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## Towards a Welsh People's History: A Reflection on Welsh Women's History and Women in *Llafur*<sup>1</sup>

Deirdre Beddoe's 1981 article in this journal is rightly credited as being a foundational piece in the study of Welsh women's history.<sup>2</sup> Her shrewd observation that if 'a creature from outer space landed in Wales, obtained a National Library of Wales reader's ticket and conscientiously worked through Welsh history, she would be really perplexed as to how the Welsh procreated. They were all men, even the Daughters of Rebecca were men in drag!' must be one of the most quoted lines from *Llafur* in undergraduate Welsh history essays. This is not just for the humour or wit, but more so the disbelief from twenty-first century students that in 1981 Welsh women remained largely neglected from the pages of history books and journal articles. It is telling that Beddoe begins by outlining the importance of writing Welsh women's history. It was, simply put, a case of 'We need to understand our past to understand our present'. Understanding the sexual division of labour would help to explain 'twentieth century patriarchal capitalism' and 'A well researched history of women can prove a source of strength and encouragement to women engaged in initiatives for change today.'<sup>3</sup> The patient walk through why women's history should be studied, the reasons for its neglect, and the importance of women's history to labour history must have been shaped by how Beddoe imagined her readership would receive the piece. Historians of Wales had done much to shift the focus onto the working class since the more systematic focus on modern Welsh history from the 1960s. Yet, despite this shift in interpretation to include the toil and struggle of labourers, women's experiences remained largely confined to a supporting act in the home or a passing line recognising their presence during strikes and protest. Beddoe was careful to note that this was because of the cultural conditioning of male

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<sup>1</sup> My thanks go to Hywel Francis and Deian Hopkin who both helped clarify some points on *Llafur*'s earliest history. Conversations with Beth Jenkins were very helpful in shaping my ideas. I would like to extend a particular thank you to Angela V. John for a long conversation about Welsh women's history and *Llafur*'s role. Any errors are, of course, my own and this is very much my reflection on women's place in Welsh history and the society.

<sup>2</sup> Deirdre Beddoe, 'Towards a Welsh Woman's History', *Llafur*, 3, 2 (1981), pp. 32-38.

<sup>3</sup> Beddoe, 'Towards a Welsh Woman's History', pp. 32-33

historians rather than wilful neglect, but she was clear in her concluding point that 'If we wish to understand capitalism – to be better equipped to fight it – we need one another. Women's history and labour history should proceed together.'<sup>4</sup>

Since the publication of Beddoe's article there have been huge advancements in the field of Welsh women's history. In the Society this achievement was in no small part down to the work of a group of scholars who included, Angela V. John, Sian Rhiannon Williams, Dot Jones, Shelia Owen-Jones, Rosemary Jones, and Neil Evans. Our knowledge of women's lives in political parties, protest movements, the home, in the workplace, and their intimate lives is now much richer. While there have been undoubted achievements in the establishment of the subject, we should, perhaps, stop short of only celebrating successes. In reflecting upon the development of the field and Llafur's role in it, we also need to consider the uncomfortable. Describing organising the first conference on women's history, Deirdre Beddoe recalled:

I had organised a conference that was really a Llafur conference based in the University of Glamorgan, which was still then the Polytechnic of Wales, and Llafur was a very male organisation, there'd been lots of arguments, should we have a conference that was devoted to women's history, some of the miners said it's not our area boys, but I persisted with this and some of the men on the Llafur committee were very for this. We tried it for a few years but by 1983 we went ahead ... it gave the whole subject huge publicity and I got great people to contribute, I think Sheila Rowbotham spoke at it, we had a panel on which Elaine Morgan contributed, and Professor Gwyn Alf Williams was the sort of great, fantastic historian on Welsh working class life. And he was great because men like him were willing to confess, we made an error, it's wrong that we have left women out of the history and always the way to appeal to these men, older men was through their mothers [laughs] and

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<sup>4</sup> Beddoe, 'Towards a Welsh Woman's History', p. 38.

younger men was through their daughters. They didn't want their daughters to be held back in their careers.<sup>5</sup>

The cultural conditioning of the 'male dominated society' and 'the assumptions of a male dominated left and labour movements' that male labour historians had grown up with had a dimension in the real world and not just in print.<sup>6</sup> In assessing the state of Welsh women's history and its relationship to *Llafur*, recognising the influence of contemporary gendered culture on the writing, researching, and presentation of women's history is a fundamental aspect.

