

A Tale of Two Bridges: The Poetry and Politics of Infrastructure in Nineteenth-Century Wales

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Title: A Tale of Two Bridges: The Poetry and Politics of Infrastructure in Nineteenth-Century Wales

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Abstract:

Drawing on Brian Larkin's concept of 'infrastructural poetics', this article considers and compares a selection of English- and Welsh-language poems, by writers including Eliza Mary Hamilton, Frederick Faber, Richard Llwyd, and Eben Fardd, about two nineteenth-century infrastructures that transformed North Wales and Great Britain's relationship to Ireland: the Menai Suspension Bridge (1826), and the Britannia Tubular Bridge (1850). I argue that these non-canonical poems complement perspectives derived from parliamentary records, official reports, technical planning documents, scientific manuals, and journalism, enhancing our understanding of the nineteenth-century infrastructural imagination. Specifically, building on the association of infrastructural development and modernity, I explore how the poems under discussion participate in nineteenth-century negotiations about Wales's place and future in the United Kingdom, and how these negotiations evolved between 1819 and 1852. I show that, although Wales was the site of impressive engineering feats and accelerating industrial extraction, English-language poems present the Menai Bridge in picturesque terms, drawing on popular images of the Celtic fringe that evoke timeless, ideal beauty. Anglophone verse about Britannia Bridge, by contrast, focuses explicitly on the infrastructure's technological modernity but claims it as an English landmark. Both strategies, I suggest, effect an erasure of Wales—as a distinct cultural and political entity—from a future conceived as Anglo-British. Poems written in Welsh, and the work of Welsh writers in English, complicate this picture, not because they reject British nationalism and imperialism, but because they seek to embed a modern Welsh nation more centrally within those political and ideological frameworks.

Keywords:

Infrastructure, civil engineering, Wales, poetry, Menai Suspension Bridge, Britannia Tubular Bridge.

A Tale of Two Bridges: The Poetry and Politics of Infrastructure in Nineteenth-Century Wales

I. Introduction

This article considers and compares English- and Welsh-language poems about two nineteenth-century infrastructure projects that changed the North Wales coast: Thomas Telford's Menai Suspension Bridge, constructed between 1819 and 1826, and Robert Stephenson's Britannia Tubular Bridge, which provided a railway crossing over the Menai Strait from 1850. It takes a literal prompt from Brian Larkin's concept of infrastructural poetics. Infrastructures, Larkin argues, 'emerge out of and store within them forms of desire and fantasy and can take on fetish-like aspects that sometimes can be wholly autonomous from their technical function'.¹ 'Focusing on the issue of form, or the poetics of infrastructure', he continues, 'allows us to understand how the political can be constituted through different means'.² While the 'poetics of infrastructure' inhere in built environments and take shape at the intersection between different materials, media, and genres, I read poems themselves as sources of insight into the 'forms of desire and fantasy' that historic infrastructures embodied (and continue to embody). Poems, including non-canonical verse, complement and complicate perspectives derived from parliamentary records, official reports, technical planning documents, scientific manuals, and journalism; through their imagery and formal organisation, they can enhance our understanding of the nineteenth-century infrastructural imagination and its legacies.

Drawing on Hannah Appel, Nikil Anand and Akhil Gupta's claim that infrastructures 'have long promised modernity, development, progress, and freedom to people all over the world', I

¹ Brian Larkin, 'The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 42 (2013), 327-343 (p. 328).

² Larkin, 'Poetics of Infrastructure', p. 328.

argue that the poems under discussion participate in negotiations about Wales's place and future in the United Kingdom.³ While I thus aim to delineate broader patterns in the poetic reception of the two bridges, I look at a selection of poems from a wider corpus, especially in the Welsh language. Generally, I have traced fewer English-language poems; those considered here were written by affluent visitors rather than locals and printed in volumes or high-profile literary periodicals rather than newspapers. The scarcity of English-language newspaper poetry about the bridges appears surprising, particularly given the popularity of spectacular new infrastructures as a topic for this kind of verse.⁴ It is likely the result of, first, the vagaries of the North Wales newspaper press and, second, the enduring dominance of the Welsh language in North West Wales in the first half of the nineteenth century.⁵ Both the *North Wales Gazette*, published weekly between 1808 and 1825, and the *Chester Chronicle*, which routinely included material pertaining to Welsh current affairs and culture, featured Welsh verse on the Menai Suspension Bridge. Similarly, the *North Wales Chronicle*, which took up business in 1827, contained poetic tributes to both bridges in Welsh—and, indeed, one to Menai Bridge in Latin—rather than

³ Hannah Appel, Nikil Anand, and Akhil Gupta, 'Introduction: Temporality, Politics, and the Promise of Infrastructure', in *The Promise of Infrastructure*, ed. by Appel, Anand and Gupta (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), pp. 27, 3.

⁴ From Robert Burns's 'The Brigs of Ayr' (1786) to Hart Crane's 'The Bridge', and beyond, there has been a long-standing poetic interest in bridges, and in the relationship between these infrastructures and historic development and modernity. In the nineteenth-century, poems about new bridges, and similar spectacular infrastructures, were a staple of newspaper verse, but perhaps never more so than in the case of Dundee's Tay Bridge. See Erin Farley's chapter 'The Tay Bridge and the Tay Whale' in *The Place of Poetry in Victorian Dundee* (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Strathclyde, 2018), pp. 31-77.

⁵ For an overview of the development of the Welsh- and English-language newspaper press in nineteenth-century Wales, see Aled Jones, 'The Newspaper Press', in *A Guide to Welsh Literature, c.1800-1900*, ed. by Hywel Teifi Edwards (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000), pp. 1-23. As Geraint E. Jenkins explains, the 'north-west counties' of Wales were less exposed to 'Anglicizing influences', but these regions nevertheless saw a significant reduction in the number of monolingual Welsh speakers. See, 'Introduction', in *Language and Community in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Geraint E. Jenkins (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1998), pp. 1-20 (p. 3). Jenkins's volume offers an invaluable overview of

English. In addition, a significant number of Welsh-language poems on the Menai Bridge were produced in the context of regional *eisteddfodau* (cultural festivals centred on literary and musical competitions and performances).⁶ Specifically, at the 1832 Beaumaris Eisteddfod sixty-two writers submitted work to a competition for the best *englynion* (stanzas) on Telford's bridge, with several being reproduced in the nationalist periodical *Y Gwladgarwr* (*The Patriot*).⁷ Due to the presence of royal patrons, including the future queen, this event was widely covered in literary periodicals and national newspapers, providing exposure beyond Welsh-speaking audiences for the winning poet Eben Fardd (Ebenezer Thomas, 1802-1863), whose entry I consider below.⁸ As this comparative reading of selected but representative poems seeks to demonstrate, the location from and language in which poets wrote about the bridges significantly shapes their infrastructural poetics.

Although Wales was the site of impressive engineering feats and accelerating industrial extraction, several English-language poems—specifically sonnets—present the Menai Bridge in picturesque terms; they displace technological materiality and modernity in favour of timeless beauty, drawing on popular r(R)omantic images of the Celtic fringe.⁹ Britannia, by contrast, stimulates verse that focuses explicitly on the materials and forms of techno-political modernity, but which—echoing the bridge's name—blurs the distinctions between Wales, England, and

linguistic history in nineteenth-century Wales, but unfortunately does not contain a dedicated chapter on North West Wales.

⁶ On the modern history of the eisteddfod, see Hywel Teifi Edwards, *The Eisteddfod* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2016).

⁷ 'Rhai o'r englynion a anfonwyd i Eisteddfod diweddar Beaumaris, ar y Testun "Pont Menai"', *Y Gwladgarwr*, January 1833, pp. 22-3.

⁸ On Eben Fardd, and his involvement in the *eisteddfod* movement, see Hywel Teifi Edwards, 'The Eisteddfod Poet: An Embattled Figure', in *A Guide to Welsh Literature, c.1800-1900*, pp. 24-47.

⁹ On the construction of such images, see Mary-Ann Constantine, 'Beauty Spot, Blind Spot: Romantic Wales', *Literature Compass*, 5 (2008), 577-90.

