

# Wales 1880–1914

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By the criteria conventionally used to measure the stature of nations Wales in the period 1880–1914 was a vibrant, proud, successful country. Industrial wealth had moved Wales from the margins of Britain to a position of world importance. Of the copper smelted in Britain in the nineteenth century 90 per cent came from south Wales, from Kidwelly in the west to Neath in the east. In 1898, the peak year for slate production, 70 per cent of UK slate was quarried in north Wales and the Penrhyn and Dinorwic quarries were the biggest in the world. In 1902 the biggest nickel works in the world were built in Clydach, near Swansea, by *Sir Alfred Mond*. Between 1914 and 1918 the Swansea area produced 75 per cent of Britain's zinc. The tinsplate industry was created in west Wales and just before the First World War 82 works from Llanelli to Port Talbot were producing 823,000 tons of tinsplate, 544,000 tons of which were for export.

The most dramatic expansion had occurred in the coal industry. In 1911, 14,500 men were employed in the north Wales coal industry in Denbighshire and Flintshire, but it was in south Wales that growth took place on an unprecedented scale. In 1913 there were 485 collieries in Wales, 323 in Glamorgan. In 1885 the Rhondda pits produced 5,500,000 tons of coal, by 1913 this had risen to 9,500,000 tons. Forty-one thousand miners were employed in Rhondda pits alone. South Wales was producing about one third of world coal exports. In 1901, 46 per cent of Britain's coal exports went from south Wales to Europe, South America and the Middle East. In the process the great coal-exporting ports of Cardiff, Swansea, Barry and Newport had mushroomed.

Economic growth was matched by population growth in industrial Wales. In the second half of the nineteenth century people were flooding into the south Wales coalfield at a rate only exceeded in the United States. The population of the Rhondda valleys in 1861 was 12,000; in 1891, 128,000. This meant that Rhondda's population was far higher than that of any Welsh county in 1801. Glamorgan's population of nearly one and a quarter million in 1911 was more than that of the whole of Wales in 1851. There were now very large thriving conurbations in Wales. Cardiff's population exceeded 100,000 and Swansea's was not too far behind, reflecting the prosperity of the commercial and business infrastructure of this society.

Politically, Wales appeared both to be united and to reflect the self-confidence resulting from such a prosperous economic base. The politics of deference had not ended in 1868 but the *Ballot Act* of 1872, the achievement of household suffrage in 1884 which had enfranchised significant numbers of the working class, and the *Local Government Act* of 1888 gave Liberals control of both national and local government. With the inauguration of urban and district councils in 1894 the domination of the landed gentry, exercised since Tudor times, over the government of Wales, was finally broken. The alliance between Liberalism and nonconformity was virtually complete during the

period. The leadership of a largely professional and commercial middle class, farmers, shopkeepers, ministers, solicitors, was accepted, with endorsement from the working class. In the election of 1880, 29 out of 33 Welsh parliamentary seats were won by Liberals; in 1885, 30 out of 35. From 1892 to 1895 Welsh Liberal MPs actually held the balance of power and were particularly effective in highlighting Welsh concerns. In 1906 only one Welsh seat was not won by a Liberal, and that was *Keir Hardie's* Labour seat in Merthyr.

There were Liberal achievements both within and without the party. In the 1880s the internal organization of the party was tightened up, with two Liberal *Federations* formed, one for north Wales and one for south, although there was a crisis in 1894–5.

From the 1880s the dynamic leadership of *Tom Ellis* and Lloyd George had produced a less quiescent brand of Liberalism and they both endorsed the *Cymru Fydd* movement for Welsh home rule. Originally this policy had also been supported by coalowner *D. A. Thomas*, but he soon turned to opposition, reflecting the views of the south Wales commercial community whose priorities were far removed from notions of Welsh independence. The crisis was short-lived. Within two years Lloyd George was again co-operating with the south Wales Liberals and the separatist movement in Wales was, in any case, never very strong.

This episode really serves to highlight the considerable achievements of a more restrained nationalism which was the hallmark of Welsh Liberalism – a striving for national respectability, for parity with England, for recognition of national differences. Here the achievements of Liberalism were impressive, although of course dependent on the Liberal Party being in government. In the 1880s Welsh – and English – Liberals forged Welsh demands for educational reform, land reform, *disestablishment* of the Church of England in Wales and some measure of devolution into a programme of concern to Liberalism nationally. In 1881 came the Aberdare report on education which resulted in the *Welsh Intermediate Education Act* of 1889, the establishment of a network of secondary schools over Wales subsidised by the Treasury – a remarkable achievement. The Welsh university colleges were also to receive grants and the University of Wales received its charter in 1893.