In this article I want to consider both the position of women's history and women within the field of Welsh history. This is not to narrowly conflate women's history with women historians, but rather to recognise the importance of considering women's voices in the past and the present as Beddoe did in 1981. As the political climate shifts, and campaigners for the rights of all who identify as women grow louder, it would be remiss not to reflect on the current position of women in *Llafur* and the field of Welsh history. Outside of academia, women's history is certainly flourishing in all kinds of ways, as the work of the Women's Archive of Wales attests. But, within academia the position is more mixed. The enthusiasm for women's history shown in the number of undergraduate and postgraduate dissertations and theses dedicated to the subject is not reflected in the publications of those in academic posts. This is not to lay the blame at the door of a relatively small number of scholars in the increasingly challenging environment of higher education. Rather, it is to consider how we might be at a crucial juncture for Welsh women's history. The turn towards histories of masculinity is to be welcomed, and not least in furthering our understanding of how gendered power relations operated within Welsh society. However, as part of this project, historians of Wales need to further develop theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of Welsh women if

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<sup>5</sup> British Library Sound Archive, Sisterhood and After: The Women's Liberation Oral History Project, Interview of Deirdre Beddoe by Rachel Cohen, June 2011. [Please note, the full interview has an embargo until December 2021, this transcribed extract is on the British Library website: <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/deirdre-beddoe-organising-the-first-welsh-womens-history-conference>, accessed April 2020].

<sup>6</sup> Beddoe, 'Towards a Welsh Woman's History', p. 34.

critical examinations of femininity are to persist. I here outline some potential future directions for *Llafur* (both the society and the journal) to suggest how to promote both women's history *and* women's voices if we are to continue the work of the pioneering generation of scholars in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

### Acknowledging Our Mothers' Land

When Deirdre Beddoe published her 1981 article, *Llafur* as a society did not have a particularly welcoming record for women's history or even women. Deian Hopkin recalled that 'in its early days *Llafur* was overwhelmingly a male organization'. On one occasion in 1984 women attending a *Llafur* lecture at the Marxian Club in Blaenclydach were asked to leave the 'Men Only' space of the bar.<sup>7</sup> At the time of *Llafur*'s foundations, the struggle for recognition of women's history was witnessed in other organizations where radical and socialist historians dominated. In 1971 at a History Workshop session the suggestion that those working on women's history should meet later in the day was greeted with laughter.<sup>8</sup> We can only speculate as to what exactly it was that men feared would be lost by including women in the record and debate. British women's history had lagged behind American and French feminist histories, but by the later 1970s Sheila Rowbotham, Anna Davin and Sally Alexander had helped to firmly establish women's history as a field.<sup>9</sup> Deirdre Beddoe and Angela V. John, both of whom became crucial in the development of Welsh women's history, were at the forefront of these developments. Beddoe's histories of Welsh convict women and her guide to studying women's history were to prove vital. John's studies of pit girls and women's work in England across the Victorian and Edwardian periods revealed the potential of women's labour history and socialist-feminist approaches. It was a body of work that helped establish

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<sup>7</sup> Deian Hopkin, 'Llafur: Labour History Society and People's Remembrancer, 1970-2000', *Labour History Review*, 5, 1 (Special Supplement) (2010), p. 143.

<sup>8</sup> Sally Alexander and Anna Davin, 'Feminist History', *History Workshop Journal*, 1, 1 (1976), p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> Sheila Rowbotham, *Hidden from History: 300 Years of Women's Oppression and the Fight Against It* (London, 1973); Alexander and Davin, 'Feminist History'; Sally Alexander, *Women's Work in Nineteenth-Century London: A study of the years 1820-50* (London, 1983).



women's history as a subject.<sup>10</sup> The achievements in these areas, while not without provoking hostility in some quarters, must have made the lack of progress within Welsh labour history frustrating. It was not only the subject matter that was an issue. Women themselves did not easily find a position or role in the early years of the society. Llafur's close ties to the labour movement and its genuine commitment to a broad membership well beyond university walls should rightly be applauded. But, it also, perhaps unwittingly, shaped the style of labour history that was to emerge. Welsh labour history was viewed through a masculine lens: it was working men whose history was overwhelmingly uncovered, written about, and celebrated. As Neil Evans later reflected, 'Welsh writing reflected a radical tradition that was unaware of, or unconcerned about, its masculinity'.<sup>11</sup> The primacy of men in histories was reflected in the society itself.

Women's entry to Llafur was not unlike women's position in the Labour Party's early years: they made up an important section of the membership, but they were part of the committee only in small numbers, and all of the officer roles were dominated by men. It was only after Angela John's election to the committee in 1977 that it enjoyed the sustained presence of women.<sup>12</sup> Angela John was to be a pivotal figure in the promotion of the position of women in Llafur and Welsh women's history.<sup>13</sup> While there were many supportive men on the committee in the late 1970s, the highly masculine make-up of the society and the history it favoured cannot be ignored. John was to be part of a group of women who were to gradually shift the

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<sup>10</sup> Deirdre Beddoe, *Welsh Convict Women: A Study of Women Transported from Wales to Australia, 1787-1852* (Barry, 1979); Deirdre Beddoe, *Discovering Women's History: A Practical Manual* (London, 1983); Angela V. John, *By the Sweat of their Brow: Women Workers at Victorian Coal Mines* (London, 1980); Angela V. John, *Unequal Opportunities: Women's Employment in England 1880—1918* (Oxford, 1986).

