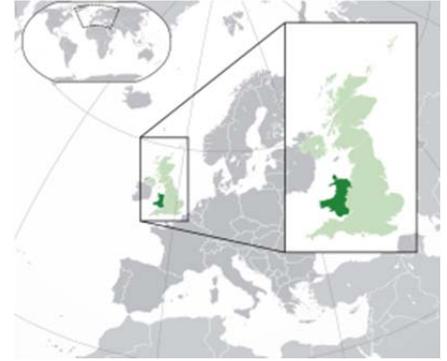


The Black Spot  
October 19, 2014  
Rev. Bruce Taylor



In July, Loretta and I traveled for three weeks in Wales, an experience that's grabbed hold of me and won't let go.

Here is a country of unsurpassed natural beauty: rolling green hills that never stop; mountains running down to the sea.

It's a country filled with historical sites ancient, medieval and modern.

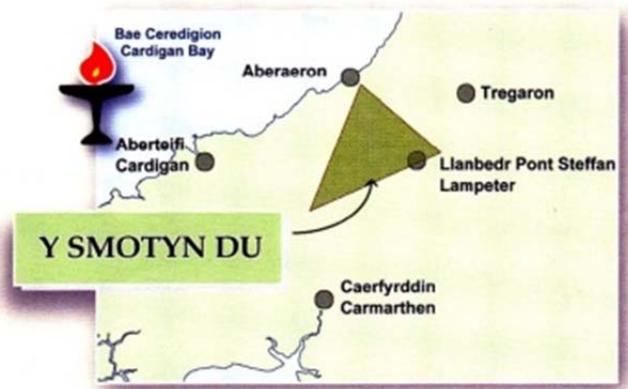
In the middle of all this, I never expected to be thinking about church.

Then one day, in the coastal town of Aberaeron, I just happened to pick up a flyer titled "The Unitarian Trail".

To my surprise, I learned that this southwest region of Wales has been a hotbed of Unitarianism, with roots extending back to the 1600s.

13 of these chapels are still in use, in an area less than 20 miles across.

In the 1800s, this area was called *Y Smotyn Du* (the Black Spot) because its people were so resistant to conventional Christian teaching.



Today I'd like share something of what I've learned about Unitarianism in Wales.

I hope you'll come away appreciating that Unitarian Universalism is not just for Americans. We are not the center of it.

Our faith has many centers, each with its own story to tell.

In hearing these stories, we learn about ourselves.

And we remember we're not alone.

First, a bit about Wales: physically part of Great Britain, and a country in its own right.

At one time, Celtic people lived in all parts of Britain.

When Germanic tribes invaded from the east, some of the Celts were assimilated, but many were pushed west into the country we now call Wales.

Protected for centuries by its mountainous terrain, Wales became an independent country politically and culturally.

But this wouldn't last forever.



When Loretta and I traveled in Wales, we saw many English castles: the "Iron Ring" of fortresses built by King Edward I.

Although the Welsh resisted conquest as long as possible, and they would rise up again more than once, their fate was basically sealed with the death of Llywelyn ap Gruffydd, the last native Prince of Wales, in the year 1282.



For much too long, the English treated the Welsh as second-class citizens.

The pressure assimilate, to stamp out Welsh customs and Welsh language, was relentless.

In the face of this ongoing pressure, the Welsh managed to keep alive their connection to the past and their identity as a people.



The story of Unitarianism in Wales is remarkable because, while it draws upon religious influences from England and America, it puts a unique stamp on them.

In the words of D. Elwyn Davies, Unitarianism in Wales was

... molded in the hands of a minority people whose everyday life was mingled with poems and poetry, songs and sufferings, and who could proclaim the newer ideas of Priestly and Martineau, Channing and Parker, in one of the oldest languages of Europe. (Davies, *"They thought for themselves": a brief look at the story of Unitarianism in Wales*, 1982, p. 28)

To see how Unitarianism came to Wales, we first need to understand how it came to England.

Henry VIII created the Church of England, and his daughter Elizabeth firmly established it as the state religion.

Within the church, dissenters arose. They included Puritans, and others whose beliefs just didn't fit in.

In a great Civil War, the Puritans took power for a time.

But the monarchy was soon restored and with it, the supremacy of the Anglican Church.

In 1662, the government issued an Act of Uniformity that required all clergy to sign an oath to conform to Anglican teachings and the Book of Common Prayer.

Two thousand ministers refused to submit, and had to leave their churches, in an event called the Great Ejection.

In those days, it was illegal to preach Dissenting views; people had to worship in secret.

The situation improved in 1689 when the government issued an Act of Toleration.

Most of the dissenting sects were now allowed to worship openly – except for Catholics and Unitarians.

It wasn't until 1813 that Unitarianism was finally legal in England.

This didn't stop some ministers and their congregations from moving towards Unitarianism – they just didn't call it that, as they gradually adopted views that were considered heresy by the established church: the notion that Christ was a man, and not God; that we don't inherit original sin from Adam and Eve; that we're not already chosen to be saved or to be damned; that we have the free will to choose between good and evil.

