

People and Protest: Wales 1815–1880

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The years between about 1820 and 1895 were the most momentous in the history of modern Wales. It was during that short period — the lifespan of an oldish person as the expectation of life was then measured — that the social consequences of the first stage of the industrialization of Wales became apparent, and it was in that period that those consequences would be fully worked out in the transformation of Welsh society. It was a time of great contradictions. Violence was never far from the surface, but saintly men and women were among the most admired characters of the age. Huge numbers of people took part in great demonstrations to show their solidarity and in riots to express their rage: but they also worshipped together in great congregations and the most prestigious buildings in the settlements where they lived were chapels and places of worship. It was a period full of political movement and energy. It began with *Radicalism*, passed through *Chartism*, and quickly learned the doctrines and techniques of representative democracy. It began with attempts among the working classes to discipline themselves in accordance with their own distinct moralities, and having achieved a mature understanding of trade *unionism* ended the period with working-class organizations based on the idea not of confrontation but on a kind of consensus. It was a period full of cultural paradoxes. The formal religion of the Church of England was largely rejected and unofficial types of religious worship, the religions of the oppressed and the rejected, flourished in its stead. It was also the time when Welsh, the ancient language of the people, its medium for the expression and transmission of their high culture, began its slow retreat in the face of the inexorable advance of the English language.

The new society was growing rapidly in numbers. It doubled in the period between 1821 and 1881, growing from around 800,000, itself a huge increase since the middle of the eighteenth century, to just over 1,500,000. It was a very young population with a large dependent population of small children who had to be socialized into working for their livings at very tender ages, in town and country alike. It was also a population which was being radically redistributed about the country in response to the irresistible duality of rural over-population and the demands of the new industries for a steady supply of labour.

Most evident, though least understood, was the growth of new kinds of communities. Ancient seaports, like Swansea and Newport, Cardiff and Caernarfon, had already expanded as the new means of communication — tramways, canals, railways — knit them into the economy of copper, iron, coal and slates. Old towns, like Neath and Flint, outside which industries had developed, grew suburbs and began that apparently inevitable process of social segregation whereby the salubrious and fashionable quarters moved away, and were kept distant, from the crowded working-class areas. But most alarming was the expansion of the 'mining and manufactory districts', those

amorphous working-class industrial settlements which appeared suddenly in rural surroundings or on uninhabited moorland, filling valleys with collier communities bereft of institutions of government, having apparently no centres of civilization beyond their chapels, *Sunday Schools*, and *friendly societies*. Many of these on the coalfields of south and north Wales grew faster even than the old iron towns had grown, but unlike them they seemed to be impermanent, the temporary habitations of a rootless people. They were 'towns of an adventitious character', 'condensations of people' filled, it was believed, with a sensual and ignorant people, disaffected towards the state and hostile towards their employers. So the industrial areas filled with people until by 1881 more than half the total population of Wales lived in Glamorgan, Monmouthshire and the eastern side of Carmarthenshire. More than one-third of the population of Merioneth lived in Blaenau Ffestiniog. Wales had become an urban country and many of its rural districts, wherever there was coal, or iron, or slates, had assumed the character of towns.

This redistribution of a constantly growing population had profound effects on the rural areas, for it was they who were providing people for the new industrial areas. This had been the case from the earliest days of industrialization: Merthyr Tydfil and the other iron towns at the heads of the valleys had been peopled by migrants from adjacent parts of the counties concerned and from over the county borders. As the demands for labour grew so they came from more distant parts, from south-west and mid-Wales. In this period only industrializing counties gained population, and all counties, with the notable exception of Glamorgan, suffered a net loss by out-migration. The counties with least industry were the ones to be soonest depopulated.

Almost certainly the sanitary conditions of rural and urban areas deteriorated for the first thirty or forty years of our period. The death rate for the country as a whole in the 1850s was around 22 per 1,000 per annum. That was an average figure which concealed wide variations: in small rural towns and in the new industrial districts it could be as high as 30 per 1,000. Infant mortality was horrifyingly high: in Merthyr Tydfil in the decade 1851–60 it was 184 per 1,000 live births. No-one can tell how many still-births there were or how many births went unrecorded.

These high levels of mortality — in some towns almost as high as in the great industrial cities of England — were undoubtedly related to bad sanitary conditions, poor housing and crowded conditions, malnutrition, insufficient clothing, excessive labour in unhealthy conditions, and ignorance. It is a myth that country people, least of all the farm labourers, were better housed, better fed, and healthier. Like the inhabitants of the crowded towns they were subject to the ravages of endemic killer diseases, to frequent epidemics of contagious and infectious diseases against which most people were unprotected, and to wasting diseases such as tuberculosis. It is probable that the people who fled to the towns from the grinding poverty of the countryside brought debilitating diseases with them and that their low physical condition made them an easy prey to the characteristic diseases and hazards of the towns. Disease does not discriminate between social classes, as the cholera epidemics of the time demonstrated: but some of the main constituents of social class, such as higher incomes, better housing, diet, clothing, and education helped in some measure to defend the better off in town and

country from the worst ravages of disease. Not until the Public Health Legislation of the 1840s and 1850s had been made obligatory on all local authorities, including the supply of clean water, better sanitation, and improved medical services, did conditions change for the better. In the Welsh valleys it may very well have been the case that the improvements following the *Public Health Act of 1872* and the reorganization of local government of the same time were negated by the headlong population growth of the last decades of the century.

