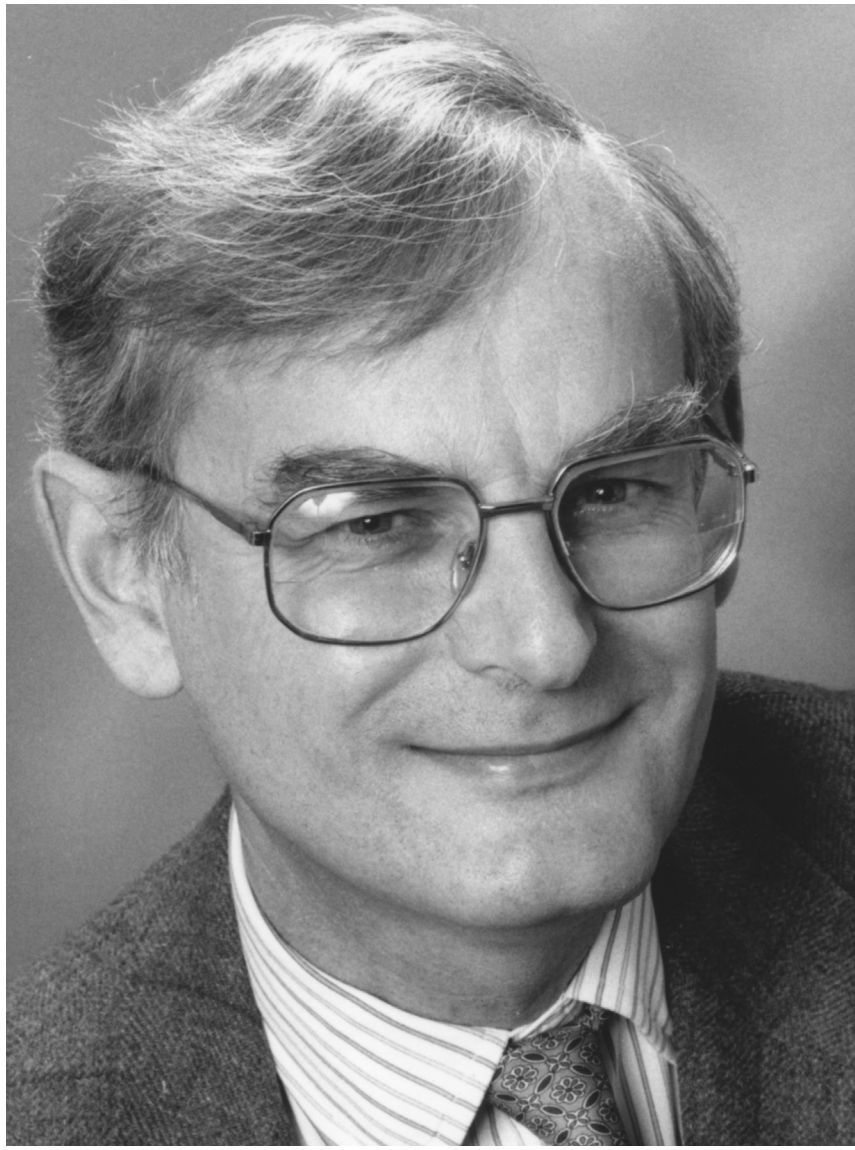

REES DAVIES

Robert Rees Davies
1938–2005

A Welshman with wide horizons, Rees Davies was a highly original historian who offered compelling new insights into medieval society through a body of work focused on Britain and Ireland and, above all, Wales.[1] His distinguished historical scholarship was, however, no mere academic exercise, but was rooted in humane values that permeated his whole life and were reflected in a dedication, generosity and integrity from which many benefited. Though a private man, deeply attached to his family, he did not shy away from deploying his formidable public skills as a chair of committees and eloquent promoter and advocate of the cause of history, skills that drew on a sharp intelligence and a capacity for cogent, though always courteous, argument. To a considerable extent the contours of his work as a historian were shaped by his higher education at London and Oxford, as well as by the example of Marc Bloch, whom he greatly admired, and of other French historians—an aspect of a more general Francophilia revealed, too, by the pleasure he took in visiting France, which was his favourite holiday destination. Yet both his choice of historical terrain and his commitment to history also owed much to his upbringing in Wales and his identification with his native land.

Rees Davies was born on 6 August 1938 at Glanddwynant, Caletwr near Llandderfel in Merioneth, the fourth and youngest son of William Edward and Sarah Margaret Davies.[2] When he was about three the family

[1] For his publications to 2005, see Rhidian Griffiths, 'A bibliography of the published writings of Rees Davies', in Huw Pryce and John Watts (eds.), *Power and Identity in the Middle Ages: Essays in Memory of Rees Davies* (Oxford, 2007), pp. 264–74.

[2] Valuable biographical information is provided in the obituaries and tributes listed in ibid., p. 1, n. 2, to which should be added obituaries in *The Herald* (Glasgow) 28 May 2005 (Dauvit Broun)

Proceedings of the British Academy, **161**, 135–155.

moved a few miles north-east up to the hill farm of Blaengwnodl Uchaf near Cynwyd, located above the River Dee in the same county in what had been the medieval district of Edeirnion. Almost fifty years later, Rees dedicated his magisterial account of medieval Welsh history to the memory of his parents, describing them as *Halen Daear Cymru* ('The Salt of the Earth of Wales'), and there is no doubt that he felt a strong and abiding debt to his family and to the rural, Welsh-speaking community in which he was brought up. This background may explain his love of hill walking, and a sensitivity to the realities of medieval lordship, though it did not engender a deep interest in farming: while indebted to his roots, Rees's education and career inevitably drew him away from them, and he spent all of his adult life in towns and cities. Owing to poor health, his formal education at the village school in Cynwyd, a two-and-a-half-mile walk away from his home, only began when he was six, and it was there that his interest in history was awakened by a lesson on William Caxton and the printing press. His schooling continued from 1949 to 1956 at the County School, Bala, where Rees was a weekly boarder with Mrs Lilian James, widow of the school's former headmaster. The time spent with Mrs James and her children, during their holidays from boarding school in England, had a lasting influence. Not only did his landlady encourage Rees's academic development by lending him books, but her children, who did not speak Welsh, helped to foster two lifelong accomplishments: a command of the English language and a love of music, and more specifically of the piano, which Rees played in a small ensemble with the other children. (Later in life he would relax most evenings by playing the piano, Mozart being a particular favourite.)

