

Alawon Gwerin Môn: towards a reception history

Andrew Cusworth

With this year's National Eisteddfod taking place in Anglesey, it seems an opportune moment to reflect on the two collections of folk songs from that island published by Grace Gwyneddon Davies. One of the songs from the first collection, 'Y Gelynen', is the set piece for the Unawd Alaw Werin dros 12 ac o dan 16 oed,¹ and the return of at least this song to its point of collection might allow us to muse for a moment on the extent to which Grace Gwyneddon Davies' hope that her publication would 'in some measure, be the means of arousing greater interest in the folk-song movement in Wales' has been realised. To consider this question, an at least partial history of the performance and reception of the songs since their publication is required: we know from the collections themselves and the annals of this journal at least some of the history of the songs prior to their being printed, but what happened to them afterwards? When and where were they sung and heard, and by whom?

Similar questions have led to research projects that aim to create large and accessible resources for the cultural study of music through the collation of large volumes of sources of performance and reception history. Drawing on wide-ranging historical sources and crowdsourcing, these large-scale projects, such as the Listening Experience Database,² are demonstrating the capacity of digital research methods to uncover the cultural and social history of music, providing the capacity to begin to address questions such as those posited above in a multi-perspectival and widely-informed manner.

One of the affordances of digital technology is its ability to collate and present an array of information on a single subject on one canvas at great speed; research questions requiring the processing of vast quantities of information and sources that have hitherto been fanciful are increasingly approachable, and addressing such questions can now, in some fields and given certain digital resources, be a matter of months of research rather than years. A prime example of this can be found in recent developments such as the Welsh Newspapers digital collection of the National Library of Wales, which potentially helps to save months of laborious research by providing rapid, searchable access to millions of newspaper articles, enabling the user to find multiple references to an event, person, object, or idea very rapidly, and thereby facilitating the creation and population not only of general histories but of highly specific microhistories.

The questions and ideas above were amongst those that led me to develop a prototype website for the performance and reception history of Welsh traditional music as the basis for my PhD research with the Open University and the National Library of Wales between 2012 and 2015. Using a database, I was able to accumulate information about music sources, events, and the people and locations involved in the performance and reception of Welsh music; sometimes transcribed, sometimes only referenced, these sources included music scores, reviews, letters, diaries, music publications, and so on. Most importantly, every item of information in the database was related to at least one other item; as such, it was possible, for example, to pass from a review of a performance, to the tune of the song performed, to the book in which the song was published, and to the biography of the book's creator. The

¹ Yr Eisteddfod Genedlaethol, *Rhestr Testunau 2017*, 2016, https://eisteddfod.cymru/sites/default/files/resources/rhestr%202017_WEB.pdf

² Listening Experience Database, <http://led.kmi.open.ac.uk>

accumulated information was then presented as a website, sometimes using geographic mapping to link information to the landscape of Wales.

It was one of the hopes of this earlier research to create a starting point or stimulus for a substantial public resource on Welsh traditional music; now, with the formalities completed, it seems time to begin work on that aspect of it by creating a small public resource. When I began my PhD research, it was with creating a small reception history of the first folk song collection of Ruth Herbert Lewis; in parallel, and with the Eisteddfod Ynys Môn in mind, I now turn to the collections of folk songs from Anglesey by Grace Gwyneddon Davies, and principally to the first collection, *Alawon Gwerin Môn*.

Grace Gwyneddon Davies

Born Grace Roberts in Liverpool in 1879, Grace Gwyneddon Davies was later to become a member of ‘the band of women collectors and activists’³ that helped first to establish and then, perhaps more importantly, to sustain the Welsh Folk Song Society. Other members of this band included Grace Gwyneddon Davies’ aunt, the prominent singer Mary Davies,⁴ and her near contemporary, Ruth Herbert Lewis. Grace Roberts was a competent and qualified pianist and singer. She studied in London at the Royal Academy of Music, and pursued a career as a singer and accompanist. Having met her husband-to-be, solicitor, poet, and politician Robert Gwyneddon Davies, after a performance at the Eisteddfod in Caernarfon in 1906,⁵ she was married in London on 16 April 1909.⁶

