

Andrew Davies

Reflections on Swansea - the 'Intelligent Town'

Based on a talk given at the public launch of the RISW History Project, Swansea Museum, 28 April 2018

I am not a Swansea Jack by birth but by adoption and choice - and maybe it is 'the outsider' who can sometimes see things more clearly. My first experience of Swansea was arriving at the University in 1970 as a somewhat apprehensive undergraduate, travelling by train over Brunel's Landore viaduct and viewing the 'moonscape' of the Lower Swansea Valley - then the largest area of industrial dereliction in Western Europe and a legacy of Swansea's preeminence as 'Copperopolis', the global centre of the copper, tinplate and other non-ferrous metal industries. First impressions often persist and for some time that image dominated my views about Swansea and its industrial past. However, after living here for 40 years and reading about the city I have learned that our city's history is more interesting and complex than its tag as 'Copperopolis' would imply and that this history may provide a rich source of ideas in re-thinking its future.

As a graduate in Economic History & Russian Studies, one is trained to see the past in the present, to see the world today as formed by the past. One is also aware of the temptation to view the world as largely formed by the 'dramatic discontinuities', the radical changes, disruptions and revolutions of the past and ignore the 'cultural continuities', those deeper, slower moving and more deep-seated movements, with a long gestation, that often lead to more significant developments and movements. One can see this in the history of Russia and the persistence of political cultures and behaviours in pre-revolutionary Russia, the former Soviet Union and now present-day Russia under Putin. On a similar basis I have often been struck with the parallels between Swansea in its development as a modern urban centre in the late 18th and early 19th century and the city today in the early 21st century and the opportunities it provides for the city's future.

Many writers and academics have pointed to the importance of persistent and long-standing aspects of culture in determining the way in which individuals, organisations and indeed even countries think and behave. For example, Geert Hofstede, the Dutch social psychologist, has argued that deep, long-standing cultural characteristics have a remarkable influence on national, regional and organisational attitudes and behaviours. And similarly many other writers have pointed to the influence and persistence of cultural factors in a wide range of organisations, whether in the public or private sectors. This can be summed up in the well-known phrase, "Culture eats strategy for breakfast", allegedly originated by Peter Drucker, the management writer and made famous by Mark Fields, former President of the Ford Motor Company.

Swansea owed its earlier development and pre-eminence to its location - as a port on a navigable river giving access to abundant natural resources, especially of coal, and also being situated on a stretch of glorious coastline that saw it emerge in the late 18th century as a tourist and bathing resort. However, these factors in themselves would not have been sufficient to see Swansea emerge as the dominant town - the 'intelligent town' - in the early 19th century if it hadn't also had been for its quite distinctive mix of social and intellectual capital. For what is remarkable, certainly in a Welsh context, is how the town's collective sense of itself, was based on a clear confident civic purpose as a centre of learning, of enquiry, innovation and enterprise.

Dr. Louise Miskell, of the University's History department, has written about the city's early history in *Intelligent town: an urban history of Swansea, 1780-1855*. As she says, 'with its combined functions as a metal smelting town, bathing resort, port and cultural centre its urban character was arguably unique'. Swansea, nicknamed 'Copperopolis', 'gained an unrivalled position of

influence as an urban centre, which led it briefly to claim to be the 'metropolis of Wales', with its wealthy industrialist employers, gentlemen scientists and from banking establishments to assembly rooms and libraries, Swansea developed a reputation as a prosperous, flourishing and 'intelligent' town.'

Miskell argues that Swansea's urban character, while similar to the wider process of urbanisation across other part of the UK, was in fact unique in Wales and combined functions as a port, metal smelting town, bathing resort and cultural centre. Swansea became a centre for middle-class society within Wales. As Professor Prys Morgan (brother of former First Minister Rhodri Morgan) has described it, Swansea was the place where 'Merthyr met Tenby - where the industrial boom met the genteel tastes of polite society.' Miskell believes that this status and early urban history has been hidden by the legacy of the copper industry and post-industrial dereliction and while characterised as 'Copperopolis', in the early 19th century Swansea was certainly not a one-industry town and had a very broadly based economy, for in addition to metal industries such as copper, it had a significant number of coal mines and a thriving pottery industry with the Cambrian pottery. Swansea was the major commercial and service centre for South Wales, as well as emerging as a major tourist centre based on its location, not least the sea-bathing afford by the wonderful sweep of Swansea Bay. It was the dominant port in South Wales in the first half of the 19th century and was only eclipsed late in the century by the growth of Cardiff as the main exporter of coal.

