

# *National Identity and the Digital Library: a Study of the British Library and the Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru*

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This paper examines the digital presence of two national libraries, the British Library and the Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru (National Library of Wales), and the means by which the perceptions of national identity and heritage can be seen to influence the choices made regarding the digitization of specific collections. It begins with an examination of the constructed nature of national identity and heritage. Then a brief study is made of the histories of the two nations in question, Britain and Wales, and the connections and struggles between the two that have influenced formations of identity. Using this

historical background, a study is made as to the digital holdings of each institution, including a comparison of the type, amounts and means by which items have been digitized, as well as the stated aims of the institutions as to their own understanding of their mission and remit in terms of the audience they perceive they serve. Finally, a comparison is made of the two institutions, and conclusions reached as to the ways in which the historically constructed myths of national identity can be seen as reflected in the individual choices made regarding the preservation and digitization of their collections.

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## *Introduction*

Behind the institutional face of national libraries lies a complex web of political, social and cultural influences that combined result in the formation of a national identity that is upheld and maintained through the auspices of citizens, governments and the acknowledgement of a consensus-based collective memory and identity. Such identity is constructed around specific characteristics, histories, myths and geographies that together encourage its formation and perpetuation, and which uniquely signify both to outsiders and insiders a 'true' sense of what it means to belong to a specific national group.

The decision to concentrate on The British Library (BL), and the Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru or National Library of Wales (LLGC), is influenced by several factors, including their close geographic proximity and their shared and tangled history

and government. Despite being ruled by the same leaders for the previous eight centuries, the people of each nation display differences in culture, society, religion and – perhaps most obviously – in language. In order to begin this examination, it will be necessary to give a brief overview of the history between the nations, so that a deeper understanding of how myths regarding national identity came to be created in each country.

It is also necessary to define the meaning of the term 'digital library' as used here. We can look at such libraries in a number of ways – as a means of gaining access to information about the holdings, such as through the online access to catalogues; or as a means of displaying collections or individual items held by the institution. This latter example provides visual representations of the item itself, rather than a simple bibliographic representation of the item, often with transcriptions in the case of written works, or other background

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information regarding the artifact or item in question. Both of the institutions chosen here indicate within various documents their responsibility to provide access to information about the materials within the collection, and therefore have provided online catalogues for free public use. However, we will focus on the collections that have been fully digitized for access in visual terms. In other words, those collections deemed important or worthy enough to have a visual record made and provided online for use by the public for free, and the relevance of these items to themes of national heritage and the perpetuation of identity. This will be the meaning of the term 'digital library' or 'digital collection' when used within this paper.

### *National identity and heritage*

The concept of national identity has been seen as dependant on the formation of nation-states, and the specific historical and political contexts in which these nebulous and changing entities were created. An investigation of the history of the creation of the two nations that are referenced in this essay could be a separate study in itself, but as an ideological concept, national identity in general is created in the cauldron of historical conflict. Due to pressures on society, either from external forces or internal social upheaval, those in positions of social, cultural or political power can be forced to create myths around a common identity that is strong enough to embrace the divergent forces within the nation or region-state, and which can therefore be utilized politically. Unifying the disparate individuals and tribes of the state under the umbrella of an embracing über-myth has historically proved a successful way for individual monarchs or leaders to unite the varied peoples within their dominions, and to use that force to expel external conquerors, squash internal dissent, and otherwise bolster the political ruling classes' position. This powerful political entity is maintained through peace and war by the careful cultivation of commonality amongst those who belong:

rather than being rooted in primordial verities and time immemorial origins and traditions, collective identities are remembered. Moreover, these 'rememberings' are malleable ... identities are constantly being re-constituted according to the needs of the present through selective

appropriation, manipulation, and even imaginative invention of many pasts. (Osborne 2002)

This collectivity and belonging must necessarily be based on the creation of alien others who do not, and in the case of England and Wales, the creation of national identity was therefore based not only on the purposed similarities amongst the geographical regions within each nations' borders, but also on the perceived difference or otherness of those outside the realm. In the specific situation of these two nations, their entwined histories and the struggle for independence and domination between them necessarily resulted in the formation of antagonistic identity-based relations. National identity can be seen as an invented character, and that character is supported by a set peopled with specific landmarks, landscapes and traditions that can collectively be referred to as artifacts of heritage:

Most heritage reflects personal or collective self-interest, things prized as mine or ours. We may be modest about what we are, but rarely about what we were. In celebrating the symbols of their identities societies are really worshipping themselves. Heritage is hence innately incomparable. The legacy we laud is domestic; that of others is alien ... Heritage differentiates; we treasure most what sets us apart. Its uniqueness vaunts our virtues. (Lowenthal 1991)

The preservation of this heritage, which provides the quasi-historical underpinnings for the mythic celebrations of national identity, has fallen to various memory institutions, not least of which are the national libraries of each nation.

