Of Red Flags and Red Dragons

Welsh Labour History in Retrospect and Prospect

The transition from homogenous 'British' approaches to the history of labour to the adoption of a 'four nations' framework is by now a well-established feature of our discipline. There has, however, been relatively little systematic consideration of the ways in which the historiographies of labour in the constituent nations of the British Isles are distinct from and relate to each other. The 8,000 square mile western peninsula of mainland Britain known as Wales (or, in Welsh, *Cymru*) offers an interesting case study in this respect. Arguably, Wales has been more thoroughly incorporated into the economy and politics of Britain than any of the other so-called 'Celtic Fringe' nations. In some crucial respects, however (language perhaps being the most obvious), striking elements of divergence have persisted. This has implications for both Welsh and British labour historiography. Wales has a well-established tradition of labour history, which has been organised as a discipline for over half a century but has roots that may be traced back fifty years further still.[1] Inhabited almost exclusively by historians born, bred and educated within Wales, the Welsh labour history community has always maintained a strong sense of distinctiveness and independence. A sense of detachment from mainstream labour history has at times attracted criticism, although it has also been a source of strength.[2] This notwithstanding, it is suggested here that there is much to be gained by labour historians on both sides of Offa's Dyke from a reconsideration of some of the key themes of Welsh labour historiography. Wales has, after all, been one of the great theatres in

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[1] For a history of Llafur: the Welsh People's History Society (formerly the Welsh Labour History Society), which was formed in 1970, see Deian Hopkin, 'Llafur: labour history society and people's remembrancer, 1970-2009', *Labour History Review*, 75/1 (2010), 129-46. I would like to thank the editors of *Labour History Review* for their comments on a previous version of this essay.

[2] See Andy Croll, '"People's remembrancers" in a post-modern age: contemplating the non-crisis of Welsh labour history, *Llafur* 8/1 (2000), 5-17.

which the issues that have defined the history of labour have been played out and historicised. The relationships between regional and national histories of labour, between class, gender, race, and nation, and between socialism and nationalism, and the role of language in mediating all of these, are just some themes that have a distinct Welsh dimension, but which carry a more universal significance. All have featured prominently in labour historiography, to the point where they have raised questions about the very meaning of 'labour history'. The aim of this essay is to explore some of the central features of Welsh labour history and to consider them in relationship to some of the wider themes of British labour history. This, it is hoped, might suggest some new agendas for both Welsh and British labour historians and encourage a closer relationship between two parallel worlds.

The essay is divided into four sections. The first makes some observations and suggestions on the historiography of the organised Welsh working class, in other words what might be considered 'classical labour history'. The second turns to the study of narratives of radicalism and labour politics and makes some observations about their nature and periodisation in relation to their 'British' counterparts. The third section reflects on the current context of the discipline in Wales, and the conclusion considers some of the issues raised by the creation of a 'new Welsh labour history'.

Hewn from the Rock

The single most important influence to shape the history of labour was not capitalism, the 'factory system', class consciousness or any other anthropogenic force, but the most inanimate and subterranean of all influences: geology. Nowhere is this truer than in Wales, the nation that provided much of the power, roofing and rail track for the British industrial revolution. Despite its integral role in the creation of the 'workshop of the world', the Welsh economy was markedly different from that of England. The hallmark of the English industrial

revolution - mechanised production in 'dark Satanic mills' - was notably absent in Wales, a fact that allowed one Welsh economic and labour historian to ask provocatively whether Wales was even industrialised at all.[3] Welsh industrialisation was almost exclusively based upon the primary extraction and initial processing of raw materials, and its full impact in terms of demographic change and urbanisation (key characteristics of other industrialising economies) was not felt until relatively late in the nineteenth century. This shaped the bedrock of Welsh labour history, which from its beginnings was dominated by studies of extractive workers, chief among which were the south Wales miners.

The history of the miners, which revolved around their trade union, was mapped out by Ness Edwards, E.W. Evans and Robin Page Arnot from the 1920s onwards.[4] Edwards (a working miner, then a Labour politician) and Page Arnot (a Communist) were both directly involved in the politics of the coalfield. Their work was didactic in nature: it aimed to support the miners' union by educating its members about 'the tremendous tasks it has performed in the past'.[5] The pre-eminent historiographical position in which these authors placed the colliers was reinforced by an abundant supply of memoirs written by other prominent trade unionists and coalfield politicians.[6] Significantly, these were almost exclusively written in English, which made them accessible inside and outside of Wales, further establishing the

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[3] L.J. Williams, 'Was Wales industrialised?', in *Was Wales Industrialised?* (Llandysul, 1995), 14-36.

[4] Ness Edwards, *History of the South Wales* Miners (London, 1926) & *History of the South Wales Miners' Federation* (London, 1938); Robin Page Arnot, *South Wales Miners – Glowyr De Cymru: A History of the South Wales Miners Federation* (3 vols, London, 1949-1961); E.W. Evans, *The Miners of South Wales* (Cardiff, 1961).

[5] Ness Edwards, *History of the South Wales Miners' Federation*, vii.

[6] E.g. Frank Hodges, *My Adventures as a Labour Leader* (London, 1925); Wil Jon Edwards, *From the Valley I Came* (London, 1956); Arthur Horner, *Incorrigible Rebel* (London, 1960); James Griffiths, *Pages from Memory* (London, 1969); Will Paynter, *My Generation* (London, 1972).

miners' hegemony over the written historical record.[7] Some of their authors played an active role in the organisation of Welsh labour history. Will Paynter, for example, whose *My Generation* records his role in the struggles of the inter-war period, was not just a political activist, but President of Llafur, the Welsh Labour History Society.[8] The Miners' union was thus an active force in the organisation of Welsh labour history as a discipline. Its members provided an important critical mass for Llafur in its early years, and the survival of pioneering miners' leaders such as Abel Morgan (a founder of the South Wales Miners Federation) and Dai Dan Evans into the 1970s provided a sense of continuity and immediacy that tied the practice of labour history directly and personally to the history of coalfield trade unionism.[9]

As the 1970s progressed it became clear that this continuity was coming to an end: 'miners dominate the labour history of Wales, but not its present' observed one contributor to a discussion on the future of Welsh labour history in 1980.[10] This did not, however, undermine the miners' historiographical hegemony. To the contrary, it resulted in a redoubling of efforts to rescue the history of organised labour in the coalfield. In two phases, between 1971 and 1974 and from 1979 to 1982, the South Wales Coalfield Project, funded by the Social Science Research Council, spearheaded an effort to salvage coalfield history through the collection and preservation of miners' lodge records and the content of numerous miners' libraries, many of which had been threatened with permanent loss as pit closures had begun to decimate the coalfield. Another important aspect of the project, and one that gave it an innovative edge, was a major oral history initiative in which over a thousand hours of

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[7] This was a deliberate decision, even on the part of some Welsh speakers, including James Griffiths, see Martin Wright, 'Wales, socialism and Huw T. Edwards (1892-1970)', *Welsh History Review*, 28/2 (2016), 307-34, 329.

[8] See the tribute to Paynter written by Hywel Francis, *Llafur*, 4/2 (1985), 4-9.

[9] See David Egan, 'Abel Morgan', *Llafur*, 1/2 (1973) 29-33; Dai Francis, 'Dai Dan Evans: a tribute', *Llafur* 1/3 (1974), 3-4.

[10] Neil Evans, 'Report on the contributions to the discussion "Llafur in the 1980s"', *Llafur*, 3/2 (1981), 90-4, 90.

interviews were recorded, many with what Dai Smith termed 'secondary leaders' of the miners' union – those who were integral to its operation at a local level but whose stories were not fully represented in the written record.[11] An important literary outcome of this was Hywel Francis's and Dai Smith's immensely influential history of the south Wales miners, *The Fed*. As its title suggests, this kept the union at the centre of the story of south Wales labour, but developed its history beyond an account of mere structural development and placed it within the wider social setting of the coalfield communities to which it was integral.[12] *The Fed* provided the foundation for the work of the following generation, represented by historians such as Chris Williams and Susan Demont, who developed its insights to move their focus beyond the confines of the miners' union to explore the social, cultural and political strands of coalfield life in yet more detail.[13] Historians have since reminded us that there are different types of coal, which produce different types of mining communities in places outside of the central-south-Wales valleys. Ioan Matthews, for example, served the anthracite miners of his native Carmarthenshire well by emphasising their distinctiveness,[14] while Keith Gildart has led the way in providing the north Wales coalfield with its own distinct labour history.[15]

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[11] Dai Smith, '"What does history know of nailbiting"', *Llafur*, 1/2 (1973), 34-41.

[12] Hywel Francis & Dai Smith, *The Fed: A History of the South Wales Miners in the Twentieth Century* (London, 1980).

