

What Makes a Museum National? National Identities at Community Museums

Ellen Chapman

International Centre for Cultural and Heritage Studies,
Newcastle University, Britain

ellen.chapman@ncl.ac.uk

How can we understand and define the national museum concept? One broad definition is that a national museum is a state or government funded institution that plays an important role in shaping and mediating public discourses of national identities. This paper argues that national museums are not the only museum sites which address issues of national identity, contrary to what much of the existing literature on this topic suggests (Crooke 2000; Boswell and Evans 1999; McLean and Cooke 2003; Mason 2004). Local community based museums, often perceived as only addressing local and community identities (Karp, Kreamer and Lavine 1992), have the potential to engage with discourses of nationhood.

My doctoral research addresses the construction and representation of Welsh identity by a number of community museums in the United States, run by and for self-identifying Welsh Americans. This identification is commonly based upon possession of Welsh immigrant ancestors. While not funded by government nor possessing collections of national significance, these sites could be described as 'national museums' because they are engaged in the process of creating and narrating a sense of Wales, its national identity, history and culture. I argue that, while the national museum is a key site to study public discourses of national identity, the potential contribution of local and community museums to this discourse should also be considered.

Introduction

How can we understand and define the national museum concept? A broad definition might be that a national museum is a state or government funded institution that plays an important role in shaping and mediating public discourses of national identity. This role as a space in which national identities are articulated is a key element in our understanding of the national museum concept; the vast majority of academic studies of the relationship between museums and national identities have focussed on national museum sites (Crooke 2000; Boswell and Evans 1999; McLean and Cooke 2000, 2003; Mason 2005, 2007; Prösler 1996; Kaplan 1994; Fladmark 2000). We commonly implicitly assume that *national* identities will naturally be addressed at *national* museums. Very little work has been done on the construction and representation of national identities at local community museums. Indeed, most research done on community museums has focussed on their role in articulating local community identities (Karp, Lavine and Kreamer 1992).

In this paper I argue that community museums can and do engage with national identities, utilising ideas about nation and national identity in their constructions and representations of local identity. My ongoing doctoral research investigates the production, display and performance of Welsh national identity at a number of 'Welsh American' community museums in the USA. These museums have been established and are run by and primarily for self-identifying Welsh Americans, individuals who claim an identity as both American and Welsh, commonly on the basis of an ancestral link with Wales. This paper draws on the results of this investigation at three sites: the Welsh American Heritage Museum in Oak Hill, a village in south eastern Ohio (site 1) ; the Welsh Nationality Room in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (site 2); and the North American Festival of Wales, an annual and peripatetic cultural heritage festival (site 3). A number of research approaches were used to explore and analyse constructions and representations of Welsh identities at these sites. The first involved an analysis of the exhibition spaces and collections, drawing on existing museological research. The second approach involved in-depth interviews with the curators and managers of each site. The third approach involved exit interviews with visitors to the sites, using a qualitative survey of seventeen questions to explore their perceptions of Wales, Welsh identities and the museums: 272 exit interviews were carried out over the three sites. By combining these three approaches a detailed analysis of the Welsh identities articulated at each site was achieved.

Museums and National Identities

The vast majority of literature on the role played by museums in constructing and representing national identities has focussed on national museum sites. This focus is both natural and valid: national museums play an important role in the articulation of national identities, providing a space in which the nation, its national culture, history and identity is defined and embodied in material form (Prösler 1996: 34). Investigations of the relationship between national museums and national identities take one of three main approaches (Mason 2007). The first is an historical approach, focussing on the creation of national museums by European nation-states in the nineteenth century and their role in transforming the population into a national citizenry (Crooke 2000; Prösler 1996; Boswell and Evans 1999). The second approach deals with national museums in relation to contemporary debates about postcolonialism and First Nation peoples (Kaplan 1994). The third approach addresses the changing roles of national museums today in the context of globalization and postnationalism (MacDonald 2003).

All three of these approaches focus their attention upon national museum sites, large public institutions funded and often established by central governments. However, national

museums are not the only museums at which national identities are constructed and articulated. National identity is constructed at the local level as well as the national (Crooke 2006: 174). The local informs the national and vice versa: my research suggests that community museums play a part in shaping and representing local perceptions and experiences of national identity, while, as MacDonald argues, ‘the model of identity articulated by national museums play[s] into the more localised identities being constituted and displayed’ at non-national museums such as my case studies (2003: 4).

This reciprocal relationship between the national and the local is of particular relevance when we look at diasporic hybrid and transcultural identities such as Welsh American. As a result of the ongoing processes of globalization and the increasing ease of movement of people, goods and information across national borders, national identities are no longer to be found only within the borders of their respective nation states (Hall 1991: 22; Cohen 1997: 157; Clifford 1997: 261). Self-identifying Welsh Americans identify with and claim a Welsh identity outside the geopolitical boundaries of Wales.