In this study, we look at the effects of digital technology on these memory institutions, and how the technologies of today influence the reproduction and perpetuation of national identity. The influence of digital technology has allowed the dissemination of information previously only available within the walls of the institution to the global audience. This new reach changes the role of the national library from that of serving the local audience – situated geographically within that nation – to also serving the wider audience, who can access the symbols of a national heritage simply as virtual objects, rather than as signifiers of a national myth of identity. The challenge for the national libraries, therefore, is to examine the myths of national identity and their importance

in a world where globalization is the watchword, and to decide what their role is in the contemporary era, and where they stand in relation to their role as national institutions.

### *A history of the nations*

It is almost impossible to give a truly brief history of Britain, given that various peoples have inhabited the nation and recorded their presence on the landscape since the Neolithic Age. However, suffice to say, the land has been invaded, conquered and occupied by various invaders since before the Romans first arrived in 55 B.C. It was post-invasion that the antagonism between the neighboring tribes of the country, and particularly those in the northern and western areas (modern day Scotland and Wales), became problematic to the point of constructing fortifications to keep the 'barbarians' out of the 'civilized', Romanized culture in the south and east. Following the collapse of the Roman Empire, these divisions became more marked, and the various invading forces did little to unite the disparate peoples so much as emphasize their differences, and the desire for continued independence among the fringe tribes (Schama 2000).

As political power became centered in London, and as power became entrenched in dynastic rulers and the aristocracy, and the borders of the country spread beyond the southern counties and Wessex by the Medieval period, the need to bind together the nation into a controlled whole became a prime motive for the brutal quashing of any real independence within the neighboring territories of Scotland, and more particularly Wales. The English finally conquered Wales after centuries of incursion, in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Following this defeat, the sheer might and size of the English army and the wealth of that nation were more or less enough to quash any hope of Welsh independence. From this period onward, Wales became a permanent part of the United Kingdom, ruled from England and with no control over its own destiny (Davis 1995).

The discovery of the South Wales coalfields in the 19<sup>th</sup> century pushed the exploitation of the people into a higher gear, but there is an irony in that the rapid industrialization of the workforce led to politicization, an increased support for independence, and a resurgence of interest in their

culture and language. While movements such as Plaid Cymru drew little attention in Westminster in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the growing interest in Welsh nationalism, tied to the fact that the coal seams were depleted, led to devolution and the creation of the Welsh National Assembly in 1999, although it still remains part of the UK and MPs continue to hold seats in Westminster.

This, then, is the story behind the formation of the modern nations of Britain and Wales, and while this history and its factual basis have formed the political institutions that govern each country, the offshoot of the narrative has been the construction of an identity formed in opposition to each other. This identity has greatly influenced the characterization of both the national libraries, necessarily informed by their position within the narrative dynamics of their relation to each other. By looking at the representative libraries of each nation, we can see how the political and historical conflicts of the past continue to influence the role played by the ideals of a national, collective identity, and the extent to which such an idea influences and informs the digital collections each institution has produced.

### *The British Library – history and digital presence*

The British Library as an institution is relatively young, having been formed through the amalgamation of several other institutions in 1973, including the National Central Library, the National Lending Library for Science & Technology, the Patent Office Library, the British National Bibliography, and the Office for Scientific and Technical Information. However, the bulk of the collection came from the Library of the British Museum, which was initiated as a collecting body in 1753. This Library was itself made up from three existing collections – the Sloane, Cotton and Harley Collections, to which was added the Royal Collection in 1757. It has the privilege of legal deposit of all published works in the UK, including newspapers, maps and printed music, and this forms the bulk of its ongoing collection policy (BL, History Web page).

