

# illuminating a Resilient Rural Culture in Twentieth Century *Y Fro Gymraeg* Using Bourdieu's *Bearn*

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## Abstract

This article uses Bourdieu's analysis of peasant life in the *Bearn* to illuminate a changing but resilient rural culture in mid-twentieth century Wales. Rather than finding their culture and language eroded by economic and social change, Welsh speaking participants in this biographical study used the education system to build upon their existing cultural capital previously cultivated through religious and informal civic institutions. A distinctive habitus enabled exchange of locally acquired cultural capital for the symbolic capital of qualifications, in the face of declines in the farming and quarrying industries and consequent loss of employment opportunities. Anglicising influences of upward social mobility were counteracted by Welsh language activism, combined with a sense that Wales was heir to a tradition of Bards and scholars. This helped maintain the *illusio* that 'Welsh culture' was a game worth playing. Unlike peasant life in the *Bearn*, this story is of transformation rather than demise.

## Introduction

This article addresses the question of why some language and cultural communities die and others grow in strength and vitality. Wales and the Welsh language are often identified as exemplars of the latter (Coupland *et al.* 2006), in that they have retained vitality and dynamism despite a long and acrimonious history of minoritisation and Anglicisation (Williams 1990, 2000; Jenkins 1997). Whilst the relative vitality of Welsh is well documented, questions remain regarding subjective orientations to the language and their origins which, despite meticulous historical scholarship, are still mysterious. Here, we attempt to 'think with Bourdieu' (see Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) to explore the origins of the recent vitality of 'Welsh culture' in a region comprising north and mid Wales. Like Bourdieu, we approach this in a way that focuses on the way that agents are determined by objective structures and on the way that agents themselves may exert a determining influence through

their own subjective action (Grenfell and James 1998). We see the sustenance of rural communities in the 'behaviour of ordinary people living and thinking in accordance with the dispositions which they have inherited from the group affiliations of their families' (Robbins 1991, p. 8). There is also a broader process at work through which groups secure their survival in the face of economic and political changes.

We use Bourdieu's account of peasant life in the *Bearn* to illuminate the culture of a region of rural Wales that, in the middle years of the twentieth century, was unique within the UK in terms of religious and socio-linguistic characteristics. Whilst English was spoken, for the majority of the population Welsh was the first language<sup>1</sup> and integral to the identity of these communities. It could be used to exclude non-Welsh speakers and safeguard localised forms of symbolic capital. Our area of interest has been termed '*Y Fro Gymraeg*' ('the Welsh language area'), mapped by Aitchison and Carter (2000). During the mid-twentieth century, it was economically disadvantaged, especially with the decline in the farming and quarrying industries.

The *Bearn* and *Y Fro Gymraeg* share some similarities. Both were characterised by a distinctive language or dialect and were economically disadvantaged compared to the broader national configurations of which they were a part, and are often seen to be suffering the kind of rural marginality identified a generation later by Cloke (Cloke *et al.* 1994; Cloke 1997). They relied to significant degree on small farms, affording a near-subsistence existence for their proprietors and a few workers. One of the most striking differences between the *Bearn* described by Bourdieu (2008) and *Y Fro Gymraeg* was that the latter played host to a distinctive religious movement, 'Nonconformity', a variant of Christianity staunch in its dissent from mainstream Anglican and Catholic churches.

The development of Nonconformity in Wales owed much to the Methodist movement (Jones 2004). The importance of literacy and direct access to the gospel, enhanced by the availability of the Bible in Welsh (White 2007), instilled a close relationship between Welsh Methodism and education (White and Suggett 2002). Lay preaching and extemporised 'oral prayer' on the part of congregations created an ethos of personal reading and understanding.

The relationship between Nonconformity and a variety of forms of civic, cultural and educational activity in *Y Fro Gymraeg* resulted in the emergence of a 'public religion' (Chambers and Thompson 2005), amounting to a 'Nonconformist hegemony'.

Gains made by Nonconformity were particularly noticeable in the early nineteenth century, penetrating the whole of religious and secular life (Jones 2004). Yet by 1850, secularisation was occurring and a social ethos was nurtured. By the end of the century, Nonconformity was associated with political radicalism (Chambers and Thompson 2005) and in Wales acted as 'the repository of Welsh cultural identity and anti-English political sentiments' (Bruce 1995, p. 521).