It might be said that Grace Roberts and Grace Gwyneddon Davies were two public identities donned at different times by the same person, for her activities and profile before and after her marriage to Robert Gwyneddon Davies seem to have been markedly different. The former Grace was a well-trained art song soprano who appeared regularly in contemporary reports as an accompanist and singer, and not least for her singing at Welsh national events such as the Eisteddfod; the latter Grace, married, firmly settled in Caernarfonshire, and seemingly no longer professionally active as an art song singer, was an advocate of Welsh folk song collecting, singing, and arranging, as well as being a committed and active member of the WI. Through this substantial change in her musical persona, she seems to reflect, as well as having helped to drive, the movement that turned away from the canon of essentially ‘classical’ national airs of the ‘Ar hyd y nos’ and ‘Gwŷr Harlech’ type, and towards the collection and promulgation of folk song as a form of musical patriotism. She continued her activities in the field of Welsh folk song until her death in 1944, with letters to John Lloyd Williams on Folk Song Society business dating as late as February 1944.⁷

³ James, E. Wyn, ‘An “English” Lady among the Welsh folk: Ruth Herbert Lewis and the Welsh Folk-Song Society’, in Ian Russell & David Atkinson (eds), *Folk Song: Tradition, Revival, and Re-Creation* (Aberdeen, 2004), pp.266–83.

⁴ Thomas, Wyn, *Meistres ‘Graianfryn’ a cherddoriaeth frodorol yng Nghymru* (Cymdeithas Alawon Gwerin Cymru, 1999), p. 7.

⁵ Parry, Enid, ‘Enid Parry yn Cofio Grace Gwyneddon Davies’, *Y Casglwr*, Rhif. 43, Mawrth 1991, p. 5.

⁶ ‘Priodas Mr. Gwyneddon Davies’, *Baner ac Amserau Cymru*, 21/4/1909, p. 14, <http://newspapers.library.wales/view/3848018/3848032/161/>

⁷ Letter from Grace Gwyneddon Davies to John Lloyd Williams, 15/2/1944, NLW GB0210 JLLW AH 3/1/27i.

As Grace Roberts, she was directly involved with the folk song society from its inception, having been engaged to attend and deliver musical illustrations at its first preliminary meeting at the same Eisteddfod of 1906 at which she met her future husband.⁸ After this early involvement, she supported the work and administration of the society, and contributed to its journal, events, and community until her death. Separately she published three collections of folk songs in arrangement for voice and piano, two of which were dedicated to songs from Anglesey; she also provided accompaniments to the last four songs in Ruth Herbert Lewis's second collection of folk songs, following the untimely death of Morfydd Owen.⁹

Alawon Gwerin Môn

Grace Gwyneddon Davies' interest in Anglesey stemmed from a familial connection on her father's side, and the focus of her first two published collections of folk song arrangements on Anglesey makes them interesting in terms of examining the rapid spread of localised, personal repertoires through publication and performance. In scope and content, the collections of folk songs from Anglesey are modest, comprising a total of fourteen songs in arrangement for voice and piano.¹⁰ All of the songs of the first collection and most of those of the second were collected from Owen Parry, a tenant of Tyddyn-y-Gwynt Farm, Dwyran, Anglesey, who 'was not shy of singing into the phonograph, and was greatly pleased to hear that wonderful instrument reproducing his own quivering but clear tones'.¹¹ Like a number of her contemporaries, Grace Gwyneddon Davies kept up with what might be described as 'best practice', and was a user of the phonograph machine, lamenting in one letter that she was unable to complete a transcription of an air sung by Owen Parry because her phonograph was '*hors de combat*'.¹²

It is worth noting that Grace Gwyneddon Davies had collected more songs from Anglesey, not to mention other locations, than those that she arranged for inclusion in her publications; indeed, her letters to John Lloyd Williams indicate that she was at least considering a third collection in the series, which may have been arranged for more ambitious forces than solo voice and piano.¹³ Some of these other songs, from Anglesey and elsewhere, appear in the early numbers of the *Journal of the Welsh Folk Song Society*, and at least one other (a lulla-

⁸ 'Folk Song: Formation of a Society', *North Wales Observer and Express*, 17/8/1906, p. 5, <http://newspapers.library.wales/view/3571267/3571272/33/>

⁹ Lewis, Ruth Herbert, *Second Collection of Welsh Folk-Songs* (Hughes & Son, 1924).