[13] Chris Williams, *Democratic Rhondda: Politics and Society, 1885-1951* (Cardiff, 1996) and *Capitalism, Community and Conflict* (Cardiff, 1998); Susan Demont, 'Tredegar and Aneurin Bevan: a society and its political articulation', PhD thesis, University of Wales, Cardiff, 1990; Dai Smith, *Aneurin Bevan and the World of South Wales* (Cardiff, 1993).

[14] Ioan Matthews 'The world of the anthracite miner', *Llafur*, 6/1 (1992), 96-104; 'Maes y glo carreg ac undeb y glöwyr 1872-1925', *Cof Cenedl*, 8 (1993), 133-64; 'The World of the Anthracite Miner', PhD thesis, University of Wales, 1995.

[15] Keith Gildart, *The North Wales Miners: A Fragile Unity 1945-1996* (Cardiff, 2001); 'Militancy, moderation and the struggle against company unionism in the north Wales coalfield, 1926-1944', *Welsh History Review*, 20/3 (2001), 532-64; '"Men of coal": miners' leaders in north-east Wales 1890-1964', *Llafur* 8/1 (2000), 111-30.

The assumptions underpinning this historiography were essentially heroic: that 'The great story of the coalfield has been the struggle to develop a consciousness that would lead to understanding, solidarity, and action on the part of all'.[16] By the start of the twenty-first century, however, as the practice of coal mining began to recede into history, a more questioning 'new coalfield history' had emerged, which presented south Wales' mining communities as more diverse, culturally complex and perhaps less united than earlier histories cared to admit.[17] Old assumptions about the miners' legendary solidarity nevertheless die hard, as the more recent work of Ben Curtis demonstrates. His study of the decades leading up to the fateful strike of 1984-5 not only brings the history of the mineworkers closer to contemporaneity; it also brings it around in full circle. The 'south Wales mineworkers [were] something of an exceptional case', concludes Curtis, holding 'an exceptional vanguard place in British labour history'; they were 'the conscience of the labour movement'.[18] Whether we reject the 'myth of the radical miner' or subscribe to the radical narrative resuscitated by Curtis, one thing remains clear: the miners remain at the apex of the hierarchy of Welsh labour history. They occupy this position in a state of separateness, differentiated from other occupational groups by the nature of their work and its fateful relationship to geology. When comparisons are to be made, they are naturally with miners elsewhere rather than with other groups of Welsh workers.[19]

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[16] Dai Smith, '"What does history know of nailbiting', 39.

[17] Mike Lieven, 'A "new history" of the south Wales coalfield?', *Llafur*, 8/3 (2002), 89-106. An important early sign of this is Alun Burge, 'In search of Harry Blount: scabbing between the wars in one south Wales community', *Llafur* 6/3 (1994), 58-69.

[18] Ben Curtis, *The South Wales Miners, 1964-1985* (Cardiff, 2013), 258. The theme of solidarity and the social centrality of the SWMF is similarly developed in Steven Thompson, '"Brodyr trwyadl mewn tywydd garw": welfare provision and the social centrality of the South Wales Miners Federation', *Welsh History Review* 24/4 (2009), 141-67.

[19] E.g. David Gilbert, *Class Community and Collective Action: Social Change in Two British Coalfields, 1850-1926* (Oxford, 1992); Roger Fagge, *Power Culture and Conflict in the Coalfields: West Virginia and South*

An alternative point of comparison might be with the group of extractive workers that occupy second place within the pantheon of Welsh labour: the north-Wales slate quarrymen. The quarrymen come second to the colliers for obvious reasons. Apart from the fact that there were far fewer of them, the early histories of the *chwarelwyr* were written in Welsh, the dominant language of the quarrying communities.[20] This meant that, unlike that of the colliers, the quarrymen's history was inaccessible to the wider community of British labour historians. This changed in 1981 with the publication of Merfyn Jones' work on the history of the quarrymen during the turbulent zenith years of their industry.[21] Jones did for the quarrymen what Francis and Smith did for the miners. Subsequent historiographical development, however, has not been on the same scale as that of coalfield historiography. Industrial disputes, particularly the momentous Penrhyn lockout of 1900-1903, have naturally attracted attention; historians have also explored the linguistic and social dimensions of the quarrying communities.[22] Nevertheless, there has not been anything like the debate that has developed around the history of the colliers, and the world of quarrying beyond the slate

Wales, 1900-1922 (Manchester, 1996); Stefan Berger, 'Working-class culture and the labour movement in the south Wales and the Ruhr Coalfields, 1850-2000', *Llafur* 8/2 (2001), 5-40; Stefan Berger, Andy Croll & Norman LaPorte, *Towards a Comparative History of Coalfield Societies* (London, 2005).

[20] W.J. Parry, *Chwareli a Chwarelwyr* (Caernarfon, 1897); *Owen* Parry, *Undeb y Chwarelwyr, 1908-1929* (Caernarfon, 1929), Emyr Jones, *Ganrif y Chwarelwyr* (Denbigh, 1963).

[21] Merfyn Jones, *The North Wales Quarrymen, 1874-1922* (Cardiff, 1981). Also see, Merfyn Jones, 'Y chwarelwyr: the slate quarrymen of north Wales', in Raphael Samuel (ed.), *Miners Quarrymen and Salt Workers* (London, 1977), 99-136.

[22] Jean Lindsay, *The Great Strike: A History of the Penrhyn Quarry Dispute, 1900-1903* (Newton Abbot, 1987); Merfyn Jones, 'The Llechwedd Dispute, Bleanau Ffestiniog', Llafur 1/4 (1975), 4-11; Dafydd Roberts, 'Undeb y chwarelwyr a'r Streic Gyffredinol, 1926', *Llafur* 3/4 (1983), 48-58; H. Paul Manning, 'The streets of Bethesda: the slate quarrier and the Welsh language in the liberal imagination', *Language in Society*, 33 (2004), 517-48 & 'English money and Welsh rocks: divisions of language and divisions of labor in nineteenth century Welsh slate quarries', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 44/3 (2002), 481-510. Elin Tomos, '"Ai nid ysbyty i'r chwarelwyr ydyw?": darpariaeth iechyd ysbyty chwarel Dinorwig, c. 1875-1900', *Llafur*, 12/4 (2019), 107-26; Dafydd Roberts, *Y Chwarelwyr a'r Sowth* (Bethesda, 1982) is of interest in that it explores links between the quarrymen and the coalfield, thus spanning the geological boundary discussed here.

quarries of north-west Wales remains relatively unexplored.[23] We should remember that one of the great figures of twentieth-century Welsh labour (and Labour) history, Huw T. Edwards, whose autobiography, *Hewn From The Rock*, gives this section of the essay its title, came not from the world of slate but from the geologically very different world of granite.[24] This might suggest that there is some virtue in extending the historiography of quarrying more systematically beyond slate and into other regions of Wales. Even so, it would take an unimaginable effort to extend the labour historiography of slate to anything like that of coal.

The predominant historiographical position of the miners is, of course, not without reason: there have been vastly more of them than of any other occupational group in Welsh history. For a full explanation, however, we need to go beyond mere weight of numbers. The history of the miners is consonant with conceptions of class that have dominated the study of labour history for most of the discipline's existence. Their putative solidarity and their remarkable educational and cultural achievements have placed them in a heroic position at the vanguard of the proletariat that, as we have seen, has proved resistant to historical revisionism. They have played a central role in the rise of both Labourism and Communism, which, as discussed earlier, has been recorded for posterity in English. Their story colludes neatly with narratives of progress and 'labour's forward march'. Other occupational groups appear by contrast backward-looking. Even the *chwarelwyr*, steeped in the rich literary culture of their *cabanau* and remarkable for an industrial solidarity that insisted *nid oes*

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[23] Exceptions are Dafydd Roberts, '"Nhw oedd y chwarelwyr – arwyr y fro": The Pembrokeshire slate quarrymen, *Llafur,* 5/1 (1988), 21-8, and 'Gwyn Jenkins, '"Yspryd Bolshevik": streic chwarelwyr ithfaen Penmaenmawr, 1920', *Llafur*, 5/3 (1990), 34 – 44.

[24] Huw T. Edwards, *Hewn From the Rock: The Autobiography of Huw T. Edwards* (Cardiff, 1967). This was originally written in Welsh in two volumes as *Tros y Tresi* (Denbigh, 1956) and *Troi'r Drol* (Denbigh, 1963).

bradwr yn y tŷ hwn, cannot compete with the heroic history of the miners.[25] The *chwarelwyr*, stopped in their tracks by Lord Penrhyn as the twentieth century opened, were obliged to stand aside from labour's forward march, sullenly observing their collier counterparts in the working-class vanguard from among the isolated mountains of *Eryri*.[26] They only ever sent one Labour MP to Parliament, and then only briefly and almost as an afterthought.[27] Rather, their politics were Liberal (thus doomed to oblivion) and expressed in Welsh, the language of nationalism (which it has been argued was doomed as a political language of the twentieth century).[28] It might even be argued that they were not members of the 'working class' at all, but belonged to something called the *gwerin* – a Welsh word that doesn't fully translate, but means something approximating to 'the folk'.[29] *Y werin* is a different creature to the working class: the word describes a rural, nonconformist, Liberal, literate (in Welsh) common people tied closely to a sense of place *('y filltir sgwar'*, or 'the square mile').[30] It is a particularist

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[25] *Cabanau:* the quarrymen's spaces undergound where cultural activities were pursued*; 'nid oes bradwr yn y tŷ hwn':* there is no traitor in this house (signs displayed in the windows of quarrymen's cottages during the Penrhyn dispute).