The doctrines and beliefs of Nonconformity led to a puritanical culture prevailing in *Y Fro Gymraeg*, resulting in public houses closing on Sundays and a suspicion of mass culture. Emmett's (1964) account noted the disapproval of Whist drives and dances. Through fieldwork conducted in the 1960s, Madgwick *et al.* (1973) detected the erosion of this culture through secularisation. Its residual influence and symbolic

value generates interest in contemporary accounts of Welsh identity (Jones and Fowler 2007) and may continue playing a part in the construction and maintenance of such identities at community level, thereby sustaining knowledge, culture and symbolic capital (Carter 2006).

Since Iolo Morgannwg in the eighteenth century, Welsh culture has been built *in situ* in the manner of Hobsbawm and Ranger's (1983) 'invention of tradition'. Jones (1982) characterises a good deal of what we describe as the symbolic capital of Nonconformity, in the notion of 'Welsh culture', a concept still present. The accumulated labour of culture was translated, manifested and actualised in symbolic capital, through practices such as participating in and valuing education, attending Sunday school, learning and practicing music, developing proficiency in extemporised prayer and the construction and narration of stories relating to the 'imagined nation' of Wales.

This inculcated the notion that Wales had a heritage of scholars and poets (Jones 1992). The chapel played a key part in this newly-imagined Welsh culture, with its Bible study, Sunday school and transmissible cultural capital in the form of education, song, music, preaching and prayer. Welsh culture gave a sense of gaining something special. In piety and culture, the austere world of farm, quarry and chapel could outdo anything mustered by the English; Nonconformity and Welsh culture was something that English oppressors could not take away. Welsh culture was carefully crafted and there had been a frenetic accumulation of value and the development of formal and informal techniques to ensure its sustenance, growth and transmission. The Welsh were 'an imagined people', themselves doing the 'imagining' (Manning 2002, p. 482). Community studies carried out in the region around the mid-twentieth century (Davies and Rees, 1960; Rees 1975) provide statements 'from within the culture' exemplifying many of the concepts central to the notion of Welsh culture.

Socio-economically the most dominant group in the region was the large Anglicised landowners. The Established Church gloried in its social status as the church of the Anglicised aristocracy (Morgan 1999). Nonconformists became the dominant fraction of a dominated group, yet their dominance was cultural rather than economic. The Nonconformist Liberals never replaced the Tory elite as wielders of economic power in North Wales. When landed fortunes were eroded in the twentieth century, the local economy disintegrated (Jones 1982).

Bourdieu (2008) describes the decline of a culture and way of life in the *Bearn*, as farming declined in importance and centres of economic and cultural activity were found in towns. Bourdieu observed that many unmarried men were present at village social events. They had little chance of marrying and their way of life showed every prospect of disappearing. Young people became attracted to town life and young women sought romantic engagements with young men in towns pursuing urban occupations. Women's preference for 'townsmen' rather than 'peasants', revealed changes in attitudes to the peasant condition, reflecting the realignment of attitudes with the opinions of dominant groups in France at the time. The peasant farmers, their education, skills and meagre capital had little value. They had little chance of being able to argue for anything distinctive, valuable or attractive about their lives and had to reckon with a devalued image from the townsmen.

For Bourdieu, the construction of a social order takes place in social practice. It is not merely to do with the agent's thinking or beliefs. The regularity of society and social action originates in physical action and practical sense – the capacity bestowed by the habitus to produce ways of acting that align themselves with the social order so as to appear natural – a 'social necessity turned into nature, converted into motor schemes and body automatisms' (Bourdieu 1990, p. 69). We turn to these habitualised practices and ways of seeing to understand the similarities and differences between the *Bearn* peasants and those in *Y Fro Gymraeg*. In connection with 'motor schemes and body automatisms', it is instructive to note that Trosset (1986) writes of how Welsh language and Welsh identity are performed. There are parallels here with Bourdieu's (2008) notion of *tenué* – how a person holds themselves – *hexis* and the embodied qualities of habitus. A number of features were present in *Y Fro Gymraeg* that were absent in the *Bearn* that may illuminate the relative resilience of the particular *buchedd* (a Welsh concept that may be interpreted as 'way of life') or habitus prevailing.

Wales and its people suffered a devalued image in the nineteenth century (Jones 1992). Outsiders sometimes struggled to see achievements in its education system. In 1847, government-appointed commissioners, reporting on the state of education in Wales, published the 'Blue Books', describing the Welsh as immoral and poorly educated. This was attributed partly to the Welsh language: 'a language of old fashioned agriculture, of theology and simple rustic life' (Commissioners of Inquiry into the State of Education in Wales 1847, p. 3). Yet half a century later, 'National identity came to be associated with specific political and religious beliefs ... a sense of identity fuelled by notions of religious purity, by the intimacy of chapel services and the strains of communally known and sung hymns ...' (Jones 1992, pp. 338–339). A rapid evolution of culture and spiritual life had occurred imbued with symbolic value, partly in direct response to the *Brad y Llyfrau Gleision* or the 'treason of the Blue Books', which had aroused the indignation of the Welsh (Derfel 1854).