Above all, his years at Bala revealed Rees Davies's exceptional academic gifts, and his particular bent towards history.[3] It was to read Modern

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and *Postmaster and The Merton Record* (2005), 142–4 (Niall Campbell), as well as R. Geraint Gruffydd, 'Nécrologie: Sir Rees Davies 1938–2005', *Studia Celtica*, 40 (2006), 175–8, and Gareth Elwyn Jones, 'Professor Sir Rees Davies, FBA, 1938–2005', *Welsh Historian/Hanesydd Cymreig*, 34 (2006), 6–8. See also D. A. L. Morgan and John Davidson, 'Appreciations', in Pryce and Watts (eds.), *Power and Identity*, pp. 5–10; Rees Davies, 'A farewell speech, delivered at a dinner held in honour of the retirement of Rees Davies, Geoffrey Ellis, and Jean Dunbabin, Thursday, 10 June 2004', ibid., pp. 261–3; and Robert J. W. Evans, 'Teyrnged i'r Athro Syr Rees Davies' (Address given at the memorial service held in the University Church, Oxford, 15 Oct. 2005), published on the website of Cymdeithas Dafydd ap Gwilym: *http://users.ox.ac.uk/~ydafydd/reesdavies.html*.

[3] For the recollection of a fellow pupil, see A. Lloyd Hughes, 'Emeritus Professor Sir Rees Davies (1938–2005)', *Journal of the Merioneth Historical and Record Society*, 14, pt. 4 (2005), 277–81 at 280.

History, therefore, that he applied in 1955 for a place at Jesus College, Oxford. However, he was turned down, rightly, he later thought (wryly recollecting that the Principal of the college asked him about local folklore as if he were some exotic equivalent of the Dinka or Nuer), and thus in autumn 1956 Rees began reading for a degree in history at University College London. He read prodigiously across a broad range of topics (including political thought from Plato to Marx), further expanded his horizons through receiving travel scholarships to the Continent, and in his essays and examinations demonstrated the analytical strengths that would underpin his subsequent work as a historian. In particular, he developed an enduring interest in medieval history, fostered by Geoffrey Barrow—who found the first-year Rees 'a precociously scholarly, very polite, rather shy individual'[4]—and Christopher Holdsworth, while in his final year Rees took the special subject on Richard II taught by May McKisack, recently arrived from Oxford, at Westfield College. The outstanding First obtained in 1959 by 'the ablest undergraduate we have had in the department since the war' amply confirmed the expectations of his teachers,[5] who had already arranged, following McKisack's advice, for Rees to move to Oxford to begin doctoral research on the March of Wales under the supervision of Bruce McFarlane.

By the time Rees Davies submitted his thesis in 1965 he had returned to UCL as assistant lecturer in history. He in fact spent only two years in Oxford, as a member of Merton College (thanks to Ralph Davis, formerly of UCL), before taking up an assistant lectureship in history through the medium of the Welsh language at University College, Swansea in 1961—a post kept open for him for a year by the head of department, Glanmor Williams, so that Rees could complete his residency requirement at Oxford. This appointment reflects not only the high esteem Rees already enjoyed on account of his academic talent but also his desire to return to Wales. In London he had maintained his contacts with Wales through attending various Welsh chapels and the Welsh Society. The same was true in Oxford, where he was an active member of Cymdeithas Dafydd ap Gwilym, the university's Welsh society, whose business was conducted entirely in Welsh and whose (male-only) members in those years included a remarkable number of individuals who later became distinguished in academic and public life in Wales. Rees filled all the society's offices in turn. As secretary, his comprehensive and

[4] Letter to the present writer, August 2007.
[5] Morgan and Davidson, 'Appreciations', p. 6.

witty minutes of the weekly meetings during term were written in the precise, regular handwriting so familiar to countless correspondents over the following decades, while as chair (*Caplan*, literally, 'Chaplain') he plied members in his rooms in Merton with coffee and 'Maryland Kookies'. He also delivered two papers, one on the Welsh poet, essayist and scholar T. H. Parry-Williams, whose 'new intellectual and spiritual honesty' strongly appealed to Rees, the other on a subject about which he would have much more to say over the following decades: Owain Glyndŵr.[6]

It may seem that the two years Rees spent at Swansea (1961–3) were a mere interlude between postgraduate study at Oxford and a return to UCL. To think this would be a mistake. For one thing, it was at Swansea that Rees Davies became a teacher. As the lecturer with sole responsibility for providing courses through the medium of Welsh, his cohort of students may have been small but the coverage required was very broad, extending from prehistory to the nineteenth century. He thus had to familiarise himself rapidly with a large amount of material and try to make it comprehensible to students who were not, on the whole, among the strongest academically. Moreover, Rees responded positively to the challenge, devoting considerable care to his pupils. Above all, he developed a liking for teaching which would remain for the rest of his life. In addition, he was fortunate to be part of a history department enlivened by the recruitment of a number of talented young historians at and shortly after this period. It was then that Rees made enduring friendships with Kenneth O. Morgan and Bill Greenway (a medieval historian whose early death greatly upset Rees), as well as with older colleagues, notably Alun Davies, Ieuan Gwynedd Jones and Glanmor Williams—the last of these remained a warm admirer and, perhaps fittingly, delivered his final public lecture in a series at Oxford in 2005 to honour his erstwhile assistant lecturer. Nor were Rees's friendships restricted to historians: he was also drawn, for example, to the philosopher J. R. Jones, whose passionate advocacy of the rights of the Welsh language struck a chord with Rees,[7] who in later life would also speak and write passionately about his hopes and fears for the future of a distinctive Welsh identity.

[6] Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Welsh c. 4 ('Llyfr Cofnodion Cymdeithas Dafydd ap Gwilym 1958–1963'), pp. 85–203; Gwyn Thomas, 'Argraffiadau', in D. Ellis Evans and R. Brinley Jones (eds.), *Cofio'r Dafydd: Cymdeithas Dafydd ap Gwilym 1886–1986* (Swansea, 1987), pp. 166–8. A photograph of the members of Cymdeithas Dafydd ap Gwilym, including Rees, in 1959–60 is reproduced in Gwyn Thomas, *Bywyd Bach*, Cyfres y Cewri, 30 (Caernarfon, 2006).

[7] Though they did not always see eye to eye: see below, n. 38.