In the nineteenth century leading figures in Swansea were struggling with similar challenges as we are today of how to maintain health, order and safety in an environment undergoing demographic and economic change. While they were struggling with the demands of rapid industrialisation, we are now dealing with the challenges of post-industrialisation. I believe that while Swansea owed its earliest growth in the Industrial Revolution to its combination of physical location and existence of natural resources, a crucial factor was its intellectual and social capital, and the breadth and diversity of activities in Swansea which was so distinctive.

Swansea in the early 19th century was small by present day standards. In 1800, its population is estimated to be about 6,000, but by the 1850s had grown to 35,000. The largest town in Wales at that time was Merthyr Tydfil, which had seen its population grown the back of its rapid industrialisation based on coal and iron. Yet Merthyr lacked Swansea's greater mix of social and intellectual capital and its phenomenal growth was often marked by greater social unrest.

Swansea established a reputation for a distinctive urban culture in the early 19th century and while it lost its earlier economic and industrial preeminence as towns like Cardiff and Newport to the east grew, so this reputation became more important later in the 19th century.

Although a relatively small town by UK standards, in the early part of the century, Swansea had a very rich, diverse and distinctive nature, out of which developed a remarkable list of 'Firsts' which actually predated its later importance as an industrial centre.

Swansea had the first English-language weekly newspaper in Wales, *The Cambrian*, first published in 1804. Interestingly, *The Cambrian* deliberately and self-consciously aimed to be a provincial newspaper for the whole of Wales and did not see itself as merely a local source of news.

Swansea also developed the first infirmary in Wales which opened in 1817, and built on the earlier establishment of a dispensary in the town established in 1810. Its description or mission as being the 'Swansea Infirmary for warm and cold sea water bathing and for the relief of the sick and lame poor from every part of the kingdom', again reflected an ambition that reached beyond the

immediate local community.

Similarly, in education Swansea was a pioneer in the development of schools in Wales. What is also noteworthy in this as in many other developments was the role played by non-conformists such as Quakers like Richard Phillips and Lewis Weston Dillwyn. In 1806, the Swansea Society for the Education of the Children of the Poor, was formed, exclusively for children whose parents could not afford to pay for their education. Indeed, this tradition continued when Swansea's Ragged School was founded in 1847 by the first Medical Officer for Swansea, Dr William Henry Michael, the purpose of which was to care for and educate boys and girls of the poor, and the building still stands today in Pleasant Street.

The wider cultural ambitions of the town were marked by the building of a new theatre in Goat Street in 1806 and construction of new Assembly Rooms started in about 1805, with significant financial support for the latter from the Swansea Corporation reflecting its importance for both the town's local elite as well as visitors.

These developments grew out of several factors. Critical to this was the significant growth in population and the existence of a critical mass of philanthropists, members of the local commercial and industrial elite, many of whom were non-conformists such as Quakers like Richard Phillips who, while a London-based lawyer, was the son of John Phillips, the Cornish-born agent at the White Rock copper works in the town. This elite was committed to seeing 'public services', such as medicine develop, especially for the poorer sections of the local community. Another key factor was Swansea's status as a sea-bathing resort, and the extolling of the virtues of sea-bathing over hot springs by many of its proponents.

As Louise Miskell has argued, the fact that 'Swansea achieved these important milestones in improving the health and education of its poorer residents... the improvement ethos was not narrowly conceived to lure greater numbers of wealthy tourists to the town. Rather it was based on a determination to secure benefits for the public at large.'