[26] Which is how they were perceived by the rest of the labour movement. See the comments by Keir Hardie about the quarrymen in the *Labour Leader,* 17 August 1901: 'The Celtic fire which so brightly illumes the eye of the South Walian seems to be smouldering in the dull sunken eye so common in the North'.

[27] E. Price, '"Yr unig un erioed": R.T. Jones, chwarelwr llechi ac aelod seneddol', *Cof Cenedl*, XXI (2006), 129-58.

[28] Neil Evans & Kate Sullivan, '"Yn llawn o dân Cymreig" (full of Welsh fire): the language of politics in Wales 1880-1914', in Geraint H. Jenkins (ed.), *The Welsh Language and its Social Domains in the Nineteenth Century, 1801-1911* (Cardiff, 2000), 561-85.

[29] A powerful counter argument to this is offered by Merfyn Jones, 'Notes from the margin: class and scoeity in nineteenth century Gwynedd', in David Sith (ed.), *A People and a Proletariat: Essays in the History of Wales, 1780-1980* (London, 1980), 119-214.

[30] For *y werin* see Frank Price Jones, 'Gwerin Cymru', in *Radicaliaeth a'r Werin Cymreig yn y Bedwaredd Ganrif ar Bymtheg* (Cardiff, 1975), 196-206; Christopher Harvie, 'The folk and the *gwerin*: the myth and reality of popular culture in nineteenth century Scotland and Wales', *Proceedings of the British Academy* (80) 1991, 19-48; Prys Morgan, 'The *gwerin* of Wales – myth and reality', in Ian Hume & W.T.R. Pryce (eds), *The Welsh and Their Country* (Llandysul, 1986), 134 -52.

term of reference, whereas the miners, drawing on the world-wide ideas amassed in their legendary libraries, were born to usher in a universalist world.[31] *Y werin* belongs not to the politics of Labour, but to the politics of nationalism, and between the two there has been long-lived suspicion. The labour-history community in Wales, with only a few exceptions, has struggled to bridge this division, leaving occupational groups that did not conform in a sort of historical limbo, excised from the great forward march.

Moving beyond the underlying strata of slate and coal, the ground becomes more fragmented. Other extractive workers have been largely neglected. The mining of metals – chiefly lead, silver, zinc, copper and gold – has taken place across much of Wales for thousands of years, particularly in the neglected uplands between the iconic worlds of coal and slate. Its history makes the coal boom of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries seem a mere flash in the pan. Yet the industry remains largely unexplored as a subject of serious labour history. W.J. Lewis's outstanding *Lead Mining in Wales* is now half a century old, and, like most other work on metal mining, is really a book about business and technology, containing only a brief examination of 'social conditions'.[32] Academic work on the labour history of the mines amounts to a mere handful of articles.[33] Metal mining thus remains the property of industrial archaeologists and antiquarians.[34] This fascinating group of workers, straddling antiquity and modernity and offering insights into the liminality of labour

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[31] For the miners' libraries and their fate see Christopher Baggs, 'The Miner's Libraries of South Wales from the 1860s to 1939', D. Phil thesis, University of Wales, Aberystwyth, 1995; Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (London, 2010), chapter 7; Hywel Francis & Siân Williams, *Do Miners Read Dickens? Origins and Progress of the South Wales Miners' Library, 1973-2013* (Cardigan, 2013).

[32] W.J. Lewis, *Lead Mining in Wales* (Cardiff, 1967).

[33] E.g. C.J. Williams, 'The lead miners of Flintshire and Denbighshire', *Llafur* 3/1 (1980), 87-96; Meic Birtwistle & Dafydd Llŷr James, 'When the party was over: Welsh and Italian lead miners in dispute, Cardiganshire 1900-01', *Llafur*, 12/1 (2016), 9-24.

[34] Who have served it very well. See the work of David Bick, George Hall and Simon Hughes, and, more recently, Ioan Lord.

in rurally-located, pre- and early-industrial contexts, still awaits a large-scale academic history.

If we escape geology and consider occupational groups formed under more organic influences, though, matters do not improve. Farm labourers have featured in the agricultural histories of David Howell and Richard Colyer, and David Pretty has written the history of their trade union.[35] Beyond this, however, rural workers seem in danger of appearing only intermittently in the history of Welsh labour, either as 'primitive rebels' or subservient peasants. Likewise, workers in the woollen industry – such a formative influence on Wales - seem consigned to a world somewhere between museums of 'folk-life' and oblivion. Dockers have their historian, and maritime workers have recently received some welcome attention.[36] Other groups of industrial workers, though, remain in the relative wilderness: railwaymen, the steel workers of north-east Wales, even the iron workers, who intervened so decisively in narratives of Welsh labour's early history, remain on the margins of labour history, despite all offering abundant opportunities to explore the meaning and political role of labour.

And this is all before we even begin to consider the position of Welsh women workers. Welsh labour history has been from the outset undeniably male-centric. 'The Welsh working class', stated one early contributor to *Llafur*, 'present no great problem of definition. In history they will go down as that group of men who performed manual labour in the industries of the area'.[37] Welsh women's historians have since made such a statement

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[35] David Howell, *Land & People in Nineteenth Century* Wales (London, 1977), chapter 6; David Howell, 'Labour organisation among agricultural workers in Wales 1872-1921', *Welsh History Review*, 16/1 (1992), 63-92; Richard Colyer, 'Conditions of employment amongst the farm labour force in nineteenth century Wales', *Llafur,* 3/3 (1982), 33-41; David Pretty, *The Rural Revolt That Failed: Farm Workers' Trade Unions in Wales, 1889-1950* (Cardiff, 1989).

[36] Phillip Leng, *The Welsh Dockers, 1880-1921* (Ormskirk, 1981); Richard Haines, 'Quantifying the crews: seafaring labour at Swansea, 1838-1903', *Welsh History Review*, 26/4 (2013), 560-96.

[37] Peter Stead, 'The Welsh working class', *Llafur*, 1/2 (1973), 42-54, 42.

unthinkable. Deidre Beddoe first drew attention to the shortcomings of Welsh labour history in this respect in 1981.[38] Ten years the collection of essays, *Our Mothers' Land*, edited by Angela John, demonstrated a decade of remarkable progress and gave the study of Welsh women's history a major boost.[39] The establishment of *Archif Menywod Cymru* / Women's Archive Wales in 1997 has also been of an importance similar to that of the 1970s and 80s Coalfield Projects in terms of the rescue and preservation of source material for Welsh women's history.[40] Consequent upon these developments, the history of Welsh working class women has become a more established part of Welsh labour historiography.[41] Predictably perhaps, the women of the coalfield have featured prominently, with Sue Bruley's treatment of the 1926 General Strike and lock-out from a gendered perspective standing out as an example of how integrating the experience of both sexes can redraw historical narratives.[42] Welsh women's historians have not confined themselves to the coalfield, however, and have played a pioneering role in extending the traditional boundaries of labour history in Wales.[43] Despite this, the history of Welsh labour remains overwhelmingly written by men about men

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[38] Deidre Beddoe, 'Towards a Welsh women's history', *Llafur,* 3/2 (1981), 32-8.

[39] Angela John (ed.) *Our Mother's Land: Chapters in Welsh Women's History, 1830-1939* (Cardiff, 1991).

[40] https://www.womensarchivewales.org/en/

[41] The discussion here barely scratches the surface. Stephanie Ward provides a more comprehensive overview in 'Towards a Welsh people's history: a reflection on Welsh women's history and women in Llafur', *Llafur*, 12/4 (2019/20), 56-67.

[42] Sue Bruley, *The Women and Men of 1926: A Gender and Social History of the General Strike and Miners' Lockout in South Wales* (Cardiff, 2010). Also see Angela V. John, 'A miner struggle? Women's protests in Welsh mining history, *Llafur,* 4/1 (1984) 72-90.

