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The Royal Welsh Agricultural Society: Patronage and the reproduction of elites in rural Wales

Abstract

This paper is concerned with the reproduction of rural elites and the role of volunteering and participation in rural civil society institutions. Set in the context of popular discourses of the gentleman farmer and the agricultural elite as historic (as opposed to contemporary) leaders in the countryside, this research extends longstanding debates on rural class politics and gentrification, and resonates with a renewed sociological interest in the elites in society. Focusing on senior volunteer roles in the Royal Welsh Agricultural Society (RWAS), we explore the connections between social and cultural capital, the maintenance of moral boundaries, and the relationship of these processes with recruitment at the committee level. Our findings indicate that systems of patronage remain significant in rural contexts, and that these systems interrelate with professional and business fields, and with embedded social and intergenerational networks. Data depicts an organization that is looking to balance the sustained benefits to organizational capacity brought through longstanding obligations of public service, duty, and family ties, with an acknowledged need to recognize diversity and foster inclusivity. This requirement, however, is largely articulated and confined to considerations of gender, age and to a lesser extent, multiculturalism.

Introduction

This paper examines the patterns of patronage among rural elites, the role of symbolic capital in this respect and, more broadly, potential processes of change within the composition of the rural elite in Wales. This is informed through an analysis of the Royal Welsh Agricultural Society (RWAS) and, in particular, through considering stability and change in the organization of the Society's Royal Welsh Show (RWS). Described as the 'pinnacle' event in the Welsh rural calendar (Thomas 2016), this spectacle attracts nearly 300,000 visitors each year. In this context, key figures in the Welsh farming community cultivate and reproduce social and cultural capital through their involvement in this sphere. Whilst this context has a very localised nature, it provides insights into the processes of rural elite reproduction and its changing constituency, alongside advancing understanding of patronage systems in civil society. This is of broader relevance to international scholarship in both these areas. To this end, this study draws upon two historically discrete bodies of literature: civil society research and specifically voluntary sector studies; and sociology of elites, with a focus on rural contexts.

In voluntary sector scholarship, a significant body of research has focused on grassroots volunteering and the day-to-day activities of community organisations. Comparatively few studies have, however, directly addressed the form and function of 'elite' volunteering and processes of patronage. Critical attention has been paid to the consolidation of hierarchies in organizational structures, and particularly in respect to the recruitment and responsibilities of trustees, the role of Chairs, and the interaction of these roles with Chief Executives (De Clerck 2019; Mathews 2019). Our research extends this through examining elite volunteering across a wider range of senior patron roles, including board membership and a diversity of honorary profiles. This corresponds with a resurgence of interest in the resilience and reproduction of elites in sociology, which Khan (2012) allies with a growing concern with income inequality, advances in social network analysis and the continued popularity of Bourdieusian class analysis. It resonates with recent work on transnational elites and globalization (Kunz 2016) and appraisals of the 'corrupt elite' trope in populist politics (see Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012), but here we are primarily concerned with rural elite scholarship. Within rural studies there is a paucity of work which explores the reproduction of elites (Shucksmith 2012), with class analysis being largely restricted to discussions on middle class machinations and – in particular – the theme of gentrification. Stated or not, the influence of the landed gentry and the agrarian elite on the social fabric of the countryside has been effectively consigned to the past, albeit with a few notable exceptions (inc. Brooks 2020; Hillyard 2015).

Drawing on interviews undertaken with senior volunteers within the RWAS, this paper highlights the ongoing relevance of the discourse(s) of the country gentleman and agrarian elite in characterizing organisational membership and the rationales for involvement employed by senior figures. Employing discourse analysis as a means of revealing hierarchal structures and power relations within organisations (Wodak 2001), and sensitive to Bourdieusian models of capital reproduction, our findings also resonate with studies of elite volunteering within voluntary sector scholarship, including patriarchal relations, intergenerational transfer, career pathways in voluntary roles, and rhetoric centred on belonging and birth-right. This research also highlights an organisation engaged in a process of self-evaluation regarding diversity and inclusivity. Incorporating concerns allied to gender, age and ethnicity, our analysis demonstrates a conscious, but problematic, effort by members of the RWAS to define their organisation in opposition to narratives of upper-class, 'landed' privilege associated with English agricultural societies and shows.

Literature review: elite volunteering within the rural elites

Elite volunteering

Our interest in the reproduction of elite roles in rural civil society resonates with those concerns allied to well-documented decline in civil society engagement (Putnam 2000) and reports on the declining rate of volunteering (e.g. Tsai et al. 2023). This process of disengagement has accelerated in a post-pandemic world and in an era of government spending cuts (Dederichs 2023), making it more important than ever to understand the motivations and ideological impulses that prompt (and curtail) civil engagement across multiple settings. This has been a central concern of the WISERD Civil Society Research Centre, of which our project is part. The work of the Centre is informed by Lockwood's (1996) dual notion of civic expansion and civic deficit. Civic expansion refers to those processes through which an individual's status and claims to citizenship are enhanced through participation in organizations. In contrast, civic deficit refers to those circumstances where people's involvements in organisational settings are restricted, thus reducing claims to citizenship (Ibid: 543). This provides a useful framework upon which to reconnoitre the reproduction of opportunities, inequality, and life chances in everyday settings. The processes of patronage are defined as a philanthropic set of activities involving the donation of time, reputation, and expertise (after Tribe 2020) which— express and affirm civic stratification.