<sup>11</sup> Neil Evans, 'Writing the Social History of Modern Wales: Approaches, Achievements and Problems', *Social History*, 17, no. 3 (1992), p. 483.

<sup>12</sup> Patricia Moore was the first woman to be part of the committee in 1973 and 1974, but she was likely co-opted onto the committee or elected for her role as archivist for Glamorgan Record Office.

<sup>13</sup> John has remained an active and influential figure within Llafur. She has served on the committee, been the chair of the society, and is now one of the vice-presidents. John has also written histories and biographies of Welsh women who defied the gendered conventions of their own period including: Lady Charlotte Guest, Menna Gallie, Margaret Wynn Nevinson, and Lady Rhondda. Her publications in *Llafur* include: 'A Miner Struggle? Women's Protests in Welsh Mining History', *Llafur*, 4, 1 (1984); "'Run Like Blazes": The Suffragettes and Welshness', *Llafur*, 6, 3 (1994).

composition of the society and its published histories. She was joined on the committee two years later by Sian Rhiannon Williams, and then Deirdre Beddoe in 1980. Thereafter, women's presence on the committee fluctuated between two and four, including Dot Jones and Sheila Owen-Jones (both first elected in 1983) and Ursula Masson (elected in 1985). Together these women formed what we might now think of as a pioneering generation of women's historians. They blazed a trail for other women to follow in Llafur and firmly laid the foundations for Welsh women's history. Dot Jones became the first female officer in her role as Membership Secretary in 1984. In 1990 Angela John was elected as Chair of Llafur, and thereafter the presence of women increased. In 1994 while John was Chair, Joanne Cayford was elected as Secretary, Kay Browning as the Membership Secretary, and Katrina Gass, Angela Gafney, Rosemary Jones, Dot Jones, and Mari Williams all served on the committee. While not all of the earliest women's histories were written by women, as Sharon Block and David Newman have recently reminded us, the connection remains important and should not be overlooked.<sup>14</sup> How women are viewed in the present undoubtedly shapes the attention given to women in the historical record.

After Beddoe's 1981 published call, articles on women's work (1982) and unmarried mothers (1983) appeared in the following two issues. In 1984, three articles on women's protests, female involvement in friendly societies, and images of Welsh women were published. Collectively these works not only made it clear that Welsh women had a separate history: they challenged established narratives and laid the foundations for new avenues of historical enquiry. The rising presence of women in cultural life was also reflected in the establishment in 1986 of Honno, an independent co-operative press dedicated to publishing works by female authors. That women's history was slowly coming of age was reflected in the publication in

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<sup>14</sup> The support of Neil Evans and his work in Welsh women's history deserve particular mention. He was part of the first group of historians to investigate women's lives in the suffrage movement, the Labour Party and as campaigners for change. For example, Neil Evans, "'A blessing for the miner's wife' : the campaign for pithead baths in the South Wales coalfield, 1908-1950', *Llafur*, 6,3 (1994), 5-28; Neil Evans and Dot Jones, "'To help forward the great work of humanity'": women in the Labour Party' in Duncan Tanner, Chris Williams, Deian Hopkin (eds), *The Labour Party in Wales, 1900-2000* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000). On women's position as historians and women's history see, Sharon Block and David Newman, 'What, Where, When, and Sometimes Why: Data Mining Two Decades of Women's History Abstracts', *Journal of Women's History*, 23, 1 (2011), pp. 86-7.

1991 of *Our Mothers' Land* which brought together works by many of the those who had been at the forefront of developing women's history within *Llafur*.<sup>15</sup>