Swansea was associated with innovation in an extensive range of activities. The Swansea and Mumbles Railway was built in 1804 to move limestone from the quarries of Mumbles to Swansea and markets beyond and became the world's first railway to carry fare-paying passengers. However, the area of innovation with which the town became increasingly associated was in the emerging fields of science.

Swansea, like other similar urban centres in Britain, had a vibrant and amateur scientific community in the early 19th century. The Swansea Scientific Society, founded in 1835, was one of dozens of similar institutions established in provincial towns across Britain. Today, when we see most scientific research being undertaken within higher education or funded by large private companies, it is easy to forget that in the 18th and early 19th centuries much, if not most scientific research was carried out by what we would nowadays term amateurs. That Swansea was the centre for this type of activity in Wales was no accident as in the early nineteenth century the town attracted many ambitious and intelligent men who saw a future or a fortune for themselves in the new industries which powered the town's growth. Swansea became a centre for artists and also the home of a number of distinguished scientists, whose knowledge was essential to the new industries. This mixture of art and science helped the invention of photography, closely associated with William Henry Fox Talbot who spent much of his youth at Penrice Castle on the Gower Peninsula and found the intellectual life of Swansea stimulating.

The example of the Swansea-born lawyer, William Robert Grove demonstrates this. Born in the town in 1811 into a local merchant family, the Oxford-educated lawyer became a QC in 1853 but was also elected as a fellow of the Royal Society in 1840 at the age of 29 and later held the Presidency of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, having in 1839 developed an early form of electric cell and in 1842 created the first fuel cell, the foundation of today's hydrogen economy. Grove also worked on early forms of photography, such as the daguerrotype and calotype. It is difficult to imagine anyone in today's world achieving such eminence in two distinctive fields.

The origins of the Royal Institution of South Wales, can be traced to the establishment in 1835 the Swansea Scientific Society, following on from the creation in 1821 of the short-lived Cambrian Society set up for the study of geology, zoology and natural history. While there was a significant link between local industrialists and the formation of the Society, as can be seen from the membership in 1839, the dominant influence on the society was in fact those from the local professional and commercial elite and those of independent means. Within a year of its formation, the Swansea Scientific Society applied for royal patronage, which was granted in 1838 allowing it to be named the Royal Institution of South Wales.

It is easy to forget how diverse the population of the town was at that time. There was a huge variation in the origin of Swansea's population, which was largely from outside the town and indeed Wales. In 1851 43% of the 31,500 inhabitants of the town had been born elsewhere and as a major port with international links perhaps this is not surprising, but it also reflected the significant opportunities provided by the town's dynamic and diverse economy, as well as the breadth of Swansea's intellectual and cultural life.

Again, it is noteworthy that Swansea became a dynamic, 'intelligent' town based on a population, a large number of whom originated from elsewhere. It has been said that Swansea developed the reputation in the 17th century as a 'City or Town of Refuge', based on its relative toleration of religious non-conformity. As a port, industrial town and seaside resort in the 18th century it developed largely on the basis of immigration from other parts of Wales and England, and then increasingly from other parts of the world. For example, a strong Irish community settled in the Greenhill or Waun Wen area of Swansea, which became the location of the city's Roman Catholic cathedral. Louise Miskell argues that Swansea was marked by its relatively harmonious social relations, and did not experience the social tensions and upheavals, including occasional anti-immigrant tensions that occurred elsewhere in South Wales. It clearly had an established, settled sense of community and a tolerance for religious differences.

Swansea has since seen successive waves of immigration, especially in the late 20th century, much of it because of the presence of its two higher education institutions. As a relatively small city it had a reputation for friendliness and tolerance and for welcoming people fleeing oppression in their own countries, e.g. Chileans in the 1970s, Iraqis and Kurds in the 1980s. Its record has resulted in a well-earned reputation for good community and race relations. This reputation has been built on when Swansea became the UK's second official City of Sanctuary in May 2010, after Sheffield became the first in 2007.