From 1886 the Welsh land question was at the forefront of attention, accentuated by agricultural depression. The *betes-noires* of Welsh society were the landed gentry, English-speaking, Anglican, absentee, rich, having acquired their riches by the exploitation of a Welsh-speaking, Nonconformist tenantry who had been victimized in a variety of ways. This victimization took the form of non-compensation for improvement to holdings, and, above all, eviction for political principle when they had refused to vote for their landlord's nominee at elections. The evictions of the 1860s were real enough, if exaggerated. Some of the other indictments had far less substance. But the myths, carefully fostered, could be more potent than reality and there was nothing imaginary about the agricultural depression. In 1891 the *Tithe Kent Charge Act* made *tithe* payable by the landowner, though of course this did not satisfy Liberal opinion. In 1893 came a royal commission into the land question, though by the time its two conflicting reports emerged a *Tory*

government was in power and no action followed. In any case a changed situation by the time the Liberals were next in power in 1906 made the question less urgent.

The issue of the payment of *tithes* was satisfactorily, even triumphantly, solved with eventual *disestablishment*. The iniquities of a predominantly Nonconformist nation being subjected to the payment of *tithes* to the Anglican church had long stirred Welsh Liberals. Natural justice was flouted by the refusal of Anglicans to bury Nonconformists in consecrated ground. There was the constant problem of Anglican schools, since there were over 300 school districts in Wales where the only available elementary education was in a Church school. Liberal strength in Wales enabled Lloyd George to lead a revolt against the implementation of the 1902 *Education Act*. In north Wales 175 out of 260 councillors were Liberals, in south Wales 215 out of 330. Breconshire was the only county controlled by the *Tories*. Not surprisingly Lloyd George was able to unify the Liberal party nationally and locally in opposition to rate aid being given to the voluntary schools. A policy of non-cooperation with the government followed and the conflict was not resolved until the Liberals were once more in power in 1906. Here was a significant national revolt against the traditional enemy.

The pinnacle of Liberal achievement was the eventual granting of *disestablishment* in 1914, to be implemented after the war. Other monuments to Welsh cultural nationalism and distinctive legislative treatment are not hard to find. When the Liberals were in government from 1906 Wales was granted a *Welsh Department of the Board of Education*, a National Library, a National Museum, a Welsh Insurance Commission and a National Council for Wales for Agriculture.

Respectable Victorian opinion valued religious observance highly and, according to the criteria of chapel accommodation and attendance, the Welsh were a very religious people. Temperance movements, *Bands of Hope*, emotional preaching, the Sunday School, chapel societies, chapel choirs, *cymanfaoedd canu*, were woven into the fabric of Welsh society, rural and industrial. Wales had produced more than its share of outstanding pulpit orators, *Christmas Evans*, *John Elias*, *Herber Evans*, *Elfed Lewis*. Their effect was dramatic: 'wave after wave of emotion would pass over and thrill through the vast congregation, until it was seen to move and sway to and fro as the trees of the wood are moved by the wind'. Occasionally the waves of emotion would spread through the nation. Revivals tended to be localized, but there had been national revivals in 1840 and 1859. There was another, more unconventional, in 1904, fostered by the intense, emotional fervour of *Evan Roberts*. There were Bible studies, prayer meetings, and, above all, preaching. For three years his hold was remarkable, though the Nonconformist establishment, now highly respectable, was rather alarmed. Perhaps it is not surprising that new, dislocated communities, growing at such a rate at the turn of the century, flooded with people whose roots were often in rural Wales, should respond to an appeal which offered old values in a new environment. For a few years the revival was certainly effective. The chapels claimed that their membership increased by 90,000. In Wales in 1906 total membership stood at 549,000 – and that ignores adherents.

For a short time it seemed that *Evsfan Roberts's* revival would nip in the bud the remarkable growth in south Wales of a public school game which had been embraced by all classes in Wales. Rugby football clubs closed as members were convinced of the inherent sinfulness of that, or any other, game, but not for long. For even in the sport of the English, Irish and Scottish upper-middle class the Welsh were proving particularly adept, whether in tactical innovation or in winning games. The event which caught the public imagination and entered Welsh folk-lore was the defeat of the seemingly invincible *New Zealand All Blacks* in 1905.

Economic growth, political achievement, educational progress, religious fervour and sporting prowess seem to be the hallmarks of Welsh life in this period – and would be difficult to parallel elsewhere in the nation's history. They contrast dramatically with what was to follow in the 1920s and 1930s. Historians would agree that the factual basis of this analysis is reasonable and accurate. The facts themselves can be checked against a variety of sources – census returns, government statistics and reports, newspaper accounts, *Hansard*. Historians would agree also that the analysis so far has been highly selective, that it concentrates on the positive and emphasizes the achievement and the consensus. They would want to redress the balance by showing another Wales.