But, the development of a subject cannot be measured in the terms of scholarly output alone. It's longevity and the transformation of a field is also dependent upon access to archival sources, day schools for debate, and a wider popular interest in the field. Alongside these early publications in *Llafur*, spaces were created for debate and discussion of Welsh women's history. In 1983 Deirdre Beddoe organised a conference on 'Working Class Women: The Welsh Experience Past and Present'. The conference aimed to showcase the latest research with the dual ambition of letting women reclaim their history and understand contemporary inequalities. Presentations were given by Sheila Rowbotham, workshops provided on subjects such as women in coalmining, women's history in the community and schools and women's work, and a panel composed of Gwyn Williams, Elaine Morgan, Hilary Sutton and Deirdre Beddoe was chaired by Angela John. Beddoe felt that one of the most important aspects of the event was the number of women who attended who had not previously been to *Llafur* conferences. The event showed 'publicly' *Llafur*'s commitment to the inclusion of women and women's history and Beddoe hoped that the interest in the past and present concerns of women *and* men by the society would continue.<sup>16</sup> Beddoe's stress on the achievement of the conference is more obvious when understood in the context of 'the furious debate' that had taken place in *Llafur* about whether women's history qualified for three days of discussion.<sup>17</sup> It was still difficult in 1983 to organise a conference dedicated to women's history, although the turnout and response to the day suggested just what an appetite there was for the topic. The activities of the Swansea Women's History Group in the same year in recording oral histories and producing materials for local schools also encapsulated the ambition of feminist historians for uncovering women's voices in the past, to help fight oppression in the present.<sup>18</sup> For a small group, the legacy of their work was really important.

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<sup>15</sup> Angela V. John (ed.), *Our Mothers' Land: Essays in Welsh Women's History* (Cardiff, 1991).

<sup>16</sup> Deirdre Beddoe, 'Easter Conference Report', *Llafur*, 4, 1 (1984), p. 100.

<sup>17</sup> Evans, 'Writing the Social History of Modern Wales', p. 483.

<sup>18</sup> Deirdre Beddoe, 'Swansea Women's History Group', *Llafur*, 4, 1 (1984), p. 101.



Ursula Masson had been a member of Llafur's committee since 1985, and she was the embodiment of the society's ethos of serious scholarship and engagement with public histories. Masson went on to write histories which made historians rethink how we approach Welsh politics and women's place within these arenas.<sup>19</sup> But, it was her 'Smiling and Splendid Women' that, for me, encapsulates her achievement in the academic rigour of the research, the pioneering use of video recording technology and, at the same time, her infectious enthusiasm in getting her students and the wives of miners on strike to participate so readily in the project.<sup>20</sup> The voices of the women in the film are haunting in their passion for preserving the strike, the glow of newfound female friendships, the adventure of their militant activities, but, above all, their unwavering hope for the future. It is an historical document that pointed to the importance of preserving women's voices and history. The spirit of change in the lives of individual women in the film who expressed personal and political awakenings during the miners' strike was evidence of women's gradually shifting position in other areas of life. In the 1980s Thatcherism and all of the industrial turbulence it brought through the 1984-85 strike, along with its assault on education and welfare, created its own pressures for Llafur and its membership. Nevertheless, women's history continued to develop and women's position on the society strengthened.<sup>21</sup>

### Moving Welsh women's histories *Out of the Shadows*

While *Our Mother's Land* was to become a seminal text within the field, interestingly, there was not to be a subsequent collection of history essays of this kind. Instead, it was scholars in the fields of literature, cultural studies, and sociology who produced follow-up volumes in *Our Sister's Land*, *Our Daughter's Land* and *Our Changing*

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<sup>19</sup> For example, Ursula Masson, 'Divided loyalties: Women's Suffrage and Party Politics in South Wales 1912-1915', *Llafur*, 7, 3-4 (1999), pp. 113-26; Ursula Masson, "'Political Conditions in Wales are Quite Different ...': Party Politics and Votes for Women in Wales, 1912-15", *Women's History Review*, 9,2 (2000), pp. 369-88.

<sup>20</sup> The film was directed by Masson along with Gail Allen and Jen Wilson. 'Smiling and Splendid Women' (dir. Gail Allen, Ursula Masson, and Jen Wilson), 1986.

<sup>21</sup> In his Secretary's report to the 1990 AGM, Neil Evans noted the difficult years the society faced in the mid-1980s. 'Minutes of the Llafur AGM, 3 November 1990', *Llafur*, 5, 4 (1991), p. 110.

*Land*.<sup>22</sup> Monographs of Welsh women's history were few and far between, although the shift to gender history from the early 1990s saw women feature more prominently in a range of histories.<sup>23</sup> Deirdre Beddoe's *Out of the Shadows* (2001) was, therefore, a considerable achievement in being the first book-length study dedicated to providing an examination of women's lives across the twentieth century in Wales.<sup>24</sup> It, alongside *Our Mother's Land*, shaped the historiographical landscape and they remain the starting points for histories of women's lives in the fields of work, education and the home. Beyond edited collections and monographs, throughout the 1990s a steady stream of publications on women's history continued within the journal.<sup>25</sup> *Llafur*'s double 1999 issue reflected the state of field in many ways. Mari Williams became the first female editor in 1999 (alongside Neil Evans), the issue contained four articles relating to women's history, and the chair of society was Mair Francis with a healthy number of women also serving as Vice-Presidents, Officers and committee members. The editorial reflected on *Llafur*'s role in promoting women's history, concluding, 'We are delighted that the current issue substantially maintains our commitment to write the history of all the people of Wales.'<sup>26</sup>