Both professionally and personally, then, the two years at Swansea were fulfilling and happy. Of course, the move there did not mean that Rees had severed all ties with Oxford and London. He continued to work on his thesis and regularly visited Bruce McFarlane at his rooms in Magdalen College or his country home at Quainton. McFarlane was a major scholarly influence to whom Rees owed 'a subtle grasp of medieval records and a deep understanding of the social dimensions of power'.[8] He also valued McFarlane's friendship for 'its utter directness and total equality' and 'uncompromising mental honesty', though he was well aware of his supervisor's less attractive qualities of jealous possessiveness and pettiness.[9] Despite a rather shaky start, not helped by his referring to McFarlane's cat as 'she' (the noun for 'cat' in Welsh being feminine), Rees soon earned the respect of his supervisor, whose only concern as the thesis neared completion was that its author was 'almost too mature a scholar for his age; he can't bear a slovenly sentence, a misplaced comma, or a reckless generalisation in anything he reads'.[10] Nor were Rees's accomplishments forgotten by his former teachers in London. Alfred Cobban was anxious to secure Rees's services as a lecturer in medieval history and succeeded in persuading him—and his head of department Glanmor Williams—that he would flourish better back in his *alma mater*.

Thus, in the autumn of 1963 the twenty-five-year old Rees Davies began a new phase of his life teaching at UCL. The following thirteen years spent in London were significant, and personally satisfying, in several respects. It was then that Rees established himself as an original and acute historian, amply fulfilling the early promise that had so impressed his teachers and other mentors both with the successful completion of his D.Phil. thesis in 1965 and the publication of his first articles. The thesis met the exacting standards of both McFarlane and the ever self-critical Rees himself, and laid the foundations for much of what was to come in future years.[11] For one thing, it demonstrated a capacity to master a plethora of documentary sources, mainly the archives of the lordships

[8] John Watts, 'Sir Rees Davies', *Guardian*, 26 May 2005, 29. For an acknowledgement that McFarlane's 'work and example have shaped me as a historian', see R. R. Davies, *The Matter of Britain and the Matter of England. An Inaugural Lecture delivered before the University of Oxford on 29 February 1996* (Oxford, 1996), p. 2. See also *idem*, *Lordship and Society in the March of Wales 1282–1400* (Oxford, 1978), p. vii; *idem*, *Conquest, Coexistence, and Change: Wales 1063–1415* (Oxford, 1987), p. viii.

[9] K. B. McFarlane, *Letters to Friends, 1940–1966*, ed. Gerald Harriss (Oxford, 1997), pp. 251–2.

[10] Davies, 'Farewell speech', p. 263; McFarlane, *Letters to Friends*, p. 227.

[11] R. R. Davies, *The Bohun and Lancaster Lordships in Wales in the Fourteenth and Early Fifteenth Centuries*, D.Phil. Thesis, Oxford University, 1965.

being studied, and thus the rigorous empiricism that underpinned Rees's scholarship. Yet the work was also informed by a keen awareness of the patchy and partial nature of the sources, and, while less overtly indebted to theoretical perspectives than some of his later work, reflected a problem-oriented approach in an analysis that viewed the lordships under consideration as units both of seignorial administration and of the economic and social structure of later medieval Wales. Moreover, in a further sign of things to come, Rees combined these twin approaches in a chapter focusing on the revolt of Owain Glyndŵr, observing that, 'as in so many other cases, a period of revolt reveals much more clearly and incisively than a period of peace both the nature of local administration and the structure of Welsh society'.[12]

The completion of the thesis, and his subsequent research on the lordships of the Welsh March, was greatly facilitated by the proximity of the Public Record Office in Chancery Lane. Yet the opportunities London gave Rees Davies to endow his work with even greater empirical depth were complemented by obligations that further broadened his historical horizons. Thus he exhibited an enduring commitment to serving the wider historical profession by becoming Assistant Editor and subsequently Review Editor of the journal *History*, under the editorship of Alfred Cobban. His teaching, too, reflected the broad outlook that was so fundamental to his work as an historian, with courses on a range of medieval European history as well as on historiography. It is telling that his earliest articles, both in Welsh, were harbingers of an abiding concern with historiography. The first is an extended—and in parts quite critical—review, which included perceptive comparisons with Huizinga's *Waning of the Middle Ages*, of Glanmor Williams's magnum opus, *The Welsh Church from Conquest to Reformation*.[13] The other is a short study of Marc Bloch.[14] The latter piece is particularly revealing; indeed, it almost reads like a manifesto for the kind of historian Rees aspired to be, expressing convictions that shaped all his subsequent work. In its strong identification with Bloch the article testifies to its author's independence of mind, and suggests that Rees, notwithstanding his admiration for McFarlane in particular, felt that the English historiography to which he had been so deeply exposed needed to be complemented, and in some respects challenged, by French example. Thus, he criticised the reluctance

[12] R. R. Davies, *The Bohun and Lancaster Lordships in Wales in the Fourteenth and Early Fifteenth Centuries*, D.Phil. Thesis, Oxford University, 1965, p. 260.
[13] R. Rees Davies, 'Machlud yr Oesoedd Canol', *Y Traethodydd*, 119 (1964), 34–45.
[14] R. Rees Davies, 'Marc Bloch', *Taliesin*, 11 (1965), 68–75.

of most English historians, unlike their counterparts in France, to meditate on the nature and purpose of history as well as their slowness to adopt the methods favoured by Bloch, whom he praised for rejecting mere erudition in favour of a problem-oriented *histoire humaine* that sought to depict society in its totality. More particularly, he urged historians of Wales to 'raise their sights beyond the historiography of England' and follow the lead of French historians, whose sociological bent, while in danger of playing down the significance of the individual, was especially well suited, he believed, to the study of a stateless nation which had preserved much of its cultural and social identity. And he concluded that Bloch's 'ardent patriotism' could only increase his appeal to 'the warm-hearted Welshman'.[15]

Nor was his identification with Wales confined to the scholarly domain. There was a strong Welsh dimension to his personal life in London, none more so than through his marriage, in 1966, to Carys Wynne Lloyd, whose family also had roots in Merioneth. (Years later, in a talk on genealogy in Welsh society, Rees recalled how one of Carys's relatives had provided him with her family tree, going back to the eighteenth century, just as a buyer of a Siamese cat would receive its pedigree!) Although they had first met when both were students in London, it was only after Rees's return from Swansea that their relationship became close. The marriage, and the family life that followed with the birth of a daughter, Manon—who for a time attended the Welsh School in London, which Rees and Carys did much to support—and son, Prys, were a source of great happiness and pride for Rees, providing an essential anchor in what would become an increasingly busy life. At the same time these new family commitments encouraged a change of direction. Keen that his children should be brought up in Wales, and more particularly receive their education through the medium of Welsh, Rees sought to leave the metropolis, and in 1976, while still only thirty-seven, he was appointed to the Chair of History at the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth. In his inaugural lecture, he confessed to having had mixed feelings about Aberystwyth as a place (which he had long known through his research visits to the National Library of Wales), but declared that