Britain. Despite their apparent difference, both strategies effect an erasure of Wales—or rather, specific constructions of Welshness—from a future conceived as Anglo-British. Poems written in Welsh, and the work of Welsh writers in English, complicate this picture, not because they reject British nationalism and imperialism, but because they seek to embed a modern Welsh nation more centrally within those political and ideological frameworks.

Both Menai crossings were, as major bridges often are, designed for nation- and empire-building, improving road and then rail connections between Dublin and London via Holyhead (see figures 1 and 2). Both embodied promises about progress and prosperity, a national (Anglo-British) future characterized by stability and wealth. Thus, the two bridges became objects of wonder, but they also emerged as sites of challenge: between competing formulations and experiences of national identity, shifting views about the cultural and linguistic status of Wales (and Ireland), and conflicting economic interests. While poetic responses to these architectural features are united in infrastructural enthusiasm, they also shed light on tensions that arise, and are erased, when national futures are imagined and planned. In studying these non-canonical texts, we can address questions about the relationship between locality, national identit(ies), and the uneven distribution of futurity in the United Kingdom, which resonate beyond the poems' geographical and historical scope.

Figure 1. Detail from John O'Mahoney, *The Sunny Side of Ireland. How to see it by the Great Southern and Western Railway* (Dublin: A. Thom, 1898). Image from [British Library Flickr Commons](#). Public Domain Mark. Cropped from Original.

Figure 2. Ordnance Survey Map. One-inch England and Wales. Revised New Series, 1892-1908

(1899). Detail from sheet 106 (Bangor). Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Scotland under the [Creative Commons Attribution \(CC-BY\) licence](#).

II. ‘most wondrous bridge!’: Menai Suspension Bridge

As Jo Guldi notes, the rise of political economy—which affirmed the importance of connecting geographically dispersed markets—gave impetus to state investment in road infrastructure.¹⁰ The most spectacular and costly improvements to the road network, however, also responded to the imperatives of nation-building, especially the project of forging four nations into one.¹¹ Thus, the new political reality ushered in by the Acts of Union between the Kingdoms of Great Britain and Ireland in 1800 furnished a compelling argument for a Menai crossing.¹² For most of the nineteenth-century, the Irish mails sailed from Holyhead, a port on the North Eastern coast of Anglesey (Ynys Môn). In 1815, Thomas Telford began construction of a new London-Holyhead Road, cutting through the mountains of Snowdonia to accelerate travel between London and Bangor, the town on the North Wales coast from which ferries typically departed for Anglesey. Still, the Menai Strait—a narrow yet notoriously dangerous stretch of water—represented a major obstacle for the transfer of people and correspondence. Accordingly, after delays due to war-time pressure on the revenue, the project to construct a bridge resurfaced in 1815, meeting, like an earlier attempt, with local opposition. Residents of Caernarfon and its surroundings worried about the damage a fixed crossing might cause to the area’s thriving economy, which relied heavily on navigation.¹³ But in this instance, local interests gave way to national politics.

¹⁰ Jo Guldi, *Roads to Power: Britain Invents the Infrastructure State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), pp. 88-90.

¹¹ Guldi, *Roads to Power*, pp. 79-127.

¹² Paul Stafford, ‘The First Menai Bridge Project’, *Welsh History Review*, 9 (1979), 278-318 (p. 278).

¹³ See Stafford, ‘First Menai Bridge’.

Telford's innovative suspension design was approved in 1818; in 1826, the *Chester Chronicle* informed readers that the 'stupendous structure was opened for general intercourse on Monday, the 30th of January, at half past one in the morning', timed according to the Holyhead mail crossing.¹⁴ At this date, the Menai Bridge was the largest structure of its kind, and it made the journey—and the passage of people, goods and, information—from Arfon to Anglesey, and onward to Ireland, significantly safer and faster.

Even before construction had begun, the bridge inspired verse by the Anglesey-born antiquarian and poet Richard Llwyd (1752-1835), who is best known for his long poem *Beaumaris Bay* and has received increased critical attention since the publication, in 2015, of a new edition of his poems by Elizabeth Edwards.¹⁵ Llwyd's brief 'Lines on the Intended Bridge' appeared in the *Chester Chronicle* in June 1818, accompanied by characteristically (for the author) lengthy notes. They read:

So shall the Tritons, in their floating shells,
See modern Magic, by their happier spells,
Raise the tall pier, extend the graceful bow,
And smile at dangers that may lurk below,
Pass o'er the tempest, when it rages—roars,
And bid a new Rialto bind the shores.¹⁶

The syntax of this one-sentence poem tracks shifting agencies. Maritime gods are disempowered, 'floating' with the water's motion as they become passive observers of 'modern Magic' (that is, civil engineering); 'modern Magic' holds the power to create ('raise' and 'extend') and command ('bid'), constituting new formal structures. But if 'modern Magic' brings 'a new Rialto' into being, the 'intended bridge' itself 'bind[s]' the landscape, moulding the hostile

¹⁴ 'Menai Suspension Bridge', *Chester Chronicle*, 3 February 1826, p. 3.

¹⁵ Richard Llwyd, *Beaumaris Bay and Other Poems*, ed. by Elizabeth Edwards (Nottingham: Trent Editions, 2015).

¹⁶ Richard Llwyd, 'Lines on the Intended Bridge over the Menai, at Bangor Ferry', *Chester Chronicle*, 12

natural environment into improved shape. In Llwyd's composite text, however, the Welsh landscape is not a passive recipient of improving measures; rather, he stakes a claim for Wales's shaping presence in the union's future.

As poem and notes interact, the projected bridge is aligned with what Larkin terms 'the sense of shaping modern society and realizing the future'.¹⁷ Llwyd writes:

At length the predictions of the Bards—the suggestion of intellect—and the wish of ages, and of nations, is likely to be accomplished; and the wonder of a few years hence will be, not that it was done, but that it was so long undone; for the wealth and industry of a country—especially a commercial one, is in no way more rationally employed, than in the promotion of its intercourse, and the consequent interchange of its produce: and it has long been the disgrace of a great empire, whose means, for every other purpose, has been the effect of a wish, that the strait of the Menai has, in a stormy day, put a stop to its intercourse.¹⁸

Llwyd reiterates a set of ideas central to nineteenth-century liberalism and, as Guldi argues, to the large infrastructure projects it launched: 'intercourse' stimulates free trade; free trade increases and distributes wealth; wealth accelerates moral and intellectual improvement.¹⁹ Following this logic, connective technologies and infrastructures became shorthand for British civilization. In its failure to promote 'intercourse' between the mainland and Anglesey, Llwyd complains, the 'empire' has demonstrated disgraceful neglect; by stalling economic progress in Wales, it has set back the development of the whole nation.

As the text replicates a dominant developmental narrative, however, it also complicates its terms of reference: 'nation', 'nations', 'country', and 'empire' emerge as separate entities with potentially competing, but potentially complementary, claims. In tracing the history of the 'wish'

June 1818.

¹⁷ Larkin, 'Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure', p. 329.

¹⁸ Llwyd, 'Intended Bridge over the Menai'

¹⁹ See Guldi, p. 108. For a critique of the continuing investment in this ideal of connectivity, see Armand Mattelart, *Networking the World, 1794-2000*, trans. Liz Carey-Libbrecht and James Cohen (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

for a crossing, the author alludes to Suetonius and Edward I's respective attempts to cross the Menai on a 'bridge of boats', linking infrastructural ambition to colonial conquest. Such acknowledgments of historic conquest are paired, however, with affirmations of enduring national difference, embodied by literary quotations—by medieval poets including Rhys Nanmor, Sir David Trevor, and Davydd Gorllech—as well as topographical markers in Welsh. These particularize the landscape and postulate a local culture, with its own dreams of infrastructure, that cannot be subsumed into an Anglocentric vision. The text thus echoes Llwyd's method in the earlier, more famous *Beaumaris Bay*, where, as Timothy Heimlich notes, intrusive footnotes complicate the locodescriptive poem by recentring 'human history', often taking up more space in their fulsome celebration of the political, religious, and literary culture of medieval Wales than the verse itself.²⁰

But Llwyd's commentary on the Menai Bridge does not reject the politics of union or empire. Rather, having established the local history of longing for a crossing, Llwyd considers how the bridge might strengthen Wales's future position within those larger configurations. He writes, first, that 'When this national object is completed, there will then be little doubt, that the great commercial towns in the northern parts of England, as well as Liverpool and Chester, will be benefited by an embankment, and a few arches over the Cynwy [*sic*]'.²¹ Infrastructural development, in other words, begets more infrastructural development. Even if such development is driven by England, it embeds Wales more securely in the union's economic and political networks. Moreover, the imperial formation accommodates both a degree of cultural difference and a vision of partnership within the union. Thus, Llwyd can 'contemplate the ability

²⁰ See 'Romantic Wales and the Imperial Picturesque', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 81 (2020), 169-192 (p. 188).

