

Laurel Bradshaw, teaching Welsh and Welsh dance for decades

Interview by newsletter editor Mary Morris Mergenthal. March 2025.

1 - When did you first start learning Welsh & why?

Well, that is a little complicated... I have always loved languages in general. I took German in high school. I took Koine Greek in college. Also a Chaucer class, and Anglo-Saxon. In grad school I took a French reading course, and studied Latin, especially focusing on medieval Latin.

I had been working on my MA in musicology, but health was an issue, and I had to carry at least a half-time load of classes in order not to defer paying student loans. I really had completed everything I needed except for writing my thesis, so that's partly why I took the language classes.

I should also say I was really focusing on early music, and eventually I thought I would get a PH. D. in medieval studies, combining my interests in music, literature, languages, history, etc. So I was taking medieval history and other classes, too. I was also very interested in Celtic stuff.

There was a teacher that offered medieval Welsh and medieval Irish alternate years. I really wanted to take the Irish, because the Bradshaws had come from Ireland. But it was the year for medieval Welsh, so I took that. (I did take the Irish the following year.) And I just fell in love with the Welsh. I loved the language, the poetry and literature. It actually wasn't until the following summer that I was doing a lot of genealogy and discovered my own Welsh ancestry. And it was medieval too - I was descended from the brother of Owain Glyndwr through the Yale family, and they were descended from the princes of both North and South Wales. So that just cemented it!

There was a Welsh church near the University of Iowa that had a Gymanfa Ganu around the 4th of July every year. So I started doing all these Welsh things! And went to my first WNGG in Minneapolis (1987). (I remember seeing Mike and Audrey McClellan going into the banquet in full Scottish costume - such a striking couple! I didn't know them then, of course, nor did I know that I would be back in Minneapolis 4 years later and teaching them Welsh folk dances! But I'm getting ahead of myself...)

2 - You're also a licensed Welsh Folk Dance instructor. How do the two interests interact?

I was also into folk-dancing in Iowa City. The University had a folk-dance group that I had joined. We even had a group that did some performing around town. I especially loved the eastern European dances - Romania, Czechoslovakia - anything with bagpipes! Ha! Okay, we did Greek, and Israeli, and English, and Scandinavian. Everything really. Well, after I got bitten by the Welsh bug, I ran across a record of Welsh folk dances with instructions by the group *Ar Log* and tried teaching some of them to the folk-dance group. By then I had gotten my library degree, because I had to do SOMETHING to earn money, if I was going to go on

for a PH. D. And other music students were also getting library degrees. Because how many actual musicology jobs are there out there...

And my very first job interview happened to be at Yale University. They flew me out to New Haven and it was quite exciting (my first plane ride, too...) Anyway, I didn't get the job, but I knew I wanted to be in the east. I was born in Connecticut. And my father and grandfather had both gone to Hartford Seminary, and a lot of my ancestry was in New England. Well long story shorter, I didn't even get so much as a nibble for almost a year. In desperation, I applied for a job in a small-town public library (Oneonta, New York). The salary was laughable but as I say, I was desperate. And I knew I would get it.

The silver lining to that whole tale was that I had learned about this course called Welsh Heritage Week, and lo and behold it was to be held in New York, and I could commute there from Oneonta. It was about a 90-minute drive as I recall. I contacted Anne Habermehl who was then the organizer, (I had probably met her at the WNGG in Minneapolis) and she told me there was one more opening in the Welsh folkdance certification course that was being offered for the first time (and so far only time) in North America. Was I interested? You bet I was!!

This course is normally taken over several months in Wales, but this was going to be over one week. That was in 1988. So after that course, I was one of eleven certified Welsh folk-dance instructors in North America that took the course. Sian Frick was one of the others. Alice Williams, then President of the Welsh Folkdance Society, taught the course. We became great friends, and I would also drive down to Delaware and visit Sian, and dance with her little group now and then. I had joined a folkdance group in Albany, and I started teaching them some of my Welsh folk dances.

3 - When did you first start teaching Welsh?

That job in New York only lasted a couple of years and then began more fruitless job hunting. The economy had crashed, and libraries were closing, not hiring. I couldn't find anything and finally came to live with my sister who was going to vet school in St. Paul, Minnesota. So that got me here at the tail end of 1990.

Within a week, I was going to Tapestry for folk-dancing, and I met someone who told me there was a Welsh minister at Plymouth Congregational. That was Vivian Jones, of course. I went to check it out, and Martha Davies (then Martha Dickey) was serving tea after the service. The rest is history! She introduced me to the Saint David's Society, and I found there was a group trying to start a Welsh folk-dance group or at least learn a few dances to perform at the St. David's Day banquet.

I had had a taste of learning modern Welsh at Welsh Heritage Week. Because I had taken the medieval course I could read Welsh but not speak it. So, they threw me into the Advanced Class, which proved to be just fine! But it was sort of baptism by fire. I then picked up some books and tapes to keep learning on my own. Well, Martha was teaching Welsh then, and it turned out she was using the same book that I had been studying. I think it was about three years later, that she met Phil Davies and got married and moved to Iowa.

So I took on teaching the Welsh class after that - about 1994 I think, and I've been doing it ever since.

I eventually got a job subbing for the Minneapolis Public Library, and I never did finish my MA musicology thesis, or go on to do medieval studies. But I've sure had a lot of fun with Welsh folk dancing and teaching the language classes, and doing more genealogy, and going to Welsh Heritage Week many times, including going to Nant Gwrtheyrn [*Welsh Language Centre for Adult Learners in disused quarrying village in north Wales*], and singing with Crempogau [*Welsh language quartet composed of Society members*], teaching Welsh to members of a church choir planning to go Wales, and then getting to sing with them, and doing the Celtic Festival at Murphy's Landing, and leading Traed y Ddraig [*StDS folk dance group, "Feet of the Dragon"*] for 25 years (!), and it just keeps getting better and better.

Now that Sian Frick is no longer teaching, I'm the one that gets asked. After Covid, when they couldn't bring a Welsh folk-dance instructor from Wales, I was asked to do the course in Scranton, PA. Then Dan Proud and I have been doing a Welsh folkdance session at NAFOW the last two years. And we've been asked to do it again this year in Ottawa. So even though that first job in New York turned out to be a disaster, nevertheless, it put me where I needed to be for all the rest that followed.