[15] Many of these points were reiterated in a fuller, more scholarly article on Bloch, though without the specific appeals to a Welsh context, a characteristic contrast in emphasis when Rees wrote about the same subject in both English and Welsh which reflected a clear desire to adapt his message to different intended readerships: R. R. Davies, 'Marc Bloch', *History*, 52 (1967), 265–82.

these had been mistaken;[16] and he and Carys, settled in their home at Maeshyfryd and, attending the town's Welsh Presbyterian chapel, made many friends there during a stay of nineteen years—the longest Rees had spent in any one place since leaving home in 1956.

By the time of his move to Aberystwyth Rees Davies had about a dozen articles to his name and had also completed a substantial monograph, some of which he was required to cut before it was finally published in 1978.[17] This body of work exhibited an originality, ambition and empirical depth that would continue to characterise his historical scholarship in the future. A striking quality was his ability to grasp the potential of a technically challenging, and certainly unfashionable, topic, the lordships of the Welsh March, and deploy it as a lens through which to gain important new insights into medieval society. Moreover, while grounded in his doctoral research, this work went well beyond its parameters: rather than simply writing a monograph about the Bohun and Lancaster lordships in Wales, Rees drew on studies of other lordships as well as further archival research of his own in order to analyse the interaction of seignorial authority with both native and settler society in the March of Wales as a whole. He was thus able to invest the March with a significance that extended far beyond its territorial borders by presenting it as 'an ideal area for an analysis of the range and character of lordship in medieval society and the more ideal in that the lordship was that of a foreign élite exercised over a native society'.[18] Similarly, several articles deployed evidence from late medieval Wales to address broad themes such as the nature of law and custom, including bloodfeud, and Rees also encouraged his readers to draw contemporary parallels in papers that characterised the impact of English lordship and settlement in terms of 'race relations' and colonial rule.[19] As these last examples show, his approach was very much one indebted to Bloch, who had 'conceived historical writing as a response to a series of intelligently-posed questions'[20]—an

[16] R. R. Davies, *Historical Perception: Celts and Saxons* (Cardiff, 1979), pp. 4–5.

[17] Davies, *Lordship and Society in the March of Wales*. Comparison with a plan for the book in Rees Davies's papers suggests that it was originally conceived in two roughly equal parts, 'The March' and 'Society', and that the cuts mainly affected the latter.

[18] Davies, *Lordship and Society in the March of Wales*, p. 9.

[19] R. R. Davies, 'The twilight of Welsh Law, 1284–1536', *History*, 51 (1966), 143–64; *idem*, 'The survival of the bloodfeud in medieval Wales', *History*, 54 (1969), 338–57; *idem*, 'The Law of the March', *Welsh History Review*, 5 (1970–1), 1–30; *idem*, 'Colonial Wales', *Past and Present*, 65 (1974), 3–23; *idem*, 'Race relations in post-conquest Wales: confrontation and compromise', *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion for 1974* (1975), 32–56.

[20] Davies, 'Marc Bloch' (1967), 269.

approach also apparent in the organisation of Rees's research notes under thematic headings while preparing his magnum opus on the March and later books. At the same time, those notes, like the references in his published works, show that his conclusions were based on an impressive grasp of a wide range of sources, coupled with a gift for identifying the telling example.[21] Nevertheless, what makes his work so illuminating as well as stimulating is not just the thoroughness but also the sensitivity with which he read those sources, which he was all too aware could imprison the historian by imposing their own categories and assumptions on interpretation.[22] That he could carry off this delicate balancing-act between empirical rigour and problem-based analysis so successfully was a tribute both to his imagination as 'a historian alive to the wholeness of human experience' and, as Idris Foster, Professor of Celtic at Oxford, put it in the late 1970s, his razor-sharp mind.[23]

With the chair in history came the headship of department, and therewith new opportunities for promoting his ideas about history and exercising his formidable powers of problem-solving. Rees's principal aim in his early years at Aberystwyth was to bring about major changes to the history syllabus.[24] Though this initiative met with some scepticism and opposition, Rees succeeded in persuading his colleagues to adopt much of what he had advocated, including a much greater emphasis on the teaching of historiography, to which he contributed as part of a full teaching load that included classes through the medium of Welsh. This teaching did not extend to the history of Wales, however, as this remained the preserve of the separate Department of Welsh History (thus he was advised that it would be inappropriate for him to cover Owain Glyndŵr in his special subject on the reign of Richard II), although he did succeed in establishing greater cooperation between the two departments, which eventually merged in 1994, with respect to Welsh-medium provision. He also cooperated with Llinos Beverley Smith of the Department of Welsh History in a major ESRC project to calendar and provide a database of select portions

[21] See J. R. Maddicott, 'Review of *Lordship and Society in the March of Wales*', in *English Historical Review*, 94 (1979), 377–81.

[22] His views on the challenges posed by the sources to historical interpretation were later summarised in R. R. Davies, *The King of England and the Prince of Wales, 1277–84: Law, Politics, and Power*, Kathleen Hughes Memorial Lectures on Mediaeval Welsh History, 3 (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 7–8.

[23] Quotation from Davies, 'Marc Bloch' (1967), 277. See R. R. Davies, 'A medieval Merioneth album: troi dalennau'r gorffennol', *Journal of the Merioneth Historical and Record Society*, 13/1 (1998), 11: 'imagination is quite as crucial for the historian as is knowledge'.

[24] Morgan and Davidson, 'Appreciations', pp. 8–9.

of the extensive court rolls of the marcher lordship of Ruthin or Dyffryn Clwyd.[25] Thus in the very years Rees was becoming a historian of Wales in a fuller sense than ever before, principally through his writing of the volume on the period 1063–1415 for the Oxford History of Wales, he was constrained in sharing his insights with the undergraduates he taught. On the other hand, it was precisely his immersion in medieval European history that enabled him to write so freshly and perceptively about his native country.