The second half of the nineteenth century saw a resurgence of interest in Welsh language and culture and the rewriting of Welsh history, stressing cultural and scholarly tradition. Despite historians' scepticism about this history (Jones 1982), it formed the basis for the *illusio*, the sense that the cultural game was worth playing. Combined with the developing interest in Welsh nationalism and the influence of Nonconformity, this served to consolidate the sense for many in *Y Fro Gymraeg* that they had something special to preserve and pass on.

In Bourdieu's account of the *Bearn*, the education system was a factor in the process of devaluing rural life. The influence of schools undermined family strategies of reinforcing children to invest themselves in the land. Children enjoyed the extended period of time spent in school and it cut farmers' children off from the experiences, lifestyle and temporal rhythms of peasant society. Schooling, says Bourdieu, eroded values transmitted by the family, redirecting children's affective and economic investments away from reproduction of the family line. By contrast, schooling and study were embraced by the Welsh and not seen as being inconsistent with the Welsh rural condition. By the mid-nineteenth century Welsh Nonconformists had acquired significant cultural capital. Although condemning the state of education in Wales, the Blue Books remarked upon high quality Sunday schools provided for and

attended by 'dissenters', their appetite for Biblical education and the democratic atmosphere obtaining in class (Commissioners of Inquiry into the State of Education in Wales 1847).

Through their education, Bourdieu's *Bearn* peasant children gained a sense that they should progress to wage earning rather than remaining subsistence farmers and they looked forward to an adulthood with a personal income and associated rights. Among the children of farmers and quarrymen in Wales, as will be seen from the comments of contemporary informants, encouragement to gain an education and a more comfortable life did not involve a comparable estrangement from family or culture. However, there were issues around having a wage in farming families and quarrymen were wage labourers. In Wales, teaching became a desirable profession, drawing people from the Nonconformist tradition (Madgwick *et al.* 1973) and the Welsh gained a reputation as a nation of preachers and teachers.

In the *Bearn*, many farmers, with their slim marriage prospects, were unlikely to continue their family lineage. Children anyway were unlikely to pursue farming, the education system having enlightened them regarding more attractive prospects elsewhere, thus contributing to the demise of the peasant class. Johnes (2012) mentions how some women in twentieth century rural Wales left farming communities to live in towns rather than marry farmers, but no data is provided and if there was such a trend it was nowhere near as obvious as that witnessed by Bourdieu in the *Bearn*.

The middle years of the twentieth century in *Y Fro Gymraeg* saw the 'demoralisation' of industries such as quarrying and farming in terms of the loss of employment possibilities and the decline in these industries. Bourdieu's analysis and our own work come into alignment when he says that the flight into education prevented the revolt of those who had been uprooted, by transmuting objective bankruptcy into reconversion, proletarianisation into social promotion and by providing adolescents excluded from traditional activities not with jobs, but with a provisional occupation by staying on at school.

## Methodology

The empirical work upon which this article draws arose from a study of community life in twentieth century rural Wales via the medium of older peoples' biographical narratives. The data for this article was provided by two groups of respondents, participating in distinct but related studies. All participants lived in rural north Wales and ranged in age from 51 to 84 years at the time of interview, between 2004 and 2006. Whereas participants in the first group were made aware that the researcher was interested especially in their decision to enter higher education, the second group was told that the major focus of interest was their experience of growing up in rural Wales. Despite the difference in focus, the respondents independently and spontaneously produced accounts of the significant place of Nonconformity in their lives and community. The centrality of chapel to participants' accounts of their early lives prompted a focus on their recollections of cultural transmission and reproduction in religious life. Most participants had been involved with Nonconformist chapels and many had experienced childhood in Nonconformist families. Some had simply been

exposed to Nonconformity through village life. One person had been brought up as an Anglican but joined her husband's Nonconformist chapel upon marrying.