I have often wondered if a large element of Swansea's distinctive early growth as an 'intelligent town' and subsequent development, was to its largely being 'on the edge'; the 'boundary' in so many key areas: Swansea as a port located on the boundary between sea and land, and sea and mountains/hills; the urban and rural; the Welsh-speaking and non-Welsh speaking communities of south west Wales. I believe there is merit in exploring this notion of Swansea being 'on the edge', of being located between interesting 'boundaries'. Boundaries between entities are often the areas where the most interesting and exciting things happen. In academic research this is certainly

true and the university is pre-eminently a 'space' where boundaries between academic disciplines, e.g. between engineering, medicine, computer science, etc., can be explored.

I remember in February 2005 at the launch of the first Institute of Life Science, as a Welsh Minister asking senior IBM Executives why they had made the decision to invest in this £50 million joint venture on the university's Singleton campus. They replied that they were attracted by the idea of the Medical School being new, with an innovative curriculum and on a single campus where there was the opportunity for multi-disciplinary research and collaboration and the potential for exploiting that knowledge for developing new products and services.

Whereas Swansea's geographic location on the western edge of the UK in the 19th and 20th centuries industrial economy was a distinct disadvantage, in the digital and information age geographic location and distance is no longer a constraining factor on economic development and access to ideas, creativity and a good quality of life is much more important. In this respect Swansea has clear parallels with Seattle on the northwest coast of the USA. Seattle, like Swansea, is on the western edge of its country and also an industrial city (home of Boeing) but which now attracts knowledge workers from all over the USA and the rest of the world because of the presence of knowledge-based industries and employment, e.g. Microsoft, but also because of the quality of life in the north west of the USA with its mountains, 'wilderness', forests and ocean. Jonathan Raban, the British writer, now domiciled in Seattle, in his book of essays, 'Driving Home', describes this sense of being on the edge of the continent and also the attraction for many of living there. Raban describes the understandable and perhaps inevitable tensions that arise between the more established communities and population, built around the older industries of the city and its region and the incomers, attracted by the life-style and opportunities provided by the new knowledge-based economy.

With the decline of manufacturing industry in the last 50 years, dynamic economic development in the digital age and information society of this century is increasingly based on knowledge, ideas and creativity and is much less reliant on access to physical resources. As Brian Fleet, former Senior Vice President of Airbus, said to me as a Welsh Minister some years ago, while the old industrial economy was about muscle; the new knowledge economy is about mind and brain.

Indeed Swansea University itself reflects this journey and also its foundation to Swansea's legacy of its civic-minded business leaders having a commitment to the wider well-being of the city and its region. Established in 1920 by local industrialists who realised that a university's knowledge and research needed to be applied to the needs of local industry, Swansea University's logo - an excellent example of graphic design - illustrates its original mission brilliantly. The University's logo presents an open book, representing the world of learning, resting on a crossed anchor, hammer and pickaxe - the world of work as it was in 1920. Approaching the university's centenary in 2020, one is tempted to ask what the University's logo would look like today, if it was to portray the world of work today?

I will give a single example from my own area of the NHS and the university to illustrate why education, knowledge and skills are crucial for a dynamic economy. Swansea's Medical School was established following a motion I presented as a Welsh Minister to the National Assembly in November 1999 and which opened its doors to the first new medical students in 2004, yet barely ten years later its ranking regularly shows Swansea's medical school as the fifth-ranked or better in the UK.

As a Welsh Minister and local Assembly Member I was determined to bring a medical school to Swansea - which had been a long-standing ambition for the city, which accounts for the location of Singleton Hospital next to the university. Why was I so passionate about this and fought so hard

for it?

- Doctors are more likely to practise where they train, and we knew that it was difficult to recruit doctors for many of deprived and rural communities in Wales (it's still a problem by the way!
- A medical school raises the quality of clinicians by attracting specialists to practice in Swansea and West Wales
- It raises the research profile of the university and helps drive multi-disciplinary research and develop;
- Life and health sciences, including health informatics, are one of the big growth areas in wealth generation and employment. Since the opening of the Swansea's Medical School we have opened the First Institute of Life Science and several of its successors, creating many new knowledge-based companies with many, high paid jobs.