The publication in 1987 of *Conquest, Coexistence, and Change: Wales 1063–1415*,[26] which won the Wolfson Literary Award for History, further enhanced Rees's reputation as a scholar, and he was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in the same year. The volume provided the first major synthesis of Welsh history in the central and later middle ages since J. E. Lloyd's pioneering magnum opus of 1911,[27] and avowedly differed from that earlier work in crucial respects. Whereas Lloyd had concentrated on establishing a reliable political narrative in which the native rulers of Wales took centre stage, Rees Davies offered a much wider perspective that reveals a great deal about his outlook and skills as an historian. In part, this was a matter of bringing the Norman and English conquerors of Wales in from the cold and examining the impact of foreign conquest and settlement, and the development of marcher lordships, as integral parts of Welsh history. Linked to that was a determination to delineate social, economic and ecclesiastical change across the whole of Wales, and thus to promote an interpretation of the period that subsumed the traditional emphasis on political conflict—especially between the Welsh and the English—in a broader pattern of social transformation. That Rees was able to accomplish this owed much to the labours of previous scholars in the field, as he readily acknowledged. Yet it owed more to his breadth of vision, sustained, crucially, by a singular capacity to write with equal flair and assurance about the different kinds of history his account encompassed, be it the teasing out of assumptions and values, the analysis of society, settlement patterns and the economy, or the assessment of military developments including the impact of castles,

[25] See, for example, R. R. Davies *et al.*, 'The Dyffryn Clwyd Court Roll Project, 1340–1352 and 1389–1399: a methodology and some preliminary findings', in Zvi Razi and Richard Smith (eds.), *Medieval Society and the Manor Court* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 260–97.

[26] Oxford University Press insisted on changing the title of the work for its reissue in paperback: *The Age of Conquest: Wales 1063–1415* (Oxford, 1991; rev. edn., 2000).

[27] J. E. Lloyd, *A History of Wales from the Earliest Times to the Edwardian Conquest*, 2 vols. (London, 1911).

not to mention skilful political narrative.[28] In short, the book's great achievement was to provide a compelling, multifaceted account of medieval Welsh history which went a long way towards redefining what that history should look like.

After completing the volume on Wales, Rees turned his attention to what would become a central concern for the rest of his career: a comparative and integrative study of medieval Britain and Ireland. As he would have readily acknowledged, he was not the first to adopt such an approach (his teacher Geoffrey Barrow had published *Feudal Britain* in the year Rees commenced his undergraduate studies at UCL), though it is fair to say that he gave it an impetus and character of his own. It is also true that this change of direction was anticipated to some extent in Rees's early decision to focus on the marcher lordships that spanned England and Wales and in the lessons he drew from these about the exercise of both seignorial and royal power, as well as by the frequent comparisons he had made between Wales and England, Ireland and Scotland. However, from the mid-1980s his commitment to a British Isles approach became much more explicit and prominent. The shift in emphasis was signalled by a colloquium he organised, with the support of the British Academy, in September 1986 at the University of Wales's residential centre at Gregynog, where he set forth his agenda in a paper boldly entitled 'In Praise of British History'.[29] The publication of the conference proceedings in 1988 coincided with his delivery of the Wiles Lectures in Belfast, which provided an opportunity for him to elaborate his approach by examining the differing impact of Anglo-Norman and English domination and conquest on Ireland, Scotland and Wales.[30] The guests on those occasions marvelled, not only at his ability to deliver a characteristically incisive and stimulating lecture, but also at his poise in fielding a wide range of questions—some fairly critical, especially with respect to how well Scotland fitted into his analysis—after a substantial dinner each evening!

In the mean time, the clear mind and sense of purpose he brought to his role as head of department meant that Rees Davies became much sought after beyond the History Department to undertake a variety of

[28] See Robert Bartlett, 'Review of Davies, *Conquest, Coexistence, and Change*, in *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*', 39 (1988), 582–5.

[29] R. R. Davies (ed.), *The British Isles 1100–1500: Comparisons, Contrasts and Connections* (Edinburgh, 1988). For an early harbinger of this approach, see *idem*, 'Lordship or colony?', in James Lydon (ed.), *The English in Medieval Ireland* (Dublin, 1984), pp. 142–60.

[30] R. R. Davies, *Domination and Conquest: the Experience of Ireland, Scotland and Wales 1100–1300* (Cambridge, 1990).

administrative roles. He served as Vice-Principal (1988–91) at his college in Aberystwyth, and he also began to take a prominent role both in the wider life of his native country and in the historical profession in Britain. To quote what he wrote of a great predecessor, J. E. Lloyd, Rees 'never shirked his public responsibilities in Wales'.[31] Very soon after his arrival in Aberystwyth, in 1977, he had been appointed the youngest ever member of the Ancient Monuments Board for Wales, the committee charged with advising the government on the country's archaeological heritage, and he subsequently served as the Board's Chair from 1995 to 2005. He was also a member of the Council of the National Museum of Wales (1987–90) during a period which overlapped both with his term as Vice-Principal and with another role in which he made a significant contribution to Welsh life, namely as Chair of the National Curriculum History Committee for Wales (1989–91). The establishment of this committee represented a concession by the Conservative government of the day that the national curriculum it wished to introduce should be adapted to the particular circumstances of Wales, and Rees brought his administrative and diplomatic skills to this delicate task in co-operation with colleagues in order to produce a report that designed a syllabus for the teaching of history in Welsh schools.[32]

His work for the curriculum, in common with his other contributions to Welsh public life, was doubtless animated in part by a deep sense of obligation to his roots, as well as by a conviction that knowledge of the past was essential to the well-being of any civilised society. This conviction was also reflected in his efforts to promote history in a wider arena. Thus in 1991–2 he was convener of the newly formed History at the Universities Defence Group, and during the following four years (1992–6) he was President of the Royal Historical Society, a responsibility which involved frequent five-hour train journeys between Aberystwyth and London in order to attend meetings of the Society at its offices in UCL. Typically, Rees saw his presidency as an opportunity to get things done, and he initiated important changes, notably by moving many of the meetings out of London and trying to broaden the society's membership, as well as by using his position to uphold the values of history as a humane subject against the increasingly pervasive—and in Rees's view

[31] R. R. Davies, 'Lloyd, Sir John Edward (1861–1947)', in H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (eds.), *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004), vol. 34, p. 142.
[32] National Curriculum History Committee for Wales, *Final Report* (Cardiff, 1990).

pernicious—audit culture driven by the government and university funding bodies.[33]