[43] E.g. L.J. Williams and Dot Jones, 'Women at work in the nineteenth century', Llafur 3/3 (1982), 20-32; Dot Jones, 'Self-help in nineteenth century Wales: The rise and fall of the female friendly society', Llafur 4/1 (1984), 14-26; David Pretty, 'Women and trade unionism in Welsh rural society', *Llafur* 5/3 (1990), 5-13; Robin Evans, 'Merched y Cymunedau Pysgota', *Llafur*, 10/3 (2010), 18-39; Teleri Owen, 'Yn ddirgel ac yn gyhoeddus: effaith, rôl, a phortreadaeth merched yn ystod Streic Fawr y Penrhyn' *Llafur* 12/4 (2019/20), 146-166.

and their relationship to the geology beneath their feet. It almost goes without saying that most of these men are white.[44]

There are admittedly signs of tectonic shift. Deindustrialisation, devolution and all the social changes that are creating the much talked about 'new Wales' offer an entirely new context for the writing of labour history. Geology nevertheless continues to assert its power. Daryl Leeworthy's ambitious and poetic account of *Labour Country* is a case in point.[45] An admirable attempt at long duree Welsh labour history that successfully addresses many of the points raised above, it traces the evolution of the labour culture of the south-Wales valleys from the 1830s to 1985. A remarkable exploration of political culture, it has much to offer the new Wales in the way of a usable past. It is nevertheless essentially a manifesto for an independent, English-speaking South (not south!) Wales. The valleys of south Wales, so steep that Aneurin Bevan once famously remarked that their rivers run sideways-up, and the apparently impermeable geological boundary around their heads, have created a kind of intellectual bunker. Perhaps it is time for labour historians to break out and start thinking about the labour history of Wales as a more coherent whole: to start exploring the connections between the different parts of Wales and the workers who lived in them. These connections were after all formative to Labour's Welsh hegemony. To return to Huw T. Edwards, the 'Unofficial Prime-minister' of post-war Wales and a crucial figure in twentieth-century Welsh labour history: he may have been 'hewn from the rock', but he also worked as an agricultural labourer and a coal miner, spent much of his career as a trade unionist based in

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[44] The issue of the racial diversity of Welsh labour is not tackled here, out of respect rather than indifference. See Charlotte Williams, Neil Evans and Paul O'Learty, *A Tolerant Nation?: Exploring Ethnic Diversity in Wales* (Cardiff, 2003). Also *Llafur* 5/4 (1991) which contains articles by Neil Evans, Paul O'Leary, Joanne Cayford and Marika Sherwood on race in Wales. For a recent overview of the field see Neil Evans, 'How white was my valley? immigrants and minorities in modern Wales', *Llafur*, 12/4 (2019-20), 68-94.

[45] Daryl Leeworthy, *Labour Country: Political Radicalism and Social Democracy in South Wales, 1831-1985* (Cardigan, 2018).

a steelworks, and his life touched all parts of Wales - a fact that was key to his importance.[46]

That we don't yet have a history of Welsh labour as connected to all regions and aspects of Welsh life as the life of Huw T. Edwards - one which puts the miners in their wider perspective and explores the links between all the different occupational groups in all the different regions of Wales - is a remarkable deficit. The writing of one is considerably overdue.[47]

Döppler Shifts, Next Steps and Last Stands

It might be suggested that 'history from below' was pioneered in Wales. David Williams' studies of Rebecca and Chartism, written from the 1930s to the 1950s, in many ways pre-empted the historiographical developments of the 1960s.[48] It was one of Williams' research students, however, the dazzling Gwyn A. Williams, that did for the Welsh working class what E.P. Thompson did for the English. Gwyn A. Williams was precise in locating a 'point of emergence' in the summer of 1831 at Merthyr Tydfil, when the frontier iron town's workers took control for five days and stepped into modern history. They underwent, he claimed, 'a kind of Döppler shift, when in terms of one kind of "time", people seem to move, quite abruptly, out of one century and into another'.[49] Locating such shifts is the key to periodising Welsh labour history. Another may be proposed at the General Election of 1868, when newly enfranchised Welsh workers broke the stranglehold of Toryism and replaced their political

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[46] For a discussion of the significance of these connections in Edwards' life see Paul Ward and Martin Wright, 'Mirrors of Wales – life story as national metaphor: case studies of R.J. Derfel (1824-1905) and Huw T. Edwards (1892-1970), *History* 95/317 (2010), 45-63.

[47] The call for such a synthesis was made as early as 1980. See Neil Evans, 'Report on the contributions to the discussion "Llafur in the 1980s"', 90.

[48] David Williams, David Williams, *John Frost: A Study in Chartism* (Cardiff, 1939); *The Rebecca Riots: A Study in Agrarian Discontent* (Cardiff: 1955); David Williams, 'Chartism in Wales' in Asa Briggs (ed.), *Chartist Studies* (London, 1959), 220-248.

[49] Gwyn A. Williams, *The Merthyr Rising*, (London, 1978), 30.

masters with Liberals.[50] The transformation of Wales from a world of performative disorder,

sharp social conflict and the outright revolutionism of the 1839 Newport Rising had been

underway at least since the dramatic reaction to *Brad y Llyfrau Gleision* in the late 1840s.

1868, however, confirmed the coming of age of the respectable, chapel-going, sober world of

the mid-Victorian consensus. Merthyr, Wales's premier industrial town, where the radical

pacifist Henry Richard famously harnessed the new working-class vote to defeat a local

ironmaster, was again central to events. The Merthyr of Dick Penderyn had evolved into the

Merthyr of Henry Richard, a transformation that served as shorthand for a more general

periodisation of Welsh social, political and labour history. An influential collection of essays

edited by Glanmor Williams in 1966 served to establish both Merthyr's status as the citadel

of Welsh working-class history and this periodisation as a dominant framework for Welsh

labour history.[51]

The next watershed is more difficult to locate precisely, both geographically and

temporally. The great coal strike of 1898, which resulted in the formation of the South Wales

Miners' Federation (and has thus been embedded into Welsh historiography by Francis and

Smith), is one strong contender. Cases might equally be made, however, for 1885, which saw

the election of Wales's first (Liberal-) Labour MP, William Abraham (Mabon) in the

Rhondda, or for the General Election of 1922, when Labour replaced the Liberals as the chief

progressive force in Welsh politics. The period between, which included the arrival of

socialism in Wales, the 'Great Labour Unrest', *The Miners' Next Step* (1912) and the Great

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[50] 1868 thus defines the periodisation of the foundational text of Welsh political history, K.O. Morgan, *Wales in British Politics, 1868-1922* (Cardiff, 1963).

[51] Glanmor Williams (ed.), *Merthyr Politics: The Making of a Working-Class Tradition* (Cardiff, 1966). The historiography of Merthyr, the first great Welsh industrial town, too vast to deal with here, is a microcosm of some of the wider themes herein. Joe England, who contributed to that text, has recently brought the historiography up to date with *Merthyr: The Crucible of Modern* Wales (Cardigan, 2017). Also see Keith Strange, *Merthyr Tydfil, Iron Metropolis: Life in a Welsh Industrial Town* (Stroud, 2005).

War (whether as a catalyst or an interlude is a matter for debate) witnessed an extended transformation during which Welsh labour history effectively became Welsh Labour history. Merthyr, which from 1900 until 1915 (and perhaps for some time after) became 'The Merthyr of Keir Hardie', again features prominently. This 'next step' was, however, more geographically diffuse because industrialisation had become more generalised, across south Wales at least. The chief consequence of this in spatial terms was to confirm the south-Wales coalfield as the cockpit of Labour's hegemony, thus establishing the political superstructure on the geological base discussed in section one of this essay. This hegemony, consonant with and integral to the wider 'forward march' of British labour, has dominated Welsh history to the present, although not without being subject to repeated crises and reinventions.[52]

Arguably the most profound of these, the onslaught of Thatcherism and the 1984-5 Miners' Strike, may be suggested as the final Döppler shift in this periodisation of Welsh labour history: a watershed that is less of a *Next Step* and more of a last stand. When the miners of Maerdy marched back to their pit behind their banner and colliery band, defeated but proud, on 4th March 1985, a century of Welsh labour history effectively came to an end. As with all moments of historical change, this one had a substantial pre-history. The pit closure programme that provoked the 1984-5 strike had been underway for decades, and momentous industrial disputes were hardly a new feature of Welsh history. The defeat of the miners in 1985 was, however, terminal. It rendered the Welsh working class, to borrow Gwyn A. Williams' memorable words, 'a naked people under an acid rain'.[53] The buttresses of Labour's dominance in Wales – the mining industry and the NUM - were subsequently eradicated. Almost forty years later the full consequences of this are still unclear. The

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[52] Martin Johns explores the wider historiographical implications of Labour's Welsh dominance in 'For class and nation: dominant trends in the historiography of twentieth century Wales', *History Compass*, 8/11 (2010), 1257-74.

[53] Gwyn A. Williams, *When Was Wales?* (London, 1985), 305.

political 'forward march' of Labour seems to have survived labour's industrial and economic rout, for the time being at least. The social and economic consequences of labour's defeat are, however, more starkly etched onto the face of modern Wales. This has important implications for the writing of labour history, which are yet to be fully grasped. Some of them will be addressed in the next section of this essay. The remainder of this section, though, will consider the evolution of the Welsh radical-labour tradition described above in relation to some of the features of a wider British labour historiography.

