

Wales between the Wars

David Smith

No period in recent British history has been the subject of more intense debate and disagreement than the inter-war years. Those who lamented in the 1980s that the number unemployed were as many as those in the ‘locust years’ of the 1930s were quickly reminded that the 1930s were also a decade of remarkable economic growth. At various stages since the Second World War historians and other commentators have sought to understand the Depression or the Slump in the light of their own contemporary circumstances. It is, then, a crucial period for the subsequent debates on welfarism, on industrial relations, on social disorder, on governmental responsibilities, on the concept of ‘two nations’ and on the quest for economic regeneration. It was an argument that was well underway before 1939: were the regions of north-west and north-east England, of south-east Scotland, northern Ireland, south Wales the Special Areas the government designated in 1934 for care and attention to their problems of ailing, heavy industry and social deprivation or were they human disaster areas where whole communities were left to rot?

For a time it was those who asserted the latter who won the day. The economic management and social welfare policies that successive administrations fostered after 1945 underlined the validity of interventionism and gave credibility to the popular wisdom about the pre-war years. The 1930s, in particular, were imagined (by poets, novelists and painters) and documented (by journalists, sociologists, photographers and film-makers) as no other decade had ever been. The images were often heart-rending — wide-eyed children in ragged clothes, disconsolate groups of men shuffling around the streets in idleness, desperate women amidst the worn-out clutter of damp, bug-infested kitchens, the defiance of a *Hunger March* — and, in their human immediacy, made to seem so natural as to be absolutely real. The age of the documentary, in art as well as in life, was stamped with the mark of authenticity.

‘This book’, wrote the novelist James Hanley (1901–86) of his *Grey Children* (1937), a compilation of oral testimony on life in south Wales, ‘is a result of my own desire to go and see what has now become generally known as a “special area” . . . [but] . . . when the late Prime Minister [Stanley Baldwin] described this area as a “special area” he was rather wide of the mark. On his own assumption it would imply that being so it would have the consideration due to it . . . [and that] . . . swinging on the full tide of a vast re-armament programme, things are beginning to brighten up in south Wales . . . In fact, I should say things are worse and not better. A special area is a new kind of social hell, with nothing special about it except the demoralization of a whole people, physical and moral, the breaking-up of family life, the vast amount of malnutrition not only amongst the adult population, but amongst the children.

The unemployment problem does not mean that men are idle only; it means that throughout the length and breadth of south Wales social tragedies of

many kinds are being played out. It is not only lack of bread and scandalous housing conditions, it is the terrible feeling of not being wanted, of being useless and carrying on one's back the social stigma that now attaches to all idle men. If it went on for another few years they might well forget what human beings are like . . .'

And then the War came, and after it the insistence, on all sides, that 'Never Again' was the only worthwhile lesson to be learned. However, as the more prosperous post-war years caused individual and impressionistic memories to dim so, from the 1960s, both the authenticity and the general applicability of those inter-war images were questioned. Historians stressed that they did not indicate the extension of social services, the rise in consumerism and the availability of consumer durable goods, the coming of electricity and the family car, a rise in real incomes for the majority in work, the provision of paid holidays, a building boom from 1932 to the War, new arterial roads and light industries, leisure pursuits in sport or at the cinema and, in essence, the affluence-in-embryo of 'the Midlands' and the 'Home Counties' which would become the more general condition of the 1950s.¹ Mass unemployment and social misery receded under this historiographical bombardment to the margins and fringes which were neither central nor, for most, home. Even the history of Wales in these years — one that could not be easily accommodated in any of the rooms of this historical mansion — was depicted as more of a deviation from the usual Welsh pattern than a normative feature.² The concentration on that economic abyss into which the Welsh had fallen was seen as an ineradicable folk-memory that had coloured, and perhaps twisted, the politics and social policies of Wales for too long. It was, in short, irrelevant in longer-term perspective to the needs and aspirations of the people of Wales.