²¹ Llwyd, 'Intended Bridge over the Menai'.

contributed by the different parts of the empire to its general benefit’, using the road network as his case study.²² The Nant Ffrancon pass through Snowdonia, he explains, was promoted by an Anglo-Irish aristocrat, funded by the Liverpool-born Lord Penrhyn (Llwyd omits that Lord Penrhyn’s wealth derived from the labour of enslaved people on Jamaican sugar plantations), and is now being modernized and expanded by a Scottish engineer. Even as his text registers the uneven distribution of the economic and political benefits of infrastructural modernity, then, Llwyd reads in the ‘intended bridge’ a promise that Wales, too, participates in the modern polity—as a partner in, not merely a site of, development. But Llwyd’s vision of the United Kingdom’s future was unstable and contested, especially as early-nineteenth-century interest in Welsh difference gave way to growing pressure to assimilate.

III. Wales and the Infrastructural Picturesque

After it opened to the public, the Menai Bridge inspired further poems, including Llwyd’s 1827 reworking of his earlier lines, which again appeared, alongside the original notes, in a travel guide produced on the occasion of the 1832 Beaumaris Eisteddfod (an event to which I return below).²³ These texts, I argue, reveal the bridge’s ambivalent place in the political imaginary. Anand, Gupta, and Appel note that ‘Nation-states often build infrastructures not to meet felt needs, but because those infrastructures signify that the nation state is advanced and modern’. Spectacular infrastructures are prioritized over ‘less glamorous ones’ (which more effectively support human flourishing), precisely because of what the spectacle communicates about the

²² Llwyd, ‘Intended Bridge over the Menai’.

²³ Llwyd, ‘Y Bont Vawr o Von i Arvon Tros Ddwr Menai, The Grand Suspension Bridge, over the Fretum of Menai’, *Chester Chronicle*, 17 August 1827, p. 4. In his travel guide *Beaumaris Bay: The Shores of the Menai, and the Interior of Snowdonia* (J. Parry: Chester, 1832), Llwyd includes the later version of this poem, combined with the 1818 commentary.

present state and future development of the society that builds, or promises to build, them.²⁴ The Menai Bridge served a practical function, of course, but that function was inseparably linked to the spectacular display of national progress and political union. Yet while literary engagements with this new landmark invariably acknowledge its awe-inspiring form, only some read and write it in terms of modernization and connectivity. Others dissociate the state-of-the-art feat of engineering from the discourse of modernity, drawing on the sonnet form to gaze at the beautiful bridge through a picturesque lens.

Timothy Heimlich's work on 'Romantic Wales and the Imperial Picturesque' provides a useful framework for addressing what is at stake in these picturesque representations of infrastructure. William Gilpin, Heimlich notes, used Wales, specifically the Wye Valley, to develop and test his theory of picturesque looking as 'a labor of adjustment rather than precise representation and reproduction'.²⁵ For Heimlich, a parallel emerges between the picturesque viewer and 'the improving colonizer, who stretches a pliable landscape to maximise its productivity and desirability'.²⁶ Although the colonizer's criteria for 'desirability' may appear at odds with those of the picturesque tourist, both are involved in the same project of 'subjugating Welsh cultural and social difference'.²⁷ According to the structural logic both of colonization and the picturesque gaze, landscapes must 'be deracinated into abstract units', so that it becomes possible simultaneously to mould them into vignettes for the delectation of travellers (and armchair tourists) and mine them for resources.²⁸ But landscapes can only be subjected to such processes of abstraction if the 'human lives and cultural histories intertwined with them are

²⁴ Appel, Gupta, and Anand, 'Introduction', p. 19.

²⁵ Heimlich, 'Imperial Picturesque', p. 171.

²⁶ Heimlich, 'Imperial Picturesque', p. 177.

²⁷ Heimlich, 'Imperial Picturesque', p. 171.

²⁸ Heimlich, 'Imperial Picturesque', p. 187.

stripped away'.²⁹ They have to be made picturesque, just as they have to be turned profitable.

A set of 'Travelling Sketches' published in the *Literary Chronicle* on 3 June 1826 presents the 'picturesque adjustment' of the Menai as a work in progress. The author remarks that the new bridge has improved the journey to Anglesey, but also, especially, its surroundings:

It is a most stupendous piece of work, and nothing but sight of it can convey anything like an idea of its magnificence to the mind. Every representation of it, as a drawing, cannot fail to be paltry. It sets drawing at defiance! The country round is bleak in the extreme, nor are there any features in the landscape to render it at all picturesque. It is nothing but the bridge itself; but that is everything!³⁰

The land near Bangor is, for this traveller, defined by sheer absence of picturesque beauty. The bridge, however, makes it worth looking at, even makes looking imperative. It transforms a 'bleak' scene into a prospect: a key destination in the many guides to 'picturesque tours' of Wales, and the subject—despite the *Literary Chronicle*'s skepticism about reproducibility—of dozens of images during and since the 1820s. But the author cannot quite contain the scene in one aesthetic category, modulating instead between the picturesque and the sublime:

It is a creation in the clouds, and appears to be above the power of mortals either to erect or control [...]! It is not so picturesque as the bridge at Conway, for *that* is connected with the castle and a very fine landscape; but one is the work of pigmies, and the other the creation of giants. [...] It] looks as if a giant had passed by, and carelessly dropped a silken thread over a rocky fragment; but when you closely examine it, its massy abutments and pondrous chains, the globe itself appears too weak and frail to support the burden! In this part of the country, the features of nature are all great; it seems as if nature was sporting with man, and showing her superiority. All the erections of man are small and insignificant, whilst nature luxuriates in her creations, without law or bounds. But Telford has almost entered into a competition with nature.³¹

The register of the sublime dramatizes the struggle between the country's 'nature [...] without law or bounds' and the improving work of the civil engineer, throwing Telford's heroic

²⁹ Heimlich, 'Imperial Picturesque', p. 187.

³⁰ 'Travelling Sketches—The Menai Bridge', *The Literary Chronicle*, 3 June 1826, pp. 349-50.

³¹ 'Travelling Sketches'.

achievement in subjugating mountains, sea, and ‘lawless winds’ into sharper relief. The bridge is ‘picturesque’ after all, but not ‘*so picturesque as*’ Telford’s other suspension bridge, framed by the more congenial landscape ‘attached’ to Conwy Castle, a historic symbol of conquest. The work of adjustment is ongoing, gradually rendering the Menai more accessible, pliable, and suitable for picturesque consumption. The bridge both creates the picturesque scene, as an embodiment of the state’s improving agency, and forms its centrepiece. In early-Victorian sonnets on the bridge, by contrast, the process of picturesque adjustment is imagined as already complete, as the neatly elegant construction of the poems’ form underpins the impression they convey of perfectly calibrated prospects.