The periodisation outlined above will be familiar to historians of British labour. There are nevertheless significant points of disconnection. Some may be found in the period of performative disorder that had its roots in the grain riots of the eighteenth century and extended through the industrial and agrarian violence of the Monmouthshire Scotch Cattle (*Teirw Scotch*) and the Rebecca Riots of south-west Wales (1839-43). This influenced the reform movement of the early-1830s (notably at Merthyr in 1831) and (although Rebecca's persistence into the 1840s is inconvenient) culminated in the 'Last Rising' of not just Welsh but British history at Newport in 1839. These events were responses to the pains of economic, social and demographic change that had much in common with Luddism, Swing and other 'riotous assemblies' elsewhere in Britain. David Williams, Professor of Welsh history at Aberystwyth from 1945 to 1967, pioneered the study of popular discontent with his work on Rebecca in the 1950s,[54] and it was two of his research students, D.J.V. Jones and Gwyn A. Williams, who developed the field thereafter. Jones and Williams represented two essentially different faces of Welsh labour historiography, and their work, although sharing considerable common ground, has different emphases. Gwyn A. Williams, the Marxist firebrand of Merthyr, stressed the role of conflict and discontinuity in a Welsh working-class history characterised by ruptures and revolutionary outbursts. Jones, on the other hand, a

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[54] David Williams, *The Rebecca Riots*.

product of rural Montgomeryshire, offered a more measured perspective, which placed popular disturbances within a wider and more balanced social context.[55] Between them, they developed the study of popular protest in Wales immeasurably. Interest in the field has never entirely faded (it has for, example, been a favourite part of the school curriculum) and has recently enjoyed something of a revival. Rhian Jones' examinations of Rebecca and the Scotch Cattle, which examines the cultural liminality of both movements, and Lowri Ann Rees's investigation of Rebecca through the lens of contemporary social observers stand out as two recent and distinct approaches.[56] When compared to the intense and sustained interest focused upon Luddism, Swing and other popular protest movements on the other side of Offa's Dyke, however, the field of Welsh popular protest is relatively sparsely populated. 'Primitive rebels', it seems, have been eclipsed by proletarian vanguards.

The focus of work on Welsh popular protest has also studiously avoided the debates that have dominated the study of English popular protest. The extensive debate on the relationship between machine breaking, incendiarism and revolutionary politics, the insights offered by Carl Griffin and Katrina Navickas on the relationship between popular protest, place and landscape, on its mythological and psychological dimensions, and on its context of

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[55] In addition to *The Merthyr* Rising a good example of Williams' approach is Gwyn A. Williams, 'Locating a Welsh working class: the frontier years' in Smith (ed.), *A People and a Proletariat*, 16-46. Jones' work on this period is collected in D.J.V. Jones, *Before Rebecca: Popular Protests in Wales 1793-1835* (London, 1973).

[56] Rhian Jones, *Petticoat Heroes:Gender, Culture and Popular Protest in the Rebecca Riots* (Cardiff, 2015); Rhian Jones, 'Symbol, ritual and popular protest in early-nineteenth centiry Wales: the Scotch Cattle rebranded, *Welsh History Review*, 26/1 (2012), 34-57; Lowri Ann Rees, 'Paternalism and rural protest: the Rebecca riots and the landed interest of south-west Wales', *Agricultural History Review*, 59/1 (2011), 36-60'; Lowri Ann Rees, '"Poor deluded creatures?": patriarchal perceptions of Welsh rural protest from the letters of miss Jane Walters, 1843-4', in Terence Dooley, Maeve O'Riordan & Christopher Ridgway (eds), *Women and the Country House in Ireland and Britain* (Dublin, 2017); Lowri Ann Rees, Frustrations and fears: the impact of the Rebecca Riots on the land agent in Carmarthenshire, 1843', in Annie Tindley, Lowri Ann ress & J. Reilly (eds), *The Land Agent, 1700-1920* (Edinburgh, 2018); J.E. Thomas, *Social Disorder in Britain, 1750-1850: The Power of the Gentry, Radicalism and Religion in Wales* (London, 2011) tackles the topic from a more traditional perspective.

urban-rural liminality remain, Rhian Jones aside, relatively undeveloped in Welsh historiography. Turning the telescope around, potential insights from Welsh examples are also generally absent from work on popular protest written from a wider British (usually meaning English) perspective.[57] The absence of the Merthyr Rising from 'British' narratives of the Reform Crisis is, for example, astonishing. Welsh labour historians might bring something significant to the table by asking questions about the relationship between popular protest movements in Wales and those elsewhere in Britain. Were these movements sharp expressions of particularism or were they connected to a more universal crisis in early-industrial Britain? Were protagonists on both sides in contact (there is tantalising evidence to suggest that they may have been)? These questions might initiate promising developments in both early-industrial and agrarian Welsh and British labour history.

The history of Chartism (directly linked to that of popular protest by the 1839 Newport Rising, which had its roots in the valleys harried by the Scotch Cattle) might offer similar lines of development. David Williams, who rescued Newport Chartist leader John Frost from posterity's condescension as early as 1939, pioneered a field that was admirably developed by D.J.V. Jones.[58] Historians have since added further layers to our understanding. The search for context for the Newport drama of 1839 has proved alluring.[59] Joe England's

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[57] Katrina Navickas hints at this in 'What happened to class? New histories of labour and collective action in Britain', *Social History*, 36/2 (2011), 192-204.

[58] David Williams, *John Frost* & 'Chartism in Wales'; D.J.V. Jones, *The Last Rising* (Oxford, 1985); D.J.V. Jones, 'Chartism in Welsh communities', *Welsh History Review*, 6/3 (1973), 243-61. Also see Ivor Wilks, *South Wales and the Rising of 1839: Class Struggle as Armed Struggle* (London, 1984) for a Marxist-nationalist perspective.

[59] P. Howells, 'Why did the only major outbreak of physical force Chartism in Britain occur in south-east Wales in 1839?', *Gwent Local History*, 83 (1996), 17-33; Keith B. Jones, 'The religious climate of the Chartist insurrection at Newport Monmouthshire, 4th November 1839', *Journal of Welsh Religious History*, 5 (1997), 57-71; David Osmond, 'After the rising: Chartism in Newport 1840-48', *Gwent Local History*, 98 (2005) 8-52.

work on Merthyr has also expanded our knowledge of the social base of Chartism.[60] There

have even been occasional forays into the Chartist movement outside of south Wales.[61]

Nevertheless, considering the obvious importance of the topic to working-class history and

the vastness of British Chartist historiography, Welsh Chartist historiography weighs

surprisingly lightly. In 2010 Malcolm Chase proposed some new agendas for the study of

Welsh Chartism, in particular suggesting that an analysis of the relationship between

Chartism in Wales and the exercise of power through English-based institutions was

overdue.[62] Chase's suggestion has yet to be systematically addressed. One might go further

and suggest that the interplay between Welsh and British Chartism in the form of print

culture, travelling speakers or interest in the Land Plan, for example, and the relationship

between Chartists across the different regions of Wales, might form the rationale for a study

of its own. Welsh Chartist historiography is dispersed across local history journals and the

publications of local presses.[63] The Chartists also recently seem to have caught the public

imagination more thoroughly than that of Welsh academics; the work of Les James and the

annual Chartist Convention in Newport stand out in this regard. From an academic point of

view, however, the historiography of Welsh Chartism, like that of the occupational groups

discussed in part one of this article, is fragmented. It is time we had a full-length integrated

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[60] Joe England, 'Unitarians, Freemasons, Chartists: the middle class in Victorian Merthyr', *Welsh History Review*, 23/4 (2007), 35-58; Joe England, 'Engaged in a righteous cause: Chartism in Merthyr Tydfil', *Llafur* 10/3 (2010), 58-75; Joe England, *Merthyr: The Crucible of Modern Wales*, esp. 131-144

[61] Owen Ashton, 'Chartism in mid-Wales', *Montgomeryshire Collections*, 62/1 (1971), 10-57; Malcolm Chase, *Chartism: A New History* (Manchester, 2007), 87-94; Owen Ashton, 'Chartism in Llanidloes: the "riot" of 1839 revisited', *Llafur* 10/3 (2010), 76-86.

[62] Malcolm Chase, 'Rethinking Welsh Chartism', *Llafur*, 10/3 (2010), 39-57.

[63] Examples are the collection in the 'Chartist Anniversary Edition' of *Gwent Local History*, 16 (2014), and the work published by Six Points publishers, e.g. David Osmond, *The Chartist Rambler: William Edwards of Newport, 1796-1849* (Cardiff, 2021).

history of Chartism in Wales to parallel (and perhaps modify?) Chase's 'new history' of 2007.