Welsh American Community Museums

My research looks at three Welsh American community museums and cultural heritage events which are engaged in constructing and representing a Welsh national identity both outside Wales and outside the national museum model. Each of these community museums uses Welsh national identities to build and articulate a community identity as Welsh American, on both a local and a national level.

Welsh American Heritage Museum

The Welsh American Heritage Museum is a small community run museum in an area of south eastern Ohio that experienced high levels of Welsh settlement during the nineteenth century. The museum is housed in an old Welsh church building. Following the church’s closure, local self-identifying Welsh Americans began a fundraising campaign to purchase the building, save it from destruction and establish a museum of the area’s Welsh heritage. The museum is a non-profit making organisation, managed by a board of trustees and elected officers, who work on a voluntary basis. The museum’s collection is made up of objects donated by self-identifying Welsh Americans from both the local area and further afield. The building is also used as a meeting space for the local Welsh American community, with monthly social gatherings and annual Christmas and St. David’s Day (the patron saint of Wales) events held there.

The museum is first and foremost a community site, run by and for local self-identifying Welsh Americans and representing the local area’s Welsh heritage. Its mission statement is ‘to keep the Welsh culture and traditions alive in the area and to preserve for all time the old Welsh Congregational Church building’ (Oak Hill Public Library website). However, in order to represent local Welsh heritage, the museum draws on discourses of Welsh national identity. Much emphasis is placed on religiousness and musicality as perceived national characteristics of the Welsh settlers, characteristics that have been inherited by their Welsh American descendants: ‘We want to preserve the traditions and cultures of the Welsh people in the area, and a big part of that is the church of course - that’s why we saved the building – and the music. Us Welsh, we’re singing all the time’ (curator of the Welsh American Heritage Museum, pers. comm. 21st March 2006). Similarly, while the museum’s core audience is the local Welsh American community, the museum makes much of its claim to be ‘the only museum of Welsh heritage in the States’, stressing its importance to a national Welsh American community.

Welsh Nationality Room

The Welsh Nationality Room is currently under construction at the University of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The University houses a museum, currently made up of twenty-six period 'nationality rooms' which represent the national cultures and identities of some of the various immigrant groups that have settled in the Pittsburgh area. These rooms are both a popular tourist attraction and used as teaching classrooms by the university. A local Welsh American cultural society, the St. David's Society of Pittsburgh, has led a fundraising campaign to establish a Welsh Nationality Room to commemorate the city's Welsh immigrants. The room will take the form of a nonconformist Welsh chapel of the late eighteenth century, complete with pews, pulpit and an attached preachers' residence (St. David's Society of Pittsburgh website). Its design is based upon the Ty'n Rhiw chapel, part of the collection of the open air St. Fagans National History Museum, a National Museums Wales site.

Like the Welsh American Heritage Museum, local self-identifying Welsh Americans will be a core audience group of the completed Welsh Nationality Room. Members of the St. David's Society are looking forward to using the space to celebrate various Welsh holidays and events and see the space primarily as a memorial and monument to the Welsh immigrants to Pittsburgh. However, the room's location within the University of Pittsburgh's nationality room complex and its dual function as both a tourist attraction and a working classroom mean that its audience will be broad and varied: self-identifying Welsh American visitors from across the USA; university students; members of the general public; and both internal and overseas tourists.

North American Festival of Wales

Finally, the North American Festival of Wales is an annual cultural heritage festival that has grown from more modest beginnings as a local community *gymanfa ganu* (hymn signing festival) into a four day celebration of Welsh culture and heritage attended by self-identifying Welsh Americans from across the USA. The event includes a *gymanfa ganu*, an *eisteddfod* (literary and musical competition), seminars on various aspects of Welsh history and culture and a marketplace selling books, music, ornaments and clothing on a Welsh theme (North American Festival of Wales website). It is managed by the Welsh National Gymanfa Ganu Association (WNGGA), made up of a board of trustees and ten elected officers, and supported by membership fees and donations.