The first two of these sonnets were written by Anglo-Irish poet Eliza Mary Hamilton (1807-1851). As Virginia Blain notes, Hamilton’s verse was well-received in its day and complicates dominant understandings of the nineteenth-century ‘poetess’ figure, but it has received little critical attention.³² Eschewing the romance mode and associated tropes, Hamilton wrote ‘poems about her travels, about parts of Ireland, about being a poet, about astronomy as a mode of knowledge, and about the poetry of certain branches of science’, including ‘two sonnets on Thomas Telford’s miraculous feat of aesthetic engineering, the Menai Bridge’.³³ Several of these poems also demonstrate Hamilton’s commitment to empire-building. If, as Blain notes, Hamilton’s hybrid Anglo-Irish identity put her in a ‘marginalised cultural position’, poems such as ‘On Seeing - in 1833 - the Obelisk (ERECTED ON THE RANKS OF THE BOYNE, IN COMMEMORATION OF THE VICTORY THERE GAINED IN 1690, BY WILLIAM III)’ suggest a relatively cheerful allegiance to the concept of colonial improvement and the fact of

³² See Virginia Blain, ‘Letitia Elizabeth Hamilton, Eliza Mary Hamilton, and the Genealogy of the Victorian Poetess’, *Victorian Poetry*, 33 (1995), 31-51.

³³ Blain, ‘Victorian Poetess’, p. 46.

Anglocentric dominance.³⁴ This stance subtly underwrites the infrastructural poetics of her two ‘Menai Bridge’ sonnets.

‘On a First Approach to the Menai Bridge’ appeared in Hamilton’s only volume *Poems* (1838), and was reprinted in reviews for the *Monthly Review*, which holds it up as ‘lady-like’, and the *Athenaeum*, which praises it as ‘unaffected and simple’.³⁵ From 1840, it also featured in *Nicholson’s Cambrian Traveller’s Guide*.³⁶ The poem suggests two ways of looking at the Menai Bridge—aesthetic and political—that subtly modify one another. Hamilton begins with an image evoking the bridge’s quasi-impossible formal elegance:

Light as those delicate fairy threads we see,—
That silver web of most consummate skill,
Which, in the summer air, scarce visible,
Flings arches exquisite from tree to tree,—
Art thou, most wondrous Bridge! thy majesty
Is as some beauteous dream-like miracle!—³⁷ (ll. 1-6)

The simile approaches Telford’s ‘miraculous feat of aesthetic engineering’ obliquely; ‘consummate skill’ is attributed to the spider weaving its web—an echo, in miniature proportions, of the giant’s ‘silken thread’ in the *Literary Chronicle*.³⁸ Hamilton aligns the product of human design and labour with natural creation, using an aesthetic lexicon of fragility and refinement: ‘delicate’, ‘consummate’, ‘exquisite’. The engineer’s activity—and the processes and materials of construction—are defamiliarized. Moreover, the diction exposes, or rather creates, a gap between the infrastructure’s technical function (to serve as a durable, stable crossing over dangerous waters) and its form (suggesting fragile organic beauty). This

³⁴ Blain, ‘Victorian Poetess’, p. 46.

³⁵ ‘ART. XI—Minor Books of Poetry’, *Monthly Review*, September 1838, p. 123; ‘Our Library Table’, *Athenaeum*, 4 August 1838, p. 552.

³⁶ George Nicholson and Emilius Nicholson, *The Cambrian Traveller’s Guide, in every direction*. 3rd edition (London: Longman, Orme, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1840), p. 58.

³⁷ Eliza Mary Hamilton, *Poems* (Dublin: Hodges and Smith, 1838), p. 79

disjuncture, effected by the lightness of wrought iron, triggers a powerful affective response:³⁹

Terror, and doubt, and exultation's thrill
Into one breathless joy are blent by thee
And thy dread sky-borne pathway o'er the blue
And soundless sea, and dwindled ships that glide
Mutely the bright enchanted region through (ll. 7-11)

Unlike in Llwyd's text and the *Literary Chronicle* sketch, however, 'terror', 'doubt', and 'exultation' cannot be traced back to the natural forces the seemingly fragile structure must withstand. Here, the bridge's 'majesty' does not derive from contest with 'lawless' nature; it is as uncontested as it is delicate.

Instead of a landscape that needs to be subdued by engineering skill, Hamilton places the bridge against a backdrop that is almost otherworldly in its picturesque perfection. A sense of unreality pervades the nominally locodescriptive sonnet, not only due to such words as 'fairy', 'enchanted', and 'dream-like', but also because of the scene's stillness. As ships glide 'mutely' over the 'soundless sea', the words deny the effect of the onomatopoeic sibilance, which conjures up a maritime soundscape. The absence of sound underscores the distance between the speaker (and thus reader) and the object of their gaze, as if that object were displayed behind glass. Engagement with the human lives and histories that saturate the location is impossible, since the 'bright enchanted region' is *only* background, void of characteristics beside picturesque beauty.

The two kinds of distance I have traced—between the bridge's function and form, and between the implied onlooker and object of their gaze—underpin the final tercet's political symbolism. The bridge 'sit[s] as Empress o'er the tide' (l. 12), a Britannia ruling over eerily

³⁸ Blain, 'Victorian Poetess', p. 46.

³⁹ On wrought iron's transformative impact, see David P. Billington, *The Tower and the Bridge: The New Art of Structural Engineering* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), pp. 27-44.

peaceful waves. It is 'E'en like that Nation high, whose power and pride / Could lift thee as her symbol to our view!' (ll. 13-4). Notably, this is a singular 'Nation', not a union of four.

Moreover, power here registers not as military, commercial, or technological dominance, but as an aesthetic capability: to create harmonious prospects that render their own production 'scarce visible'. The embodiment of national power disguises the working of power, concealing the processes of nation-building and the presence of internal dissent within 'that Nation High'.

A similar perspective emerges in 'A Recollection of the Menai Bridge, (Revived by the perusal of an Article in the Edinburgh Review, "The Life and Works of Thomas Telford")', published in 1840 in *Dublin University Magazine*, a regular vehicle for Hamilton's work.⁴⁰ Even more emphatically, Hamilton here separates the aesthetic from the technological and the political:

The visible melody of one sweet mind!--
Its written music stealing through the eye
Into the listening spirit silently;--
This was thy charm, thou play-thing of the wind!
This was thy spell then, this thy undefined
Yet loftier potency o'er mind and heart
Than the cold gloriousness of daring Art,--
Or Britain's power in iron records shrined!
There did the enthusiast of an earlier time
Write upon sky and air his poet-dreams:--
In wondrous language modest yet sublime,
There did he shadow forth his soul that seems
Blent with the mountains and the sea--and breathes
Through all those graceful chains and fine-wrought massive wreathes!⁴¹

Recalling Keats's lines, 'Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter', the

⁴⁰ See Blain, 'Victorian Poetess', p. 38.

⁴¹ Hamilton, 'A Recollection of the Menai Bridge, (Revived by a perusal of an Article in the Edinburgh Review, "The Life and Work of Thomas Telford")', *Dublin University Magazine*, December 1840, p. 665.

opening's synesthetic metaphors posits sensory perception as inadequate.⁴² Only a 'listening spirit' can appreciate the bridge's transcendental qualities and recognize it as a product of timeless genius, not temporally bound labour. The grammatical structure of the poem corroborates its claim that the bridge's 'charm', 'spell', and 'potency' cannot be defined in absolute, empirical terms. In the anaphoric construction 'This was thy .../ This was thy ..., this thy...', the pronoun lacks a clear precedent, producing a tautological effect. The bridge's affective 'potency' can be expressed only by comparison; neither its status as embodiment of 'cold gloriousness of daring Art,— / Or Britain's power in iron records shrined!' has the same moving power as 'This'.

The analogy between engineering and poetry that structures the poem not only minimizes the technological dimension of engineering, but also seeks to depoliticize both types of creative labour, severing the connection between 'poet-dreams' and political thought.⁴³ Whereas the earlier poem presents the bridge as a symbol of unobtrusive majesty, this one evokes 'Britain's power' only to foreground the 'loftier potency' of Telford's genius, affirming the separability of the two. And yet, this is not quite the same as leaving politics aside. The fact that the bridge's political symbolism retains structural centrality, even as the surrounding lines disavow its significance, reveals the performative dimension of the sonnet's political nonchalance. The success of this performance, in turn, is an effect of the picturesque: it relies on the portrayal of 'sky', 'air', 'mountains', and 'sea' as features of a timelessly beautiful landscape rather than physical elements that have structured, and been structured by, collective histories and individual

⁴² John Keats, 'Ode to a Grecian Urn', in *The Complete Poems*, ed. by John Barnard (London: Penguin, 1988), p. 308.

