

REVIEW

THINK WITHOUT LIMITS: YOU CAN SPEAK WELSH!

*Gwasg Carreg Gwalch 2009, 168 pages.*

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*Lynda Pritchard Newcombe, 2009.*

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An authority on second language learning, Lynda Pritchard Newcombe, in her most recent book, targets a readership consisting of both second language Welsh learners (*dysgwyr* in Welsh) and the native speakers who would aid them. She takes her title from talks given by Caroline Hamilton, a motivational speaker who once reached the North Pole. The key phrase in Ms. Newcombe's advice, laid out in fourteen chapters, is captured in the acronym "WTC" or "willingness to communicate".

In the first chapter, setting forth the plan of the book, the author states, "The spotlight is on adult learners—*dysgwyr*—and their role in a rapidly changing Wales." She further notes, "Welsh learners are rarely tourists—they want to speak fluently." This gives a hint of some of the limitations of this thoroughly enjoyable book for North American *dysgwyr*.

The author's stated plan is to present portraits of learners assembled from both their own writings and articles written about them, as well as from diaries written by students in Cardiff's Adult Welsh Learners Project. She

also includes comments drawn from interviews of native Welsh speakers in which attempts were made to find out about their experiences in speaking to learners. Thus quite a bit of research (in the form of field work) has gone into the advice to be provided to learners throughout the following chapters.

Subheadings of this first chapter convey something of the flavor of the book. These subheadings include:

“Why you will be glad you have read this book if you are a *dysgwr*.” Here the author argues that wisdom from experience gained by experienced learners will help the new learner.

“Why you will be glad you have read this book if you are a first language speaker” focuses on how the native speaking reader can do his or her part to advance the cause of the Welsh language by understanding the problems that second language learners encounter, especially problems with dialect, slang, and the speed of the spoken language. Natives are urged to continue on in Welsh when speaking with learners encountering difficulties rather than switching immediately to English.

The third subheading, entitled, “One reason why you think you don’t need this book” addresses the widespread view that one does not need to learn Welsh to communicate effectively in Wales since all Welsh speakers above the age of six are bilingual. The author argues that a whole different cultural world opens up to those who learn Welsh.

In chapter 2 Ms. Newcombe recounts her own struggle as a second language Welsh learner. In particular, she tells the story of her own family’s language loss as they emigrated from Anglesey to Merthyr Tydfil in South Wales because of economic concerns; namely, they “wanted to eat.” As an adult on a trip to New Zealand, she encountered an expat Welshman with some knowledge of the language. This encounter inspired her to resume her study of Welsh, which she had begun as a schoolgirl with the formal Welsh of school instruction of her day. Through intensive course work, emphasizing

the spoken, colloquial language, she has achieved fluency, become an instructor and a model for other second language Welsh learners. In fact, one of the most interesting aspects of this book is the many vignettes of second language learners who have achieved fluency. North American Welsh learners will recognize the pictures and stories of many friends from *Cwrs Cymraeg* courses sponsored by *Cymdeithas Madog*.

Chapter 3, entitled “Welsh is in,” tells some of the story of the modern Welsh language revival movement, which at first was based in part on the “Ulpan” movement in Israel, seeking through intensive course work to give new immigrants the ability to communicate in Modern Hebrew. This movement in Welsh became “*Wlpan*” and emphasized the spoken, colloquial language through intensive work. Over the years the learning of Welsh through class-work and courses has become much more popular, but the problems of bridging the gap between class-work and the use of the language in the community remain. In essence the uniqueness of this volume is its attempt to suggest some methods of dealing with this problem. Chapter 4, entitled “*Dysgwyr*: who are they and why are they learning”, will be of particular interest and amusement to North American readers as they encounter the comments of one of the Welsh tutors who felt (at least in 1989) that the media paid too much attention to learners from outside Wales. He viewed many of them as freaks, albeit “*freaks hoffus*” (likeable freaks) and stressed that more attention should be paid to those learners who are likely to remain in Wales.

Other chapters deal with the problems of learners as they go from the classroom into the community and try to use the language and to acquire fluency. The key phrase is “Willingness to communicate” or “*WTC*”, which really stands for perseverance in spite of obstacles encountered. Obstacles can take the form of Welsh speakers switching into English as soon as the learner stumbles a bit, unfamiliar dialects, slang, elisions, rapid speech, and unfamiliar

accents. Advice and tips are offered to deal with these many problems as well as suggestions for Welsh first language speakers who wish to be helpful to learners. The psychology of learners with anxiety and lack of confidence as well as that of first language speakers when dealing with learners is discussed. Finally the issues of culture and identity that go with Welsh language acquisition are broached.

In summary this is a most useful and enjoyable book which is having widespread circulation in Wales itself. It offers many tips and suggestions about acquiring fluency and is written in an interesting and approachable style. There are many quotations in Welsh to test one's knowledge along with instant translations. The one drawback for North American readers who do not have ready access to Welsh speakers is the strong emphasis on regular use of the language as the royal road to fluency, expressed in the acronym WTC "willingness to communicate." However, there are suggestions from time to time for learners who live outside Wales. In addition, second language learners of any language will find much of use in this volume.