

The Remaking of Wales in the Eighteenth Century

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Twenty years ago or so the eighteenth century was a singularly neglected period of Welsh history. Somehow the glamorous but remote Tudor and Stuart age was transformed into a modern society recognizably similar to that of the twentieth century, without much explanation or discussion of what had happened in the mean time. There was little interest in Georgian Wales as a subject of study in its own right, apart from the *Methodist* Revival and the Industrial Revolution. Happily all that has now changed, and contributors to this volume have played a leading part in the historical renaissance. Great advances have been made in our knowledge and understanding of the period, and different interpretations of the evidence have been adopted: but if historians always agreed, history would be a dull subject.

Variations of approach can produce quite different impressions. Wales in the Georgian period could be viewed simply as a largely unchanging hierarchical society, dominated by landowners, in which every man knew his place. The first Sir Watkin Williams Wynn of Wynnstay would then be deemed the most important personality of the century, as he must have seemed to many contemporaries. For over a generation Wynn dominated the Welsh scene, to the extent of enjoying the familiar nickname of 'Prince of Wales'. His family estates ranged over half a dozen counties in north and mid-Wales, as well as over the English border. His social and political significance extended through-out the Principality, as when he was asked to intervene in the Glamorgan by-election of 1745; and on his regular visits to London he would be met outside the capital by an escort of Welsh squires, or so it is said. Yet Wynn, as a patriarch and old-fashioned *Tory*, was already an anachronistic figure, a man of the past. The future of Wales lay rather with preacher Howel Harris, educationalist Griffith Jones, radical Robert Morris and industrialist Richard Crawshay. Therein lies the thrust of this volume, which is concerned with the political and religious, cultural and economic awakening of Wales that commenced during the eighteenth century. But first it is necessary to set the scene, to look at the Welsh society that was the background to these developments.

Georgian Wales was, of course, by modern standards, thinly peopled. In 1700 the population was around 390,000, rising to some 450,000 by 1750. These totals are estimates, calculated from the known number of births, marriages and deaths, and are based on the assumption that these had been in the same proportion as in the population of 586,000 revealed by the first official census of 1801. Even at that date the population was still evenly distributed. Glamorgan, with 70,000, had only recently overtaken Carmarthenshire as the most populous Welsh county. It was a rural society, a land of few towns; less than one-sixth of the population lived in towns. By modern standards most of them were no more than large villages. But it was a harbinger of the future that, whereas in 1700 the market town of Wrexham had been the biggest in

Wales with some 3,000 inhabitants, by 1801 Merthyr Tydfil had shot into a clear lead with 7,700. Swansea just topped 6,000 in second place, but Cardiff remained at 2,000 throughout the period and was smaller than several other such local capitals as Carmarthen, Caernarfon, Denbigh and Haverfordwest.

Small as these towns were, for most Welsh people they were the centre of their life. Remoteness and isolation constitute one facet of life that still distinguished the Wales of the eighteenth century, as in earlier times, from the more modern world. Not until the reign of George III did the turnpike trusts affect significant improvement in Welsh roads, and even then not many could afford the new coach and mail services. Although we now know that mobility of population was greater than was formerly thought to be the case, it is likely that many people never left their native county throughout their lives. Instead, in a sense, the world came to them. Country folk bought clothes, hardware and other manufactures at the annual or more frequent fairs in their local market town. But it was a life of limited mental as well as physical horizons for the great majority. Wales had no newspapers of its own before Swansea's *The Cambrian* in 1804 and Bangor's *North Wales Chronicle* in 1808. Although the weekly papers of the English border towns circulated widely in Wales (and, incidentally, form a much neglected source of Welsh history for the period), their readership must have been limited to the gentry, lawyers, clergy and merchants. Lesser folk would glean news of the wider world from their betters, pub gossip, and from the travelling pedlars who made regular visits to the villages.

Even more remarkable to modern eyes than this sense of isolation was the vast social and economic gulf between the classes. While labourers earned less than £10 a year, their local village squire would enjoy an annual income of £500 to £1,000. In between there were tenant farmers and *freeholders* working their own land: but a significant gap existed between these men, barely able to maintain themselves in modest self-sufficiency, and the gentry. It was the divide between the working and the leisured classes. For the hired labourers and small farmers, social life revolved around the village community, with, in most cases, the squire a benevolent despot, a role supplemented by that of the parson, for the Church was the dispenser of charity as well as religion. During much of this period it was still customary for many parishes to maintain their own paupers, especially in the more remote areas, with the money for this coming from a variety of charitable and other sources and being administered by the vicars.