⁴³ In *The Tower and the Bridge*, Billington points out that 'In politics as in structure the risky idea of new forms proved exciting to the new designers', linking early-nineteenth-century developments in structural engineering to political reform movements (pp. 38-9).

lives that complicate the homogenizing claims of Anglo-British nation-building.

Political nonchalance is yet more apparent in William Frederick Faber's 'The Menai Bridge'.⁴⁴ Faber (1814-1863) is best-known for his religious activities and writings—as a high-ranking clergyman in the Church of England and, later, the Catholic Church. In the 1840s, he also published four volumes of poetry, which continue to receive intermittent critical attention, partly due to Faber's connection with Wordsworth and partly due to his significance as a religious writer.⁴⁵ Generically, 'The Menai Bridge', which appeared in Faber's first volume *The Cherwell Water Lily, and Other Poems* (1840), is a picturesque nature poem—Faber's major mode, alongside religious verse. The bridge only 'appears' in the last four lines, half-concealed by simile. Faber begins with a description of the Menai Strait that foregrounds the 'blessed calm' (l. 2) of 'The ebbing tide' (l. 3) and the sun's reflection on 'The glossy water, shot with blue and green' (l. 5). The speaker speculates that ships 'might float,/ Trusting the deep in places so serene' (ll. 7-8) and asks:

Thus wreathed in folds of summer billow, who
Would deem old tales of wreck and tempest true,
Where yon vast Marvel, like an albatross
Still springing upward, as it seems, in air,
Spreads in light grandeur his huge wings across,
Self-poised in momentary balance there? (ll. 9-14)

The lines subtly allude to the bridge's transformative impact on the location, where 'wreck and tempest' have become relics, the stuff of 'old tales' rather than lived experience. But this allusion is overshadowed by the simile on which the poem ends, likening the bridge to 'an albatross' in

⁴⁴ Frederick W. Faber, *The Cherwell Water Lily, and Other Poems* (London: J.G.F. & J. Rivington, 1840), p. 340.

⁴⁵ See, for instance, Stephen Gill, 'Wordsworth and "Catholic Truth": The Role of Frederick William Faber', *The Review of English Studies*, 45 (1994), 204-220 and Kirstie Blair, 'Breaking Loose: Frederick Faber and the Failure of Reserve', *Victorian Poetry*, 44 (2006), 25-41.

suspended motion. The bridge's form, as with Hamilton's spider thread, evokes nature—and, given the mythological resonances of the albatross, traces of the supernatural—instead of technological skill, or imperial power, or even creative genius. Faber obscures the structure's newness as well as its 'madness' and, accordingly, the conditions of its making.

But the sonnet is not as politically or historically detached as this brief account suggests. In fact, it begins with an exclamation that identifies the Menai Strait as the 'Fairest of rocky England's channel-gates!' (l. 1). While this conflation of Wales—and Britain—with England was and remains common, in literary studies and politics, it is never insignificant.⁴⁶ The precise meaning of the opening line is unclear: is Wales simply absorbed into England by terminological slippage, or should we take the phrase to express a more literal relationship of possession? In a sense, though, both alternatives tend toward the end that also, for Heimlich, defines picturesque aesthetics: erasure of internal difference. Like Hamilton's, Faber's picturesque scene naturalizes the configuration of power within the United Kingdom, as the 'blessed calm' and serene prospect suggest smooth political waters.

Wales is peripheral to Hamilton's and Faber's sonnets. Then again, that is precisely the point of their picturesque aesthetics. Both writers celebrate infrastructure designed to maintain a tenuous national unity forged, according to Linda Colley's influential analysis, out of enduring conflict with external others, especially France.⁴⁷ But they articulate an infrastructural poetics that addresses the political problem of internal difference by affirming that it is already solved,

⁴⁶ As Wales has been governed by England's political and legal institutions since the sixteenth century, 'England and Wales' have tended to be treated as one entity, often with 'England' as shorthand. For a brilliant polemic on how 'the complexities of national, regional and local identities *within* "Victorian Britain" have sometimes been subsumed or ignored' in Victorian studies, see Kirstie Blair, 'Nation', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 46 (2018), 590-4.

⁴⁷ See Patrick Joyce, *The State of Freedom: A Social History of the British State Since 1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 64. See Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837*

that perhaps it never was a problem. An 1869 poem (reportedly composed during a Welsh tour in 1828) by the Tory MP Charles John Shore, 2nd Baron of Teignmouth, illustrates a contrasting approach: it celebrates Telford for conquering ‘cliffs that owned not Rome’s usurping power / Or Norman Edward’s’.⁴⁸ Arguably though, by presenting infrastructure as the frame for a perfectly proportioned, ‘serene’ prospect, Hamilton and Faber affirm the success of British nation-building more confidently than through grand declarations about the connection the bridge establishes between centre and periphery. While infrastructural development facilitated picturesque travel, economic extraction, and centralizing administration alike, representations of the Menai Bridge that foreground picturesque beauty can bypass questions about the state of the union, by simply denying difference and conflict. Moreover, by foregrounding the aesthetic form of the bridge, while minimizing technological functionality, these poems encourage readers to see Wales as a timeless, picturesque landscape—the ‘fairest’ in England, in Faber’s words—rather than a living culture, a political entity, a necessary stop on the mail route to Ireland, or even a source of national wealth.

IV. Old Wales’s feat: Reclaiming the Present

By contrast, illustrating the confluences between Welsh cultural nationalism and British nation- and empire-building, Welsh-language poems on the Menai Bridge strive to insert Wales into the narrative of British modernity and progress. They are distinguished, in the first instance, by close attention to a consideration that remains absent from Hamilton and Faber’s poems: the bridge’s everyday function in providing a safe, quick passage ‘Tros gerynt Porthaethwy’ [‘over the

(1992; Yale, NH: Yale University Press, 2014), especially pp. 11-54.

⁴⁸ Lord Teignmouth, ‘The Menai Bridge’, *Lays Lyrical and Legendary, Ballads and Paraphrases* (London: E. Moxon, Son & Co, 1869), p. 18.

currents at Porthaethwy’].⁴⁹ ‘Englynion i Bont Menai’ (1826), stanzas published under the initials R.J. in the *Chester Chronicle* just before the bridge opened, comment that ‘O Arfon trym-waith oedd tramwy—i Fon / Ar Fadau Porthaethwy’ [‘The passage from Arfon was hard work—to Anglesey / on the Bangor Ferries’]; the stanzas express delight that a ‘Cysswllt sydd—ffordd safadwy’ [‘A direct link—a steady path’] now connects the ‘Dwylan wahanol’ [‘different banks’]. Where Faber compared the bridge itself to a bird, R.J. suggests that travellers, no longer dependent on ferries and fair weather, experience something akin to the freedom of bird flight: ‘Mal adar wyr yn hedeg—ceir pell / Canfod ffrwd-wyllt waneg’ [‘Like a bird flying through the air—from afar, they will perceive the rapid stream of the currents’].⁵⁰ Similarly, a set of well-known stanzas by Dewi Wyn o Eifion (David Owen, 1784-1841)—who won two early-nineteenth-century eisteddfod competitions with his *awdlau* (long-form poems using a selection of twenty-four traditional Welsh strict metres) and had considerable influence on nineteenth-century Welsh poetry—emphasize the Bridge’s transformative impact on travel, assuring readers that, untroubled by waves and wind [‘Nid cerynt na chorwynt chwaith’], the journey now resembles a gentle, short drive in a hot-air balloon [‘mwyn yri / Mewn awyren fachdaith’].⁵¹

Where Hamilton and Faber present the bridge from a picturesque distance, these writers centre the thrill of a new kind of mobility. Moreover, Welsh poets tend to read the bridge’s form as an expression of closely intertwined Welsh progress and British dominance. Eben Fardd—who enjoyed considerable popularity and success as a poet, especially within the eisteddfod movement—triumphed against sixty-one competitors to win ‘a premium of £7 and a medal of the

⁴⁹ ‘Deiniol’ [Ebenezer Thomas], ‘Englynion ar Bont Menai’, quoted in ‘Beaumaris Royal Eisteddfod’, *Chester Chronicle*, 31 August 1832, p. 3.