The British Library brands itself as holding "The World's Knowledge"; a seemingly banal statement that can also be read in a political or cultural sense as somewhat arrogant, perhaps. This

branding has been the source of some cultural concern, with external consultants noting that it would be more politic, both to other nations and to the citizens of the country, if the message was something more along the lines of "The Nation's Library" (Villa 2000). While the introductory "Do you know?" section of the BL Web site iterates that it *is* the national library of the UK, it goes in the next sentence to state its goal as to 'make the world's intellectual, scientific and cultural heritage accessible' (BL, About Us). It is perhaps not surprising given this tagline, that visitors to the site do not immediately recognize its role as the national library.

The stated mission of the BL is to "foster the pursuit of knowledge ... and encourage the broadest possible awareness and accessibility of the Library's collection," and to be a 'key element' in British cultural life and a 'cornerstone' of education and research (BL, Strategic). Although it does see its role as one of the six legal depositories of published materials as representing "the collective memory of the nation by retaining for posterity the intellectual output of British publishing," (BL Collections) the fact that this is a shared responsibility amongst other libraries, including the National Libraries of Wales & Scotland, and the University Libraries of Cambridge, Oxford, and Trinity College, Dublin, undermines the role of perpetuating the cultural heritage of the nation as one of the over-riding goals of the institution.

Statements such as those above serve to emphasize the global world-view of the Library, which can be read in a number of ways. Given that some aspects of the national identity – particularly the imperial aspects – and the fact of its historical dominance during the 18<sup>th</sup> Century and beyond, this branding may seem a logical expression of the fact that the imperial policies of the British resulted in the Library becoming the repository for artifacts and collections from around the world. Given this, the ability of digital technology to allow wide access to collections virtually gives the institution the perfect opportunity to try to make up for centuries of cultural imperialism through digitization strategies. However, to take a more cynical view, the branding itself can open the Library to accusations that it is merely continuing the perpetuation of a mythically superior heritage of the British over not just their neighbors, but of the whole world. This latter view is

to some extent supported by the view within the nation itself that the BL is an elitist organization, especially given its policies on limiting actual patrons of the Library Reading Rooms. As was stated in an independent study of the BL in 2000,

this policy is one that contributes to a certain sense of elitism and aloofness that is felt about the British Library amongst the population of the country at large and the LIS community in the UK. A large proportion of the Library's budget is paid for from public funds, but a large proportion of its collections and services are not available for the general public to use. (Villa 2000)

While the above statement was made in 2000, earlier documentation regarding digitization policies emphasize that the theme of preferring the global aspects of the Library and its brand to the national or local aspects was present from the outset. A presentation made at the 1997 international conference "Beyond the Beginning: The Global Digital Library", David Inglis, the director of the BL's Digital Library Program, made constant reference to the direction of the BL's policy being towards making the institution an "international center of expertise in the use of digital materials as well as a major component within a global digital library" (Inglis 1997). This policy, was at least partially inspired by the Labour government document "Communicating Britain's Future", which looked to developing an IT strategy now known as the 'People's Network', that emphasized educational access to information and was privately funded through Lottery money. For the British Library, this policy has resulted in a guiding principle that has focused on a research-based format that plays to a literally global audience and turns away from local or national aspects. This early policy has an outward-facing aspect that positions the BL as a library for the whole world, and for the citizen of the world. The careful phrasing within the document posits the Library as an educational resource, but not simply for those within the education system of the nation, but in a worldwide sense, with a desire to make the holdings available to "an expanding, worldwide community of academics, business people, and other researchers of all kinds, wherever they happen to be working" (Inglis 1997).

Again, the effort is towards a global, not local audience, and we can see this manifested not only in the branding of the Web site, but also in the

digital projects that are available for view. This poses the question of the accessibility of the collections within the Library to its direct national constituents.

### Projects

While the BL Web site has a plethora of links and information available, there are actually relatively few purely digital collections available online at the time of writing, as defined by the standards of this paper. [1] Online catalogues and virtual tours of various exhibitions are available, but there is little in the way of digital representations of actual physical artifacts. The only items that are fully viewable on the Web site are the *Magna Carta*, Sultan Baybars' *Qur'an*, the *Sherborne Missal*, and the *Gutenberg Bible*.

Other major 'treasures' that are held in the collection, such as *Beowulf*, for example, have been digitized, but are only available on CD-Rom, for a cost.