Maybe, in the 1980s, our own contemporary engagement with our history will yield a fresh view of the significance for Wales of this period. What is already undeniable is that the hypnotic fascination of what occurred within Wales and its wider implications are, again, centre stage. 'What Wales experienced between the two Wars', wrote Gwyn A. Williams, 'was a major reconstruction of the British and world economy, which left it a battered, sub-standard and lopsided region under a peculiarly rigid economic regime',³ and Kenneth O. Morgan insisted in 1981 that though 'Some historians . . . have tended to paint a more cheerful picture of the thirties than once used to be prevalent . . . in south Wales, this verdict cannot possibly be accepted . . . a whole society was crucified by mass unemployment and near-starvation'.⁴ It is then not only the relationship of the historiography of Wales to that of Britain but also that of Wales to its own history which is thrown into high relief by study of the 1920s and 1930s.

From this angle it would be wise not to consider the period as a whole, but rather as a series of time-zones in which the different spaces of Welsh society often collided in mutual lack of recognition. Thus the relative prosperity of part of north-east Wales (steel, rayon, building) and the development of coastal tourism (Rhyl, Llandudno, Bangor, Caernarfon) can be contrasted very sharply with the huge decline in bituminous coal exports and steel-making in the south-east and the concomitant withering of the great docks at Cardiff and Barry where, in addition, a leisure industry remained frozen in the concrete

ugliness of the early 1920s from that day to this. Or we could consider the amazing vitality of cultural life in inter-war Swansea (the painters Alfred Janes and Mervyn Levy, the composer Daniel Jones and his friend, Dylan Thomas) and wonder how far it is connected to the comparative well-being of the south west's trade in anthracite coal (peak production year — 1934) whilst in the more populous valleys to the east the huge output of 1913 when south Wales dominated the world's export trade in coal seemed a dream time that, in the phrase of Rhymney poet, Idris Davies, had become 'a swift disaster'. Cardiff, that coal metropolis, shrank back into provinciality until it found a new role as a service capital in the 1960s. Certainly the city did not appear to be central to any Welsh mainstream after it lost its economic primacy in the early 1920s and until it found its eventual focus as a cultural nexus.

National and social unity were already intertwined and problematic for Wales in 1920. The paradox was that, at first sight, the material developments of the Victorian and Edwardian years had succoured an indigenous Welsh population and boosted, immeasurably, a Welsh-language culture at many levels of appreciation and attainment. The concentration of population in the south was not, for a time, perceived as a threat to the balance of Welsh life because, after all, the bulk of immigrants to 1900 were straightforwardly Welsh and, thereafter, absolute numbers of Welsh-speakers increased to 1914 despite non-Welsh incomers. After the First World War all changed and, more importantly, is seen to change. The census of 1921 reveals what that of 1931 will confirm: the percentage of Welsh-speakers has begun an absolute and percentage decline (36.8 per cent in 1931). Nor was there any real comfort in the fact that the very icon of Victorian Wales, the Nonconformist religion, could still attract in the 1920s some 400,000 adherents since it was starkly clear that the fabric of chapels, the stipends of ministers and the efficacy of the faith as a public instrument were straws held against the wind of an increasingly secular society. The Liberal Party, which had espoused the great and traditional causes of Wales in the areas of civil and religious liberties, might point to the final disestablishment of the Church under the premiership of David Lloyd George in 1920 but a surer sign of political desire was that expressed in the return of half of Wales's 36 MPs in 1922 — with Lloyd George in voluntary retreat and, involuntarily, sidelined forever — for the newly organized Labour Party under the widest franchise made available by the democratizing *Representation of the People Act* in 1918. Despite minor fluctuations, gains from and losses to Liberals in the north and west or Conservatives in the coastal extremities, border and towns, Labour's grip on the political life of Wales was to be unshakeable until the apogee of 1966 (32 out of 36 MPs returned) had been passed.

That political domination did not, in the inter-war years, spell national togetherness because it was, in effect, the delayed by-product of the gathering of a working-class population in the southern valleys. The work-force occupied by the coal industry alone was 274,000 in 1921 and the slashing in half of that body of men by the early 1930s had repercussions far beyond the economic distress of the mining areas and coal ports. The linking of rural to industrial Wales by common roots, religions and language was, to an extent, broken in this generation. The 'Atlantic of the spirit that separates the Teifi from the Bronx', in Gwyn Thomas's barbed phrase, now put the