⁵⁰ R.J., ‘Englynion i Bont Menai’, *Chester Chronicle*, 13 January 1826, p. 4.

⁵¹ Dewi Wyn o Eifion, ‘Englynion i Bont Menai’, *Y Gwladgarwr*, April 1841, p. 114. On the poet, see Hywel Teifi Edwards, ‘The Eisteddfod Poet: An Embattled Figure’.

value of £2' in the 1832 Beaumaris Eisteddfod for the best stanzas on Menai Bridge. His stanzas presents the bridge as an infrastructural yardstick for other nations:⁵²

Nid oes un wlad is y Ne lon—fyth deifl
Y fath Dîd dros Afon
Na chynnigiwch, Enwogion
Heb neud taith hyd y Bont hon.

[There is no country under the joyous heavens—that will ever throw
Such a chain across a River
Don't attempt it, you worthies,
Without making the journey across this Bridge]⁵³

The lines reveal a hybrid patriotism consistent with the image of Wales and Welshness projected at the provincial *eisteddfodau* of the early nineteenth century, which were conducted through the medium of English and, in some cases, attracted royal visitors.⁵⁴ While the Beaumaris Royal Eisteddfod sought to showcase Wales's cultural and scientific advancement—its 'rapid progress towards the temple of science and the arts', as Llwyd wrote in his visitor guide—it also signalled the country's enthusiastic 'tributary patriotism', stoked by the patronage of the United Kingdom's future monarch.⁵⁵ Such hybrid patriotism is even more explicit in Dewi Wyn o Eifion's stanzas, which portray the bridge as the crowning achievement of the arts, suggesting that 'Pontydd byd, pwyntiodd eu bai,—nid ydynt / ... / Ond pwynt maen at Bont Menai' ['Bridges of the world, when their faults are recognized—Are nothing / ... / But minor points

⁵² *The Gwyneddigion for 1832: Containing the Prize Poems, &c., of the Beaumaris Eisteddfod and North Wales Literary Society*, ed. by W. Jones (London: H. Hughes, 1839)

⁵³ 'Deiniol', 'Englynion ar Bont Menai'.

⁵⁴ On the shift of the eisteddfod movement from late-eighteenth-century radicalism to mid-nineteenth-century conservatism, see Elizabeth Edwards, 'Romantic Wales and the Eisteddfod', in *The Cambridge History of Welsh Literature*, ed. by Geraint Evans and Helen Fulton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 285-305 (pp. 296-7)

⁵⁵ Llwyd, *Beaumaris Bay*, p. iii. On Welsh tributary patriotism, see Gwyneth T. Roberts, "'Under the Hatches": English Parliamentary Commissioners' Views of the People and Language of Mid-Nineteenth-Century Wales', in *The Expansion of England: Race, Ethnicity and Cultural History*, ed. by Bill Schwarz (1996, London; New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 169-194 (p. 169).

beside the Menai Bridge’]. The ‘camp hen Walia’ [‘Old Wales’s feat’] surpasses the achievements of other civilizations and reflects the glory of ‘Ein Teyrn a’n Hunbenaeth; / A dawn gwneyd y dyn a’i gwnaeth’ [Our Ruler and Monarchy; / And the creative talent of the man who made it’].⁵⁶ Here, as in Llwyd’s earlier text, the bridge emerges as emphatically a ‘four nations’ project, an embodiment of Wales’s contribution to British nation-building.

A similar dichotomy structures the response to the second Menai crossing: while English verse seeks to separate the patriotic symbolism of the bridge from its location, Welsh-language poems use this new infrastructure to project visions of their country’s future within the union and empire. In one respect, however, the literary response to Robert Stephenson’s bridge differs from that to Telford’s: technological progress and process here emerge as a central concern for Anglophone as well as Welsh-language writers.

V. ‘poems wrought in beaten iron’: Britannia Tubular Bridge

If Telford’s older crossing was celebrated, above all, for its aesthetic qualities, Stephenson’s bridge appealed to contemporary audiences for different reasons. As ‘the iconic technology of Victorian modernity’, the railway not only redrew Britain’s map, it also presented a novel challenge for structural design.⁵⁷ While Telford’s use of wrought iron solved the problem of a bridge’s dead weight, Stephenson’s design exemplified the ‘bewildering array of structures [designed] to accommodate the railroads’.⁵⁸ His solution to locomotive weight was the tubular form that characterized Britannia and its smaller counterpart at Conwy.⁵⁹ It involved the

⁵⁶ Dewi Wyn o Eifion, ‘Englynion i Bont Menai’

⁵⁷ Nicholas Daly, *Literature, Technology, and Modernity, 1860-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 56.

⁵⁸ Billington, *The Tower and the Bridge*, pp. 30, 46.

⁵⁹ Billington, *The Tower and the Bridge*, p. 46.

construction of two massive (and two smaller) rectangular tubes, each 140 meters long and weighing 1,830 tons, from rivets and wrought iron plates. These tubes were launched onto the water, raised with the aid of a hydraulic press, and embedded into masonry towers, at a level just over 31 meters above high water. Britannia's construction, especially the 'floating' of the tubes, attracted large audiences, including those who came by steamer on the 'pleasure trip[s]' from Liverpool.⁶⁰ Interested members of the public could also read about this 'triumph of science'—and about the 'Gigantic Lions; Majestic Towers; Monster Tubes; Huge Stages'—in tourist guides, periodical articles, pamphlets, and official publications.⁶¹ The hydraulic press used to raise the tubes went on display in 1851 in another symbol of techno-political dominance: the Crystal Palace.⁶²

Britannia was, as David Billington notes, a 'self-conscious symbol' of power.⁶³ This self-consciousness is evident in a lack of design economy—Stephenson built the large towers in case his 'tube' would require suspension cables; it did not. More obviously, it found expression in the heavy-handed iconography of the massive lions that adorned the entrances of the tube.⁶⁴ It also

⁶⁰ Advertised by the Dublin Steam Company for a 'Pleasure Trip. *Britannia Tube, Menai-Bridge*' appeared, for instance, in the *Liverpool Standard and General Commercial Advertiser*, 12 June 1849, and the *Liverpool Mercury*, 15 June 1849.

⁶¹ Anon, *The Triumph of Science. An Account of the Grant Floatation of one of the Monster Tubes over the Menai Straits* (Caernarfon: James Rees, 1849); Thomas Jackson, *The Tourist's Guide to Britannia Bridge* (Bangor: W. Shone, 1849). Edwin Clark, Stephenson's superintending engineer, authored two 'official' publications: *General Description of the Britannia and Conwy Tubular Bridge ...* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1849) was short and moderately priced at 1s, and 'intended for the use of those who wish to gain a general knowledge [...] and [...] the information of those visiting the works'; the two significantly more expensive folio volumes of *The Britannia and Conwy Tubular Bridges* (London: Day & Son, 1850) were detailed and accompanied by lavish plates. Clark's publications were prompted partly by William Fairbairn's *An Account of The Construction of the Britannia and Conway Bridges* (London: John Weale, 1849), in which the author sought credit for the tubular design.

⁶² See, for instance, *A Guide to the Great Exhibition, Containing a Description of Every Principal Object of Interest* (London: George Routledge and Co, 1851), p. 104.

⁶³ Billington, *The Tower and the Bridge*, p. 59. See also Subrata Dasgupta, *Technology and Creativity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 17.