¹⁰ The first collection contained 'Titrwm, Tatrwmm', 'Y Gelynen', 'Cob Malltraeth', 'Fy Meddwl a Fy Malais', 'Cwyn Mam-y'ngyfraith', 'Un o fy mrodyr i', and 'Cyfri'r Geifr'; the second 'Mynwent Eglwys', 'Lili Lon', two versions of 'Lisa Lân', 'Myfyrdod', 'Aderyn Du Bigfelen', and 'Gwawr Can Mlynedd'.

¹¹ Gwyneddon Davies, Robert, 'The Collecting of Anglesey Folk Songs', *Anglesey Antiquarian and Field Club: Transactions*, 1923, p. 95.

¹² Letter from Grace Gwyneddon Davies to John Lloyd Williams, undated, NLW GB0210 JLLW AL 1/2/11

¹³ Letter from Grace Gwyneddon Davies to John Lloyd Williams, undated, NLW GB0210 JLLW AL 1/2/15

by, perhaps sung by Mr Gilbert Williams and arranged by Gwyneddon Davies for children to sing at a Dydd Gŵyl Dewi Celebration)¹⁴ appears in a manuscript arrangement with piano.¹⁵

Not forgetting the fact that Grace Gwyneddon Davies was a singer and pianist rather than a composer, the arrangements themselves might be described as of a type with popular music of the time; she herself admitted that ‘to write a suitable arrangement of Folk melodies is a task that presents many pitfalls & difficulties’,¹⁶ and that the accompaniments to these songs were ‘merely what the collector, herself a singer of folk songs, has found helpful.’¹⁷ For the first collection, at least, she was aided in writing out the accompaniments by her sister, and correspondence reveals that they were both nervous of selecting the correct time signatures, and felt obliged to ask John Lloyd Williams for his views;¹⁸ though this initial lack of confidence appears to have dissipated over subsequent years, she continued to seek the support of J. Lloyd Williams in her arranging work, perhaps partly in deference to his station as the musical editor for the Society.

The matter and manner of arranging folk melodies was (and still is) somewhat contested, and Grace Gwyneddon Davies clearly took a different approach to her peer, Ruth Herbert Lewis, whose instinct was to furnish accompaniment only out of necessity; indeed, in the more successful specimens of folk song arrangement at the National Eisteddfod of 1923, which Grace Gwyneddon Davies adjudicated with Philip Thomas,¹⁹ she saw ‘a step in the right direction [...] leading to musical development on national lines.’ Whilst not insensitive to the complexities of the challenges inherent in folk song arranging, her appraisals of these arrangements are far from lenient, and give the impression of an adjudicator who gave serious consideration to the matter; she favoured an arranging style that ‘preserve[d ...] those qualities which are peculiarly characteristic of the folk melody itself’, ‘caught the true spirit of the folk singer’, and were ‘cast in the proper atmosphere of folk music.’²⁰

Not unexpectedly, after the first collection was published in 1914, it appears in a number of reviews of greater or lesser detail in the Welsh press. The first review that I have so far found suggests that ‘Gwnelai ‘Alawon Gwerin Môn’ gydymaith difyr yn y cylch teuluaid y

¹⁴ Letter from Grace Gwyneddon Davies to John Lloyd Williams, undated, NLW GB0210 JLLW AL 1/2/11

¹⁵ Untitled and undated manuscript composition or arrangement in the hand of Grace Gwyneddon Davies, NLW GB0210 JLLW AH 3/1/34

¹⁶ Gwyneddon Davies, Grace, Adjudication of three folk songs for choir SATB, NLW GB0210 CYFANS 1923/12i

¹⁷ Gwyneddon Davies, Grace, ‘Foreword’, *Alawon Gwerin Môn* (Hughes & Son, 1914), p. [5].

