

## Book Reviews

*Ministering to Education: A Reformer Reports*

Leighton Andrews, 2014

Cardigan: Parthian Books

+ 170 pp.

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It is unusual for a government minister to publish a memoir within months of leaving office. Some wait years to tell their story while others move on and keep their thoughts to themselves. But Leighton Andrews was an unusual Minister for Education in the Welsh Government, never afraid to speak frankly about the perceived shortcomings of others whilst also offering generous thanks to those who contributed to the reforms he initiated.

In the introduction Andrews expresses the hope that the book will be 'of interest to anyone who wants to know more about the shaping of education policy in Wales'. *Ministering to Education* certainly achieves that although readers should also be aware, as with any memoir, of what the author has chosen to omit from his version of events. His early falling out with the Director General of the 'dysfunctional' department he had inherited is smoothly glossed over: 'David Hawker had left us in the summer of 2010 to head a new initiative ...'.

Between his appointment in December 2010 and his unorthodox resignation as Education Minister in June 2013 Leighton Andrews can rightly claim to have put in place each of the key elements of the Labour Party's 2011 election manifesto. In doing so his disdain for the baggage of politics, such as focus groups or 'the self-important rhetoric of the Assembly chamber', is refreshingly in evidence. The resulting book is clearly written and readable in spite of the occasional error that should have been picked up in the editing. For example, the index confuses Andrews's ministerial colleague, Edwina Hart AM, with the equally distinguished NHS campaigner, Dr Julian Tudor Hart GP.

The first chapter makes clear how the author's political beliefs have been shaped by his own experiences. A brother who failed the iniquitous eleven-plus test, a Rhondda constituency where educational disadvantage is still all too much in evidence and a personal educational journey that included radical student politics at Bangor University; all contributed to the passions and principles Leighton Andrews brought to his ministerial brief.

The main section of the book is a series of accounts from Andrews's perspective of significant policy episodes during his term as Minister. The background to several controversial decisions, such as the rift with England over GCSE English, is helpfully revealed. Another chapter, 'Avoiding distractions: no academies', explains why he disagrees with the priority given in England to removing state-funded schools from local democratic control. But the chapter on 'Local delivery' in Wales also starts from the premise that 'local government was generally failing to deliver the quality of services we wanted'. 'Adapt or Die' charts the course of his battles with higher education institutions in Wales over their resistance to the Welsh Government's reconfiguration agenda, while a later chapter teases out the complexities of the debates about tuition fees in higher education. Other chapters deal with the Welsh language, skills for employment, 'a world class workforce', curriculum change and qualifications reform. Leighton Andrews the politician comes through most obviously in the chapter 'Michael Gove and the war on Wales', showing how Conservative ministers and their allies in the London press used criticisms of public service provision in Wales as a way of undermining the Labour Party in England.

Andrews rejects the ideology of competition that drives education policies in England being used as the 'default position' against which policies in the rest of the UK should be judged. In so doing he begins to articulate what has too often been missing from post-devolution policy debates in Wales, a Wales-specific rationale for its educational provision.

What colours all these episodes is the approach of a minister who was willing to ask difficult questions and expected the officials he worked with to help him find answers to those questions. There can be few who care about the quality of education in Wales who would disagree with what Andrews refers to as his 'mantra' for the department he had been appointed to lead: 'better implementation; fewer initiatives; keep it simple.'

The setting up of a monthly Policy Board meeting was an early sign that 'strategy' would in future be expected to be more than a series of glossy policy papers. A new twenty-point plan established the key priorities for the raising of standards across the system. Policy proposals that had not

been followed through previously, such as recommendations for new tests in schools (proposed in 2005) and for an external review of the system by an OECD team (proposed in 2007), were also picked up and acted upon.

What is less clear is whether Andrews realised the need, in each sector of education, for appropriate and effective ‘arms-length’ organisations to implement, monitor and evaluate the reforms initiated by the Welsh Government. His successors are now looking to make further major changes, for example to the school curriculum and to teacher education. But whether Wales has put in place the structures needed for the successful implementation of systemic reform is open to question.

*Ministering to Education* is a personal account from a politician who was strongly committed to a higher-quality education system in Wales. Two quotations on the book’s cover neatly illustrate how reactions to Leighton Andrews are seldom indifferent:

‘The best Education Minister in the UK’ (Alastair Campbell)

‘Irresponsible and mistaken’ (Michael Gove)

Andrews’s verdicts on the many policies he helped to frame as Minister are expressed in clear, unvarnished language and laced at times with humour. For example, he suggests, tongue in cheek, that the (David) Letterman question, ‘What’s the deal in Wales?’, could replace the West Lothian question as the touchstone for post-devolution UK politics.

This book has lifted the lid on how, and why, a reforming minister went about carrying through the reforms he believed to be necessary. Leighton Andrews challenged what he saw as complacency at every level, and in every phase, of the education system. He was ready to make decisions he knew would be unpopular. Whether those decisions went far enough to remedy deep-seated weaknesses in the capacity of the education system in Wales to implement reforms remains to be seen.

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*Back to Normal*

Tudor Ellis, 2014

Caernarfon: Gwasg y Bwthyn

206 pp.