More than the Welsh American Heritage Museum or the Welsh Nationality Room, the North American Festival of Wales operates on a national level, both in terms of its content and its audience. The festival's mission statement is 'to preserve, develop, and promote our Welsh religious and cultural heritage and our religious and cultural traditions' (WNGGA website). Its peripatetic nature, being held in a different city every year, also contributes to its broader, more national scope; the event is not associated with the Welsh American community of a particular locality, such as Pittsburgh or south eastern Ohio, but with a national Welsh American community. It is an event at which individuals who identify as Welsh from all over the USA and Canada come together to perform and celebrate their Welsh culture and heritage. Visitors commonly perceived the festival as national in its scope and influence, with 85.4% of survey respondents (176 individuals) expressing views similar to the following quotes:

The festival informs all Americans with Welsh heritage, it tells them about what it is to be Welsh. (Respondent 55, site 3)

The festival gives Welsh Americans as a whole a sense of their heritage and cultural identity. (Respondent 12, site 3)

Community Museums and National Identities

The three case study sites are places where self-identifying Welsh Americans go to ‘actively make and remake their [Welsh] identities, to selectively select and reject and manipulate the images and identities found within’, a description applied by McLean and Cooke to the National Museum of Scotland (2000: 150). To varying extents, each of the sites functions on both a local and a national level: they construct and mediate local Welsh American communities and community identities through representations of Welsh national identity and culture, while also playing a role in the articulation of a national Welsh American community and its identity. All three of the sites also perform several roles traditionally ascribed to national museums: they provide origin stories for both the Welsh nation and the Welsh American community; they are museums ‘of’ the nation, representing Welsh national culture and identity; and they are instruments of Welsh American community pride on both a local and national level (Mason, 2007).

Museums as providers of origin stories

Providing an origin story for the nation is seen as one of the primary roles of a national museum (Mason 2007): representing ‘the nation in time and space, embodying the legitimacy of the nation for both citizens and the “other”’ (McLean and Cooke 2003: 154). A national museum traditionally defines the nation and its boundaries through its collections and exhibitions, providing a linear narrative of its history and representing its ‘unique’ cultural qualities in tangible form through the collection of objects it exhibits (MacDonald 2003: 3). While the three case study community museums’ main focus is on Welsh American history and culture at both a local and a national level, their exhibitions also represent the cultural identity and history of Wales, providing a narrative of the nation’s origins.

Each of the three sites provide this narrative by defining the cultural distinctiveness of Wales, emphasizing what makes it ‘unique’: in other words, the grounds on which Wales can be defined as a separate nation, with a distinct national culture, identity and history. This articulation of the defining characteristics of Welsh national identity feeds into the sites’ representation of origin stories, both for local and national Welsh American communities, defining what makes these communities ‘unique’ and distinct.

The North American Festival of Wales represents music and song as the defining characteristics of ‘Welshness’ through its key events, the *gymanfa ganu* (hymn singing festival) and the *eisteddfod* (musical and literary competition). Visitors’ opinions of the role of the festival reflected this emphasis, with 47.3% of respondents citing music or song as a key part of the event:

The festival promotes Welsh uniqueness in song, poetry and history. (Respondent 21, site 3)

The musical heritage – that’s played a big part in Welsh history. All the Welsh can sing. (Respondent 48, site 3)

The Welsh Nationality Room places the emphasis on religious nonconformity as the defining characteristic of Welsh cultural identity, choosing to represent Wales through the architectural style of a nonconformist chapel. As the architect responsible for the room’s design, himself a self-identifying Welsh American explained:

The room has to represent Wales as it was in 1787, the date that [Pittsburgh] University was founded. The initial concept of a manor house was felt to be too English, the people who lived there would have been mainly English... We felt that what was truly Welsh...at

that time was the chapel and if there was a way to connect with the song and voice and literature of the time it would be the early chapels.

Similarly, the Welsh American Heritage Museum emphasizes music, song and religion as the defining characteristics of Welsh culture; it is housed in a religious building and its collection is heavily weighted towards musical material, including a number of organs owned by local Welsh settlers and numerous Welsh hymnals and songbooks (Welsh American Heritage Museum catalogue).

Museums 'of' the Nation

The role played by national museums in defining the cultural distinctiveness of a nation is particularly obvious at what can be called museums 'of' the nation: sites which seek to present the nation in miniature through their collection and display of material objects deemed to be 'typical' of that nation (Mason 2007). This ethnographic approach is illustrated by sites such as Skansen in Sweden, and St. Fagans: National History Museum in Wales, whose collection included the Ty'n Rhiw chapel on which the design of the Welsh Nationality Room has been based (project architect, pers. comm. 6th March 2006). Such museums play a role as symbols of national identity (Prösler 1999: 35). The inherent element of selection at such museums must be remembered: such sites represent a single, often the dominant, discourse of national identity while ignoring other discourses.