The period from the end of Chartism to the advent of socialism presents some of the most interesting historiographical problems, and it is here, perhaps, that we get closest to the reasons for the estrangement between Welsh and British narratives of labour history. Traditionally regarded by labour historians as a fallow period, dominated by a 'servile generation' of labour aristocrats, the period has in recent decades been subject to significant revision. Again, Wales can claim pioneering status: Angela John's 1971 examination of the transition from Chartism to mid-Victorian radicalism in industrial south Wales pre-empted much subsequent revisionism,[64] but labour historians have been tardy in developing John's insights. There is, of course, a wealth of work on the Welsh common people, popular politics and radicalism in the mid-Victorian period. Ieuan Gwynedd Jones's examinations of the interplay between society, religion, language and politics provide a foundation, upon which Ryland Wallace built a narrative of the mid-Victorian reform movement from the 1840s to the 1880s.[65] A wealth of work on mid-Victorian radicalism may be found in the pages of *Llafur, Welsh History Review*, *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion* and in the impressive array of local and county history journals that Wales boasts.[66] Much of it, however, lies beyond the habitual purview of labour historians, and the fact that some of it is written in Welsh is not the only reason for this. The intricate and unique world of mid-

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[64] Angela John. 'The Chartist endurance: industrial south Wales, 1840-1868', *Morgannwg,* 15, 1971, 23-49.

[65] Ieuan Gwynedd Jones, *Explorations and Explanations: Essays in the Social History of Victorian Wales* (Cardiff, 1981), *Communities* (Cardiff, 1987) and *Mid-Victorian Wales: The Observers and the Observed* (Cardiff, 1992); Ryland Wallace, *Organise! Organise! Organise! A Study of Reform Agitations in Wales, 1840-1886* (Cardiff, 1991).

[66] Collecting this work together is too great a task for this footnote, but the work of Frank Price Jones, collected in *Radicaliaeth a'r Werin Gymreig yn y Bedwaredd Ganrif ar* Bymtheg (Cardiff, 1975) is worthy of special mention.

Victorian Welsh radicalism, which forms an integral but too-often ignored element of the radicalism of the British Isles, does not articulate easily with the central concerns of labour history. Like the world of the quarrymen, it is detached from simple narratives of class advance. It is overwhelmingly rooted in rurality. It doesn't have a strong trade union base; its bastions were not trade unions, but chapels – traditionally seen by labour historians as the enemies of the working-class movement. Its causes were not the universalist, 'forward looking' causes of the twentieth century (although it was profoundly internationalist and to see it as parochial would be to severely misunderstand it) but were more particular in nature. Its root concerns, *pwnc y tir* (the land question) and church disestablishment, either vanished from the priorities of the labour movement in the twentieth century or were never truly part of it. Its medium of communication was overwhelmingly Welsh, making it difficult to approach for most British labour historians. Its history does not marry easily into the emergence of the Labour Party and is easier to categorise as part of the 'national story' of Wales than as part of the story of labour. Mid-Victorian Welsh radicalism and British labour are essentially parallel worlds and between their historiographies there is limited communication.

One outcome of this historiographical estrangement is that the debates that dominated British labour history for decades are notably absent from Welsh labour historiography. A case in point is the so-called 'labour aristocracy' debate. This is perhaps surprising, considering that industrial Wales hosted some obvious labour aristocrats in its iron foundries, coal mines and slate quarries. Is it too late to re-open that debate and explore the role of Wales's labour aristocrats in the social and political dynamics of Victorian labour? The work of Paul O'Leary on the way that the use of public space mediated social relations during the mid-Victorian consensus intervenes in the space usually occupied by discussions of the role of a labour aristocracy. It develops creatively some of the recent themes in wider labour historiography, but do such approaches make redundant approaches that might explore the

ways in which the mediation of social relations was related to social hierarchies within the Welsh labour force?[67] On a connected theme, approaches characterised by the so-called 'currents of radicalism' interpretation, that have tended towards a dissolution of the traditional periodisation of British labour history, have also been relatively undeveloped within a Welsh context. This is surprising, as the 'currents' approach, which has had in any case a rather 'four nations' orientation, offers an obvious point of connection between the kind of Welsh radical history discussed above and the history of labour.[68] Welsh radicals such as Evan Pan Jones or Robert Jones Derfel straddled the worlds of Welsh radicalism and the labour movement just as much as their lives bridged the traditional labour-historiographical watershed of the 1880s.[69] A reassessment of Welsh radicalism which brought it into closer relationship to British labour history might use such points of connection as a starting point.

The reasons why labour historians have not gone down this path may be traced to the penultimate shift outlined earlier: the 'next step' otherwise known as the 'Rise of Labour'. The rise and subsequent history of the Labour Party in Wales can barely be considered under-investigated.[70] It has featured as *the* natural culmination of nineteenth century labour history, towards which everything else was either evolving or, if not, heading into a dead end. There

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[67] Paul O'Leary, *Claiming the Streets: Processions and Urban Culture in South Wales, 1830-1880* (Cardiff, 2012). The work of Andy Croll, particularly *Civilising the Urban: Popular Culture and Public Space in Merthyr, c. 1870-1914* (Cardiff, 2000) is also important, although deals with a later period.

[68] Eugenio F. Biagini & Alistair J. Reid (eds), *Currents of Radicalism: Popular Radicalism, Organised Labour and Party Politics in Britain, 1850-1914* (Cambridge, 1991) made the connection, but ignored Wales.

[69] For Pan Jones see Peris Jones-Evans, 'Evan Pan Jones: land reformer', *Welsh History Review*, 4/2 (1968), 143-159, and for Derfel see Martin Wright, *Wales and Socialism: Political Culture and National Identity Before the Great War* (Cardiff, 2016), 189-201.

[70] And is far too extensive for this footnote. Wright, *Wales and Socialism*, contains a bibliography that deals with the rise of Labour, and a good starting point for the study of the Labour party in Wales thereafter remains Duncan Tanner, Chris Williams and Deian Hopkin (eds), *The Labour Party in Wales 1900-2000* (Cardiff, 2000).

has been some debate about into which category certain things should be placed: Mabon's Lib-Labs, for example, were once confirmed inmates of the dead-end, but have more recently been rescued and restored as progenitors of Labour.[71] Overall, though, a teleological framework tied to the rise of Labour has worked to occlude important aspects of Wales's previous labour history. This tendency is, of course, connected to the discussion in part one of this essay: the close relationship between the miners' union and the Labour Party has created for both a formidable, mutually reinforcing historiographical hegemony. An obvious reason for this is that Welsh Labour (and labour) history has been written overwhelmingly by supporters of the Labour Party. Consequently, it has developed somewhat in isolation from other political currents in Welsh life. The history of the Red Flag and the Red Dragon have never been fully reconciled. There is a body of work exploring the political relationship between them.[72] We need to go further, however: we need to collapse the boundaries between the histories of socialism and nationalism, but also to examine in more detail the connections between the Labour Party and labour's political culture more generally, including that of other political (and perhaps not so directly political) organisations. Further, we need to do this within a context that balances the Welsh, British and international dimensions of Welsh labour's (and Labour's) history.

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[71] Chris Williams, *Democratic Rhondda*. For a recent re-evaluation of Mabon, James Phillips, 'Mabon as Journalist', *Llafur*, 13/1 (2021), 31-60.

[72] E.g. Deian Hopkin, 'Y werin a'i theyrnas: ymateb sosialaeth i genedlaetholdeb, 1880-1920', *Cof Cenedl,* 6 (1991), 162-92, & 'Llafur a'r diwylliant Cymreig 1900-1940', *Trafodion Anrhydeddus Cymdeithas Y Cymmrodorion*, *(Cyfres Newydd),* 7 (2001), 128-48; Wright, *Wales and Socialism*; K.O. Morgan, *The Red Dragon and the Red Flag: The Cases of James Griffiths and Aneurin Bevan (The Welsh Political Archive Lecture 1988)* (Aberystwyth, 1989); Andrew Edwards and Mari Elin William, 'The red dragon/red flag debate revisited: the Labour Party, culture and language in Wales, 1945-c.1970', *Welsh History Review*, 26/1 (2012), 105-27; Douglas Jones, *The Communist Party of Great Britain and the National Question in Wales, 1920-1991* (Cardiff, 2017).

There are templates for such work. Ursula Masson's examination of the role of women in late-nineteenth-century Liberalism, for example, demonstrates the value of reaching across traditional party allegiances to recover radical pasts.[73] Alun Burge's biography of the co-operator William Hazell shines a much-needed light on the relationship between Labour, socialism and the co-operative movement – an immensely important but shockingly under-researched aspect of labour's history.[74] Andrew Edwards and James Phillips, working at different ends of Wales, have demonstrated the possibilities of approaching the history of Labour within its wider political context.[75] Comparative and transnational approaches to labour history have also transformed the context in which we think about political culture.[76] We now need to synthesise this work to create a new labour

[73] Ursula Masson, *'Women's Rights and Womanly Duties': The Aberdare Women's Liberal Association, 1891-1910* (Cardiff, 2005) & *'For Women, for Wales, and for Liberalism': Women in Liberal Politics in Wales, 1880-1914* (Cardiff, 2010).