Looking at the choices that have been made in terms of the digitization projects, it is easy to see the correlation between the view of the BL's mission and the choices made regarding an online presence. Both the *Magna Carta* and the *Sherborne Missal* are English in origin, and the former in particular has a strong connection to the formation of the English political system. As such, it is a well-known part of British national heritage, establishing as it did constitutional principles against the previously unquestionable power of the monarchy. The *Magna Carta* has been digitized and transcribed, so that the virtual representative of the physical artifact is available for viewing, and the actual information embedded within the document is also readable. This differs from the display used for the *Sherborne Missal*, the earliest complete illustrated book of the Catholic service to survive the Reformation. The technology used in this project has been used also for the *Qur'an*, and other books that are on permanent display in the buildings of the BL, and the texts are digitized in such a way as to allow users to literally 'turn the pages' of the book. There is no complete transcription, although an audio file can be played which explains the images and text, and this explanation is also written.

Although the Missal has an historical importance in that it survived the dissolution of the

monasteries, its symbolical importance is more as an artifact that was saved from destruction rather than as a foundation stone of national identity, in the way that one can say the *Magna Carta* is. Similarly, the *Gutenberg Bible* is a wonderful artifact, but other than the fact that it represents an important change in the history of book production, and therefore is symbolic of the cultural influence of mass printing on society, it has little significance in terms of a purely national reading.

The range of the artifacts digitized by the BL is in keeping with its branding as the 'World's Knowledge', and this label surely influences the choice of items. Planned digitization projects, such as allowing online access to other items from 'Turning the Pages', such as the anatomical drawings of Vesalius, the next planned item to be made available this way, indicate that the Library is more interested in using the technologies available to stake a global claim for itself and its collections than to highlight the perhaps more parochial or local aspects of its position as a national library. It seems that decisions for digitization are based on the artifactual and aesthetic value of an item, as opposed to its value as a symbolic marker of national heritage. The *Magna Carta*, while a vital part of British culture and history, is also a document seen as an indicator of the long-ago beginnings of democracy, and is therefore a representative as much of a general global history as of purely British interest. Similarly, the *Sherborne Missal* is a beautiful object, gorgeously illuminated and bound, and its aesthetic qualities holds more meaning in the context of the BL decision-making process, than any connection to ideas of identity. The fact that a similarly attractive artifact, the *Qur'an* is also digitized and available helps to underscore that it is aesthetic reasons that lie behind these choices. [2]

What is interesting about the projects chosen so far is how they are representative of the strength of the collection in as much as exhibiting the broad swathe of materials that the BL holds, but without intimating as to any specific national cultural heritage. This push to display the 'world's treasures' over those that are perhaps purely national items seems not to have gone unnoticed by the public. In response to the 2001 survey, *Help Shape our Future*, 5,000 responses were received from external institutions, the public and professionals within the LIS field, and 90% of these

responses indicated a desire to see more collections and important items digitized (BL, Strategic). This document also indicated that the funds for digitization programs came purely from external bodies and not from the Grant-in-Aid monies from the British government. The immediate outcome of this can be seen in the plans for a more localized digital project utilizing items from across the collections, the planned "In Place" project (also known as 'Collect Britain'), due to launch May 21, 2003. The mission of this purely digital project is to 'chart the changing face of Britain and her people', through interaction with various items from the collections. The national/local bent of this project has in large part to do with its funding, which comes from the New Opportunities Fund. [For more about funding, see Appendix A.] The NOF's main mission is to grant awards to educational, health and environmental projects, but it has a separate digitization policy, which focuses on re-skilling, citizenship and cultural enrichment (NOF, About). Supported by this money and the remit of the funding body, an exploration of a project that is based around the people who make up the nation makes sense, and it does reflect some awareness in the executive of the Library as to the need to have some connection to the population on a more visceral or emotive level. However, the 'In Place' project seems from the initial literature to be different from the projects done so far, as it represents a collation of different items from various collections. Rather than have each as a separate entity, the items chosen are brought together around the idea of user-initiated interactions rather than as displays in themselves, integral to themselves. This seems to be a controlled exercise directing users to what can be seen, and what cannot, within proscribed limits, rather than simply presenting an artifact in its entirety for viewing by the general user, and as such is subtly different from those other item-based projects.

While this project is intimately linked to the citizens of the country, including those whose family may have emigrated or immigrated at any point, because it seems to be based on the experiences of the person interacting, rather than on a simple presentation of artifacts that are closely linked to the myths of the nation and its collective identity and heritage, it stands in a different realm from the other projects focused on here. At

this point, before its opening, the planning and documentation available do not change the overall impression one gains of the BL as being globally over locally focused, and more concerned with its standing on the world stage than in the eyes of the people who it is meant most immediately to serve.