⁶⁴ On Stephenson's un-economic design, see Billington, *The Tower and the Bridge*, p. 49.

structures Philip G. Hamerton's 1855 poetic tribute, which focuses on the ways in which infrastructure refracts national strength.⁶⁵ But although picturesque aesthetics here make way for techno-political aesthetics, Hamerton does not explicitly link technological dominance and administrative control. As Stephenson was building his futuristic railway crossing, the infamous *Reports of the commissioners of enquiry into the state of education in Wales* (1847) affirmed—prompted partly by a series of uprisings and riots in the previous decades—that Wales had failed to keep up with national progress on account of its cultural difference.⁶⁶ Given that the railway and other connective infrastructures were so frequently represented as civilizing agents, certain to erase 'local distinctions and district prejudices', Hamerton's silence on the potential effects of infrastructural development is conspicuous.⁶⁷ It is consistent, however, with a liberal logic 'of government that disavows itself', working 'to organize populations and territories through technological domains that seem far removed from formal political institutions'.⁶⁸

Hamerton, best remembered as an art writer and largely forgotten as a poet, celebrates 'The Britannia Bridge' in his collection *The Isles of Loch Awe, and Other Poems of My Youth*. Consisting of ten rhyming couplets in trochaic octameter, the poem divides neatly into symmetric halves—like Britannia Bridge itself, with its two tubes, which are also evoked in the pairs of octametrical lines. While the poem echoes Hamilton's portrayal of the engineer as artist and the bridge as a work of creative genius, it makes no similar effort to downplay the structure's status as a material product of labour. For Hamerton, civil engineering is a hallmark of English

⁶⁵ Philip Gilbert Hamerton, *The Isles of Loch Awe, and other Poems of my Youth* (London: W.E. Painter, 1855), pp. 356-357.

⁶⁶ On the inquiry and its lasting legacies on language politics and culture, see Gwyneth T. Roberts, *The Language of the Blue Books: The Perfect Instrument of Empire* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1998) and the various essays in *Language and Community in the Nineteenth Century*.

⁶⁷ Frederick Smeeton Williams, *Our Iron Roads: Their History, Construction, and Social Influences* (London: Ingram, Cooke, and Co), p. 285

(once again, terminology is crucial) dominance because it synthesizes intellect, physical strength, and material wealth:

Some have iron thews and sinews, some are muscular of mind;
Learned savans, skilful blacksmiths, each are noble in their kind.

But to give the savan's wisdom to the hammer and the shears,
Come those intermediate workers,—England's civil engineers. (ll. 1-4)

These opening verses affirm the nobility of physical labour, with the trochaic octameter echoing the rhythms of industrial machinery. As Kirstie Blair explains, Tennyson's 'Locksley Hall' had established a firm association between this measure and the 'beat and throb' of modern industry, especially in the work of labouring-class poets.⁶⁹ Yet the lines by Hamerton—not himself a working-class poet—also suggest that the labourers' skill and tools are not autonomous productive forces but rather conduits for the 'savan's wisdom', in need of external direction. The engineer's intermediate work, not the labourer's 'hammer' and 'shears', can turn abstract vision into concrete (or rather iron) form: 'So does thought gain form and substance, and we see its force at length / Doing wonders far surpassing all the feats of brutal strength' (ll. 5-6).

As they redesign physical space, Hamerton suggests, civil engineers also manipulate those who inhabit and labour in it; they 'organise the masses' and 'make them wise and strong / So that one man's head shall govern all the labour of the throng' (ll. 7-8). The bridge's 'lofty mainmasts' and 'long colossal beams' (l. 12), 'corridors of iron' (l. 13) and 'iron walls' (l. 15), 'mighty tubes' (ll. 17, 19) and 'solid marble towers' (l. 19) not only reveal command over material resources, but also a capacity to cultivate—following the poem's own horticultural metaphor—

⁶⁸ Larkin, 'Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure', p. 327.

⁶⁹ Kirstie Blair, "'Men my brothers, men the workers": Tennyson and the Victorian Working-Class Poet', in *Tennyson Among the Poets: Bicentenary Essays*, ed. by Robert Douglas-Fairhurst and Seamus Perry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 294-5.

and to harness ‘the elements of power’ latent in ‘mankind’: ‘Brain and muscle—age in seedtime—early manhood in its flower’ (ll. 9-10). Thus, as these ‘Poems wrought in beaten iron’ ‘murmur[] with music’ and ‘vibrate in the pathway of the winds’, like a giant Aeolian harp, they reverberate with a clear message: ‘Singing to succeeding ages of the enterprise of ours!’ (ll. 18, 14, 17, 20). Power appears in two guises: first, as a capacity to maximize the productivity of labouring individuals; second, in the shape of imposing physical structures created by ‘enterprise’. Hamerton’s language, especially words such as ‘govern’ and ‘organise’, also point toward the ways in which infrastructures might operate as instruments of political control, directing flows of information, resources, goods, and people. But the diction runs counter to the main thrust of the poem, which retains a clear separation between the engineer’s work and the work of government.

As Appel, Gupta, and Anand note, by presenting infrastructure as primarily a ‘technical problem’, and by separating ‘the technical from the political’, liberal states have, since the late eighteenth century, obscured the political underpinnings of the ways in which infrastructural provision (or lack thereof) differentiates between and governs communities.⁷⁰ But for all that they were celebrated as triumphs of science and industry, Britain’s growing transport and communication infrastructures were, of course, vital instruments of administration both in the ‘home nations’ and in Britain’s colonies. Patrick Joyce and Michael Rubenstein have offered compelling accounts of how infrastructural development, under the guise of public works, functioned as part of the broader system of British governance in Ireland.⁷¹ The case of Wales is

⁷⁰ Appel, Gupta, and Anand, ‘Introduction’, pp. 4-5.

⁷¹ See Joyce, *State of Freedom*, p. 44 and Michael Rubenstein, *Public Works: Infrastructure, Irish Modernism, and the Postcolonial* (Notre Dame, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), pp. 18-28. Of course, Rubenstein’s book proposes an alternative model of infrastructure as a public good, embodied in the public utility projects of the Irish Free State.

necessarily different, because of geography, because Wales and England were largely governed by the same institutions, and because of the country's more enthusiastic participation in, and willingness to profit from, Britain's imperial-colonial project. Nonetheless, the westward expansion of the road and rail networks also served to extend the reach and power of central government in Wales. And while Britannia Bridge was under construction, the sanguine optimism of Welsh-British patriots about their partnership in the union had received a significant blow. As mentioned above, the 1847 *Reports* on education denigrated Welsh cultural difference, especially religious non-conformism and the prevalence of the Welsh language. It presented the latter as a 'vast drawback to Wales, and a manifold barrier to the moral progress and commercial prosperity of the people', which had to be overcome for Wales to enter fully into a state of modern civilization.⁷² Welsh difference is conceptualized in these documents in terms precisely opposite to those widely used to celebrate the connective power of new infrastructures and technologies, exemplified by Thomas Babington Macaulay's Whiggish claim that

Every improvement of the means of locomotion benefits mankind morally and intellectually as well as materially, and not only facilitates the interchange of the various productions of nature and art, but tends to remove national and provincial antipathies, and to bind together all the branches of the great human family.⁷³

In 1818, Richard Llwyd had accused the British government of neglect, for its failure to connect the North Wales coast to Britain's communication, transport, and economic networks; three decades later, British government officials accused Welsh communities of resisting incorporation into the networks designed to propel the nation toward an ever-more prosperous future.

Poetic responses to Britannia Bridge in the Welsh language, like those to Telford's Bridge

⁷² Jelinger C. Symons, 'Report on the Counties of Brecknock, Cardigan, and Radnor, under the Commission of Inquiry into the State of Education in Wales, in *Reports of the Commissioners of Inquiry into the State of Education in Wales* (London: William Clowes & Son, 1848), p. 309.

⁷³ Thomas Babington Macaulay, *The History of England from the Accession of James II*, 4th edn, 5 vols

two decades earlier, give the lie to this accusation, demonstrating an enthusiastic embrace of connective infrastructures and technological innovation. In 1850, for instance, Robert Trogwy Evans (1824-1901), a clergyman and writer, published (alongside religious verse, hymns, and Temperance writings) a long poem about the Menai and its shores, which concludes with a section on its ‘ddwy goron’ [‘two crowns’].⁷⁴ After fulsome praise for Telford’s bridge, which has attracted ‘Filiynau i’w edrych’ [‘Millions to look at it’], the speaker turns to the brand-new Britannia.⁷⁵ For all its clumsiness, the question that opens the section—‘Ond, O, beth yw nacw?’ [But, O, what is yonder’?—captures the speaker’s rapt excitement at beholding this ‘Gwyrth egni celfydydd—gorchest-gamp tramwyfa’ [‘Miracle of artistic vigour—crowning glory of thoroughfares’].⁷⁶ Likewise, while the description of the crossing train is a prime example of involuntary poetic comedy—“‘Pwff, pwff,” meddai rhywbeth, yn Arfon [...] // Ond ha, ar amrantiad, yn Môn mae’n ymddangos’ [“Puff, puff, says something in Arfon [...] // But, ha, in the twinkling of an eye, it appears on Anglesey’]—the poem is earnest when it celebrates how transport has liberated trade [‘masnachir yn rhwyddach’] and pulled Ireland and *England* closer together [‘Iwerddon a *Lloegr* a dynodd i’w gilydd’; emphasis mine].⁷⁷ Trogwy’s verses not only express acceptance of the networks emanating from England, they also accept the identification of Wales with ‘*Lloegr*’ [‘England’], as is apparent, too, in the reference to ‘ddyfais *ein* Stephenson’ [‘the invention of *our* Stephenson’; emphasis mine].⁷⁸

Such infrastructural enthusiasm counters the 1847 *Reports*’ accusation of Welsh

(London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1849), I, p. 370.