Contemporary urban life qualifies this traditional picture of a sharply divided society. In the towns, although there did not yet exist to any great extent a business or entrepreneurial class, there were by now a number of 'middling folk', men who derived incomes from professional work and administrative employment. Among them may be numbered the clergy, customs officials and other government men, lawyers and a handful of doctors and schoolmasters. These men earned more than labourers and artisans, but not many above £100 a year, well below the income of most squires. Although this embryonic middle class was another portent of the future, Georgian Wales was ruled in every sense by the landowners.

The squires, the great men of their village, were the gentry of the county, numbering perhaps between 25 and 50 in each shire, with landed incomes of £500 and upwards. They met regularly during the year in their county town, and many came to acquire houses there. They formed the county society of Wales. But there was a clear distinction within the gentry stratum itself between those who were MPs and those who were merely JPs. Several hundred Welsh squires would be JPs at any one time, but there were only 27 Welsh MPs. A small number of leading families, perhaps 30 to 40 altogether in the whole of Wales, controlled and contested the Parliamentary representation. These top families of Wales, some of whom obtained peerages, formed an oligarchy, with incomes from £3,000 to £5,000 and above. Membership of the House of Commons was valued not merely for prestige but also as the way to control local government and patronage. The shire member might himself become *Custos Rotulorum* and therefore chairman of the *county Bench*, and could also hold the more honorific office of Lord-Lieutenant. He would claim the right to nominate to the bench and to official appointments in his area, a claim usually conceded unless he was much out of favour with the government in London. Such potential rewards led the powerful families now to exclude from Parliament the lesser squires who had had their turn in Tudor and Stuart times. These gentlemen, with only a dozen or a score of voters at their command, could not aspire to compete with *magnates* whose 'interest' in a county might comprise a hundred voters. Nor was there much chance of the smaller squires or new men breaking into the privileged circle. No new blocks of land were available to found estates, such as had come in earlier centuries from Crown, Church and civil wars. Oligarchy, in Wales as elsewhere in Britain, became ever more entrenched, by such devices as the entail of estates and the marriage of heirs with heiresses.

Another characteristic of Georgian Wales remarkable to modern eyes was the freedom from control by the central government. The eighteenth century was virtually an era of home rule in Wales, albeit rule by the squires. The Glorious Revolution of 1688 marked the triumph of the gentry over the Crown. With the final abolition of the royal prerogative courts there was no effective supervision over the local government of Wales through the Quarter Sessions, which formed not only the judiciary but in many ways also the legislature and the executive of each county. Quarter Sessions came to impose highway rates, poor rates, and occasional general taxes to raise money needed by the county to maintain bridges, the shire hall or the gaol. Magistrates also had some control over the local economy by their regulation of weights and measures, prices and wages.

This then was the golden age of the gentry in society, in government, and also in politics. Parliamentary elections were usually uncontested, for in both county and borough constituencies the overwhelming majority of the Welsh parliamentary electorate, some 25,000 in 26 constituencies, were dependants of the gentry, directly as tenants and leaseholders or indirectly as tradesmen, innkeepers and others desirous of the squire's goodwill. But as yet the factor of coercion was less important than the sense of loyalty to the local squire, and the candidate he supported. Undue pressure was not needed at a time when political consciousness was undeveloped among the great mass of the

population. Spontaneous reactions to national events were rare even among the gentry. Residual sympathy for the former royal house of Stuart manifested itself in *jacobitism*, but that was never a popular movement. The embodiment of that sentiment in such gentry organizations as the Cycle of the White Rose and the Society of Sea Serjeants owed more to masculine clubbability and the contemporary fashion for secret societies than to political fervour, as the subsequent development of widespread *freemasonry* was to demonstrate.