The increasing recognition of his exceptional talents from the late 1980s onwards was also reflected in the attempts of several English universities to secure his services, so that, as Rees later recalled, he 'acquired a reputation for turning down chairs'.[34] By the early 1990s, having recently shouldered several major administrative burdens, he was anxious to find more time for research and writing. His wish appeared to be fulfilled by his being awarded in 1993 one of the first British Academy Research Professorships in the Humanities, a five-year appointment that Rees hoped would enable him to bring to fruition an ambitious project which would combine old and new interests: a comparative study of lordship in the later medieval British Isles. In the mean time, however, attempts to prise him away from Aberystwyth continued, and in 1995 he accepted election to the Chichele Chair of Medieval History at Oxford University and a fellowship at All Souls College. Rees made no secret of the fact that the decision to leave Aberystwyth for Oxford was extremely difficult, and for the rest of his life he remained uncertain whether he had made the right decision. When after the interview he asked for time to discuss the offer with his wife, Keith Thomas, the chair of the electors, gave him until 9 a.m. the next morning to make up his mind: a sure recipe for a sleepless night. To accept meant resigning his research professorship and further delaying his plans for writing. But it also offered the prospect of a new challenge as holder of the most prestigious chair of medieval history in Britain—not least, the opportunity of taking the cause of 'British history' to the heart of the English historical establishment. If Rees had decided differently, he would probably have written more and completed the projected book on lordship (though his output in the last ten years of his life was remarkably prolific). Overall, however, the years at Oxford proved both fruitful and congenial. True, the move involved accepting a reduction in salary, and the first term in particular required considerable adjustment to the new environments of both college and

[33] See Rees Davies, 'The Research Assessment Exercise 1996—a personal view', *Royal Historical Society Newsletter* (October 1995); *idem*, 'What is happening to British universities?', *Welsh Journal of Education*, 5/1 (1995), 4–15; *idem*, 'On being Welsh: a historian's viewpoint', *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion*, NS 9 (2003), 29 ('the audit jargon that dominates so much of our public and academic life so unhealthily today'); Ralph Griffiths, 'Professor Sir Rees Davies 1938–2005', *Royal Historical Society Newsletter* (Spring/Summer 2005), 4.

[34] Rees Davies, 'Farewell speech', p. 263.

university: he recalled the difficulty of penetrating the mysteries of etiquette for particular occasions, one enquiry as to whether he was required to wear a gown receiving the polite but unenlightening reply, 'If sir wishes to', then of course he could! However, the transition was eased by friends in the university, and, notwithstanding his protestations that he never really understood how the university operated, his retirement speech to the History Faculty shows that Rees had great affection for Oxford and came to value the ethos of dedication to teaching and scholarship that informed some of its more arcane procedures.[35] Moreover, though missing Wales, Rees also appreciated what his new location had to offer culturally, including opportunities to attend chamber concerts in Holywell Music Room and visit art exhibitions in London.

Admittedly, there were things in Oxford of which he disapproved. He believed that his college's system of prize fellowships was profligate of resources, and that students should already have proved their capacity for postgraduate work before being supported so generously. The competing interests and structures of the university and the colleges were frustrating: 'O! for the simplicity of a departmental pattern!', he once remarked.[36] Yet, characteristically, his dissatisfaction with aspects of his new environment was channelled creatively into initiatives for change which form an important part of his legacy. The reforming urge already seen in the history department at Aberystwyth and in the Royal Historical Society could not be suppressed. As Chichele Professor, he brought new life to medieval history at the university, not only through caring for individual graduate students, but also by contributing to a new Master of Studies (M.St.) degree in historical research and by encouraging interdisciplinarity. Yet his vision for change went well beyond the field of medieval history. Thus, as chair of the History Faculty, he worked hard with like-minded colleagues to make the first major reforms to the undergraduate syllabus since the 1980s, as well as to reform teaching methods by giving greater emphasis to group teaching in classes—a central part of provision at UCL and in Aberystwyth—at the expense of the traditional tutorial. He also left his stamp on the syllabus by persuading the Faculty to redesignate its papers in English history the 'History of the British Isles', and by introducing a new option on 'The English and the Celtic Peoples 1154–1216'. As well as teaching on this option, he lectured to undergraduates more extensively than had his predecessors.

[35] Rees Davies, 'Farewell speech', pp. 261–3.
[36] 'O! am symlrwydd patrwm adrannol!': letter to the present writer, 27 Nov. 1998.

When Rees was appointed to the chair at Oxford the only concern expressed, by one of the electors, was that he might be 'too Welsh', a concern some may have considered all too prescient when he and the Regius Professor, Robert Evans, spoke to each other in Welsh at meetings of the History Faculty Board. Whatever was meant by it, the comment points up an important aspect of how Rees was perceived. Nor was he averse to playing to this perception through, for example, self-deprecatory references to himself as a 'Welsh windbag'. Determining what his Welsh identity meant to him, though, is no simple matter. Certainly, he was not only proud of his roots but chose to identify with Wales and especially the Welsh-speaking culture in which he had been brought up. It is notable that the precise and incisive English prose by which he was known to the wider scholarly community had been deliberately cultivated by a man whose first language was Welsh, the language he spoke at home with his wife and family as well as with Welsh-speaking friends and colleagues. He cared enough for Welsh to ensure that the language was perpetuated in his own family as well as to help support the Welsh school in London and, later, to spend one Saturday morning a month, along with his wife Carys and Robert Evans, conversing with Welsh-learners in The Mitre in Oxford. In later life, too, some of his publications express a passion and anguish about the future of Wales and its Welsh-language culture. At the same time, however, he seems to have believed that the best prospects for securing their future lay in the creation of a new British political framework that would be more tolerant and less Anglocentric than the British state of his own day; supportive though he was of devolution, greater self-governance for Wales was no panacea on its own.[37] As with Bloch, his deeply felt patriotism retained a critical edge.[38]

[37] Revealing insights into Rees Davies's views on the future of Wales and Britain are provided in an unpublished talk to Cymdeithas Dafydd ap Gwilym, Oxford, in 1997 and a public lecture given in Aberystwyth the following year: National Library of Wales, Papers of Rees Davies; R. R. Davies, *Beth Yw'r Ots Gennyf i am—Brydain? Darlith Goffa Syr Thomas Parry-Williams 1998* (Aberystwyth, 1999). Significantly, both coincided with the preparation and delivery of his Ford Lectures at Oxford, subsequently published as *The First English Empire: Power and Identities in the British Isles 1093–1343* (Oxford, 2000).