25 participants were interviewed all of whose first language was Welsh. A summary of participants and their details is presented in Table A1 (Appendix). Participants came from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds. A small number had endured extreme hardship when young, due to factors such as domestic violence or the death of a parent. The sample contained both women and men drawn from across *Y Fro Gymraeg*. Within this kind of biographical method, the choice of individuals *per se* is not crucial; the data yields information regarding the individual in the social setting. Individual narratives reflect the prevailing cultural background, the experiences and processes involved and use of symbolic capital around the axis of social mobility and education. Many participants had followed careers as teachers or academics. This composition was unintentional, but interesting in the light of the high value that Nonconformity placed on education; teaching and preaching were prestigious occupations in the region (Madgwick *et al.* 1973), people aspiring to 'success' often aiming for such careers. This has implications for our findings, in that many of our participants were highly educated and often had an excellent knowledge of Welsh history, politics and literature. Such participants might be more likely to emphasise education, aspects of cultural capital and accounts of their own social mobility.

Interviews were conducted using an adaptation of Chamberlayne *et al.*'s (2000) technique, commencing with the interviewer asking a single generative question, prompting the participants to talk about their life, starting from childhood. The participants then led the interview by expanding their narrative in any way that they chose, the interviewer interrupting only to ask for clarification or to follow up particular points.

Analysis proceeded in line with Chamberlayne *et al.*'s (2000) recommendations, by discussion of the interviews on a case by case basis among a research team from the authors' host departments, identifying themes and pivotal moments in the narrative. Notes and records of these discussions formed a further layer of data for analysis. Analysis was informed by issues raised in the background literature concerning types of identities, interpretive repertoires and narrative forms that helped illuminate how culture, spirituality and education might be constructed, reproduced and imbued with meaning. Bourdieu attached importance to practice and lived experience. The strength of this approach in discovering novel aspects of recounted experience is attested by the fact that the centrality of religion to our participants' lived experience had not been anticipated. It emerged from the data in a grounded fashion. As a further check on the veracity of the interpretive structure devised, the analysis was fed back to selected participants for confirmation that the researchers had understood the material in the way that participants had expected.

The participants who talked about their own or the wider community's involvement with Nonconformity made detailed and specific references to its role in cultural life and the preparation this gave for education and the acquisition of credentials in the wider world. This prompted a reflection on the applicability of notions of cultural capital. We were struck by the diligence with which it was described as being accumulated throughout the data. As analysis progressed, the data were examined

systematically for themes relating to cultural and symbolic capital, especially concerning Nonconformity.

## Results and discussion

From our analysis, four key themes emerged: education, marriage, *buchedd*/habitus and *illusio*.

### *Education*

By the mid-twentieth century the infrastructure to practice and authorise the distinctive culture of *Y Fro Gymraeg* – the networks of chapels, the *Eisteddfodau*<sup>2</sup> and so on – was sufficiently well established to give authority, legitimacy and symbolic value to the recognition and prizes that they conferred.

‘He [her uncle] sat the *Eisteddfod* exams to become a member of the *Gorsedd* ... for a man who had sacrificed a university education for somebody else, that was very, very important ...’  
Ceinwen (female)

In our data, it is as if the education system was part of the common culture rather than situated in opposition to it. Schools and colleges were a reason to stay in the area for many who had succeeded in the education system, providing job opportunities as teachers or lecturers. This deepened the sense that the education system was part of the community and belonged to it in a way that seems to have been absent in the *Bearn*. The idea among parents that an education would prevent one’s child having to endure a life of manual labour was widespread and consistent with the status given to education as part of the *illusio*.

‘It was primarily to get a good job I think, something away from farming and hard labour jobs ... if you had a good education it opened doors didn’t it, you could go to any job’. Dafydd (male)

In *Y Fro Gymraeg*, while education might lead to one getting out of certain occupational trajectories, it did not necessitate getting out of the culture – if anything, it facilitated moving more deeply into it.

‘A great deal has been made and probably rightly, of the influence of Nonconformity and religious education and Sunday schools ... in creating a literate, disputatious culture in Wales which lent itself in a sense to university education ... one was certainly aware that Wales did have a lot of teachers and preachers who had had an education whereas the other people in my community had not ...’ Arwel (male)

As well as functioning as role models for the future generation, the ‘teachers and preachers’ that Arwel remembers reinvested their cultural capital into their communities. Paradoxically though, the education valued and desired for children increased their opportunities to leave the area altogether. As Arwel mentioned when describing his own trajectory, he returned to the ‘region’, but not the ‘area’.