⁷⁴ Trogwy [Robert Evans], ‘Afon Menai a’i Gororau’, in *Y Myfyrdodydd Ieuanc; Yn Cynnwys Barddoniaeth, ar armyw Destynau; yn nghydag Ymddiddanion, Dadleuon, Caniadau a Hymnau Dirwestol* (Caernarfon: H. Humphreys, 1850), p. 23.

⁷⁵ Trogwy, ‘Afon Menai’, p. 23.

⁷⁶ Trogwy, ‘Afon Menai’, p. 24.

⁷⁷ Trogwy, ‘Afon Menai’, p. 24.

backwardness, but it does not resist their underlying Anglocentric logic. Verses like Trogwy's fall into a broader pattern, examined extensively by historians and literary scholars, that characterized Welsh cultural responses to Anglo-British dominance.⁷⁹ Many reacted not by abandoning the Welsh language or nonconformist worship, but by affirming and performing their compatibility with British values. The celebration of new infrastructures and innovative technologies, bound up as they were with conceptions of modernity, played an important part in this endeavour. But for writers attached to the idea of the 'principality' as a distinct nation, so did appeals to history.⁸⁰ The two rhetoric strategies—and temporal perspectives—coalesce in the sentimental 'Lines Composed on looking at her Majesty Queen Victoria Drawing a Picture of Britannia Bridge' (1852), published in the *North Wales Chronicle* by Macwy Mon. Macwy Mon (Robert Roberts, died 1871), who appears to have worked as a letter-carrier in Bangor, was a very active newspaper poet and contributor to Welsh-language periodicals.⁸¹ The poet begins by drawing the reader's gaze to 'Bont Britannia dlos' ['lovely Britannia Bridge'], but the focus rests on the royal visitors and especially 'Unbenes Prydain Fawr' ['Great Britain's sovereign']. Yet the bridge is not just a background; rather, the poem imagines Victoria herself as a bridge between Wales and England, based on her alleged Tudor heritage. Victoria is designated 'Orwyres i Syr Owen'—'Sir Owen [Tudor]'s great-granddaughter'. Allusions to historic 'galanas' ['slaughter'], especially the defeat of Llywelyn ap Gruffudd by Edward I, are

⁷⁸ Trogwy, 'Afon Menai', p. 24.

⁷⁹ See for instance, Gwyn A. Williams's classic *When Was Wales?: A History of the Welsh* (London: Penguin, 1985), especially pp. 209-10.

⁸⁰ Jane Aaron, for instance, argues that during the Romantic period texts that idealized the (often very remote) past 'helped to create a cultural atmosphere in which Welshness could feature as a positive aspect of one's identity rather than a source of contempt'. See Aaron, *Nineteenth-Century Women's Writing in Wales: Nation, Gender and Identity*, 2nd edn (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2010), p. 51.

⁸¹ Macwy Mon, 'Llinellau a Gyfansoddwyd wrth edrych ar ei Mawrhydi y Frenhines Victoria, yn Cymeryd Arlun o Bont Britannia', *North Wales Chronicle*, 24 December 1852, p. 6.

juxtaposed with the ‘undeb teg’ [‘fair union’] that originated, according to this text, when ‘Gwnaeth Henri Tudor ein rhyddhau / O hen grafangau trawster’ [‘Henry Tudor set us free / From the old clutches of iniquity’]. Not only do North and South Wales now live ‘mewn hedd’ [‘in peace’], but

Nid oes dedwyddach gwlad is nen
Heb gynen na goganu;
A rhyddid crefydd yn ein gwlad
A chyfraith fad i’n barnu
O Gybi Mon hyd Dofer Cent
Un talent ac un teulu

[There’s no more blessed country on earth
Without strife or derision;
And religious freedom and fair laws
Rule over us
From Holyhead to Dover, Kent
One talent and one family]

The poem demonstrates a deep investment in the notion of Britain, extolling Victoria as ‘Y wir Fritannia hardd ei hun’ [‘Herself the true, beautiful Britannia’]. At the height of loyalist sentiment and tributary patriotism, however, the poem nonetheless resists the blurring of national distinctions evident in Trogy’s verses and in the writings of Anglophone contemporaries; rather, the idea of Britain here accommodates the claim of Wales’s continuing importance as a distinct entity in the union. But this version of the United Kingdom, too, proved unstable and contested.

VI. Conclusion

Between 1818 and 1852, writers from Wales regularly turned to infrastructure to imagine and negotiate their nation’s future within the United Kingdom—sometimes to lobby for access, at other times to demonstrate allegiance to British conceptions of development and modernity. As I have sought to show, they competed with an Anglocentric infrastructural poetics (and politics)

that allowed little or no space for Wales as a separate entity in the nation's future. The poems I have considered mediate, interrogate, and demand promises of unity and progress. They participated in the broader cultural project of defining British identity.

Of course, infrastructure continues to play a central role in endeavours to imagine different national and global futures, including possible Welsh futures beyond Britain and British futures beyond Europe. Now as then, such acts of imagination treat infrastructures as 'entextualised forms', which embody affective and political meanings in excess of, or in tension with, their technical functions.⁸² Infrastructural poetics and politics tend to be future-oriented (even where they are also deeply conservative): infrastructures—promised or realized—often support narratives through which dominant political formations perpetuate and renew themselves, but they can also facilitate alternative visions. Appel, Gupta, and Anand theorize infrastructures as 'promises made in the present about the future', arguing that 'As the infrastructures we live with are remade, they provide us with an opportunity to think, imagine, and rebuild the world differently'.⁸³

Such 'thinking differently' is central to the interdisciplinary field of critical infrastructure studies, and has shaped literary criticism's contributions to the project. Bruce Robbins is right, I suspect, in arguing that 'in the eyes of literature and of literary criticism, the narrative of progress based on bridges, tunnels, sewers, railways, gas lines, electrification, and so on almost immediately came to seem naïve and misguided'.⁸⁴ Much nineteenth-century writing about infrastructure is either naively enthusiastic (the non-canonical material I have considered falls firmly into this category) or staunchly anti-utilitarian (Matthew Arnold's writings exemplify this

⁸² Larkin, 'The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure', p. 336.

⁸³ Appel, Gupta, and Anand, 'Introduction', pp. 27, 31.

⁸⁴ Bruce Robbins, 'The Smell of Infrastructure: Notes toward an Archive', *boundary 2*, 34 (2007), 25-33

tradition) and thus resistant to appreciating the ‘usefulness’ of certain material structures’.⁸⁵ Accordingly, infrastructuralist readers have tended to focus on an archive of twentieth- and twenty-first-century writings, characterized by ‘structuralist experiments’ that reveal ‘ways to denaturalize and revalue our taken-for-granted conveniences’.⁸⁶ And yet the ‘naive’ Victorian narrative of infrastructural development remains firmly lodged in the contemporary political imagination; the cultural texts that expressed, popularized, and developed this narrative deserve our attention, as much as the texts that challenged it, and those which make us revalue public infrastructures.

(p. 26).

⁸⁵ Robbins, ‘Smell of Infrastructure’, p. 27.

⁸⁶ Robbins, ‘Smell of Infrastructure’, p. 31.