

REVIEW

Roberts, Simon Gwyn. 2020. *From the Welsh Border to the World: Travels in Minority Languages*. Chester: University of Chester Press. 228 pages. ISBN 978-1-908258-37-3.

Review by ANTONY HOYTE-WEST, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań

In these uncertain times of conflict, issues of sociocultural, linguistic, and ethnonational identity have naturally come to the fore. Accordingly, Simon Gwyn Roberts's wide-ranging study of minority languages and their speakers is a timely contribution to broader studies of the intersection of major/minor linguistic identities with geography and politics. Based on nine case studies selected from areas known to be particularly diverse in terms of the number of languages spoken, the book draws on the author's academic and practical background in journalism (he is senior lecturer in journalism at the University of Chester), as well as his wider research interests in online media and his extensive global travels. As the title of the volume suggests, the common point of reference for these studies is Wales and the Welsh linguistic context. Indeed, the author highlights his own paternal Welsh ancestry and his awareness of relevant debates relating to language politics; through this, a useful framework for comparing and contrasting these seemingly disparate locales is provided.

The book is an engaging combination of travelogue, memoir, and fieldwork study. Roberts states at the outset that he is not a linguist, and thus the work offers an external perspective – drawn primarily from cultural geography – which is both refreshing and enriching. The volume opens with an introduction which outlines the broader rationale underpinning the study. Grounded in scholarly literature, this section explores how technology, with a focus on social media, can help to preserve linguistic diversity in the modern age without recourse to overtly protectionist measures. It examines whether the best approach to ensure the survival of minority languages is either through coexistence with or separation from the majority language, and this is something the author explores through his travels in different parts of the world. The case studies, which cover every continent except for North America, are centred on the narratives of the people that Roberts meets, with a focus on what

these languages mean to them. These stories are contextualised by a wealth of relevant socio-political and cultural information, thus helping to situate each study firmly in the appropriate milieu.

The first case study deals with how languages cut across old colonial divides in Senegal and The Gambia. Through the prism of a trip to a remote island to meet speakers of the critically endangered Karon language, Roberts explores religious, cultural, and ethnicity-related aspects and how these intersect with multilingualism in the Senegambian reality. Turning to the Caucasus, the second chapter focuses on Georgia, where the author highlights that the country's small size belies its extreme linguistic diversity. Noting this richness, Roberts also draws parallels between the uniqueness of Georgian cuisine with the linguistic smorgasbord presented by the nation's many languages. He profiles the complex socio-political relationship between tongues including Abkhaz, Mingrelian, and Svan, thus underscoring the links between language and identity in the domestic context.

The author's third port of call is the Central American republic of Panama, where he comes into contact with the Ngäbe indigenous people and their language. He also notes attempts by the Panamanian government to create so-called *comarcas* to protect certain rights relating to the country's minorities, although these have not necessarily included linguistic rights. Taking the analogy of the early Celtic peoples in the British Isles, Roberts notes that the Ngäbe are spread out across a relatively wide area of territory. This is true, also, of the language and region portrayed in Chapter 4, where it is the author's travels in the Balkans – centring on the cultural geography of Albanian and its speakers - that are the focus of attention. Accordingly, through the people that Roberts meets on his adventures in North Macedonia and Albania, useful historical and sociocultural context regarding the Albanian language and culture is provided, with interesting snippets including an overview of the short-lived Francophone Republic of Korçë, which had a brief existence after World War I.

Turning to Asia, Chapter 5 focuses on Sri Lanka and its multilingual and multicultural heritage. In providing an overview of the country's history and culture, Roberts explores topical issues relating to language politics, noting that although Tamil is a national language, it is visible only in certain areas of the general linguistic landscape. In addition, the author highlights that, rather than there being a strict binary division between Tamil and Sinhalese speakers in terms of territory, there tend to be many

areas that are mixed. He also does not shy away from surveying Sri Lanka's difficult recent past, including the prolonged conflict and – via a postscript to the chapter – the harrowing terrorist attacks of 2019.

The sixth chapter of the book returns to the African continent, this time to South Africa and Eswatini (formerly Swaziland). Here, via exploration of the Xhosa language, Roberts offers a panorama of the region's linguistic and socio-political history, including the fate of the Bantustans under apartheid and the extreme linguistic diversity embodied by modern South Africa. Other relevant issues are also explored, including the role of social media in the Eswatini context as well as aspects relating to migration, this time of Portuguese-speakers from Mozambique. In Chapter 7, Roberts travels to Moldova, including a visit to the unrecognised republic of Transnistria which appears frozen in a quasi-Soviet existence. In profiling the coexistence of Romanian/Moldovan, Russian, and the Turkic minority language of Gagauz, he delves into the domestic role played by language and identity within the challenging geopolitical reality, a complex sphere where many different players are vying for influence.

Moving to Argentina, the penultimate chapter of the volume illustrates how social media has provided a source of vitality for Welsh in Patagonia, thus helping it to survive alongside major world languages such as Spanish and English. In this regard, Roberts acknowledges the well-studied nature of Patagonian Welsh, but chooses to bring a different approach, including exploring this topic through the lens of the museum in Puerto Madryn, site of the original arrival of the first Welsh speakers in 1865.

The ninth and final chapter deals with the Pacific nation of Vanuatu, where dozens of languages are spoken including Bislama, the national tongue. Through an exploration of the island's tradition of *kava*, a potent local alcoholic beverage, Roberts details the history, politics, and culture of the archipelago with reference to the legacy of Anglo-French colonialism. To conclude, the book's closing section reiterates the major points made in each of these case studies, before stating the author's belief that minority languages can be an influential force against broader societal issues such as nationalism and majoritarian tendencies.

As noted in the introduction to this review, it is Wales that provides the common denominator between the nine case studies, informed by the author's own heritage and interests. In spite of the considerable geographical mobility portrayed, this gives the book a degree of cohesion. For example, issues uncovered in the case studies such as bilingual signage, the contrast between minority and official languages, and

discussions of linguistic imperialism are all analysed and related to the Welsh context. In addition, when describing aspects such as history and geography, Roberts often uses Wales as a point of comparison, frequently in an unexpected and insightful manner. To offer a few brief examples, the population of Vanuatu is described as similar to that of Swansea; parallels are drawn between the evacuation of Soviet art treasures to rural Georgia in World War II and the storage of masterpieces from London in Wales during the Blitz; the reader also learns that South Africa's multilingual national anthem was inspired by a Welsh hymn tune. As such, by adding to relevant geographical and socio-political facts with not only his own observations but also those of the people he meets, Roberts ensures that these aspects impact the reader in a memorable way, drawing striking synergies between very different places, peoples, and cultures. This is heightened by the colour photographs included in the volume, which very much help to bring the author's global travels to life.

In short, *From the Welsh Border to the World: Travels in Minority Languages* has numerous strengths, including its engaging and accessible style as well as its novel and interesting presentation of the subject matter. It provides a useful panorama of the selected case studies, and the endnotes provide a point of departure for further reading and research on the topics covered. As such, the book is recommended for the generalist reader seeking to familiarise themselves more with minority languages in the global context, as well as for those specialists seeking to gain an alternative perspective on relevant issues. What stands out though, is the work's comprehensive global reach, which provides a holistic view of the status and use of selected minority languages in today's world.