The 1999 editorial quite rightly highlighted *Llafur*'s role, which could be witnessed beyond the journal. Those individuals who were at the forefront of the development of Welsh women's history continued to contribute key works to the field. Mari Williams' *Forgotten Army* explored the lives not just of women munitions workers: it also examined the gendered nature of the labour market in south Wales

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<sup>22</sup> Sandra Betts (ed.), *Our Daughters' Land Past and Present* (UWP, 1994); Jane Aaron, Teresa Rees, Sandra Betts and Moira Vincentelli (eds), *Our Sisters' Land: Changing Identity of Women in Wales* (UWP, 2004); and Dawn Mannay (ed.), *Revisiting Gender, Class and Identity in Contemporary Wales* (UWP, 2016)

<sup>23</sup> Exceptions include, Mari A. Williams, *A Forgotten Army: Female Munitions Workers of South Wales, 1939-1945* (2002).

<sup>24</sup> Deirdre Beddoe, *Out of the Shadows: A History of Women in Twentieth-Century Wales* (Cardiff, 2000).

<sup>25</sup> For example, Pamela Kneller, 'Welsh Immigrant Women as Wage Earners in Utica, New York, 1860-1870', *Llafur*, 5, 4 (1991); Sydna Ann Williams, 'Women's Employment in the Nineteenth Century Anglesey', *Llafur*, 6, 2 (1993); Margaret Douglas, 'Women, God and Birth Control: The First Hospital Birth Control Clinic, Abertillery, 1925', *Llafur*, 6,4 (1995); Kerry Davies, 'Sexing the Mind: Women, Gender and Madness in Nineteenth Century Welsh Asylums', *Llafur*, 7, 1 (1996).

<sup>26</sup> *Llafur*, 7, 3-4 (1999): Grace Hagen, 'Women and Poverty in South-West Wales, 1834-1914'; Graham Martin, 'The Culture of the Women's Suffrage Movement, the McKenzie Letters'; Mason, 'Divided Loyalties'; Brain Roberts, ' "The Budgie Train": Women and Wartime Munitions Work in a Mining Valley; and Neil Evans, Paul O'Leary, and Mari Williams, 'Editorial'.

and patterns of leisure and family life.<sup>27</sup> Beddoe edited collections of women's writings on the Second World War and in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>28</sup> In 1998, Sian Rhiannon Williams along with Carol White produced *Struggle or Starve* a mixture of histories and writings on women's lives in interwar south Wales.<sup>29</sup> These works highlighted the ongoing project to recover women's voices in historical records in order that historians and students could analyse their experiences.<sup>30</sup> The foundation of the Women's Archive Wales in 1997 was the fruition of the ambitions of Ursula Masson and has ensured that this process of recovery continues. Women's Archive Wales has been absolutely pivotal in enriching archival collections across Wales, generating new materials through ambitious oral history projects, producing publications, and making women's histories more visible.

This changing environment and the fact that a special case no longer needed to be made for women's history was shown in the change of the society's name from the Welsh Labour History Society to the Welsh People's History Society in 2001. Gender history became a key theme for the journal which, while keeping labour history at its centre, adopted a broader social historical approach. In the twenty-first century a steady stream of publications on women's history continued in the journal; topics included experiences of war, education, co-operativism, work, trade unions, criminality, and youth culture.<sup>31</sup> There were not articles on women's history in every issue, but there was certainly considerable momentum. Moreover, Mari Williams

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<sup>27</sup> Although other works in the Studies in Welsh History Series (founded in 1977) do focus upon gender, it is the only work alongside Ryland Wallace's *Suffrage* to focus explicitly on Welsh women's history. With the current funding position of University Wales Press there must be many Welsh women's history monographs who would have found a home here potentially left unpublished. Williams, *A Forgotten Army*.

<sup>28</sup> Deirdre Beddoe and Leigh Verrill-Rhys, *Parachutes and Petticoats: Welsh women writing on the Second World War* (Dinas Powys, 1992); Deirdre Beddoe (ed.), *Changing times: Welsh women writing on the 1950s and 1960s* (Dinas Powys, 2003).