[38] For example, he criticised protesters against the investiture of the Prince of Wales for distorting history through their romanticisation of the middle ages: R. Rees Davies, 'Yr apêl at hanes—vintage '69', *Barn*, Medi 1969, 292, 297. For a sharp rejoinder to this article, see J. R. Jones, 'Cilmeri', *Barn*, Hydref 1969, 317. Rees's views on the extent it was reasonable to expect works of history to be published in Welsh also proved controversial: R. Rees Davies, ''Sgrifennu Hanes Cymru yn Gymraeg', *Y Faner*, 18 Medi 1981, 6–7; *idem*, 'Teyrnged ymarferol i R. T. Jenkins', ibid., 25 Medi 1981, 14–15; J. E. Caerwyn Williams, 'Golygyddol', *Ysgrifau Beirniadol* 12 (1982), 7–11. See Davies, 'Marc Bloch' (1965), 74–5.

Nor was the expression of Rees Davies's Welsh identity restricted to the private and the personal. It also had a major, though by no means exclusive, impact on his work as an historian. After all, his three most substantial books—not to mention a host of articles—were about medieval Wales. Shortly after he started in Oxford in 1995, Oxford University Press published the third of these: *The Revolt of Owain Glyn Dŵr*, the fruit of a long-cherished interest going back over thirty years to his time as a postgraduate in Oxford and indeed beyond that to his childhood, when it was first nurtured by folk tales related by his mother.[39] One result of this interest is that Rees became best known in Wales after he moved to Oxford, especially through the talks he gave all over the principality in 2000 during the commemorations of the rising, followed up by a short popular book on the subject in Welsh[40] and a lecture, happily captured on video, delivered at the National Eisteddfod in Meifod in 2003 which earned him a standing ovation. In his work on Glyndŵr, Rees revisited themes that he had made very much his own, this time focused on one episode, which was contextualised in a way that had never been done before. But the work was also, as he made plain, an attempt to discharge a sense of obligation to his own background and people—a fitting avowal for an historian so sensitive to the way historical writing was shaped by the milieux and preconceptions of its practitioners.

The broadening of his horizons from the mid-1980s onwards to embrace a history of the British Isles was arguably a natural extension of his concern with Wales, a concern that had never been narrow but always sought to place the country's history in a European context. The preface to *Conquest, Co-existence, and Change* reveals a proselytising aim, namely to promote 'an interest in the history of Wales as part of the histories of western European societies'. Likewise, while paying tribute to the largely unsung labours of other historians of medieval Wales, it also observed darkly that 'Welsh history too often has grown in isolation, with the consequent dangers of becoming ingrown and introspective'.[41] This comparative approach was extended to the work on Britain and Ireland, and especially in the way it sought to show how the Celtic countries—or the 'western British Isles'—could throw light on developments not only in England but elsewhere in Europe by offering a glimpse of how 'two very

[39] For early manifestations of his scholarly interest in Glyndŵr, see above, pp. 138, 140; R. Rees Davies, 'Owain Glyn Dŵr and the Welsh squirearchy', *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion for 1968* (1969), 150–69.

[40] R. R. Davies, *Owain Glyn Dŵr, Trwy Ras Duw, Tywysog Cymru* (Talybont, 2002).

[41] Davies, *Conquest, Coexistence, and Change*, p. viii.

different paradigms of social consciousness and social and political power negotiated a working relationship with each other'.[42] The reasons given for this approach—one of whose consequences was to promote Wales, as also Ireland and Scotland, from the historiographical periphery to centre stage—doubtless reflected a sincere desire, shared by several other historians from the 1980s onwards, notably Robin Frame, to find fruitful new ways of looking at the medieval past of Britain and Ireland. Nevertheless, the urgency of Rees Davies's insistence on the value of adopting Britain and the British Isles as frameworks for historical study surely also owed something to his very contemporary concerns with the future of Wales and Britain.

To imply, however, that his Welshness provides the most important key to understanding Rees Davies would be a gross oversimplification. In particular, an emphasis on ethnic and cultural identity may lead us to overlook a fundamental characteristic which underpinned everything else: his humanism. It is surely telling that, as a young man, the greatest compliment he could pay to Marc Bloch was to call him 'one of the great humanists of the twentieth century—in the best sense of that word'.[43] Many years later Rees provided a more precise indication of his outlook in what, for a Welsh nonconformist, may seem the somewhat unexpected context of an impassioned apologia for the commemoration of All Souls, 'which', he declared, 'helps remind us of the common bond of all humanity, past and present'.[44] One consequence of his recognition of that bond was a commitment to influencing the world for the better, reflected in his support for the work of Amnesty International and readiness to march in London in February 2003 to protest against the impending war in Iraq.[45] In addition, though, such engagement with current concerns went to the heart of his understanding of history as a humane discipline, essential to the well-being of society, which, if it lost its memory of the past, would lose its identity and even its sanity.[46]

[42] Rees Davies, 'Kinsmen, neighbours and communities in Wales and the Western British Isles, *c*.1100–*c*.1400', in Pauline Stafford, Janet Nelson and Jane Martindale (eds.), *Law, Laity and Solidarities: Essays in Honour of Susan Reynolds* (Manchester, 2001), pp. 172–87; quotation at p. 187.

[43] Davies, 'Marc Bloch' (1965), 75; see also *idem*, 'Marc Bloch' (1967), 281.

[44] *A Sermon Preached in the Chapel of All Souls College by Rees Davies on Sunday, 4th November 2001* (n.p., n.d.), quotation at p. 6.

[45] Niall Campbell, in *Postmaster and the Merton Record* (2005), 144.

[46] See, for instance, Rees Davies, 'Dyfodol ein gorffennol', *Y Traethodydd*, 147 (1992), 5–11, esp. 10–11; *idem*, *Owain Glyn Dŵr: Hanes a Chof Gwlad. Darlith Eisteddfodol y Brifysgol, Eisteddfod Bro Colwyn, 1995* (n.p., n.d.), p. 12 (including an example of the play on the Welsh words *cof*

A further crucial aspect of his humanism was the value he placed on friendship: 'The talent of true friendship is one of the most glorious aspects of humanity.'[47] During his life Rees Davies built up a wide network of friends, many through his contacts in academia, and he had a great capacity for friendship, exemplified by a remarkable facility for remembering the previous conversation he had had with someone on meeting that person again and also by the great interest he took in the families of friends and colleagues. The sympathetic quality of his own conversation was enlivened by a playful sense of humour and by anecdotes drawn from his own experience, though its very poise and fluency may also on occasion have served as a protective screen that enabled him to control how much of himself he chose to disclose. Likewise his wit could convey an ambivalence about certain matters (for instance, the value of a primarily textual analysis of medieval Welsh lawbooks). In addition, Rees was 'a great encourager', to quote his description of Ralph Davis, which applied equally well to himself,[48] and was exceptionally generous in giving advice and help. True, if asked to read others' work, his comments could sometimes be disconcertingly forthright, but any apparent sharpness stemmed from a naturally questioning temperament and a conviction that scholarly endeavour merited a thoughtful and honest response. On other occasions his comments could be more subtle, though no less disconcerting, as he seemed to avoid any direct criticism of a piece of work, while none the less suggesting significant improvements, or even praising it for virtues that in fact it conspicuously lacked!