Rhondda on the other side of the ocean. The woollen mills of west Wales had been directly dependent 'on the industrial market of south Wales'⁵ and prices had rocketed between 1914 and 1918. Along with their market they now collapsed and in Drefach and Felindre alone almost half of the 50 mills in operation in 1900 closed in the years immediately after the War. Neither market nor escape route for landless labourers existed any more. Life on the land in this Wales was only an idyll in the evocative memoirs of those whose emigration or professionalization removed them from its toil. The tenant farmers into whose hands the land went after the break-up of the great landed estates after 1918 — itself a sale encouraged by inflated prices as much as impelled by crippling costs — were the recipients of a nineteenth-century legacy they had long wanted to inherit but their path to prosperity was, overshadowed by debt and agricultural difficulties and only lubricated to ease by the coming of the Milk Marketing Board in 1933, a stony one. Mechanization ended the existence of farm labour in any numbers just as surely as the railways had drained away the rural working class to the towns and industries. What was left behind was a rate-paying political class of farmers and professionals in the small towns whose neglect and indolence in the face of socially preventable diseases (especially 'the Welsh scourge' — *tuberculosis*) was indicted by the Ministry of Health's comprehensive survey in 1939. Labour politics in the stricken valleys had effected, via its imperfect democracy, action which a stagnant rural Wales could not, or would not, take.

The divisiveness was more acute in this decline than the fracture between regions and occupations had been when the boom was on. The 1890s have been plausibly interpreted in British economic history as 'a climacteric' or ending which only the 1930s turned around; in Wales no such phasing existed, for the 1890s were still expansionist and it is the 1920s which, for Wales, marks this climax and the 1960s that sees a new shift. Lloyd George had speculated in 1907 that south Wales might 'develop into one of the greatest manufacturing centres in the whole Empire' but that was not, as L.J. Williams observes, 'the kind of question that could have been posed with any sense of tact — or credibility — in . . . Merthyr or Blaenau Ffestiniog in the 1930s.'⁶ The latter was, in common with the rest of the slate quarrying industry which had been declared 'non-essential' in the War, a forlorn remnant of that quintessentially Welsh extractive industry. The former, too, insofar as its existence as iron and steel manufacture was concerned, was well set on its career as myth and legend in fiction and historical writing. Merthyr's population plummetted in inverse proportion to its unemployment rate and, with a thousand people leaving the borough every year in the 1920s, government commissioners investigating in the mid-1930s and P.E.P. (Political and Economic Planning) thinkers in 1938 concluded it was time to close it all down. The President of *Plaid Cymru*, Saunders Lewis (1893–1985), who wrote in his scathing poem 'The Deluge, 1939' that 'Here once was Wales . . .' would have agreed.

'Here once', but no longer in Lewis's eyes, for industrial Wales had forfeited its Welshness not only by virtue of its majority use of the English language but also by overthrowing all hierarchies of culture and taste in a loathsome embrace of popular culture and mass politics that masqueraded as democracy. Unemployment for him, and the youthful *Plaid Cymru* (founded in

1925 in Pwllheli) which largely agreed that south Wales needed to be ‘de-industrialized’, was the sad, rotten fruit of bourgeois exploitation and proletarian materialism. *Plaid Cymru* was a response to the soft, cultural or sentimental nationalism of the Edwardian era but it remained a culture-group until after 1945 with no discernible influence on Welsh politics. Its heart-felt wish to unify a broken-bodied Wales by the healing touch of linguistic shamanism was diametrically opposed to the much more influential politics of the Communist Party which enjoyed considerable support in south Wales. The Communist Party saw the immiseration of the Welsh working-class as stout evidence of its ‘proletarian internationalism’ to be harnessed to the cause of oppressed workers on Clydeside or in India or, dramatically, in Spain. No parliamentary seat was won in Wales but Rhondda East almost fell in 1933 and, more narrowly still, in 1945, whilst the Communist Party’s deep influence can be better traced in local council elections and union activities. Most of the 118 from the mining valleys who fought on the Republican side in the *Spanish Civil War* went under the aegis of the Communist Party.⁷ Their heroism and sacrifice are not to be gainsaid, but, once more, it has been endowed retrospectively with a weightiness that it did not have in its own day. The social and economic extremities to which parts of Wales had been driven, elicited and encouraged extremist views as well as Utopian visions of a radically altered future. Reality was more circumspect, politics generally more pragmatic. No less than nationalists or communists did the Labour Party abhor the Wales for which it became *the party* (as had the Liberals before it) but it continued to advocate *collectivist* policies of a reformist nature and to administer the derelict towns and villages it had inherited as best it could. On the whole it was a thankless task performed with more compassion than imagination. And, on the whole, it was widely supported for, in addition to the radical/liberal outlook and pre-1920 cultural characteristics of most Welsh Labour MPs, they and the people they represented had come to share, via wartime controls and economic dislocation, the view that only a centralized state planning and managing the economy could usher in any kind of tangible improvement in their own lifetimes. The seeds of the 1945 Labour general election victory and its far-ranging policy commitments were as much rooted in this popular consciousness as in the books of Keynes and Beveridge.