<sup>29</sup> Carol White and Sian Rhiannon Williams (eds), *Struggle or Starve: Women's Lives in the South Wales Valleys Between the Two World Wars* (Dinas Powys, 2002)

<sup>30</sup> Project Grace was established in 1992 to prepare learning packs of documentary sources related to Welsh women's history for University of Wales Extra Mural / Continuing Education classes. The project was led by Neil Evans, Pam Michaels and Annie Williams, and the impressive collections of original materials showed that women's history was established as a subject in its own right in higher and further education. See Martin Wright, 'Whose Past? Whose Future? An Exploration Of Women's History in Wales', *Equal Opportunities International*, 19, nos. 2/3/4 (2000), pp. 25-30.

<sup>31</sup> For example, Lisa Snook, "'Out of the Cage"? Women and the First World War in Pontypridd', *Llafur*, 8, 2 (2001); Deborah James, "'Drunk and riotous in Pontypridd": women, the police courts and the press in South Wales Coalfield society, 1899-1914', *Llafur*, 8, 3 (2002); Alun Burge, 'Swimming against the tide: gender, learning and advancement in South Wales, 1900-1939', *Llafur*, 8, 3 (2002).

and Ursula Masson both acted as co-editors in these years. Outside of Llafur, women's history has been considerably enriched through studies of women in politics – including the Labour, Liberal, and Conservative Parties – sexuality, the women's suffrage movement, the 1926 lockout, professional occupations, health, Welsh cultural circles, immigration and race, the Rebecca Riots, and responses to the infamous Blue Books. For those interested in Welsh women's history or, indeed, Welsh people's history, there was now an expansive body of work to draw upon. In the forty years since Dierdre Beddoe's call for Welsh women's history, much work has been completed. And yet, there remains much to be done within the journal and the society. Since the mid-2000s the number of women on the committee has never exceeded three, and has sometimes been reduced to a single member. While women are present as Secretary (Sian Williams, another crucial figure in Llafur's history), joint editor (Stephanie Ward), membership secretaries (Rhian Diggins) and treasurers, and the committee is populated with men dedicated to women's history and women's rights, the reduction in the number of women on the committee represents a concern that needs to be addressed.<sup>32</sup>

#### Future Directions, 'For Women, For Wales ...'

How the position of women on the committee and women's history more generally should progress might be considered as interlocking issues. In this final section, I want to sketch out some potential new avenues of research and to also suggest ways for addressing what might be a growing gender imbalance. In outlining new directions, in some ways we might return to very familiar themes from Llafur's original primary interest in labour history. We still do not know enough about women's working lives. Carys Howell has revealed that there were more domestic servants in Wales than miners at the turn of the twentieth century,

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<sup>32</sup> For 2019-20, there are two women on the Executive Committee, three in officer positions and two as Vice Presidents. They are Rhian Diggins and Mary MacGregor (Executive Committee), Siân Williams (Secretary), Siân Rhiannon Williams (Welsh-Language Editor), Morwenna Osmond (Publicity and Communications), and Deirdre Beddoe and Angela John (Vice Presidents).

and yet we know little of their experiences.<sup>33</sup> Domestic servants reflect many of the issues of working women's lives: an unquestioned image predominates leading to a lack of understanding of experiences *and* narrowly conflating women's roles to particular fields. There was a breadth of occupations for women, of which we know very little. The story of how women became unionised, fought for the right to be trained and skilled, agitated for higher wages and improved working conditions all remains largely hidden. In the twentieth century, the Voices from the Factory Floor project shows the potential for exploring women's experiences of the workplace.<sup>34</sup> Rather than taking a traditional labour approach to women in the workplace, exploring the intersection between class and gender could prove fruitful.

Nor should our understanding of women in the workplace should be limited to the working class. Beth Jenkins' work on professional women in Wales demonstrates how Welsh women fought for positions in medicine, the law, architecture and academia. Networks of professional women provided support across Wales and connected Welsh women with their English counterparts.<sup>35</sup> In *Rocking the Boat* Angela John explores middle-class women's involvement in challenging the gendered status quo in cultural and political life.<sup>36</sup> The long hangover of labour history has all too often pushed middle-class women's lives to the historiographical margins. Where the social circles, family roles, education, and employment of English middle-class women is relatively well-known, middle-class Welsh women appear only in their most public and prominent examples or as suffragettes in the early twentieth century. The histories of those women who do not fit into the most prominent representation of Welsh womanhood as either class conscious and Labour voting on the one hand, or a Liberal supporting bastion of Welsh cultural life on the other, need exploration. These monolithic representations

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<sup>33</sup> Carys Howells, 'Hidden Labours: The Domestic Service Industry in south Wales, 1871–1921', in Louise Miskell (ed.), *New Perspectives on Welsh Industrial History* (Cardiff, 2020), pp. 75-102. See also, Rosemary Scaddon, *No Job For a Little Girl: Voices From Domestic Service* (Gomer, 2013).

