rest long beyond the limits of its immediate task. The question of means of providing this advantageous accommodation, it feels, is 'within the field of social philosophy and perhaps of politics'; at least the Council does not think that it has been called upon to discuss it. Nevertheless, while expressing the opinion that 'every person . . . requires a fairly stable and relatively homogeneous social environment', the Council 'cannot subscribe to the view . . . that "education is for the sake of the nation and not for the sake of the individual"'. 'Culture', it is stated, 'consists of the acquired or cultivated behaviour and thought of individuals within a community, based on common tradition and conditioned by a common environment. . . . It is, moreover, the instrument whereby the individual finds one of his first points of certainty.' There is a Welsh culture, 'a unique national pattern which is Welsh . . . and very largely bound up with the Welsh language and our attitude towards it'.

On the basis of evidence, patiently collected and carefully studied, the Council proceeds to formulate its policy, bearing in mind 'the actual situation' and not departing 'one iota from universal principles'. It has been guided by the consideration that 'there is a specifically national Welsh culture'; this culture, 'vigorous and varied', has 'the prescript of traditional value' and it is 'intimately if not indissolubly bound up with the Welsh language'. At the same time another culture and another language are strong in their influence in Wales, and it is 'the individual child who is the focal point at which the varying and often conflicting influences coincide, and it is his or her welfare that must prescribe our course and point our end'. The task then is first to sustain, strengthen and improve the Welsh language in those areas where it is still the first language of a high percentage of the children; second to 'relate the children to the two cultures that exist here side by side'. In effect, this means that the children of the whole of Wales and Monmouthshire should be taught Welsh and English according to their ability to profit from such instruction. The aim is uniform bilingualism but it is admitted, and indeed suggested, that 'the immediate aim in respect of particular persons or even of areas may vary considerably'.

This is not the occasion for a detailed assessment of the methods

propounded by the Council for the implementation of its policy: they embrace the training of teachers, problems connected with the teaching of the second language, the kinds of books that are needed, the potential uses of broadcasting, the importance of visual aids, and well-planned, carefully co-ordinated and unremitting research into the manifold problems of bilingualism.

Although the policy set forth in the Report is specifically directed towards the primary schools, it becomes apparent that its ultimate effectiveness depends upon its adoption at all levels of education in Wales. It must include the secondary schools, which have at present no continuity of language policy with the primary schools and in which, too often, a child's arrival has meant a painful and frustrating search for new bearings. And so right up to the University stage.

'The attitude of the community' will eventually decide whether this policy will succeed. Much depends on its desire and will as they may be shaped and guided by many factors which the Council in steadfast purpose has refrained from discussing. Social and political issues inevitably affect men's opinions on education in general. Lively, invigorating and helpful discussion has already been aroused in Wales concerning the relationship between the Council's policy and those social, political and economic factors of which the Report makes only passing mention. It has been asserted that the Council has set as an ultimate aim what should be a transition stage (and there seems to be fairly general agreement about the unavailability of a period of uniform bilingualism) since the complete preservation and flourishing of Welsh culture will be possible only in a unilingual country. The Council was not unaware of this, but it became convinced 'that a policy of unilingual Welsh schools would not only fail to commend itself to the vast majority of our people but would embitter the situation and the relations between those who speak the two languages'. There is a deep fear in many hearts lest what now appear to be Welsh-speaking strongholds should be further weakened without an early compensatory recovery of Welsh speech in the anglicized areas.

The preliminary returns for Wales of the 1951 Census do not bring any comforting reassurance. Out of a population of about 2,600,000 (60,000 less than in 1921) there were 700,000 speakers of Welsh over the age of three. This shows that there has been an

average annual decrease of 10,000 since 1931, when the total was 900,000. In the age groups, the highest percentage of Welsh speakers is among those over sixty-five years—40 per cent. The percentage shows a progressive decrease in the other groups. It was not strange, therefore, to read in a recent article that 'Welsh is a language of old men. Unless some great change of policy occurs, it seems unlikely that as much as a fifth of our population will be Welsh-speaking in another thirty years' time.' Furthermore, present-day Wales is a country of small families: the majority are of three persons or less; indeed, more than 400,000 families (i.e. over one half of the total number) have no children under sixteen. This does not mean that Wales is in this respect strikingly different from England, but its significance for Wales cannot lightly be ignored. Then there is the serious plight of the rural areas: it is devoutly to be hoped that bold, far-reaching action will soon be brought to deal with this acute problem.

Here and there one can perceive cause for optimism, and nowhere more than in the growth of the 'Welsh' schools in anglicized areas. The first of these was opened at Aberystwyth in 1939 as a private venture. On St David's Day, 1947, at Llanelly a second 'Welsh' school was established: this time by the local education authority. Now there are over thirty of them (including five nursery schools) in anglicized areas, with 2,000 children attending them, and it is reported that at present thirteen more are being asked for. By themselves these schools will not save the situation but they show the shining light of resolute faith and buoyant hope.

It would be disastrous if in their laborious preoccupation with the pressing urgency of the economic, social and political problems affecting the life of their language and culture the people of Wales were to lose sight of their spiritual problem and of their Christian responsibilities. In the *Vita Sancti David* we read of the bewildered questionings of the saint's disciples: '*A quo docebimur? ... A quo adiuuabimur?*'. We are also given the saint's exhortation: '*Fratres, constantes estote*'.