Many of these disparate strands only came together from the mid-1930s. Perhaps it was only then that the full realization of what had occurred since the War, and how intractable the problems were, finally dawned on everyone. By then any talk of recovery was clearly laughable. The unemployment figures, worse than for any other region of Britain in the case of south Wales, were affected neither by the government’s feeble industrial transference policy of 1928 nor by the voluntary out-migration of what ended up as more than 450,000 people in less than twenty years nor yet by the late and inadequate siting of industrial estates (notably in Treforest after 1938) or new steel works provision in Ebbw Vale (1938). It would only be the next war that inspired a fresh (indeed insatiable and impossible) demand for coal and coal miners and only the war, with its ordnance factories in Wales, which gave large-scale paid employment to women. At the same time it would be mistaken to equate an acceptance of the situation with a passivity of spirit. Despair, individual and public, certainly existed, and boosted the suicide rate to cite only the most obvious indicator of the phenomenon as a social manifestation. Yet, alongside

it, there was resistance whose struggle was, in quite significant ways, channelled institutionally.

It is, again, to a longer time span that we must turn for explanation. The events that culminated in the *General Strike* in 1926 had their origins in 1909–10. It has been shown that Liberalism, alternately dressed in the clothes of *Progressivism* or Lib-Labism, had so penetrated the whole culture of Wales that before 1914 its political sway was not seriously at question. Yet, unarguably too, the industrial militancy and social discontent that erupted in riots and strikes was symptomatic of dissatisfactions that would, after 1918, sweep a new generation of leaders to power. The press of the early 1920s, as the miners reel from one national confrontation to another (1919, 1920, 1921) is full of bitter diatribes conducted between such men as Noah Ablett (1883–1935), chief *Marxist* guru in the coalfield and then miners' agent in Merthyr, and the youthful Frank Hodges (1887–1947), who had moved from the Garw valley to become a compromising General Secretary of the *MFGB* (*Miners' Federation of Great Britain*) until he entered the first Labour government of 1923–24; between Vernon Hartshorn (1872–1931), MP for Ogmore since 1918, a prominent figure in that same government and President of the *South Wales Miners' Federation* until he resigned because of '*Bolshevism*' in the coalfield led by his arch enemy 'Emperor' A.J. Cook (1884–1931), Rhondda miners' agent who succeeded Hodges as General Secretary of all the British miners whom he led with passion and blind conviction through the *General Strike* of May 1926 and the six months they stood alone until driven to defeat in December. A chapter of hope in direct action, undertaken by industrial unions exercising an unparalleled sway over the loyalty of their members, ended there.

The men who succeeded them — whether Aneurin Bevan (1897–1960) who entered Parliament as Ebbw Vale's Labour MP in 1929 or Arthur Horner (1894–1969) who led the *SWMF* (*South Wales Miners' Federation*) with skill and brilliance as their first Communist leader from 1936 — had to operate within narrower confines. Down to 1934 the *SWMF*, still the single most important organization in Wales, lost half its membership to unemployment, proved unable to organize more than half those left into the union, saw its funds and capacities in educational and welfare work destroyed, suffered the indignity of two further wage cuts (including the infamous Schiller Award of 1931 which assessed a man's wages by means of a pitiful 'family supplement' of 6d. for wife and 3d. for a child) and saw a rival union, fostered by the owners in certain pits, challenge successfully its once unrivalled rule. In these years, even within the *SWMF*, former colleagues (Labour and Communist), quarrelled bitterly in mutual, and self-destructive, recrimination.