<sup>34</sup> <http://factorywomensvoices.wales/> and Catrin Stevens, *Voices From the Factory Floor: The Experiences of Women Who Worked in the Manufacturing Industries in Wales, 1945-75* (Amberley Publishing, 2017).

<sup>35</sup> Beth Jenkins, *Graduate Women and Work in Wales, 1870-1939: Nationhood, Networks and Community* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

<sup>36</sup> Angela V. John, *Rocking the Boat: Welsh Women Who Championed Equality 1840-1990* (Cardigan, 2018).



of Welsh women in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries require further deconstruction.

In addition to women's experiences of education and work, we also need to understand more about women's lives and experiences within the home. Despite the ubiquity of the 'Welsh Mam' there are few explorations of motherhood within Wales.<sup>37</sup> The everyday experiences of family life and neighbourly networks of Elizabeth Roberts' oral histories and the changing character of maternal identities and the ideology of domesticity require a more nuanced approach.<sup>38</sup> Maternal identities could also be a starting point for political engagement. We should recognise the importance of the neighbourhood as a site of action not only for male actors. Place is, of course, fundamental to understanding identities and experiences, and *Llafur* has had a relatively good record in exploring women's lives beyond the coalfield. Expanding explorations of women's lives into rural areas and urbanised spaces will further complicate constructions of identities based upon class, age, place, and, most pressingly, race.

The call to study women of colour should be made with the same urgency as Beddoe's call for a Welsh women's history. Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) Welsh women are woefully neglected within Welsh history. This cannot continue. BAME women are absent even in histories of men of colour as it was very often relations between black men and white women that were believed to have sparked riots and led to the greatest consternation in the contemporary press. Studies of race have tended to focus on men as workers, sportsmen, or participants and victims of riots. New methodological approaches, large oral history projects, and dedicated day schools for debate and discussion will help to open the field.<sup>39</sup> It is not simply a matter of acknowledging key community figures such as Betty Campbell, as important as this is in promoting visibility, but producing rich histories of diverse

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<sup>37</sup> Rosemary Crook, 'Tidy Women': Women in the Rhondda between the wars', *Oral History: The Journal of the Oral History Society*, 10, 2 (1982); Deirdre Beddoe, 'Munitionettes, Maids and Mams: Women in Wales, 1914-1939', in John, *Our Mothers' Land*, pp. 189-209; Sue Bruley, "'Little mothers': Adolescent Girls and Young Women in the South Wales Valleys between the Wars', *Llafur*, 10:3 (2010), pp. 126-144.

Catriona Beaumont / Kate Fisher, mother's health, but place and position in the home might go further.

<sup>38</sup> Elizabeth Roberts, *A Woman's Place: An Oral History of Working-Class Women, 1890-1940* (Oxford, 1984); Elizabeth Roberts, *Women and Families: An Oral History, 1940-1970* (Oxford, 1995).

<sup>39</sup> For the difficulties of sources see, Mandi O'Neill, 'Restoring the "Mam": Archives, Access and Research into Women's Pasts in Wales', *Public History Review*, 18 (2011), pp. 47-64.

lives. Given the dearth of investigations here, a return to Llafur's links with teachers would help to ensure that these histories could be accessed by students and teachers more readily. As the Black Lives Matter protests revealed in the summer of 2020, without understanding histories and without representation it can be impossible to feel a sense of belonging in the present.

In thinking about diverse histories, the work of the Coalfields Disability Project has been at the forefront of challenging preconceptions and popular representations of masculinity.<sup>40</sup> The interest in working-class masculinity in recent years has allowed historians to begin to take up Paul O'Leary's challenge to no longer view men as a yardstick to judge women's experiences again.<sup>41</sup> As Daryl Leeworthy's ground-breaking work reminds us, there was no one version of masculinity in Wales even within a particular class or occupational group.<sup>42</sup> Studies of masculinity reveal the potential for gender to uncover power relations in specific temporal and cultural contexts. But, in examining male experiences we need to ensure that interrogations into women's identity and experiences continued. Beyond snapshots into women's lives as mothers, in education, and work, what do we know of Welsh women's lives? Or, to put it another way, what should we know? Performances of femininity seem key here and how women negotiated the spaces their bodies occupied.<sup>43</sup> Kate Fisher's study of birth control suggests that a further exploration into private lives may be warranted, and histories of the emotion might be fruitfully employed to this end.<sup>44</sup> Sexuality is another key area, with lesbian, trans, and bi histories presenting a challenge to the domination of heteronormative

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<sup>40</sup> Ben Curtis and 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 - The Journal of the Social History Society*, 12:4 (2015), pp. 587-606.

<sup>41</sup> Paul O'Leary, 'Masculine Histories: Gender and the Social History of Modern Wales', *The Welsh History Review*, 22, 2 (2004).