There were influential Welshmen in the period whose view of their country had a considerable impact. *Sir O. M. Edwards* (d. 1920), historian and litterateur, produced two extremely important magazines, *Cymru* and *Cymru'r Plant*. These, his book on the history of Wales and his many other writings, evoked a Wales which was in essence an idyllic rural country, with a people who had struggled valiantly against oppression through the centuries, and retained the virtues of a generally classless people, Welsh-speaking, skilled at rural crafts, law-abiding. For such a people struggles against the oppression of landlords and alien Church were in the mainstream of history. The increasing emphasis of *Edwards* and other scholars on the rural, peasant existence was romanticized and distorted the whole nature of nineteenth-century Welsh history, with its rapid industrialization. But even for those to whom the essence of Welshness lay in the mountains of Snowdonia and the tenant farms of Bala the situation in the late nineteenth century was extremely worrying. As we have seen, the second half of the nineteenth century had witnessed a revolutionary demographic change. At the beginning of the century the population was roughly evenly divided between north and south. By 1900 Glamorgan and Monmouthshire were overwhelmingly preponderant. Rural Wales was not only losing its natural increase in population, numbers were actually declining. Anglesey's population went down from 57,000 to 50,000 between 1851 and 1911. The movement from the land into industrial Wales gathered momentum in the 1880s and 1890s with agricultural depression, although it did slow down after 1900. Was it the case, then, that the values and language of rural Wales were being transported to industrial areas as had happened to a considerable extent in the early nineteenth-century? Far less so in the late nineteenth century because mixed in with Welsh migration was an increasing element of English immigrants. In 1871 9.6 per cent of the population of south Wales came from English counties. By

1891 the proportion was 16.5 per cent. Each decennial census revealed that the number of Welsh speakers, proportionately not absolutely, was declining.

The move from the land into industrial Wales accentuated the disparity between the two parts of the country - in population, in resources and in life-style. The great Liberal leaders of the late nineteenth century, *Tom Ellis* and *Lloyd George*, were products of the rural north. *Cymru Fydd* foundered because commercial interests in the south would accept nothing other than the predominant influence in Wales. Central Liberal policies - land reform, *disestablishment*- were less relevant to industrial Wales. Liberalism never really developed incisive social policies to answer the needs of industrial communities. The world of official Liberalism seemed far removed from that of labour unrest, riots, lock-outs, class conflict, and confrontation.

Coal brought wealth to south Wales but that wealth was not evenly distributed. Successive *marquesses of Bute*, *dukes of Beaufort*, and *Morgans of Tredegar* made 3d to 10d per ton of coal in royalties without actually having to be involved in the production process at all. For the owners in the great coal combines, *Ocean* or *Powell Dyffryn*, there were fortunes to be made. For the men who dug the coal there were fluctuating wages according to a *sliding scale*, the ever present danger of roof falls and gas explosions or the steady invasion of lung-tissue by coal dust. Between 1851 and 1855, 738 men and boys died in pit accidents in south Wales and Monmouthshire. After legislation and inspection there was an improvement but families and communities were faced with the constant threat of tragedy. In 1913 it came to *Senghennydd*. An explosion killed 439 men. Colliers were convinced that out of the enormous wealth which accrued to the coalowners they spent wholly inadequate sums on safeguarding the lives of the men who dug the coal.

Consensus could not survive disputes over wages when coalowners took an intransigent attitude, as they did. In 1898 miners wanted a 10 per cent increase on the rate used for calculating the *sliding scale*. There was a six-month stoppage, the owners yielded not an inch, the miners were defeated and in the aftermath the *South Wales Miners' Federation* was born. In 1910–11 there was a one-year stoppage in the *Cambrian* combine. In October 1910, 12,000 men had stopped work and in the following month they were joined by *Rhondda* miners. *Blacklegs* were brought in to break the strike, there was violence as police and rioters clashed and one miner died from a fractured skull. The coalowners refused any compromise, *Winston Churchill* authorized the sending of troops. This was confrontation, not consensus. In the year when the miners of *Aberdare* and the *Rhondda* valleys were defeated there was a national railway strike. In August, 1911, troops shot and killed two railway workers in *Llanelli*.