### *Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru – history and digital presence*

The opening welcome page of the LLGC Web site gives the history and mission of the LLGC. This page gives a bare bones background regarding the mission of the institution, its geographic setting, and its history as an institution (LLGC, Introduction). Since 1911, the LLGC has had the right to collect a copy of every printed work published in Britain and Ireland. Therefore, it is the legal deposit library for Wales, and, as we have seen, one of the six in the United Kingdom as a whole. As well as having this function, it holds a huge collection about Wales and other Celtic countries, and the collection takes multiple forms – books, pamphlets, newspapers, microforms, ephemera, manuscripts, photographs, sound recordings, moving images, pictures and electronic material. It also has a publishing arm, and exhibit space.

In the *Introduction*, a history is given that begins to dig behind its bibliographic and recording missions, into a deeper examination as to the politics behind its inception and continuation. This institutional history stretches back to the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, with the Welsh émigré community's call for the formation of a National Library for Wales. Following the 12<sup>th</sup> century defeat, the fervor that had gone into revolt was redirected into the rituals of poetry and prose. Building on a tradition of literature that went back centuries, the Welsh began the attempt to preserve their language, culture, heritage and history through literary production, creating and forming a tradition that exists to this very day. The dream of a National Library grew to a reality from the National Eisteddfod at Mold in 1873, and with the support of members of the Liberal Party, and leading members of Welsh society, the Budget of 1905 included specific monies set aside for the setting up of a national library for Wales in Aberystwyth (LLGC Introduction).

The Charter of the LLGC cements its mission policy as the

Collection, preservation and maintenance of ... works of all kinds whatsoever ... which have been or shall be composed in Welsh or any other Celtic language or which relate or shall relate to the antiquities, language, literature, philosophy, history, religion, arts, crafts and industries of the Welsh and other Celtic peoples'. (LLGC Charter)

Here there is an immediate, obvious contrast to the remit of the British Library, which while stating its position as the national library of the United Kingdom does so in language nowhere near as partisan as that exhibited in the LLGC's defining statements.

From the opening page of the Web site, it is immediately obvious that the LLGC has retained within its digital presence a sense of the achievement of survival against the odds, and the importance of language in preserving and maintaining a unique national identity in the face of oppression. The site is completely bilingual, with parallel pages in English and Welsh that can be navigated through separately. The number of digital projects that have been completed and put up for public access far surpass those of the BL, and they have a far greater connection to the historical mission of the Library and the social and cultural heritage myths that the nation has tried so hard to maintain.

Public response to this aspect of the collecting mission of the LLGC is whole-hearted, according to responses gathered in an outreach survey begun in February 1999 (LLGC Future 1999). Although this survey was taken around the same time as devolution, when nationhood was perhaps more in the public eye than at other times, it is pertinent to note that a further document, published four years later, maintained that the same aspects were still considered important. Since devolution and the setting up of the Welsh Assembly, the LLGC has set itself on a path that necessarily acknowledges its place as an institution with the task of preserving the nation's heritage and culture – it's 'National Memory', to quote:

The Library's heritage collections provide information related to all communities in Wales, whatever the language, cultural or religious background... The collections form the record of the memory of Wales, without which little historical work in any media would be possible. (LLGC Collecting 2003)

The combined sense of political, social and cultural vindication that devolution caused has not been ignored by the LLGC, and the political connection between these institutions of culture and politics are necessarily close, as acknowledged in collecting for the Welsh Political Archive. The digital version of the Archive, *Campaign!* highlights a century of political and social campaigns in the nation, and the Head Librarian states the belief that the Assembly has "reinforced the existing sense of a Welsh identity... [that] has very deep roots." (Green 2002) Given that it is recognized that a national library can only operate successfully within the contexts of the social, political and economic contexts of the nation that it serves (Villa 2000), it is no surprise that the digital collections available via the LLGC cement this belief and continue to adhere to the primal collecting mantra that has defined it from birth.