¹⁸ Letter from Grace Gwyneddon Davies to John Lloyd Williams, 30/12/1930, NLW GB0210 JLLW AL 1/2/2

¹⁹ Both Grace Gwyneddon Davies and Philip Thomas provided adjudications for the competition; the former wrote in English and the latter in Welsh. A number of the adjudications that year, and found in the same collection, were given in English (notably on translations from Welsh into English, on compositions for piano trio, and on essays on the subject of the “Folkspeech of Flintshire”). At the 1928 Eisteddfod, Grace Gwyneddon Davies and Philip Thomas were once again co-adjudicators, in this instance of the Iorwerth Glyndwr John Shield; the adjudication was written only in Welsh in the hand of Philip Thomas, and was countersigned by Grace Gwyneddon Davies. (Letter from G. Lloyd Williams to E. T. John enclosing the adjudication, 18/10/1928, NLW GB0210 ETJOHN 4981)

²⁰ See footnote 16.

ystod gwyliau'r Nadolig' 1914.²¹ Early in 1915, D. Vaughan Thomas wrote favourably of the collection, and in particular of the arrangements:

'The collection ... is evidently a labour of love ... The accompaniments deserve a word of praise for appropriateness and a steady avoidance of unnecessary draperies.'²²

Despite the good impression made by the collection as a whole ('It is a pleasure to see set up in good type and on good paper the music and words of seven Anglesey folk songs'), he summarily dismissed some of its contents, writing that "'Fy Meddwl a fy Malais" (Jealousy), "Un o Fy Mrodyr i" (One of My Brothers), and "Cyfri'r Geifr" (Counting the Goats), are not perhaps so worthy of preservation.' In this, he disagreed somewhat with a review that appeared in *The Welsh Outlook*, in which 'Wele, un o fy mrodyr i' is described as 'a good example of a cumulative song.'²³ Though printed by Hughes & Son of Wrexham, the collection was generally referred to as published by *The Welsh Publishing Company* in contemporary reports, and their own advertisements carried part of a review by J. Lloyd Williams himself: 'Y mae'r trefniadau yn haeddu canmoliaeth neillduol, gan eu bod yn ddigon syml ac ar yr un pryd yn wreiddiol a diddorol.'²⁴ Such advertisements are useful, even if they are sometimes difficult to locate, and indicate that the collection was available to the Welsh diaspora at least as far afield as America, where it was regularly advertised in *Y Drych* for sale by mail order at a 'prys[] mwyaf rhesymol' as 'Folk Songs, Sir Fon (Miss Gwynedd Davies) yn y ddau Nodiant a'r ddwy iaith, 35c.'²⁵

The uptake of the songs is also recorded in the media of the time, with their use in concerts, lectures, and eisteddfodau all reported at different times. At the Annual Meeting of the Welsh Folk Song Society during the 1915 National Eisteddfod, selections from the two new collections, *Alawon Gwerin Môn* and Ruth Herbert Lewis' *Folk Songs*, amongst others, were sung by a variety of 'artistes,' including Grace Gwynedd Davies herself:

The following entertaining programme of folk-songs was given:-

Address, Sir Vincent Evans; folk-songs from Anglesey, "Fy meddwl i a fy malais" and "Cob Malltraeth," Miss Idwen Thomas; folk-songs from Flintshire, "Y blotyn du," "Mynwent Eglwys," and "Bachgen Main," Miss Lena Hughes; folk-songs, "Mae 'Nghariad i'n Venws" and "Tros y mor," Mrs Henry Williams (nee Miss Megan Evans), Menai Bridge; folk-songs from Anglesey, "Titrwm Tatrwm," "Y Gelynen," and "Mam-

²¹ 'Llen a Thelyn Cymru', *Baner ac Amserau Cymru*, 12/12/1914, p. 6, <http://papuraunewydd.llyfrgell-cymru/view/3888367/3888373/36/>

²² Vaughan Thomas, D., 'Alawon Gwerin Mon', *Cambria Daily Leader*, 4/2/1915, p. 8, <http://newspapers.library.wales/view/4098467/4098485/124>

²³ 'Reviews', *The Welsh Outlook*, Vol. 2, No. 1, January 1915, p. 38.