<sup>42</sup> Daryl Leeworthy, 'Hidden From View?: Male Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century Wales', *Llafur*, 11:4 (2015), pp. 97-119; Daryl Leeworthy, *A Little Gay History of Wales* (Cardiff, 2019).

<sup>43</sup> Paul O'Leary, *Claiming the Streets: Processions and Urban Culture in South Wales, c.1830-1880* (Cardiff, 2012); Beth Jenkins, "'Queen of the Bristol Channel Ports": The Intersection of Gender and Civic Identity in Cardiff, c.1880–1914', *Women's History Review*, 23,6 (2014), pp. 903-921.

<sup>44</sup> Kate Fisher, *Birth Control, Sex and Marriage in Britain, 1918–1960* (Oxford, 2006).

experiences.<sup>45</sup> Women's support networks, friendship groups, and how they constructed a self for different audiences will allow us to draw out subjective experiences and not only representations. I began with a call to return to some of Llafur's earliest themes, and I want to end with a call to consider how drawing upon cultural history to examine how gender, 'material forces', and place intersected with class will ultimately enrich our understanding of the social histories of modern Wales.<sup>46</sup>

There are, of course, many other potential avenues of exploration. Day schools and a closer collaboration with WAW could prove a key mechanism for generating new areas of interest.<sup>47</sup> There needs to be greater links between amateur historians, academics, students, and teachers. We live in a very different world from the day schools which attracted hundreds of participants in the later 1970s, but technology also gives us a medium to potentially expand the reach and scope of inclusive events.<sup>48</sup> Llafur could once again be at the forefront of these events in championing new histories that draw in a wide audience. *Llafur* should remain an important outlet for new research and exploratory research. Such studies require commitment and enthusiasm within the field and a diverse programme of activities celebrating new research. Finally, ensuring that the Committee represents and reflects its membership and the direction of the field is a vital part of this work.

## Conclusion

I was delighted to have been invited to write a rejoinder to Deirdre Beddoe's 1981 article, but this was not an easy piece to write in many respects. Llafur and its journal have played a fundamental role in widening our knowledge and understanding of the lives of the working-class in Wales. The first generation of scholars who founded the society and helped transform the historiography have left

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<sup>45</sup> See the points raised on lesbian histories in, Kirsti Bohata, 'Review of *A Little Gay History of Wales*, *Reviews in History*, Review no. 2423, DOI: 10.14296/RiH/2014/2423, Date accessed: 10 November, 2020.

<sup>46</sup> Katrina Navickas, 'A Return to Materialism? Putting Social History Back in its Place', in Sasha Handley, Rohan McWilliam and Lucy Noakes (eds), *New Directions in Social and Cultural History* (London, 2018).

<sup>47</sup> There was for a time a society representative on each committee.

<sup>48</sup> The online day schools held in the summer of 2020 attracted much larger audiences than day schools in recent years.

a lasting legacy. Many maintain an active role or interest within the society. It is not, perhaps, to undermine these achievements by acknowledging the imbalance in representation of the early committee and histories published in the journal. Women were not present on the committee until 1977. It was not until Beddoe's 1981 call for a women's history that an article dedicated to the subject appeared in the journal. These landmarks did not represent a clear break with the past: the struggle for women's place in the society and in Welsh history was a continuing process. The achievement of those pioneering women, Angela John, Deirdre Beddoe, Sian Williams, Dot Jones, Sheila Owen-Jones and Ursula Masson, was considerable. Without reading committee minutes and interviewing those involved it is impossible to get a sense of the atmosphere to the committee and wider society towards women members. But, what is clear to me, is that it is not easy or always comfortable being the only woman in a room full of men no matter how supportive the tone and atmosphere. The writings of Beddoe make clear that this was something of a battle for position and history.

When I joined Llafur's committee in 2005 I was able to reap the rewards of Llafur's pioneering women. I was nominated by my PhD supervisor Steve Thompson and found much support from Neil Evans in all sorts of ways. But, it was perhaps the encouragement from Ursula Masson and Angela John during my early years that really made a difference. The importance of having women as role models cannot be underestimated. As a society we still need to consider women's place and role in all kinds of ways. The ambitions of the socialist feminists who established Welsh women's history in understanding the past to confront issues in the present remains as pertinent as ever. The '#metoo' movement saw women from diverse backgrounds and walks of life divulge everyday subtle and damaging examples of the sexism they had encountered. These imbalances of power, the continued lack of female representation in positions of leadership, a gender pay gap of 14.5%, and the vulnerability in all kinds of ways of transwomen, cannot be solved by historical research alone, but history remains a central way in which to understand the present and draw power from representation. The challenge for us all in Llafur is to ensure that we continue the project of a people's history of Wales.