In north Wales there had already been confrontation which blended old causes and new, a struggle between Nonconformist, Welsh-speaking workmen and landowning capitalists. It had taken place in the slate industry. *Lord Penrhyn*, owner of one of the largest slate quarries in the world was also owner of the third largest estate in Wales. In 1896–7 there was a confrontation in which the men were defeated after eleven months. In 1900 another dispute led to the 2,800-strong labour force being locked out. *Lord Penrhyn*, with his vast resources of wealth, could afford to forgo his slate

profits, aware that this fight was for the preservation of a social and economic power structure in which men like himself were utterly dominant. The quarrymen had no resources once meagre union funds ran out. They were helped by the British trade union movement, but such aid could only be minimal. Some men and their families came close to starvation, many emigrated, many moved south. The men lost, as did the slate industry. In the end the vast estates of men like *Penrhyn* were to go, too.

Confrontation in labour relations was paralleled by the growth of a new politics. Of course the Liberal hold on Wales, at Westminster and in local government, remained firm in this period but after the 1898 dispute in the coal industry *Independent Labour Party* branches spread in industrial Wales, in Merthyr, Swansea and Wrexham. In 1900 *Keir Hardie* was elected ILP member for Merthyr. By 1900 there were Labour councillors in Swansea and by 1905 there were 27 ILP branches in Wales. In 1908 the *Miners' Federation of Great Britain* affiliated to the Labour Party and miners' MPs joined the Labour Party in the Commons.

In 1909 *Noah Ablett*, a marxist advocate of the overthrow of capitalism and its replacement by workers' control, was instrumental in founding the *Plebs' League* in Rhondda. In 1912, from an unofficial reform committee of the *South Wales Miners' Federation*, came *The Miners' Next Step*, a remarkable and influential document which advocated a 7-hour working day, an 8s per day minimum wage and most significant, workers' control of the coalmines to be achieved by strikes and industrial action. Here indeed was an alternative politics.

Virtually all aspects of Welsh life in this late-Victorian, Edwardian period, seemingly vital, prosperous, politically successful, can be viewed from another direction. To take only one more example, the *Welsh Intermediate Education Act of 1889* had resulted in county schools being set up in every Welsh county by 1896. This was a fine achievement, representing a commitment to exemplary community values and to the future. Yet in the years before the First World War the schools, and the *Central Welsh Board* which examined and inspected them, were being increasingly criticized for providing the kind of education which was betraying the linguistic, cultural and social needs of Wales.

It is perhaps more general for historians to catalogue the very real achievements of the period in Wales. Yet none would deny the paradoxes and the tensions they concealed. The historians who write the essays which follow have explored some of the questions which emerge from these paradoxes. They have not written conventional textbook accounts of their theme, to add to received 'truth' about the period, the books and the articles in historical journals. But in the last resort historical paradoxes, contradictions and tensions can only be explored and illuminated by resort to the documents and other types of source – the raw material with which the historian works according to strictly defined principles.

Exploration of the sources will not provide definitive answers, but it will produce new information, new questions, and new perspectives.

As we have seen, the historian of Wales in this period has plenty of problems to explore and some of them are treated in the ensuing essays. The object of the essays is to show historians at work on important themes from the perspective of some of the essential primary sources for that time. They will make statements, come to some conclusions, but, more important, relate their judgements to specific primary sources, so demonstrating why some are tentative, others more firmly based, why there are some questions which cannot be answered. The material rests on a wide range of primary sources. Historians ask similar questions of them all. Why did the source come into existence? Who was its author? Was its author in a good position to know about the event recorded? What bias – political, personal, social – was the author likely to display, and is there evidence in the source for it? What actual historical information does the source provide intentionally? Often more important, what information not intentionally conveyed by the author, does the source yield about the period and, indeed, about its author?

Such questions are always at the back of historians' minds. In answering them they establish the reliability of their evidence which, of course, materially affects their conclusions. They know well that some sources are more reliable than others. Census returns for this period are accurate and informative – we know the processes by which the material was collected and collated. A private letter from a politician may reveal more about his attitude to a particular policy than a speech in the House of Commons, though the motives for both may not be as they seem. Newspaper accounts are the only source for many events, yet they have to be treated with great circumspection. What is the editor's political stance – or that of the proprietor? 'Factual' reports are often of dubious accuracy.

Photographs are an invaluable source for architecture, dress and leisure activities, for example, but the camera can misinform just like written sources. With the period ending in 1914 historians are just able to make use of oral testimony. The reminiscences of people living in the period with which historians are concerned are unique and can be invaluable, but again have to be treated with great caution and checked as rigorously as possible with other information. Memories are faulty and selective. Experience and hearsay easily mingle. Implicitly and explicitly historians are constantly analysing the reliability of their sources. They are also constantly asking questions of them. For example, census returns yield a mass of information but the raw data have to be interpreted. In the hands of the specialist historian information about population density, migration or linguistic patterns, for example, will be built up to illumine judgements about the state of a nation. The essays and their accompanying documents show historians at work on different types of sources central to the period. As well as augmenting our knowledge of the period the essays illuminate the historian's craft.