The three Welsh American community museums can all be described as museums 'of' the Welsh nation. Each site presents a narrative of Welsh cultural identity through its exhibitions, all three choosing to focus on a romantic and nostalgic version of Wales and 'Welshness'. There were no references to specifically contemporary symbols of Wales or Welsh identity evident in the three sites' exhibitions; similarly, there were few representations of elements of the recent industrial history of Wales such as coal mining. The three museum sites each presented a timeless, preindustrial Wales, focussing on romantic imagery of unspoilt natural landscapes, music, song and religion. As the curator of the Welsh American Heritage Museum put it: 'The museum...is a memorial to what this area was and the Welsh people who founded the area and the Welsh culture they brought with them. We're trying to preserve what Wales was like in the past' (pers. comm. 21st March 2006). This focus on a Wales of the past in numerous survey responses:

When I think of Wales I think of beautiful hills, legends, enchantment...Something ancient and noble, castles, harps and Merlin. A place I yearn to be, to see, to know.
(Respondent 6, site 2)

To me, Wales means mountains, valleys, song and *hiraeth* [roughly translated as a longing for the homeland]. (Respondent 24, site 1)

Wales is a land of natural beauty, rough country, wind...My people's homeland, sheep, an undecipherable language, a proud people, struggle... (respondent 45, site 3)

Over three-quarters (82.0%) of respondents drew on similar romantic and nostalgic symbols of the Welsh nation.

This emphasis on a Welsh culture and identity of the past may be linked to the sites' roles as museums 'of' both localized and national expressions of Welsh American community. The Welsh American Heritage Museum's aim is to preserve and present the Welsh culture that flourished in its local area in the nineteenth century. Similarly, the Welsh Nationality Room seeks to represent Wales as it was in the late eighteenth century, at the time the University of

Pittsburgh was founded. These sites provide self-identifying Welsh Americans with a sense of roots, of the nation and culture their ancestors came from, as epitomized by the North American Festival of Wales, with its emphasis on traditional aspects of Welsh culture. These three sites are not museums 'of' the contemporary Welsh nation but of a Welsh nation of the past. They use aspects of traditional Welsh cultural identity to construct local and national Welsh American communities and identities.

Museums as a Source of Community Pride

National museums play an important role as instruments of civic pride, symbols of a city or nation's cultural status (Mason 2007; MacDonald 2003: 3). Indeed, possession of a national museum is frequently perceived as an essential symbol of nationhood (McKean 2000: 126). In a similar way, the three case study sites serve as instruments of community pride, for both their local and the national Welsh American community. The museums are symbols of Welsh Americans' pride in their Welsh heritage, their desire to preserve it and their willingness to support its preservation through the donation of funds, time and objects for the museums' collections. These collections assert and represent in material form 'Welsh American' as a distinctive and separate cultural identity. They are 'empowering institutions that have provided the people of the area with a renewed and positive sense of identity' (Crooke 2006: 176). As 'bottom-up' museums, established, funded and run by self-identifying Welsh Americans and existing outside the formal museum sector, they represent a desire for self-representation of the community's history and culture. A key element of the three museums' role is that of ownership. As the architect of the Welsh Nationality Room put it:

...the fundraising has all come from Welsh Americans who are interested. We've had a lot of ownership from societies around Pennsylvania and the general Welsh community across the country. So, we have these people feeling that ownership and so... [the Welsh Nationality Room] is important to them, it will be their room and not just ours here in Pittsburgh. (pers. comm. 6th March 2006)

The decision of these various Welsh American groups to claim, articulate and perform Welsh identities through the establishment of museums illustrates the important role museums are perceived to play in shaping and mediating national identities. As quoted earlier, MacDonald has argued that 'the model of identity articulated by national museums play[s] into the more localised identities being constituted and displayed' (2003: 4). The decision made at the three sites to construct and represent community identities through a museum draws on the role played by larger public museums, including national museums, in the articulation of national identities. Similarly, the three sites have drawn on Welsh national identity in their construction of Welsh American community identities.

Conclusions

With reference to the question asked at the beginning of this paper, 'how can we understand and define the national museum concept?', I argue that our understanding should not focus too heavily on the national museum as a museum site at which national identities are articulated. In this paper I have argued that community museums, as well as national museums, are engaged in the construction, representation and mediation of national identities. Community museums can and do address national identities; the Welsh American case study sites utilise discourses of Welsh national identity in their construction of Welsh American community identities on both local and national (America-wide) scales. The national is being used to achieve local agendas.

A key element in our definition of the national museum concept should be the way in which they are managed and funded. The Welsh American museums, while they can be described as museums 'of' the nation, 'national museums' in the sense that their exhibitions represent Welsh national identity, are not national museums. They are community museums, established, funded and managed by and for self-identifying Welsh American groups. National museums are large public institutions, established and funded by, and accountable to central governments of their respective nation-states. The defining characteristic of the national museum is in this relationship between the museum, the state and the public: in the political agendas inherent in the activities of a national museum and the way in which it constructs, represents and mediates public discourses of national identity. It is not that the national museum articulates national identities that defines it, but *how* and *why* it articulates national identities in the way that it does.

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