In adopting these Unitarian Christian views, the people were encouraged by Enlightenment thinkers who valued science and reason, calling for freedom and tolerance in all things, including religion.



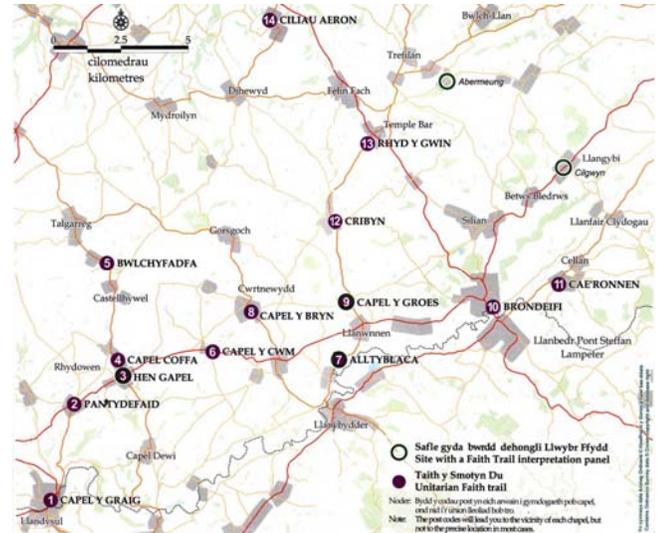
A watershed event took place in 1774 when Theophilus Lindsey opened Essex Street Chapel in London, the first Unitarian church in Britain.

The first worship service was attended by over 200 people, including Joseph Priestly and Benjamin Franklin.

While Unitarianism was growing in England, it was also growing in Wales.

With the Great Ejection, a number of dissenting groups came to the west and put down roots in Ceredigion, or Cardiganshire.

These dissenting churches found favor among the Welsh because they were organized locally, by the people, not imposed on them like the Church of England. Some became Unitarian.



In the area known as the Black Spot, a network of chapels grew up.

I've read the history but I'd have to read it a few times more to really trace the lineages of ministers, and congregations, in the villages over three centuries.

They're so richly interconnected: ministers training younger ministers, moving from one parish to another, starting new chapels; congregations splitting or sending out a core group to plant a new congregation.

This close-knit quality should strike a familiar chord with us in New England, where the churches governed themselves and supported one another.

A few examples:

Jenkin Jones, ordained in 1726, preached that that men and women can achieve salvation through their own good deeds. In 1733, Jones built a chapel at Llwynrhydowen. He also founded Alltyblaca chapel in 1740. He was a great influence on the other ministers and congregations in the surrounding towns.

And his descendants include Jenkin Lloyd Jones, an influential preacher who founded All Souls Unitarian Church in Chicago, and his nephew Frank Lloyd Wright, the famous architect.

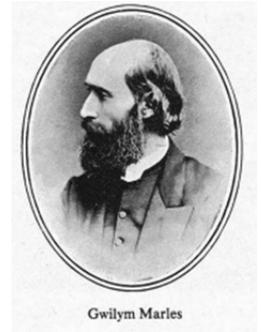


100 years after Jenkin Jones, Gwilym Marles came to Llwynrhydowen.

As it happens, he's the uncle of another great Welshman, Dylan Marlais Thomas.

Gwilym Marles was strongly influenced by Theodore Parker, the Transcendentalist minister.

He's responsible for introducing Parker's ideas to Wales.



Like Parker, Marles was a champion of social reforms.

At this time in west Wales, the people were living under a kind of feudal system, with the farmers and peasants practically enslaved by wealthy landowners and their agents.

For preaching and organizing for political and social causes, in 1876, Marles and his congregation were evicted from their chapel at Llwynrhydowen.



The landowner said that the chapel had been built 'for the worship of God and to no other purpose whatsoever' – in other words, it was no place for preaching sermons against the political status quo.

The following Sunday, Marles preached to a congregation in a nearby village, at Bwlchyfadfa chapel.

That afternoon, they all marched back to Llwynrhydowen chapel. Marles preached a sermon to a crowd of 3,000, standing outside the locked gate.

He warned that the eviction was just the beginning of a persecution against religious dissent, in general, and Unitarianism in particular.

In 1879, Marles was vindicated. The landowner died, and his sister inherited the land. She came Llwynrhydowen bearing a key to the chapel, accompanied by a crowd of jubilant people.

In the words of the historian, D. Elwyn Davies: "The 'key' was no longer a piece of metal to unlock a door, but a symbol of the freedom" Marles had fought for. (40)

Like his mentor, Theodore Parker, Gwilym Marles died young after living at the center of conflict and controversy. But as Davies describes, "the Spirit of Gwilym Marles and the cause for which he stood lives on and is still very much alive because, in his own words, the enemy can only take the candle-stick – 'the flame and the light is God's, and that will live'" (40)

When we speak of Unitarianism in Wales, we also need to mention Iolo Morganwg, the stonemason and poet, who lived from 1747 to 1826. Wherever Unitarians could be found in Wales, wherever Unitarianism had a chance of being planted, Iolo was there to lend his support, to draw up a petition, to draft the by-laws for a new congregation, to carve a stone inscription over the door of a new chapel.