Throughout the period, and increasingly as industrialization continued in its irregular progress of boom and bust, the inequalities in society became more pronounced. Undoubtedly it was the employment and wealth generated by industry that enabled the vast bulk of Welsh people to remain in the land, if not in the locality, of their birth: the alternative would have been the Irish experience of mass migration overseas during the Great Famine and after. Welsh peasants in the south-west were also becoming over-dependent on the potato as a staple crop. But industrialization also widened the social gulf between rich and poor. Townscapes and building styles reflected these differences, the beneficiaries of capitalism distancing themselves from its victims, the poor who, whether in their pre-migratory rural days or in the towns in which they found themselves, had borne and continued to bear the brunt of the pressures of population and food. Immense fortunes were being made in industry and commerce — Wales had its millionaires — but the spending of private fortunes on public causes was not one of the characteristic features of their life-style; and the towns and industrial villages of north and south Wales reflected not the riches of the industrialists but the relative poverty and deprivation of the workforce.

Evidence of the same kind of social distancing was to be found in the countryside. The conspicuous consumption of estate owners, especially of the small and medium-sized owners whose tastes were in inverse relation to their incomes, the frantic and extravagant rebuilding of the old *plastai* and mansions and the pursuit of aristocratic styles of living were often perceived to be at the expense of the rural poor. The Welsh farm labourer, enigmatically silent in his hovel, and the small tenant farmer scraping a living out of land that would never be his own, were both held in the vice of economic dependence and social inferiority. The problem of the rural poor at the gate of the rich was as acute as that of the pauperized masses in the towns.

Poverty, something experienced only by the lower classes, but defined in legislation by the ruling classes, was the major problem of the age. At the beginning of our period it was being dealt with by a kind of *ad hoc* combination of private charity and public welfare. After the *Poor Law Amendment Act* of 1834, which established a strict, uniform and centrally enforceable system of relief based on workhouses serving unions of parishes, it seemed to those who suffered that poverty had come to be regarded more as an offence than a misfortune by those who administered the law, and not to sink into the state of complete dependency and degradation of the pauper class became a prime aim of the respectable poor. In the bitter 1840s, when agricultural distress was deepest, workhouses came under attack and troops were needed to protect them as in south-west Wales in 1843.

These were the social conditions, these the pressures, which underlay the movements of popular protest discussed in the essays that follow. Many were clearly related to economic fluctuations, agricultural depression, slumps in the iron trade and worsening economic conditions generally. But they could also be aroused by perceptions or feelings on the part of groups or of whole communities that their standard of living was declining in conditions of relative plenty, that they were being exploited or treated unfairly by those in authority. Miners in Merthyr in the early 1850s who had been ready to work for less during depression resented the refusal of the masters to pay more for their labour now that trade had improved. Invariably in such cases disturbances were justified on grounds of justice and fair play. Historians have pointed out that many popular disturbances in England were defensive in character and deeply conservative in that they appealed to community values and moral codes which were believed to govern the relations between different groups in society. Thus custom and a community's sense of what was right and proper determined the common reaction to the grievances complained of. Ritual, like the *ceffyl pren* (wooden horse) described by Dr Jones or the wearing of women's garments by the Rebecca rioters described by Dr Howell, was characteristic of these pre-industrial protests and disturbances. This was why they were feared by the authorities: they signified a widespread and effective rejection of conventional codes of behaviour, and were most dangerous when they were most secret in their operation.

Of great significance in the development of Welsh society during this period was the diminution after the 1850s both in intensity, frequency and geographical spread of these forms of protest and the shift to more peaceful and constitutional forms. Some historians have attributed this to improvements in the economic climate, but it is necessary to bear in mind that the economy, like the weather, fluctuated widely from time to time and from place to place: it is extremely doubtful that the conditions of life of peasants in south-west Wales were significantly better in the mid-1860s than they had been twenty years earlier. It would be perverse to infer improved conditions from the absence of militancy. In the industrial areas the move to trade unions was consciously a move away from the endemic and particularized violence of the beginning of our period to more openly organized, rational, restrained and institutionalized forms of conflict. In an astonishingly short period of time the industrial workers of north and south Wales had created more or less permanent and very mature trade unions, in which violent protest was the exception and controlled, massive demonstrations the norm. The horns of the *Scotch Cattle* were still heard, but less frequently and to less effect.

Behind this were two developments of a fundamental kind, religion and politics. It must never be forgotten that the massive growth of *Nonconformity* in Wales was itself the most characteristic protest movement of the time. If, as was probably the case, disturbances and protests coincided with years of acute social tension, so also did the growth of the *Nonconformist* denominations. By the 1850s patterns of adherence had been firmly established and the Welsh people moved into the middle decades of the century with immensely powerful, well integrated and pacific religious denominations as their most characteristic creation and with a primary claim on the loyalty of the common people. The moral and cultural values of religion

made for debate rather than conflict, for consensus rather than confrontation, and for respect for legality and the constitution in the pursuit of political ends. Thus, religion reinforced the old *Chartist* drive for constitutional reform. By the 1860s the chapels of most of the denominations had become potential political centres devoted to teaching peaceful ways of protest, relying on the pulpit and platform and schoolroom, supporting the press and looking towards parliament for redress of grievances of all kinds. Violent forms of protest did not cease, but they were less in evidence at the end of the period than at the beginning. The people had been politicized.