²⁴ Williams, John Lloyd, quoted in advertising material for *Alawon Gwerin Mon*, in *Y Brython*, 25/5/1916, p. 2, <http://newspapers.library.wales/view/4018238/4018240/11/>

²⁵ 'Llyfrau a Cherddoriaeth', *Y Drych*, 15/4/1915, p. 7, <http://newspapers.library.wales/view/3776006/3776013/50/>

yng-nghyfraith,” Mrs R. Gwyneddon Davies; folk-songs from Cardiganshire, “Can’ Mlynedd i ‘nawr” and “Merch ai’r Mham,” Miss Jennie Williams (Ehedydd Ystwyth).²⁶

A year later, over the Christmas weekend, the collection was the testing-ground for would-be folk singers in the ‘Cylchwyl Undeb Llenyddol a Cherddorol Rhostryfan a Rhosgadfan,’ in which a prize of five shillings was offered to the best singer of any one of the songs from *Alawon Gwerin Môn*.²⁷ Similarly, songs from the collection began to enter into the concert repertoire. In 1918, ‘Titrwm, Tatrwm’ appeared at a ‘Grand Concert at the New Town Hall’ in Denbigh in aid of the ‘Fund for Comforts for Soldiers’; the song was given in tandem with ‘Wrth fyn’ d hefo Deio i Dywyn’ by Laura Evans-Williams, who was encored for her efforts.²⁸ Like Grace Gwyneddon Davies and Mary Davies, Laura Evans-Williams was a well qualified singer and a graduate of the Royal Academy of Music; she was also the soprano engaged to sing for the charring ceremony of the 1917 National Eisteddfod at Birkenhead, an event for which the anniversary will be marked in this year’s Eisteddfod.²⁹

As a singer and active promoter of the cause of Welsh folk song, Grace Gwyneddon Davies herself gave lecture recitals with her husband, and is recorded as having sung ‘Titrwm, Tatrwm’, ‘Cob Malltraeth’, and ‘Y Gelynen’ at one of these events that held by the Cymdeithas Genedlaethol in Manchester; it was reported, ‘Cafodd y Gymdeithas noson o adloniant Cymreig, pur a chartrefol o’r Hen Wlad.’³⁰ Despite this, it is clear from her correspondence that she was not always willing to perform her songs, and in an undated letter, perhaps shortly following or preceding one of her publications, she told J. Lloyd Williams that she would not sing at a meeting in Aberystwyth:

I am coming to Aberystwyth as a member of the Executive Com[mittee] not as a performer. I shall not arrive from London until 5:30 – & after the com[mittee] there will be nothing of me left but a tired out body anxiously thinking of getting back to the Hotel as soon as possible. No – I am not going to sing any of those songs – & I am in that state that I loathe the very sound of them – & never want to see or hear them again.³¹

Using the BBC’s *Genome* service, currently in its beta phase, we can find details of Grace Gwyneddon Davies arrangements that were heard on the radio, sung by a range of per-

²⁶ ‘Welsh Folk-Song Society’, *North Wales Chronicle*, 6/8/1915, p. 6, <http://newspapers.library.wales/view/4243087/4243093/52/>

²⁷ ‘Rhybudd Cyhoeddus’, *Y Genedl Gymreig*, 17/9/1916, p. 4, <http://newspapers.library.wales/view/4025631/4025635/37/>

²⁸ ‘Grand Concert at the New Town Hall’, *Denbighshire Free Press*, 19/1/1918, p. 3, <http://newspapers.library.wales/view/3612562/3612565/18>

²⁹ Ellis, Thomas Iorwerth, ‘Evans-Williams, Laura’, *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*, 2001, <http://yba.llgc.org.uk/en/s2-EVAN-LAU-1883.html>

³⁰ ‘Ein Cenedl ym Manceinion’, *Y Brython*, 6/3/1919, p. 3, <http://newspapers.library.wales/view/4019211/4019214/20/>