Even in quiet Hanoverian Britain, Wales was renowned, or notorious, for its political torpor. Welshmen who wanted to change the world made for London: men like Robert Morris, founding Secretary of the Bill of Rights Society, and the radical MP Sir Watkin Lewes; and those famous men of word rather than deed, *Richard Price* and *David Williams*. But Wales itself took long to stir. No petition of protest was sent up to London against the treatment of *John Wilkes* in the 1760s. On the outbreak of the War of American Independence in 1775 only three petitions from Wales, totalling some 500 signatures, were directed to the Crown. All were in favour of government policy! Their geographical distribution (Carmarthenshire, Carmarthen and Haverfordwest) points to the guiding hand of George Rice, the Carmarthenshire MP who was a leading ministerial spokesman on America and who doubtless wished to demonstrate the support of his home area. So-called public opinion was still a political weapon of the gentry. The political awakening of Wales in a modern sense was a plant of late growth. Not until the 1780s were the first challenges made to the rule of local oligarchs in such counties as Flintshire and Glamorgan.

Such a backward and conservative society would not seem to constitute a promising seed-bed for the variety of changes that form the theme of this volume. But it was this very circumstance of quiescence, in many respects a deteriorating situation of abuse and decline, that both provided the opportunity for a religious revival and proved the incentive for a deliberate recovery, or creation, of national consciousness. Moreover, as is apparent from the papers in this volume, most of the influences that helped to transform Wales were not indigenous, but came from outside: the *Methodist* Movement, the *French devolution*, the Romantic Movement, and the Industrial Revolution.

It should be apparent, also, that the above brief sketch of Georgian Wales has necessarily been painted with too broad a brush. A hierarchical society it may have been, but not one rigidly tiered into classes of labourers, small farmers, lesser squires and landed *magnates*, for there were infinite gradations of income and status. The dominating class of landowners was not homogeneous in any respect, ranging from *freeholders* who proudly styled themselves 'esquire' to wealthy aristocrats. In many parts of Wales the gentry, especially those in the higher ranks, were becoming increasingly absentee, anglicized, and alienated from the mass of a population that remained 90 per cent Welsh-speaking. In his recent study of the Glamorgan gentry, Philip Jenkins comes near to depicting a rural situation more analogous to Ireland than England. Yet both in that county and elsewhere many squires took a prominent role in the economic development of their localities, if only to supplement their landed incomes. They were not all idle and bucolic! And, in any case, industrialization and agricultural improvement had commenced in Wales long before *George I* came to the throne in 1714.

The seventeenth century had witnessed so many political and religious upheavals that people, high and low, were only too thankful for a time of peace and quiet. It is easy now to forget that in 1700 Britain's recent political record caused her to be seen as the most unstable country in Europe. A deferential society was in part a natural reaction, with a respect for convention and authority in all classes: 'the moral economy of the crowd' depicted by E.P. Thompson was an acceptance of the constraints of law and property tempered by the dire necessity of hunger. But Britain's recent history had nevertheless bequeathed a legacy, not merely of political memory and tradition but also of religious minorities, dissenting congregations already outside the established Church and numbering perhaps 10 per cent of the Welsh population. In various ways economic, religious and political changes had already commenced long before the developments discussed in this volume.

History is said to be written by the winners. Certainly it is difficult to see much of the life of Georgian Wales except from the viewpoint of the landowners. For the bulk of our information comes from their family papers; from the records of the administrative and judicial institutions that they managed; and from the literature that they read. One contributor to this volume, Philip Jenkins, goes so far as to claim that it is not possible to write a political history of the lower classes in this period because so little is known of their opinions. Certainly it is the gentry of Glamorgan and of south-west Wales that have been the subjects of stimulating recent studies by, respectively, Jenkins and David Howell. The eighteenth century suffers from a dearth of information compared with more modern times, both altogether and more especially in a statistical sense. Wise historians of the period qualify their conclusions and make frequent confessions of ignorance. It is virtually impossible to ascertain (even more so than nowadays) how genuinely spontaneous were manifestations of public opinion. Economic historians necessarily dispute the respective weight to be attached to the various causes of the Industrial Revolution. And, as is made evident here by Paul Evans, historians of the 'Welsh Renaissance' even encounter problems of forgery, falsehood and fantasy created by patriotic fervour. Least obvious, and most difficult, is the problem of penetrating the contemporary mind. Acceptance of one's place in the hierarchical society of the time was a contemporary phenomenon that needs to be explained rather than criticized. These stimulating papers and their documentation should provide much food for thought on these problems.