### Marriage

Rather than an exogamous marriage strategy for young women as described by Bourdieu in the *Bearn*, our participants described a much more endogamous approach. There was evidence of encouragement to marry people that one's family found desirable, with desirable occupations:

'[my parents] were very pleased when I met and married Geraint and my sister then married his best friend ... so they were very pleased about that, that they'd both been to Oxford'. Elsi (female)

But there was also some encouragement not to marry people who were English or anti-Welsh. One participant started a relationship with (and later married) an English PhD student studying at a nearby university:

'I remember my grandmother saying to me why don't you find yourself a nice Welsh boy, the emphasis on not getting married to the English'. Alwena (female)

### Buchedd/*habitus*

Participants' accounts of their lives and those of others in the communities in which they grew up describe a highly particular milieu with a specific '*buchedd*', a sense of the way in which life was performed (Trosset 1993) and how one was encouraged to carry oneself. The idea of *buchedd* (Jenkins 1960) itself, along with the idea of the Welsh representing a common folk or *gwerin*, could be part of a constructed past, formulated by middle class Nonconformists (Jones 1982). What is important is the sense of identity conferred, of being part of a particular culture or community and the value this gave to cultural and religious pursuits that lent themselves to educational aspiration. Whilst people's accounts recalled several decades later are not definitive representations of reality, they are important because they represent how people see their past and, by implication, see themselves in relation to the present:

The quarrymen were keen to get on ... that was part of the Welsh culture ... maybe the Welsh did want to learn and go further ...' Eryl (male)

We emphasise the parallels between the concepts of *habitus* and *buchedd*, particularly the kind of *habitus* described by participants and what Jenkins (1960) called '*buchedd A*', the performance of a respectable Nonconformist existence and a pervasive respect for knowledge, yielding the disadvantaged but aspirational first generation of university students who benefited from the post war expansion of university education in the UK<sup>3</sup>. The idea of a *habitus* peculiar to the people concerned helps us make sense of the stories they told, the clothes they wore, the kinds of songs and poetry which came most readily to mind and the alacrity with which they invested time and energy in Sunday schools and cultural events.

### *Illusio*

*Buchedd* also has something in common with *illusio* (Bourdieu 1990, p. 66), the continued belief in the aims and rewards in a particular field. Declarations of loyalty



and love for Wales and Welsh culture despite its historical marginal status are examples of *illusio*, reminiscent of the rural sense of relationship to the landscape and social cohesiveness identified by Cloke *et al.* (1994). A persistent feature mentioned by many participants was the readiness with which they grasped the sense that it was all worthwhile.

‘The chapel was a major influence on my life and on certain members of the [school] class. The chapel encouraged reading, literary culture ... it especially helped me when I had to perform and go in front of an audience, so that was part of the Welsh culture ...’ Eryl (male)

Lowri’s story in particular exemplifies much of the *illusio*. Throughout her life, she had been surrounded by others who also subscribed to the *illusio*, in the sense that life was best lived through the welfare of others:

‘Many of them were members of churches with a faith, with a belief that you sacrificed yourself, that you don’t go after your own ends and I think that makes the whole difference to your life doesn’t it?’ Lowri (female)

Within chapel communities, there was a complex and tightly knit social network, ‘keeping’ one another. This might involve care and support but also keeping alive the language, the presumed traditions and culture and the system of values suffusing and sustaining these communities:

‘Williams the [nationalist] poet referred to “the Holy network of God – keeping thee and him and her and me” – and that was the right thing for the stage for what we’re discussing now [women supporting and caring] – because there was always someone there to look after – and we’re back to your Nonconformist community and church ...’ Lowri (female)

‘I think within Nonconformity in particular that’s part of the business isn’t it ... in our house we never had any inclination as to who was worthy of respect and who wasn’t. Everybody was worthy of respect ...’ Lowri (female)

Certain ideals – even idealism – and intangible dividends of the social field prevent total disaffection and disconnection and ensured continued participation. As Dreyfus and Rabinow (1993, p. 41) call it, ‘the self-deception necessary to keep players involved in the game’. The *illusio*, a faith and investment in the worth of the stakes of the field (Bourdieu 1990, p. 66), is what holds together and brings energy to the field where cultural and spiritual activities, self and family improvement were practiced. *Illusio* is the animating force making things meaningful and worthwhile – it turns *options* into *generative oppositions*.

This generative conviction – the *illusio* – is to do with the relationship between habitus and field (Bourdieu 1996, p. 172). The field is a set of objective relations, a ‘social universe’, whose logic enjoys a degree of autonomy from that of larger scale politics or the economy. It is made up of institutions and agents and their struggles over the stakes of the field (Bourdieu and Johnson 1993, pp. 162–164). We might see chapels, schools, *Eisteddfodau* organising committees, families and individuals seeking to gain legitimacy for themselves and their ‘products’. These were often aesthetic or cultural products – knowledge, music, poetry – thus we recollect Bourdieu’s remarks about the artistic or literary fields (Bourdieu and Johnson 1993, p. 164; Bourdieu 1996, p. 224), where the stakes have to do with the kinds of cultural forms granted legitimacy.