### Projects

The digital collections that are accessible on the LLGC Web site are collected in one area, the 'Digital Mirror – Treasures' page, a list of links with descriptions about each item, and live links to the page. So far, the Library gives full access to twenty-nine separate digital collections, including manuscripts and archival materials, photographs, maps, sound recordings and paintings. These materials are overwhelmingly Welsh in terms of the subject matter, creator and language. Only the Carleton E. Watkins collection is by neither a Welsh national nor covering Welsh subjects, but is included as one of the original parts of the Sir John Williams collection whose donation of land and materials begat the LLGC in 1905.

The items that have been chosen for digitization span both centuries and media, and the collections have been made accessible electronically in a variety of ways. The photographic collections in particular are based more on a database schema, where images can be searched by keyword, and are therefore of less concern here given the stipulations of this paper. However, the majority of the collections available are of the required type; i.e. item-level digitization of a specific artifact in its entirety, and within this stipulated boundary twenty-five of the collections fit.

The digitization of the items follows a general scheme, with an introduction page giving a back-

ground to the history of the artifact, the information embedded within it, and the creator of the piece. A new window opens with the images of the item itself, which can be viewed in close-up or at the complete page level. It is interesting to note that there is little transcription of items that have been digitized. While the personal items, such as Lloyd George's diary, can be read from the screen, there is no direct translation available for those items written in Welsh, and no transcription of all of the items that can be viewed. The introductory information gives a general overview of the narrative or information within each document, with cross references to items of particular interest or pages of note, but it seems that the actual details within the text are of less importance than the symbolic value of the item. It is noticeable that the most background information is available about personal items within the collection, such as the *Smuggler's Autobiography*, which gives an overview of William Owens' life in some detail. Given the more personal or human interest of such a story, it is perhaps inevitable that this, and other examples of works based on individual experiences or lives, would incur the most in-depth narrative background, as they rely for their importance on an empathy or interest in the personal subject rather than in their more symbolic or artifactual value. It is perhaps more important that items such as this can be read or understood in more basic, direct terms as they are items that have an interest for patrons on a personal, interactive level.

For items such as the *Black Book of Carmarthen* or *The Book of Taliesin*, it is the symbolic value, and the idea that it is somehow a representative of the mythic structures of "Welshness" that is important, over perhaps the actual information residing inside. There is, it seems, more meaning in the simple, digital existence of the item as a pure artifact, rather than in the information embedded within it. No transcription or translation is provided for either of these major items, and yet the donation of them by Sir John Williams formed the foundation of the Library's collection and their preservation and retention are vital indicators of the important role that national heritage and the symbolic perpetuation of the collective myth of Welsh identity play within the structure and responsibility of the LLGC. Similarly, other items within the digital collections

have a parallel role. A recent addition to the 'Treasures' is the first known manuscript and score of the National Anthem, written in 1856. The collected scores include other works by the father and son team of Evan and James James, but a note on the title page takes the user to the page where the anthem is written, and a sound file is also added of the first known recording of the song, sung by Madge Breese in 1899. It is a point of interest that in this case, the only words given of the song, *Hen Wlad Fy Nhadau*, are in the original Welsh, with no English transcription available.

This partisanship serves to emphasize the strong connection between the national library and collective identity, as its digital collections are specifically chosen in such a way as to consolidate the "meaning" of what it is to be Welsh. Through the distribution of these virtual artifacts, digitized purely because they mythically represent the essential heritage of the country, the LLGC has continued to keep within the remit of its original Charter, and focus its digital presence on a localized role of examining and displaying artifacts of heritage that have, in some symbolic way, enabled the nation to survive, and which, in this age of electronic information and distributed communication networks, can aid in the continuation of a Welsh identity both within the nation and without. Just as these items have aided the collective heritage of a Welsh identity, so the availability of such materials to a worldwide audience can communicate a similar essence to those in the global arena. In other words, choosing such artifacts is a means of perpetuating a mythic collective identity within the country, and in conveying its cultural identity globally, without undermining the locally focused mission of the institution itself.

### *Summary & conclusions*

If we can say that the LLGC was created to preserve a specific culture that was in danger of disappearing, it would not be too difficult, given a knowledge of the BL's origins and the nations' history, to say that it seems that the BL was created to continue to uphold the principles of cultural domination over other nations and peoples. In this era of globalization, the branding of the BL as the home of the 'world's knowledge' both be-

lies and upholds its imperialist origins. Indeed, given the digital projects that are available from the BL, one can ask whether it is suffering from an acute awareness of the culturally imperialistic overtones of being the United Kingdom's library. Given that fact that there are libraries for the other nations of the Union which have taken on a life of their own through recent political changes, and in a wider sense, that the socially and politically domineering means by which so much of the initial collections were started must be acknowledged by a modern institution, it is perhaps the case that the BL is caught in a difficult cultural and social trap. The BL may well be attempting to deal with a consciousness of the accusations that can be leveled at it, given the history of its collecting, and that this awareness has necessarily informed its digital collections to be more global in outlook, because so many of the collections are from other nations, and indeed would form the basis of collective national memory for these other nations.