The tide turned when the anthracite coalfield in the west exerted its growing authority and elected Jim Griffiths (1890–1975) as overall President. Before he left to become Llanelli's MP in 1936 Griffiths oversaw the re-organization (by streamlining and rank and file involvement) of *the Fed* and equipped it for the dramatic episodes of stay-down strikes (1935) and social boycotts (1934–38) by which it extirpated its rival and regained prestige and membership.⁸ 1935 was a crucial year, for it was then that the National Government, abandoning the pretence of being able to 'solve' the unemployment problem, introduced its new bill whose net result would be to reduce the benefit paid by

making payment more uniform, more bureaucratically assessed and more severely means-tested.

The mass community demonstrations of January and February 1935 in south Wales have now re-entered the public memory in Wales and their impact by forcing the government to slap a stand-still order on the Act (subsequently introduced in less harsh form) has, rightly, been acknowledged as a vital political intervention. Historians have been too ready, though, to pounce on relatively minor episodes like the scuffle at the assistance offices in Merthyr in which communists and women were involved and which Merthyr's 'marxist' Labour MP, S.O. Davies (1886–1972) roundly condemned. This is to read the current desires of some activists backwards. What was overwhelming in 1935 was the peaceful, mass action of up to 300,000 people on weekend after weekend and, as much to the point, the impetus to action which *only* a re-vitalized SWMF could supply for that society. The later *Popular Front* activities were, as Horner knew full well, dependent on the Communist Party acting as no more than an accredited minority: and it was the SWMF which stood for the bedrock of that politics and of that society. By 1939, 13 out of the 18 Labour MPs in south Wales were nominees of *the Fed*. It was this story which can affirm that the area was indeed and not just 'perhaps the most militant area in Britain during this period'.⁹

There were many aspects of Welsh life which were relatively untouched by this drama in the south, untouched in ways that made the area hermetically sealed in its economic decline where it had been expansive and all-embracing in its economic rise. Newer aspects of Welsh unity were being seen in the spread of grammar schools and the shared days of those with scholarships at the university colleges, with the growing protectiveness for Welsh-language culture that saw constant demands for an all-Welsh rule to be introduced at the National Eisteddfod, and, in contradistinction, with the permeation of Welsh life by newspapers, movies and radio, by sporting events and retail (advertised) goods which imposed their own cultural logic on all the others. Time and space intersected here, too, and broke down, in daily affairs no less than in political and economic ones, the more separate features of pre-1900 Wales.

The stormy times to which Wales was subjected in the inter-war years did not, for a long while yet, permit a longer-term reading of this history. Instead, the 'legend' was embellished until the rhetoric and novels of Red Rhondda and valleys once green cluttered up our understanding with their clichés of guilt, betrayal and redemption. Then forgotten was a literature, mainly though not exclusively in English for the poetry of *Gwenallt* was a notable fusion from the Swansea Valley of *Marxism* and Christianity, which sought to fashion a form that could be faithful to this collective drama. Gradually we have come to recognize that in the panoramic novels of Jack Jones (1884–1970), the surreal Marx Brothers comedies of Gwyn Thomas (1913–1981) and the epic political romances of Lewis Jones (1897–1939) we possess a literature of thunderous historical resonance.¹⁰ These were the years, too, in which the poets Alun Lewis (1915–44) and Dylan Thomas (1914–53), both from middle-class backgrounds in Aberdare and Swansea, oddly out of touch with the world erupting all around them, found voices as fine as any in the poetry of these islands this century. They, and their more

involved, older contemporaries — Glyn Jones (b. 1905) and Idris Davies (1905–53) — were given a platform in the magazines of this new ‘Anglo-Welsh’ school, in Gwyn Jones’s (b.1906) *Welsh Revival* (1939–48) and Keidrych Rhys’s *Wales* (1937–49). Already the fierce determination to comprehend fully — beyond the document or the voiced testimony — the total nature of these disturbing Welsh times was being eloquently expressed. Alun Lewis, non-Welsh speaking son of a Welsh-speaking professional family planted in the heart of the steam coalfield, wrote home from war service in India in 1944:

I regret my lack of Welsh very deeply. I really will learn it when I come home again. I know more Urdu than Welsh: it's very sad . . . If I could live my life over again one of the things I'd do would be to learn Welsh: another to do an English degree at Oxford or London: a third to work underground for a year . . . When I come back I shall always tackle my writing through Welsh life and ways of thought: it's my only way; but I must get to grips with the details of life as I haven't yet done: the law, the police, the insurance, the hospitals, the employment exchanges, the slums . . .¹¹