The habitus represents an internalisation of one's position in and understanding of the field, both currently and in terms of one's personal and family history, grounding generative practice. The *illusio* – individual or collective – is a sensed connection between self, social context and purpose, a conscious unquestioned faith. It is the conviction that this is the right way, given the field as it currently presents itself and one's historical and ongoing internalised position. This social cement, allied to broader sentiments of nationalism, provided a means of holding families and communities together, facilitating their transition.

This *illusio* helps explain why it was that, with declines in local industry and occupational opportunities in the mid-twentieth century, people did not become deculturalised, but directed their efforts toward exchanging cultural capital for credentials outside the immediate community – for qualifications and, as our participant Cadi commented, for jobs 'with a pencil'.

It is differences in the habitus and *illusio* which may explain some of the contrasts apparent between the story told by our participants and the situation of other rural cultures.

'That political awareness was there and culture was tied in with that, so there was always discussions of politics, of philosophy ... books were everywhere in our house ... it was taken for granted that education was one of the central parts of life ... in general terms education was very highly regarded in the community ... literature was very important for my parents ...' Ceinwen (female)

There was evidence within the narratives that the idea of going to university was not a whim, or a simple aspiration. Participants had an embedded educational aspiration and many remembered being encouraged toward educational achievement from a very young age, hence the previous use of the term 'aspirational habitus' (Baker and Brown 2008, 2009) rather than simply 'aspiration'. Their habitus seemed to enable a pervasive feeling that they had a right to a university education and to feel comfortable in the university environment, despite being aware that their social backgrounds were very different from their peers at university:

'In some sense, [we were] going to college on behalf of the generation previously, who hadn't been able to go to college – you're almost going to college as a proxy for other people ... they had felt a certain frustration at not being able to take advantage of university ... I expressed it in what was a very poor poem ... but the fact that I wrote it clearly meant something ... the thought of for example failure at university would have been horrendous ... you would not be letting yourself down, you'd be letting down a whole generation of people for whom you were there as this proxy'. Geraint (male)

An understanding of ethnographic sites as essentially porous, with ambiguous boundaries subject to external influence and migration, is central to the relational approach. 'To think in terms of the field is to think relationally' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 96), thus encouraging the researcher 'to seek out underlying and invisible relations that shape action rather than properties given in commonsense categories' (Swartz 1997, p. 119). Obtaining a 'clean job' was valued, yet this often involved transition to an English speaking workplace. Equally, obtaining higher education might involve a movement to a different part of the country. Nevertheless, among our participants, close ties to the neighbourhood and community and its way of life remained.

There was a strong collective sense of ownership concerning the founding of a university in Bangor in 1884 – the notion was promulgated that it had been funded through subscriptions of ‘quarrymen’s pennies’ (Roberts 2009). Higher education in Wales was not so vastly geographically distanced from the general population as it often was in England; as in Scotland, there were ‘local’ universities. Entering higher education did not always imply substantial movement across space. Neither did it, via the notion of ‘quarrymen’s pennies’, involve a sense that one was entering alien social or cultural territory.

When industry was buoyant in *Y Fro Gymraeg*, much of the cultural activity of the *caban* (quarry rest room) as described by Jones (1982), or the *Ysgol Sul* (Sunday school) was directed inwards, for the community’s own entertainment and edification. As people sought to maximise their capital accumulation strategies in response to demoralisation of industry, cultural activity was directed outward, towards enabling the rising generation to obtain the educational credentials that would grant them recognition in the wider world of employment. This required the conversion of indigenous culture into the symbolic capital of qualifications. Our data support Rees’s (1975) contention that rural life represents an adaptive accommodation to its circumstances.

Participants’ habituses had a transformative aspect reminiscent of Richards’s (2005) sense of ‘advancement’ and ‘investment’ in the self by gaining an education. This facilitated their movement into the middle classes after university, as they adopted new professions and lifestyles, yet enabled them to retain continuity with their core commitment to family and community. Narratives detailing embedded attitudes towards education revealed much regarding the ability of many participants to climb out of disadvantage. Rees (1975, p. 100) maintained that Welsh rural communities lacked a religious organisation that could be ‘crystallised in institutions that could ensure maximum continuity’. Our own data, collected over half a century after Rees’s, suggest that continuity was more widely diffused through the culture and relations within it, rather than being manifest through stasis in forms of worship or kinship relations.