It could perhaps be seen as a subtle form of cultural retribution, this seeming awkwardness in addressing the issues surrounding its role of being "The British Library", but the inability of the BL to respond to the national or local aspects of its role can leave it open to criticism of operating on an elitist and remote level that simply replicates an arrogance that such institutions need to be aware and wary of perpetuating. While it may be admirable that the BL views its collections as belonging to the world, and chooses to emphasize the diversity of its holdings, denying its role as a national institution could breed distrust among the very people it purports to serve. The complex dynamics between Britain and Wales, with the LLGC representing something of an underdog nation, means that the perpetuation of its national memory is not tinged with the cultural guilt that perhaps informs the digital decisions of the British Library.

However, national heritage does not necessarily have to be chauvinistic. Providing free access to works that are part of the collective heritage of the nation is surely a huge part of the role that a national library must play in order to be justified in its existence in the eyes of those citizens who support it, both theoretically and literally. Given the wealth of collections within the British Library, it would not be difficult for the institution

to provide access to artifacts that are both of importance to the global audience and also form a vital link to the collective memory of the nation. It is interesting that independent auditors of the Library's digitization strategies have themselves called for such this aspect to become more of a part of the library's digital presence, stating:

there is some feeling both within and outside the Library that the British Library has yet to embark upon a really major digitisation [sic] project and make this available through the web. Specifically, a "UK Memory Project" could be promoted...[this] would have the advantage of bringing the British Library and its collections closer to ... the citizen in the street, as happens in many other countries .... (Villa 2000)

Through a study such as that above, we can begin to see how unique and dynamic historical, social and political contexts are influential factors on the formation of national institutional collections, even in the digital age, and that it is imperative that those in positions of power within the executive bodies of these institutions acknowledge the complex issue of national identity and heritage that necessarily inform their privileged positions. From this perspective, we can perhaps begin to be able to understand better the reasons behind the image of specific institutions, and suggest necessary or desirable changes to the digital 'face' they present on the Web.

### Notes

1. Time of writing, May 2003. Significant changes to the collections may well be available at the time of reading.
2. This is not to negate the very real presence of Muslims in Britain for years, but to draw attention to the fact that the accepted myths of British national identity are not tied to that religion.

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## Appendix A

One of the important things to keep in mind during this investigation is the importance of funding availability, and the effect that this has on projects that are chosen as representatives of the respective library's collections. The bulk of the funding for the LLGC, which amounts to 90%, comes from the Welsh Assembly. [1] The British government similarly finances the British Library, but both institutions have in recent years looked to outside sources of funding in order to extend

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their ability to fulfill the policies and promises of their strategic plans. One of the main areas for external funding has been the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) and the National Heritage Memorial Fund (NHMF). The NHMF was started in 1980 by the British government as a 'fund of last resort' to protect items of outstanding importance to the nation's heritage. In 1993, the trustees also took over responsibility for making National Lottery grants for heritage projects, with the creation of a separate entity that became the HLF. The HLF has three core objectives that themselves expand into six subsidiary purposes that provide the mission and aims of the Fund. The core missions are to conserve and enhance the UK's diverse heritage; to encourage more people to be involved in making decisions regarding their heritage, and to ensure that everyone can learn about, have access to and enjoy their heritage. The six secondary

aims are to encourage communities to look after and celebrate their heritage; to promote a greater appreciation of the value and importance of heritage in terms of the national good and sense of identity; to open up heritage resources to a wide audience; to increase opportunities for learning about heritage; to help conserve and sustain heritage at risk, and to promote heritage conservation as an integral part of urban and rural regeneration. [2]

### *Notes*

1. GCL Management Consultants "National Library of Wales – A Quinquennial Review, Stage 1, Interim Report" May 2002, p. 4
2. Heritage Lottery Fund, The Heritage Lottery Fund and the National Heritage Memorial Fund Business Plan, 2003, p.2

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