Spending some time in London, Iolo attended worship services at Theophilus Lindsey's Essex Street Chapel. Over the years he would correspond with Lindsay, keeping him informed about the progress of Unitarians in Wales and pestering him for pamphlets and other materials to help spread the faith.

Iolo translated many Unitarian texts into Welsh and wrote over 3,000 hymns, with at least seventy still being printed in Welsh hymn books.

There is another side to Iolo that still stirs controversy. As a young stonemason, Iolo taught himself to read and write as he traveled widely around Britain.

In his travels he visited Celtic religious sites and met people interested in reviving the ancient religion.

Iolo fell in love with this heritage. He wrote poems in medieval Welsh and attributed them to the famous poet, Dafydd ap Gwilym.

He wrote a history of the Druids, piecing together the meagre information at hand, with his own imagination.

Iolo wrote so convincingly that scholars accepted this work as authentic, well into the late 1800s.

His harshest critic, the Professor Griffith John Williams, accused Iolo of "seeing his native province ... through the haze of golden dreams".

Yet Griffith also respected Iolo's sheer brilliance, his encyclopedic knowledge of the past, and his poetic powers.

While calling Iolo a literary forger, the Professor admitted that what Iolo forged was genius.

Iolo re-invented himself as a bard, the last of a long line in the Druidic tradition.

He established an annual ceremony called the Gorsedd, an open-air gathering inspired by the Druids of ancient times.



He freely mixed his religion and his politics: standing in the stone circle at Primrose Hill, he recited his poem, “The Rights of Man”, a manifesto of social, political and religious freedom.

Iolo’s Druidism bore a striking resemblance to his Unitarianism. And really, they were one in the same. Both the Unitarian chapels and the Gorsedd drew the suspicion of the government, as subversive activities against the status quo.

Some modern-day pagans cast aspersions on Iolo’s Druidism, as having a distinctly Christian flavor.

Yet whether Iolo rediscovered Celtic religion, or invented it, the Gorsedd is now part of the religious landscape in Britain.

After more than 100 years, it’s become a Celtic tradition in its own right.

In the end, Iolo accomplished much of what he set out to do: to promote free religion, and kindle a revival of Welsh language and culture.

Through the 1800s, Unitarianism in Wales grew in strength and notoriety. By the late 1800s it was established not only in west Wales but in Glamorgan, in the south east, where the Industrial Revolution was in full force.

This was the land of coal mines and iron furnaces, whole towns dependent on these industries that sucked the wealth out of the land to make a few people rich.

Unitarianism grew strong here, with its concerns for social justice, alongside labor unions and more radical groups.

These Unitarians tended to be English-speaking, rather than Welsh-speaking.

Their theology was less Christ-centered and more liberal than in the congregations to the west.

So now we have not one Black Spot, but two.

Each one formed its own society: the South West Society in 1802, and the South East Society in 1890.

Since they were separated by language, and some religious differences, they agreed to work independently, but always supporting each other and their common faith.

Today both groups belong to the British General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches.



The thirteen chapels in Ceredigion are served by two full-time and one retired minister, and many of the worship services are lay-led.

Loretta and I spent a morning exploring the area, and visiting some of these chapels. My favorite was Capel y Groes, or Chapel of the Cross, founded in 1802.

Iolo Morganwg carved a stone plaque for this chapel.

Although its architecture is similar to many Protestant chapels in the area, Capel y Groes strikes a familiar chord with us as American UUs.

The flaming chalice is conspicuously displayed – this is the version used by the British General Assembly.

Outside the building we found a number of mosaics expressing liberal religious themes.

This one moves me the most: the symbol of a heart surrounded by the words of *rhyddid, cariad, goddefgarwch* - freedom, love, tolerance.



There's another mosaic, representing a beloved church member named Joseph Jenkins, also known as the "Swagman", who is buried in the churchyard. He left his farm in 1869 to seek adventure in Australia, living for 25 years in the Outback. His memoirs are still studied by the children in Australian schools.

As you can tell, this was a rich experience for me – my time with Loretta in Wales was very special; it grabbed me and didn't let me go.

It's good to visit another country, and to remember that the past is another country, too.

It's good to realize that as Americans we're not the center of all things – there are many centers, many locations from which to tell our stories and interpret life.

It's good to know we're not alone.

This is especially true in matters of faith.

By experiencing other versions of our faith, other expressions of liberal religion, we can get a deeper grasp of what truly matters about it, to distinguish the Transient from the Permanent, as Theodore Parker (or Gwilym Marles) would say.



So may it be.