## Conclusion

Participants’ narratives chiefly cover the years from the 1940s to the early 1970s, yet their reminiscences and the people about whom they spoke represent a much longer tradition. When they were young, the older generation, people of their parents’ and grandparents’ cohort, would very likely have been born in the nineteenth century. Whilst contemporary historians point to the recent nineteenth century cultural revolution in Wales, to our participants, village life and values would appear to have a timeless, commonsensical quality difficult to appreciate nowadays. A love of learning and the sense that educational activities represented a valid socio-spatial niche appears to have been important in undergirding the subsequent achievement of educational qualifications.

It could be said that the Welsh of *Y Fro Gymraeg* harnessed education for their own purposes. As the century wore on, social mobility was accompanied by language activism, underwritten by the *illusio* of Bards and scholars. Along with cultural capital

cultivated in the chapel and village school, some people were able to embark on university education and subsequent white collar careers. Like Emmett (1964), we noted that especially prior to the 1960s, such employment often involved an ambivalent relationship to the Welsh language. As our participant Harri observed, professionals usually spoke English. By the 1960s, political lobbying and activism was placing the Welsh language on the agenda of broadcasters, policymakers and officials in a variety of public and private organisations. Social changes in Wales in the latter part of the twentieth century did not lead to the Welsh language being abandoned, but embedded more fully in public life. The rural culture of *Y Fro Gymraeg* changed, but was nonetheless strikingly resilient.

The possibility of the conversion that Bourdieu proposed between the forms of capital has been given a new and interesting cast by that which we found in this investigation. No matter how diligently people accumulated cultural capital, it was difficult to convert this into economic capital because the economy was dominated by subsistence level employment. Skeggs has suggested that the middle classes are active in appropriating resources in the making of selves and that the 'ability to propertize culture in the making of a self, therefore, becomes central to how class is made' (Skeggs 2004, p. 177). Yet in *Y Fro Gymraeg*, this process of social mobility was not so straightforward or direct. Emmett (1964) noted that class structure was often hard to discern in Welsh rural life. Even people who had their own farms or smallholdings and who might be thought of as having some degree of material capital were not readily able to live more affluent lives. The need to continually reinvest in the business could leave them worse off than many of their neighbours. To some, with the addition of a university degree, the value of cultural capital could be understood in relation to advancement in the labour market. The value of cultural capital may have been more diffuse, in contributing to an accumulated sense of prestige and cultural value. Educational qualifications represent the 'certificate of cultural competence which confers on its holder a conventional, constant, legally guaranteed value with respect to power' (Bourdieu 1986, p. 248).

The forms of capital described here are often about investment in others rather than the self. It is 'used up in interaction with others and is for the benefit of others' (Reay 2004, p. 71). Investments in the self were often seen as the culmination of earlier investment by others. Whilst depletion may occur on an individual level, the trajectories described by participants suggest that in terms of the family, the group or the faith community, there may nevertheless be a collective gain. The sense of going to university on behalf of other family members who had foregone the opportunity highlights the centrality of the family to such cultural accumulation and reproduction. It is as if the changes that many of our participants were able to make in their lives were achievable because they were standing on the shoulders of family members who had cultivated the *buchedd* in themselves and their loved ones in the past.

Because of the difficulty of turning social and symbolic capitals into material assets, a rather different symbolic economy seems to have evolved in *Y Fro Gymraeg*, a region in which material hardship co-existed with cultural enrichment. It is this damming up of the social, cultural and symbolic capital that is crucial in creating a sense of yearning for educational achievement, for some sort of outlet for the desire for education.

As we have described elsewhere, (Baker and Brown 2008; Brown and Baker 2011), the distinctive culture experienced by people growing up in *Y Fro Gymraeg* at this time might have assisted them in gaining entry to higher education. The links that people maintained to their original communities and families meant that access to higher education did not – at least in its early days – necessarily represent a ‘brain drain’, or cultural depletion of village life. Individuals maintained continuity in their citizenship and as schoolteachers, ministers, or other professionals and were locally involved, enriching the lives of subsequent generations. Within living memory, life in *Y Fro Gymraeg* was strongly, yet locally and organically, ‘capitalised’. We suggest that the activities, practices, customs, knowledge and social fabric of villages in *Y Fro Gymraeg* could be seen in terms of Bourdieu’s notions of social, cultural and symbolic capital. If capital involves ‘what people find valuable and adjudge as valuable’ (Bourdieu 1986, p. 250) then this includes a great deal of the piety, knowledge, prayer and frugality that participants remember.