ISBN 978-1-907424-62-5

There is much to commend this book to those interested in the history of teacher training and education in Wales. This English edition is a revised version of the original Welsh edition (Ellis, 2011). The author's central theme is the student experiences at Bangor Normal College from its establishment in 1858 up to its integration with Bangor University in 1996. During this period the Normal trained thousands of teachers and, in more recent times, young people who worked in fields such as the media, business and social administration.

The author draws on his experience spanning almost quarter of a century as lecturer in the Education Department of Coleg Normal. He explains that his intention is not to write a systematic history of the institution – rather, he seeks to convey important aspects of college life, as experienced by the students. He does this reasonably well by drawing on biographies, autobiographies, the official college magazine (*The Normalite*, 1896–1968) and interviewing ex-students, some of whose recollections date back to the 1920s. We are certainly introduced to a kaleidoscope of characters – those who became famous in later life, such as the scholar Sir Henry Jones, who studied in the 1870s; the entertainers Ryan Davies and Windsor Davies; politician Barry Jones and rock singer Bryn Fôn.

One of the difficulties writers of college histories face is deciding upon whether to adopt a chronological or thematic approach. The author opts mainly for the former and devotes a chapter each to the early years (1858–1910), the middle period (1910–57) and more recent times (1957–96). Each chapter features highlights from the college student magazine, *The Normalite*, mainly covering sporting events and cultural activities. Due coverage is given to red-letter days, such as the student strike in 1890 and the visit by the Beatles in the summer of 1967 to meet their spiritual guru, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, who was leading a weekend transcendental meditation convention at the College. At times it is difficult for the reader to follow the development of a particular argument or theme. Perhaps this is recognised by the author who, in the concluding chapter, breaks away from the chronological sweep to review aspects of 'Normal life' – from the academic courses to religious, social and cultural life.

Because of the way the book is structured, it is sometimes difficult to get a sense of the collective student experience and how this changed over time – where they came from, the proportion of Welsh and English students, and males and females, along with the dynamics between these groups. Although the tone of the book is very much about the qualitative experiences of students, a few statistical tables would give a sense of proportion to the discussions.

Given the focus on student life, it is also a pity we do not hear more about their diverse backgrounds and experiences, and how the authorities responded. For example, the reviewer was left wondering when the College first admitted students from beyond England or Wales, the experiences of mature students with families, or the experiences of students from (or who formed) minority groups – from students with disabilities to conscientious objectors during the two world wars.

It is not unusual to hear ex-students complain about aspects of their preparation for teaching in the classroom. Ellis regards these as something of a curate's egg. In the early period, Criticism lessons offered opportunities for students to engage in constructive analysis of each other's lessons, and Ellis reports the strain this put on students. Tensions are noted between visiting college tutors and students in school, but there are also stories of much-valued support and guidance. There are numerous tantalising references, such as to the visits of students to special schools in Liverpool during the 1930s, where further discussion of the broader educational context would be welcome.

Ellis acknowledges the challenge of selecting material to provide a broadly representative view. Given the focus on student recollections, however, the reader would benefit from some critical analysis of oral history as a source. Moreover, the author limits his sources largely to college records, which means that we learn little about the views of employers (largely schools) and inspectors on the quality of students entering the profession.

There is good balance in the selection of male and female voices and, in this English edition, non-Welsh-speaking past students. Female students were not admitted to the college until 1910. However, Bangor was ahead of its time here, given that the other male teacher training college in Carmarthen did not admit women until 1957 (Grigg, 1998). We learn that female students endured a much stricter regime than the men. They were expected to go to bed earlier, ate different food and had more restrictions placed on where they could go. Sheila Davies, a student from the Rhondda,

finally spoke up on behalf of the female students and was subsequently dismissed by the college authorities – her case was mentioned in the House of Commons and she was reinstated, though transferred to Cardiff.

The fortune of the Welsh language in the College is one of the key themes in the book. So we are introduced to recollections on the subject from various students, including activists such as Ieuan Wyn in the late 1960s and early 70s. This receives sympathetic treatment and the general picture emerges of a College that was strongly Anglicised for its first hundred or so years. But the author's claim that the status of the Welsh language at the Normal College was no different from its status at other educational institutions in Wales during the early and middle periods of its history is not strictly accurate. In Carmarthen, for example, Welsh featured on the original timetable and emerged again in the 1900s. However, Ellis makes a valuable contribution in highlighting the struggle to achieve respect for the Welsh language, noting the unwillingness of Welsh-speaking staff to address students in their first language until the 1960s.

While the author focuses on student recollections, some correctives were needed to balance the criticisms of the College's *modus operandi*. For example, little is said in the modern era about the impact of quality assurance systems that started to transform higher education in the 1990s, and the impact this had on staff and students alike.

The book is enhanced by the inclusion of photographs, including a poignantly cheerful picture of the Old Normalites who fought in the Royal Welsh Fusiliers in 1915. Historic maps of the campus sites and a timeline would help remind the reader of the basic changes in the college history.

Despite the misgivings noted, the author has put together an interesting collection that will appeal not only to those closely associated with Bangor Normal but those concerned with the wider history of education in Wales.

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### References

- Ellis, T. (2011). *Bywyd Normal*. Caernarfon: Gwasg y Bwthyn.  
Grigg, R. (1998). *History of Trinity College Carmarthen, 1848–1998*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press.