[74] Alun Burge, *William Hazell's Gleaming Vision: A Co-operative Life in South Wales, 1890-1964* (Talybont, 2014). As Burge comments elsewhere 'Reading Welsh historiography overall, it is difficult to realize that a co-operative movement has ever existed in Wales, let alone appreciate its significance', Alun Burge, 'The co-operative movement in south Wales and its history: "a task worthy of the most sincere devotion and application"', *Welsh History* Review 23/4 (2007), 59-71, 61; Alun Burge, 'Hidden in full view: the co-operative movement, the 1945-51 Labour Government and questions for Welsh labour history, *Llafur*, 12/1 (2016),132-46; *Llafur* 11/1 (2012) includes a special section on Welsh co-operatives including articles by Alun Burge, Helen Thomas and Nicole Robertson; Julie de Forges, '"We make millions of pairs of boots, but not one pair of millionaires": Co-operation and the Working Class in Liverpool and the Rhondda', *North West Labour History*, 19 (1994/5), 48-67.

[75] Andrew Edwards, *Labour's Crisis: Plaid Cymru, The Conservatives and the Decline of the Labour Party in North West-Wales, 1960-1974* (Cardiff, 2011); James Phillips, 'From Culture to Tradition: The Political Landscape of Monmouthshire, 1918-29', PhD thesis, Cardiff University, 2020.

[76] Deian Hopkin & Gregory Kealey (eds), *Class Community and the Labour Movement: Wales and Canada, 1850-1930* (Cardiff, 1989); William D. Jones, *Wales in America: Scranton and the Welsh, 1860-1920* (Cardiff, 1993); Bill Jones, 'Cymry "gwlad yr aur": ymfudwyr Cymreig yn Ballarat, Awstralia, yn ail hanner y bedwaredd ganrif ar bymtheg', *LLafur* 8/2 (2001), 41-62; Bill Jones, 'Labour migration and cross cultural encounters: Welsh copper workers in Chile in the nineteenth century', *Welsh History Review*, 27/1 (July 2014), 132-54; Stephanie Ward, *Unemployment and the State in Britain: The Means Test and Protest in 1930s South Wales and North-East England* (Manchester, 2014); Paul O'Leary, 'Power and modernity: transnational Wales,

history for a new Wales that draws on both socialist and nationalist traditions, ceases to see the Labour Party as an inevitable outcome of Welsh political development, and which reconciles the universalism of Aneurin Bevan with the particularism inherent in earlier Welsh radical traditions. Such a synthesis would offer a usable past to all the progressive elements within Welsh politics. It could also provide a resource to help reinvigorate devolved thinking within a British labour movement that currently seems suspicious of its own achievements in this regard.[77] The underpinning context for this, and the circumstance behind the creation of the 'new Wales', is the comprehensive de-industrialisation that has profoundly changed the nature of Welsh society over the last forty years. The next section will examine the implications of this for the writing of labour history.

Labour History in a Land of Playgrounds, Theme Parks and Memories.

Tower Colliery in south Wales, is an iconic location in recent Welsh labour history. After its closure by British Coal in 1994, 239 of its workers pooled their redundancy pay to buy and reopen it and ran it successfully for thirteen years against apparently impossible odds. Their achievement was a ray of light in the bleak aftermath of the 1984-5 miners' strike, but after 2008 the colliery stood forlorn. Until, in 2022, a company called Zip World developed the site. Now, for a price, those with a taste for adrenalin can enjoy a thrilling ride along a steel zip-wire suspended from the top of the mountain above down to the colliery site. And Tower is only the latest such innovation in post-industrial Wales. In the north, at Bethesda, a similar

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c. 1780-1939, *Llafur* 12/4 (2019-20), 33-55; Stephen Murray, 'Transnational labour recruitment: The Dowlais iron works Basques, 1900', *Llafur* 11/2 (2013), 27-39; James Michael Yeoman, 'Salud y anarquia desde Dowlais': the translocal experience of Spanish anarchists in south Wales, 1900-1915', *International Journal of Iberian Studies,* 29/3 (2016), 273-89; Daryl Leeworthy, 'Miners on the margins: characterising south Wales and Cape Breton as an industrial frontier, 1880-1939', *Llafur* 10/2 (2009), 53-72.

[77] For a powerful advocacy of such cross-ideological dialogue see Hywel Francis, *History on Our Side: Wales and the 1984-85 Miners' Strike* (Ferryside, 2009).

wire offers flights across the infamous Lord Penrhyn's quarries, and at Blaenau Ffestiniog, inside the largest slate mine in the world, the same company has suspended giant, bouncy nets across the huge underground voids, enabling visitors to admire the slate miners' astonishing work while they 'Bounce Below'. Some of the most impressive achievements of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Welsh labour have been transformed into twenty-first century playgrounds.

Other sites of past toil have been developed as more conventional heritage attractions. Several museums celebrate the heritage of coal, most notably the National Museum at Big Pit in Blaenavon, closed in 1980, and reopened in 1983 as a functional, intact coal mine-museum. Slate country boasts a national museum at Llanberis, and the whole slate region has recently been awarded international heritage status. If we go beyond coal and slate, however, the position of labour in the heritage portfolio of Wales becomes less prominent, thus reflecting the shape of the historiography discussed in part one of this essay. Metal mining still awaits its own 'National Museum'. The National Trust celebrates Roman Gold mining at Dolaucothi in Carmarthenshire, but the history of the mid-Wales silver-lead miners has been left in the hands of a private enterprise at Llywernog in north-Ceredigion. Once a mining museum, the 'attraction' now offers a 'Silver Mountain Experience' featuring goblins and 'fright-nights'. Textile workers have been better served, with representation at a National Woollen Museum in the Teifi Valley and a textile museum in Robert Owen's Newtown, and maritime workers are represented at Swansea's National Waterfront Museum. Nevertheless, the emphasis of most of these sites tends more towards a celebration of technology and innovation than labour history, and in the current harsh economic climate the public history of Welsh labour stands in ever-present danger of marginalisation.

Not all is bleak, however. The landscape-level memorialisation of vanished industries and their workers has developed significantly in recent years. Unsurprisingly, coal has taken

the primary place. As the pits closed in the nineties, the physical remains of the coal industry were removed with a haste difficult not to see as a deliberate attempt to wipe the memory of mining from the Welsh landscape. In recent years, however, restored winding wheels and other pieces of hardware that were fortuitously spared a trip to the scrapyard have started to reappear, strategically sited on the sites of former collieries. The commissioning of statues and memorials has added another strand to the creation of public memory. In 2013, one hundred years after an explosion took 440 lives at Senghennydd's Universal Colliery, a National Mining Memorial was opened there, comprising a garden, statues and a wall of remembrance recording the disaster's victims. More impressive still is the magnificent 'Guardian of the Valleys', erected at Six Bells in 2010 in memory of the forty-five lives lost in the 1960 disaster there. The statue is surely one of the most impressive pieces of public art in Britain. Wales is beginning to come to terms collectively with the enormity of its industrial and labour history.

This is of great import to Welsh labour historians, who see themselves, in Gwyn A. Williams' phrase, as 'People's Remembrancers', carrying the torch of popular memory. Perhaps this was once true. Today, however, a far greater proportion of the public will experience Welsh labour history through visiting theme parks or bouncing below than will ever read *Llafur: The Journal of Welsh People's History* or attend labour history day-schools. The collapse of heavy industry in Wales and the associated decline of mass-trade unionism has impacted profoundly upon the world of labour history. It has sapped membership from Llafur, which, although always organised from within the academy, in its early days drew strength from trade union structures, as discussed earlier. As time has passed that link has weakened. The recent passing of Hywel Francis, son of miners' leader Dai Francis and one of Llafur's founders, underlined the growing distance between Welsh labour historians and

Welsh labour history.[78] A sense of impending generational change is palpable. Many of Llafur's founder members are still active and continue to make a substantial contribution to Welsh labour historiography, but they now share the stage with a generation of scholars who have no direct memory of heavy-industrial Wales.