³¹ Letter from Grace Gwyneddon Davies to John Lloyd Williams, undated, NLW GB0210 JLLW AL 1/2/6

formers including Margaret Owen (1930),³² Mable Parry (1935),³³ and Dora Herbert Jones (1938);³⁴ Grace Gwynedd Davies herself became the subject of a broadcast in 1954. The broadcast *A Programme of Gramophone Records: A Welsh Recital* included the recording of 'Y Gelynen' made by Mable Parry and released by Columbia Records in the early 1930s, a venture supported by Grace Gwynedd Davies herself.³⁵

The broadcast made by Dora Herbert Jones is perhaps complemented in some respects by two broadcasts that took place, one in 1935 by the BBC Singers³⁶ and one in 1938 by the Swansea Singers,³⁷ of Gustav Holst's arrangements of Welsh folk songs. Gustav Holst came to Welsh folk music during the summer of 1930 having previously decided to leave folk songs alone in the future, noting that they were 'a limited form of art, and when one works for long in a small form, mannerisms are almost inevitable.' His change of heart, by the account of his daughter, Imogen Holst, came after hearing a number of the songs performed in Hammersmith by Dora Herbert Jones: 'he liked them so much that he immediately began setting them to Steuart Wilson's free translations.' Albeit that Holst's favourite melody was 'Lisa Lân', the version of 'Cwyn Mam y'Nghyfraith' that he used was precisely the same as the one recorded and arranged by Grace Gwynedd Davies;³⁸ as such, there seems here to have been a direct influence between Grace Gwynedd Davies' work and the work of a composer of international standing.

Returning for a moment to the opening musings of this brief article, and with all of this in mind, it seems reasonable to imagine that Grace Gwynedd Davies' hopes for *Alawon Gwerin Môn* were not only met but exceeded within her own lifetime, and that the collection had indeed 'aroused greater interest in the folk song movement in Wales' in a variety of quarters: we have seen evidence of its use by singers of varying kinds, its value to enthusiasts, the reception of her work by the Welsh and Welsh diaspora public, and that at least one of her songs helped to tempt a distinguished composer out of his folk melody retirement. But the story of these songs, of their dissemination, performance, and reception, has continued far beyond the sources that I have found and used in the creation of this article, and, just this year, 'Y Gelynen' has been performed by young hopefuls on the stage of the National Eisteddfod.

One of the great advantages offered by digital media, particularly databases and websites, over their print equivalents is that of extensibility: a database-driven website can easily be

³² *Egwyl Cymraeg*, 19:00 21 January 1930, Radio 5WA Cardiff, <http://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/schedules/5wa/1930-01-21#at-19.00>

³³ *A Programme of Gramophone Records: A Welsh Recital*, 19:45, 21 December 1935, Regional Programme Western, <http://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/schedules/regional/western/1935-12-21#at-19.45>

³⁴ *Melodies of Wales*, 21:15, 31 March 1938, Regional Programme Wales, <http://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/schedules/regional/wales/1938-03-31#at-21.15>

³⁵ Thomas, Wyn, *Meistres 'Graianfryn' a cherdoriaeth frodorol yng Nghymru* (Cymdeithas Alawon Gwerin Cymru, 1999), p. 16

³⁶ *The BBC Singers*, 18:15, 29/9/1935, Regional Programme, London, <http://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/schedules/regional/london/1935-09-29#at-18.15>

³⁷ *Melodies of Wales*, 19:45, 3/5/1938, Regional Programme, Wales, <http://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/schedules/regional/wales/1938-05-03#at-19.45>

³⁸ Holst, Imogen, *Gustav Holst: A Biography* (Second Edition, Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 146.

updated, expanded, and developed, potentially accepting, gathering, and presenting almost endless new sources of information of a wide range of types. The sources and information used in writing this article are already tabulated in a database and presented on a prototype website that I hope might help to stimulate a debate about a digital resource for Welsh traditional music. To further the understanding of Grace Gwyneddon Davies' work, the website incorporates a form through which users can submit information about the collections, the songs they contain, and when and where they have been heard, discussed, or reported upon. The website is available at <http://andrewcusworth.com/ggd/> and I hope that it will prove to be of interest.