

On the Welshness

by Anna Berkes - October 18, 2010

In his *Autobiography*, Jefferson wrote:

The tradition in my father's family was that their ancestor came to this country from Wales, and from near the mountain of Snowdon, the highest in Gr. Br. I noted once a case from Wales in the law reports where a person of our name was either pl. or def. and one of the same name was Secretary to the Virginia company. These are the only instances in which I have met with the name in that country.

Interesting, eh? Unfortunately, actual proof of a Welsh ancestry for the Jefferson family remains elusive.

Admittedly, Thomas Jefferson's paternal lineage is still kinda murky; we are pretty solid on the Jefferson line back to Thomas Jefferson "the First" (d. 1697), but everything before that is in dispute. Even so, none of the proposed lineages lead to Wales. In fact, they all lead to various parts of England.

Dumas Malone, in *Jefferson the Virginian*, remarked rather dismissively on the Jeffersons' claim to originate in Wales, "Whether they ever did seems to be beyond the possibility of historical verification and the matter is of no real importance." I respectfully disagree, on both counts. As I mentioned in an earlier blog post, things that may have been (or seemed to be) impossible to find out years ago may be well within reach now. And as for this matter being of no real importance, that is certainly in the eye of the beholder. Clearly Dumas Malone wasn't interested in investigating this question, but I'm sure the entire nation of Wales would be pretty interested in the answer. Also, if it is not in fact true, somebody could probably write a whole dissertation on how the Jeffersons came to associate themselves with Wales and their reasons for doing so.

Now, interestingly enough, Thomas Jefferson himself owned several Welsh things:

In his vast library collection was a Welsh dictionary: Thomas Jones' *Y Gymraeg yn ei Disgleirdeb, neu Helaeth Eirlyfr Cymraeg a Saesnaeg, yn Cynwys llawer mwy o Eiriau Cymraeg nag sydd yng Eirlyfr y disgawdr Sion Dafis o Gymraeg a Lading* (Shrewsbury, 1760). The title actually goes on for seven (7) more sentences, but I haven't got all day here and neither have you. For the curious, the title translates roughly as *The British Language in its*

Luster, or a Copious Dictionary of Welsh and English [something something something] John Davis [something something].

Jefferson's reasons for owning such a thing are unclear, although a somewhat startling answer to this question was suggested by an article I found the other day on the Internet: that Jefferson used it to decode all the dispatches that Meriwether Lewis was writing to him in Welsh. I'm unaware of any such dispatches, but would love to be enlightened.

Thomas Jefferson named one of his horses Caractacus (<https://www.monticello.org/research-education/thomas-jefferson-encyclopedia/caractacus>), after one of the leaders of the British resistance to the Roman invasion in the first century A.D. Although he wasn't really Welsh, technically speaking, Caractacus later became associated with Wales and Welsh figures in literature and mythology.

While these may indeed be evidence of a particular interest in Wales, I do feel compelled to point out that, based on his house, books and other possessions, Thomas Jefferson appeared to be interested in almost everything.

But back to the family story: is it true or not? So far it's looking like "not," despite repeated claims to the contrary. A friend recently sent me this article (https://web.archive.org/web/20210724195030/http://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/wales-news/tm_headline=dna-tests-prove-jefferson-s-welsh-lineage&method=full&objectid=18592199&siteid=50082-name_page.html), which happily trumpets that "DNA tests prove Jefferson's Welsh lineage." The DNA tests proved no such thing, however, and indeed the results seem to make it even less likely that the Jefferson family originated in Wales. To summarize very briefly, DNA tests were performed on 85 men with the last name "Jefferson" at the University of Leicester, and only 2 of them turned out to have the same Y chromosome as our Jefferson. These two men, whose relation to President Jefferson was estimated at about 11 generations back, had ancestral ties in Yorkshire and the West Midlands, respectively. I have just looked at a map and can tell you with some authority that neither of those are in Wales.

But, one of the things that I like about studying people in times past is that they always surprise you. Maybe the Jeffersons were Welsh, or the story is true in some way that we have yet to discover. The West Midlands aren't far away from Wales, relatively speaking – maybe the Jeffersons were originally-*originally* from Wales, by way of the West Midlands. Maybe some Jefferson way back married a Welsh woman, and she was such a cool person that her origins loomed large in the family history – but not so much in the documentary record. Anyone with relatives or ancestors knows that sometimes family stories can get a bit garbled.

I don't have an answer for this question right now – I wish I did! But by writing about it here, I'm hoping that a) some of those related Jeffersons in England might be intrigued and motivated to find the answer from the other end, so to speak, and b) somebody will tell me where those coded Welsh letters are!

A girl can dream, right?

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