Some indications of this evolution may be seen in current Welsh historiography, which has diversified from its traditional comfort zones of workplace struggle, the miners' union and the Labour Party and partially abandoned the themes tied up in the narratives of 'labour's forward march'. David Selway's work on memory reflects implicitly but intimately its own context, for example.[79] The work of Ben Curtis and Steve Thompson on health and disability confronts directly the human aftermath of industrialisation.[80] This work is still recognisably labour history, but of a sort that reflects its new post-industrial context. Nevertheless, we still do not have a full labour history of deindustrialisation in Wales that matches the attention that has been given to the subject in Scotland.[81] Perhaps the subject is simply too painful for labour historians, who have so far left it largely to social scientists to map the territory. Huw Beynon's and Ray Hudson's masterly parallel study of the south Wales and Durham coalfields, *The Shadow of the Mine,* with its extensive use of oral testimony, presents one approach, while Valerie Walkerdine's work on the psychology of

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[78] See obituary of Hywel Francis by Sian Williams, *Llafur* 13/1 (2021), 5-9.

[79] David Selway, 'Collective Memory in the mining communities of south Wales', PhD thesis, University of Sussex, 2017; David Selway, 'Death Underground: Mining Accidents and Memory in South Wales, 1913-74', *Labour History Review*, 81/3 (2016), 187-209.

[80] Steven Thompson, '"The living dead of the mining industry": deindustrialisation, sheltered workplaces and the re-employment of disabled miners in post-war Wales', *Welsh History Review* 31/3 (2023), 468-93; Ben Curtis & Steven Thompson, '"This is the country of premature old men": ageing and aged Miners in the south Wales coalfield, c. 1880-1947', *Cultural and Social History*, 12 / 4 (2016), 587-606, & '"A plentiful crop of cripples made by all this progress": disability, artificial limbs and working-class mutualism in the south Wales coalfield, 1890-1948', *Social History of Medicine* 27/4 (2014), 708-27.

[81] Jim Phillips, Valerie Wright & Jim Tomlinson, *Deindustrialisation and the Moral Economy in Scotland Since 1955* (Edinburgh, 2021).

steel plant closure suggests the possibility of a form of psycho-labour history (to parallel, perhaps, the emergence of 'psychogeography'?).[82] Labour historians might take inspiration from this work and think about applying some of its lessons to what could be conceived as a longer-term history of deindustrialisation. The recent mass, almost comprehensive, closure of heavy industry may be unprecedented, but industries have been rising, faltering and closing for hundreds of years in Wales. Turning the telescope away from the great spectacle of modernisation underpinned by the rise of coal, and examining the rise and fall of Welsh industries in a more comprehensive sense offers an opportunity to create some revisionist approaches to labour's Welsh past. It might help construct a framework within which to address some of the imbalances discussed in part one of this essay and contribute towards the creation of the new Welsh labour history advocated in part two. One thing is certain, the new post-industrial, devolved context offers both uncertainties and opportunities for labour historians. To avoid confronting them is not an option.

Conclusion

Shaped by geology, Welsh labour historiography has been dominated by its greatest occupational group, the south Wales miners; it has been overwhelmingly regional in nature, and outside the coal and slate producing regions has tended towards fragmentation. Welsh labour historians have also studiously avoided some of the great debates that have dominated wider British labour historiography, despite having pioneered some of their themes. This essay has argued that it is time to assemble the pieces of Welsh labour's incomplete historical jigsaw puzzle to create a less regionalised, more genuinely national Welsh labour history, and

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[82] Huw Beynon & Ray Hudson, *The Shadow of the Mine: Coal and the End of Industrial Britain* (London, 2021); Valerie Walkerdine, 'Steel. Identity. Community: regenerating identities in a south Wales town', in Margaret Wetherell, *Identity in the Twenty-first Century: New Trends in Changing Times* (London, 2009), 59-75.

that this history should engage more directly with some of the debates that have shaped wider British labour historiography. It has also recognised that such work will be undertaken under very different circumstances from those that originally shaped our discipline; it will be the task of a new generation of Welsh labour historians with no direct experience of the industrial base that created the history of Welsh labour to write a new labour history for a new Wales. The task ahead will demand a reassessment of the themes raised in the introduction of this essay: the relationship between regional, national and supranational histories of labour; the relationship between class, gender, race and nation; the relationship between the political ideologies of socialism and nationalism, and the role of language in mediating all of these. It will necessarily raise fundamental questions about the definition and scope of what we understand as labour history, which will be of not just Welsh but universal relevance.

Such work is, of course, well underway, as a glance through recent back issues of *Llafur* will testify. Traditional labour history – the world of industrial struggle and Labour politics - still occupies a secure place, but one among an ever-growing number of more diffuse, culturally-focused contributions. Recent years have included contributions on subjects including cinema and television, music, sports ranging from hurling to swimming and children's history, to identify just a few themes. Such diversity has, of course, always been present in the journal's pages, but it is now defining. This confirms the decision, taken in 2002, to change Llafur's subtitle from the Welsh Labour History Society to the Welsh People's History Society.[83] Welsh people's history appears to be in robust health, but these developments do raise legitimate questions about the definition of our discipline. The Welsh

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[83] 'Editorial', *Llafur*, 8/3 (2002), 1-2. The change of name was the second step in Llafur's evolution away from its original title. The change from 'The Society for the Study of Welsh Labour History' to 'Welsh Labour History Society' was taken in 1987, and 'Welsh People's History Society' was adopted in 2002 to remedy 'the defect of not clearly placing some scholarly distance between the society and party politics' and because 'the word "labour" tends to have inordinately masculine connotations'. It was also hoped that the change of name would encourage more contributions on pre-industrial Welsh history.

society is the only one of the labour history societies in the British Isles to have abandoned the word 'labour' in its title. In 2000 Andy Croll simultaneously congratulated and chided Welsh labour historians for the way in which they had managed to avoid the much discussed late-twentieth century 'crisis' of labour history.[84] It would be ironic if, having conspicuously enjoyed a 'non-crisis' in the 1990s, Welsh labour history created its own twenty-first century crisis at a time when the re-emergence of class as a defining historical theme was creating a new and vibrant labour history elsewhere.

If these developments put the 'labour' aspect of Welsh labour history under scrutiny, there is also reason to interrogate its 'Welsh' dimensions. Since its early days Welsh historical writing has been part of a nation building project, and Welsh labour history has been consonant with that end. The sharply regionalised nature of Wales (which is geological, economic, cultural, political and linguistic in nature) has presented this project with some interesting problems, and these have been reflected in its labour history. A 'new' post-industrial Wales, with its own devolved institutions and a resurgent national confidence might be one in which some of them can be resolved. Labour historians might feel freer to climb from their steep-sided former-industrial valleys to sample the view from the tops of the mountains, from where they could embrace more thoroughly the entanglements between the different regions of Wales, between Wales and the rest of the British Isles, and ultimately between Welsh labour and the wider world. They might be able to integrate nation building, four nations, and transnational approaches to labour history, thus allowing a full exploration of the creative tensions between universalism and particularism. This aspiration is not, of course, new to Welsh thinking. Like other approaches discussed here, it was pioneered in Wales. The relationship between the universal and the particular is a central theme, for example, in the thought of one of modern Wales's greatest socialist thinkers, Raymond

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[84] Croll, 'People's remembrancers'.

Williams. Its further exploration points to a future Welsh labour history that will be more connected, both internally and to the world beyond.

This way forward will demand a careful balancing act. Going too far down the universalist path, embracing the debates of 'British' labour history too enthusiastically, or surrendering wholly to the 'transnational', might threaten to dissolve the very distinctiveness of Welsh labour history. As a safeguard, Welsh labour historians will need to nurture, to borrow Raymond Williams' phrase, a form of 'militant particularism'. They will need to retain in the centre of their analysis the things that make Welsh labour history distinctively Welsh. One obvious focus in this respect is the role of the Welsh language in the history of Welsh labour. It is striking that advocates of the 'linguistic turn' in the 1980s and 1990s focused almost exclusively upon the varying uses of the English language; they neglected to recognise the way in which the use of multiple languages in bilingual parts of the British Isles worked to structure political discourse and thus shape working-class history. Wales provides a fascinating case study in this respect. The existence of substantial bodies of both primary and secondary source material in Welsh also presents Welsh labour historians with an important task in ensuring that a full range of historical interpretations – not just those recorded in English – is available to historians who do not read Welsh. The translation of Welsh source material and the integration of insights offered in Welsh medium work into the kinds of syntheses advocated earlier in this essay are an essential part of the wider agenda advocated in this essay.

Other scholars will doubtless be able to add further items, and as Welsh labour history enters its second half-century as an organised discipline there is no shortage of work for its relatively small community - both inside and outside of the academy - to contemplate. This essay has made numerous suggestions with a liberality available only to one who has been asked to do so without the burden of having to act upon them. Its survey holds no pretence of

comprehensiveness, and its author is acutely conscious of its numerous omissions and avoidances. If, however, it achieves the dual task of stimulating debate within the world of Welsh labour history on the one hand, and, on the other, encouraging a greater engagement by British labour historians with Welsh history, it will have done its job. In promoting this, it will hopefully have become clear that it is in exploring what is truly distinctive about the history of labour in Wales that the Welsh labour history community makes its most important and defining contributions to the wider labour history community beyond its borders.