While the new duties at Oxford reduced the time available for research and writing, the move nevertheless provided what was in many ways an ideal environment for working on what would be Rees Davies's last, and sadly uncompleted, major piece of historical scholarship: a book on aristocratic lordship in the British Isles, 1272–1422.[49] This marked both a

('memory') and *gwallgofrwydd* ('insanity'—literally, 'faulty remembrance') in this context); *Sermon*, esp. pp. 3–5.

[47] Rees Davies, 'Colin Richmond: historian and friend', in Margaret Aston and Rosemary Horrox (eds.), *Much Heaving and Shoving: Late-Medieval Gentry and their Concerns. Essays for Colin Richmond* (Lavenham, 2005), p. 3. See McFarlane, *Letters to Friends*, p. 252, for Rees's observation that McFarlane's 'friends were given a glimpse of a world of the mind and of the possibilities of human companionship such that their lives could never be quite the same hereafter'.

[48] *Postmaster and the Merton Record* (October 1991): excerpts from Rees Davies's address at the memorial service for R. H. C. Davis at Merton College Chapel.

[49] A substantial amount of the projected volume was completed in draft and has been prepared for posthumous publication: R. R. Davies, *Lords and Lordship in the British Isles in the Late Middle Ages*, ed. Brendan Smith (Oxford, 2009).

return to a theme central to Rees's doctoral research on the marcher lordships and a further development of his concern to reconfigure the history of medieval Britain and Ireland by adopting a comparative approach. Yet, whereas his previous explorations of the British Isles had investigated questions of collective identity (notably in his Presidential Addresses to the Royal Historical Society),[50] and the role of the kings of England in extending their authority over 'the first English empire', the focus on lordship represented an attempt to shift the emphasis even further away than previously from the crown-centred picture that had traditionally dominated historians' interpretations by concentrating attention on power below the level of the monarchy and the diverse means by which this was exercised in medieval societies. In part, this concentration on the aristocracy—including its sense of identity, its self-expression through display, its domestic and matrimonial concerns, its role in war and the means by which it exercised power—reflected Rees's enduring debt to McFarlane. In addition, though, as in his first book, *Lordship and Society in the March of Wales 1282–1400*, Rees found inspiration and support for his use of 'lordship' as an analytical concept in the historiography of France and Germany, represented, for example, by the work of Robert Boutruche, Otto Brunner, Robert Fossier and Karl Leyser. This was reinforced by contacts with overseas scholars who shared comparable interests, such as Dominique Barthélemy and Thomas Bisson, and he also took advantage of the opportunity to think through the theoretical aspects of his work provided by the seminars on the 'state' held at St Peter's College.[51]

The work on lordship continued alongside many other commitments: Rees would often spend at least all morning responding to various inquiries and requests for advice. The obstacles in his path grew even greater with failing health. When still only in his mid-fifties, he had told a colleague at Aberystwyth that he did not expect to live very long owing to a chronic kidney disease,[52] and this keen sense of his own mortality was sharpened by the knowledge that both his father and one of his brothers had died relatively young. In 2003 he was diagnosed with cancer, and he

[50] R. R. Davies, 'The peoples of Britain and Ireland', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th ser., 4–7 (1994–7). He returned to this theme in two of his last published papers: 'Nations and national identities in the medieval world: an apologia', *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis*, 34, pt. 4 (2004), 567–79; 'L'État, la nation et les peuples au Moyen Âge: l'expérience britannique', *Histoire, Economie et Société: Époques Moderne et Contemporaine*, 24, pt. 1 (2005), 17–28.

[51] See Rees Davies, 'The medieval state: the tyranny of a concept?', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 16 (2003), 280–300.

[52] Gruffydd, 'Nécrologie: Sir Rees Davies', 175.

decided to retire, a little earlier than planned, the following year. The last period of his life was punctuated by frequent spells in hospital. Despite increasing discomfort and tiredness, he managed to continue writing—not only his own work but also references for research students—until about a week before the end; the commitment and conscientiousness that had always characterised him were not lightly abandoned. He died at home in Oxford, in the presence of Carys, Manon and Prys, on 16 May 2005, and his funeral was held in a packed Capel y Morfa, Aberystwyth, five days later.

During his life Rees's distinction as a scholar and his service to the cause of history were amply recognised. In addition to his election as a Fellow of the British Academy (for which he put in a great deal of work, especially as chair of its Research Projects committee and as member of the Council), he was awarded honorary fellowships at Swansea (1993), Aberystwyth (1996) and UCL (1998), as well as a CBE (1995), an honorary D.Litt. by the University of Wales (2001) and, despite some hesitation as to whether he should accept, a knighthood in the New Year Honours of 2005. He also served as president of the historical society of his native county of Merioneth (1995–2005) and as president of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion (2002–5). Such recognition was thoroughly deserved, but never went to his head: Rees Davies remained utterly lacking in self-importance. Nor should the mastery displayed in his writings be mistaken for dogmatic certainty; rather, his work was infused with a keen awareness of the partial and provisional nature of the historian's conclusions, which, as he once suggested, citing Proust, 'should serve as "Incitements" to the reader'.[53] At the same time, though, this recognition of the evanescent aspects of scholarly endeavour, far from being disabling, seems to have helped to sustain a conviction that it was, nevertheless, both possible and, indeed, imperative for the historian to try to make sense of the past. Through the penetrating light he shed on the diverse histories of Wales, the Welsh March and of Britain and Ireland, Rees Davies bequeathed a rich legacy of 'incitements' to look afresh at the medieval world.

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[53] Davies, *First English Empire*, pp. v–vi. (The volume was the joint winner of the British Academy Book Prize in 2001.) See also, for example, *idem*, *Lordship and Society in the March of Wales*, pp. v–vi.

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