So while a medical school had undoubted benefits for the NHS and the university, it also had the potential to help transform the local economy. This example demonstrates that the successful knowledge-based economy of the 21st Century will be increasingly dependent on people with high-level education and skills, including technical skills. There is growing evidence that it is the density of knowledge workers that is crucial in determining a city or region's economic dynamism and sustainability. Writers like Edward Glaeser have argued that successful cities need diversity and competition and that investing in people's skills is the most important factor: 'the real city is made of flesh, not concrete'. Our Universities, colleges and schools are therefore absolutely key to a sustainable future for the city and its region.

Robert Florida goes further and argues that metropolitan regions with high concentrations of what he terms 'the creative class' - technology workers, artists, musicians - fosters an open, dynamic, personal and professional urban environment. This environment, in turn, attracts more creative people, as well as businesses and capital. He suggests that attracting and retaining high-quality talent rather than a singular focus on projects such as sports stadiums, iconic buildings, and shopping centres, would be a better primary use of a city's regeneration of resources for long-term prosperity.

I agree with Glaesner and Florida in that in Swansea as in Wales more widely, we have signally failed to capture and exploit that creative and intellectual capital at scale for longer-term economic and cultural benefit. Unlike in the early 19th century we have largely exported that talent and intellect as, in the old adage, "you have to get out to get on". Mine may be a rather controversial thesis but for too long in economic development terms, in Wales there has been too much development and not enough economics. By that I mean there has been an overemphasis - indeed an obsession - on investment in physical infrastructure such as buildings, roads, etc., and not enough on people - their skills and creativity.

Swansea has a fair claim to being the creative and cultural capital of Wales, with the city and the wider Swansea Bay City Region having seen a truly remarkable nurturing of artistic and performing talent. The city itself has famously produced Dylan Thomas and the Kardomah set of friends, with the painter Alfred Janes, composer Daniel Jones and poet Vernon Watkins. Less well known is the painter Ceri Richards who grew up in the then Welsh-speaking, mining village of Duvant and after whom the former art gallery, now sadly closed, in the Taliesin Arts Centre at Swansea University was named. Duvant was also the birthplace in 1923 of the leading Welsh poet, film maker and TV producer, John Ormond. More recently the city has produced Russell T Davies, the creative talent

behind the revival of 'Doctor Who' and film star Catherine Zeta Jones. The wider Swansea Bay region has produced film star Richard Burton and actors Anthony Hopkins and Michael Sheen.

Much of this more recent talent has been nurtured by the extraordinary commitment to the arts in education over many years by local education authorities in the area, especially the former West Glamorgan County Council, and was largely the creation of the inspirational education adviser Godfrey Evans in the early 1970s. Again, this builds on the city's sense of itself as a vibrant centre of the arts and urban culture. This more recent legacy, somewhat battered after an extended period of public sector funding austerity, still survives as can be attested by the vibrant work created by the West Glamorgan Youth Theatre, West Glamorgan Youth Orchestra and the County Youth Dance Company.

One of the reasons people remain in Swansea or are attracted to it in the first place is its quality of life. Swansea has a stunning location and a tremendous diversity of natural habitats and species, parks and open spaces. It is difficult to think of any other city in the UK which can match Swansea with its miles of beautiful beaches; the Gower Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and Local and National nature reserves and European Protected Areas. Which other city in the UK has two RAMSAR sites - a wetland site designated of international importance - such as the Burry Inlet in the west and Crymlyn Bog on its eastern edge. In addition to its physical attributes, the well-attested friendliness of its different professions and origins, and we need to nurture those elements of our city today to create a sustainable future.

So in conclusion, Swansea owed its early pre-eminence as an 'intelligent town' in the 19th century and the later development of the city's university in the early 20th century based on the urban culture that had developed over the preceding 100 years, but also to the diversity of its intellectual and cultural life, based on the relationships between people of different professions and origins. I believe the future wellbeing of the city and the wider region has to be based on rediscovering and mining its 'intelligent town' origins, restating a clear, confident civic purpose based on the town's collective sense of itself, as a centre of learning, of enquiry, innovation and enterprise.

June 2018