Alun Lewis, of course, never came back but, in a sense, his detailed list of things-to-do was the one that the Welsh did adopt after 1945. They were pushed to do so by a belief that their fragmented world needed some kind of mending and, more, by the disgust which those like James Hanley felt when they contemplated the waste of inter-war Wales. For, when all the statistics have been massaged to indicate growth in care and improvement in services, Wales still serves to indict the callous indifference that condemned two generations to live in a social hell in which an ‘allowance of 3d. a meal for an adult may have been adequate to ward off an Ethiopian extreme of starvation, but it would not buy a pint of milk, costing at that time 3½d.’ and where dependence ‘on benefit rates committed the unemployed to a humiliating and meagre subsistence’. Nutritional minimum standards were met by less than half the unemployed and within families it was ‘the universal cry of commentators that the full impact of malnutrition was being staved off by the sacrifice of mothers’.¹² As late as 1939 only 2 per cent of the British school population enjoyed free school meals as Medical Officers of Health continued, by and large, to ignore the effects of malnutrition and the *Means Test* continued to be applied harshly. A malnutrition rate of 25 per cent in the Pontypridd area in 1934 and 1935 did not see a meals scheme introduced. Clothes deteriorated along with health. Women, especially young mothers and pregnant women, sacrificed themselves to keep children clothed and fed as best they could. Clinics and other welfare services came, late on, in the second half of the 1930s but preventative measures were only just beginning amidst a chaotic and haphazard spread of vital services. Teeth were the quickest to go — almost a quarter of all south Welsh miners aged 25–34 had lost all their teeth. The young aged quickly in Wales between the Wars.

Contemporaries knew instinctively what we must reconstruct. The inter-war years were not the odd-men-out in Welsh history. They were the product of untramelled economic development and they funnelled a population through a conscious sense of themselves as a distinctive people which has lasted well into our own day. These years, as the essays and documents that follow

illustrate, raise the most acute problems any practising historian could confront — from the hidden history of women to the interaction of politics and culture, from the control of an economy to the depiction of a society in literature and historiography, from the impact of generational change on communal activity to the gender roles of men and women within a society whose traditional family structures were, one way or the other, under attack. Were there turning points? blind alleys? selected exits? Inter-war Wales, like the eighteenth century that began in 1660, was a 'long' period that began, perhaps, in 1917 and only ended in 1947 with the nationalization of the coal industry. It has not ended yet in our minds, in our interest and in our ongoing history.

¹ See, for example, J. Stevenson and C. Cook, *The Slump* (1974).

² As in Peter Stead's interesting and combative review article 'And Every Valley Shall be Exalted', *Morgannwg*, XXIV, 1980: 'Those were the bad years . . . but . . . remain an aberration as far as the general history is concerned [for] it is the consensus of late Victorian and Edwardian days and social improvement since 1945 that have been the most significant forces shaping contemporary Wales.'

³ Gwyn A. Williams, *When Was Wales?*, 1985, p.253.

⁴ Kenneth O. Morgan, *Rebirth of a Nation: Wales 1880–1980*, 1981, p.230.

⁵ See Geraint Jenkins, *Life and Tradition in Rural Wales*, 1976, pp. 103–5.

⁶ L. J. Williams, 'The Climacteric of the 1890s' in *Modern South Wales: Essays in Economic History*, Colin Baber and L. J. Williams (eds.), 1986.

⁷ Hywel Francis, *Miners Against Fascism*, 1985.

⁸ Hywel Francis and David Smith, *The Fed: A History of the South Wales Miners in the 20th Century*, 1980.

⁹ See John Stevenson, *British Society 1914–45*, 1984, p.478.

¹⁰ See Dai Smith, 'A Novel History' in *Wales: The Imagined Nation*, Tony Curtis (ed.), 1986.

¹¹ Quoted in D. Smith, 'Alun Lewis: A Case of Divided Sensibility', *Llafur*, 1981.

¹² For this, and what follows, consult Charles Webster, 'Health, Welfare and Unemployment During the Depression', *Past and Present*, November, 1985.