The symbolic capital attained was, to a large extent, derived from cultural capital, especially as it involved knowledge and the ‘love of learning’. It was also derived from social capital as it was intimately bound up with social networks enabling the organisation of competitions and *Eisteddfodau*, chapels and their congregations, informal help and support for relatives and neighbours and much more. The communities in which people had described growing up were ones that had a relatively legible structure of status, prestige and respectability, as well as small but significant differences in wealth.

We have emphasised the differences between the *Bearn* and *Y Fro Gymraeg* and it remains for future research to tease out the relative contributions of religion and working life to their different trajectories. Perhaps there is something distinctive about Protestant Nonconformity in *Y Fro Gymraeg* that may have provided an escape route from the demoralisation and decline which was inaccessible to the Catholic *Bearnois*. The presence of quarrying in North Wales and the distinctive occupational culture which it engendered might be the origin of the difference between *Y Fro Gymraeg* and the more thoroughgoing pastoral economy Bourdieu described in the *Bearn*. Future research needs to clarify the relative contributions of such differences.

*The Bachelors’ Ball* (2008), one of Bourdieu’s lesser known works, has the potential to illuminate rural cultures – in the case of *Y Fro Gymraeg*, a changing yet resilient one. It addresses Coupland *et al.*’s (2006) plea for a greater understanding of the origins of the subjective orientation to the Welsh language and illuminates the conditions leading to the present day vitality of the tongue. Bourdieu’s work on the *Bearn* region deserves to be appreciated by scholars interested in Wales and those interested in the historical trajectories of rural communities.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Welsh, or Cymraeg, is a Celtic language particularly prominent in the North West of Wales. Under the Welsh Language Act of 1993 it is a legal requirement for public records and official documents to be presented in both Welsh and English throughout Wales.

- <sup>2</sup> *Eisteddfodau* are local and national competitions staged throughout Wales, celebrating the artistic landscape of Wales, with prizes being awarded for ability in poetry, music, and literature composed in Welsh. The National Eisteddfod is an annual event, governed by the *Gorsedd y Beirdd*, a group of patrons of the Welsh language who claim to have their roots in the druidic tradition of pre-Christian Wales.
- <sup>3</sup> Jenkins (1960) also described *buchedd* B, a less educationally aspirational way of life not so strongly associated with religious observance.

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## Appendix

Table A1: *Details of participants*

Name	Gender	Age	Occupation	Origin	Parent's Occupation
Gwen	Female	52	Lecturer	North Wales	Shopkeeper; teacher
Euros	Male	82	Retired Lecturer	West Wales	Nonconformist Minister; housewife
Lowri	Female	84	Retired Lecturer	North Wales	Nonconformist Minister; housewife
Geraint	Male	63	Retired Senior Academic	North Wales	Butcher; housewife
Cadi	Female	80	Retired Farmer	North Wales	Farmer; housewife
Arsula	Female	79	Retired Factory Worker	North Wales	(Father died when young); mother's work unknown
Dewi	Male	60	Factory Worker	North Wales	(No permanent father); cook
Dafydd	Male	62	Retired Teacher	North Wales	Farmer; housewife
Lloyd	Male	54	University Lecturer	North Wales	Farmer; housewife
Eryl	Male	51	Pharmacist	North Wales	Plasterer; housewife
Haf	Female	80	Retired teacher	North Wales	Quarryman; teacher
Angharad	Female	61	Housewife	North Wales	Farmer; housewife
Ceinwen	Female	53	University researcher	West Wales	Miner; teacher
Eirlys	Female	60	Cleaner	North Wales	Quarryman; housewife
Alwena	Female	59	Retired primary headteacher	North Wales	(Father died when young); domestic servant
Nona	Female	62	Magistrate/housewife	North Wales	Doctor; housewife
Mabon	Male	51	Solicitor	North Wales	(Father died when young); housewife
Gwerfyl	Female	59	Teacher	North Wales	Market gardener; housewife
Eunice	Female	54	Teacher	North Wales	(Father died when young); housewife
Eifion	Male	61	Retired university lecturer	North Wales	Farmer; teacher
Harri	Male	64	Retired university lecturer	North Wales	Publicans (tenants)
Arwel	Male	58	University senior manager	North Wales	Publicans (tenants)
Gwynfor	Male	63	Farmer	North Wales	Farmer; housewife
Elsi	Female	63	Retired teacher	North Wales	Both parents farmers
Ifor	Male	70	Writer	North Wales	Unknown