The interplay between patronage and civic expansion/deficit should be considered in respect to wider shifts in the structure and function of the voluntary sector. This includes the adoption of management techniques in the public sector ('New Public Management'), and the imposition of private sector managerial techniques upon voluntary organisations engaged in shared governance ('New Public Governance') (Osbourne 2006; Lidsay et al. 2013). At a more granular level, research continues to flag an ongoing occupational legitimacy conferred on the professional middle-class as leaders (McGovern 2014; Smith 2013), as well as a hierarchal bias towards men in managerial and boardroom positions in the voluntary sector (Meyer and Rameder 2022). These studies constitute part of a growing body of work concerned with 'diversity deficits' on charitable boards (e.g. Weisinger et al. 2015; Feit et al. 2017), but more attention needs to be paid to the allocation of roles and the replication of privilege in such settings.

Elite reproduction

Lockwood's account of civic stratification shares critical foundations with well-established Bourdieusian theories of social reproduction insofar as they tend to position occupation and employment as determining components of class, but acknowledge cultural resources as a vital aspect of social stratification (see Anthias 2001). For some commentators, notes Hovden (2021), the ongoing relevance of Bourdieu's world view has diminished given an upsurge of new political values and 'privatistic' orientations among the labour class on the one hand, and the emergence of collective, post-materialistic sentiments on the other. Yet, others argue for the 'continuing and even rising

importance of social classes in the structuration of people's political practices' (Ibid. 213). From this perspective the material conditions of everyday life and cultural conditions of lifestyle are symbiotic (Burkitt 2004). This is captured by Bourdieu's capital trifecta, inclusive of; economic capital, reducible to wealth and property; cultural capital, allied to information and inclusive of educational credentials, knowledge and matters of taste; and social capital, referring to networks, group membership and affiliations. A further, cross-cutting phenomena is symbolic capital which refers to the wider recognition of economic, cultural and social goods within and across society, undergirding power relations and chances of success.

Of the three principal forms of capital, cultural capital is the least tangible and the most challenging to pin down. As Diane Reay and colleagues note, cultural capital can be acquired but more-often-than-not 'flows from habitus', defined as 'a complex interplay between past and present [where] current circumstances are not just there to be acted upon and become yet another layer to add to those from earlier socialization' (Reay et al. 2009, p. 1105). Being as much concerned with 'how' people access and shape social settings as 'why' they do so (McGovern 2014 640), habitus attempts to capture subjective aspects of day-to-day life and refers to the ability of individuals to be comfortable and unthinkingly settled in particular settings. Informed by past experiences and familiarity, habitus is a product of childhood and family discourse, as well as schooling and educational pathways. Work by Reay et al. (2009), for example, has explored the interplay between Higher Education and social mobility wherein students from working class backgrounds are more likely to experience feelings of tension, unease and of being a 'fish out of water' at elite universities. Crucially, this study – akin to many other Bourdieusian analyses of university settings (inc. Reay 2010; Loveday 2010) – notes the persistence of these psychic barriers and the challenges of overcoming them.

The conception of habitus as a deep seated, pervasive determinant of social reproduction is obviously problematic given the barriers it presents to upward mobility. It is not our intention here to establish the extent to which these structures can and do change, and it is apparent that Bourdieu's own critical position on this was less than clear. Rather, we are in accord with Friedman's assessment that stocks of capital tend to come together as persistent constellations which structure habitus, and that the 'dispositions flowing from the habitus are so robust that in the majority of cases they stay unified, meaning that those with strong initial reserves of economic, social and cultural capital are likely to accumulate further and vice versa' (Friedman 2016, p. 131). The durability of these relations, argues Friedman, provides a strong sense of stability and ensures that individual practises are preconscious and validated by those from homologous backgrounds (Ibid).

Habitus, then, exists as a 'structuring structure' borne of attitudes, comportment and the body which is formed by the accumulative experience of people in different 'fields'. Fields are varied and highly diverse including, for example, the family, towns, organisations and even professions, each characterised by their own set of rules, expectations and evaluations of capital and power (Leander 2011). Building on the previous example, university education has been conceptualized as a field which generates its own values and behavioural imperatives, but one that also correlates with other economic and political fields (James 2020). On this point Reeves et al. note the 'dogged persistence of the old boy network' (2017, p. 1139), with alumni of the nine 'Clarendon' public schools and Oxbridge being disproportionately represented in the upper echelons of law, business, and public office, and, by extension, charitable foundations and the pages of 'Who's Who'.

Less attention has been given to the interaction of civil society institutions and professional fields, although charitable settings have been recognised as sites of elite reproduction (Farkas 2012). On this subject, Dean has detailed how recruitment agents for charitable organisations purposefully target middle class in preference to working class volunteers on the basis of 'fit', thereby 'reinforcing inhabited resistance' (Dean 2016, p. 95). In more recent work Dean (2020) has considered the relationship between institutional prestige and individual capital, arguing that – while the symbolic value of charity is well established – there is a need for more research on the apparent ability of elites

to access, reproduce and mobilize this capital in such a way that their control and authority over these assets is retained.

The growing critical recognition of elite reproduction in civil society sits alongside a longstanding interest in the spatial articulations of inequalities and class dynamics. This includes research on the function of volunteering and charitable activities in establishing and maintaining social cleavages (e.g. Kendall 2002; Power et al., 2016; Misener and Mason 2006), as well as a parallel body of literature which explores the contextual distinctiveness of institutions that articulate and consolidate elite networks in rural settings past and present. This constitutes the focus of the next section.

The discourse of the squirearchy and the rise of the 'Gentleman Farmer'

Within the realms of rural studies there has been a longstanding interest in the role of the upper- and upper-middle classes in shaping the political, economic and social fabric of the UK countryside. At its zenith, the moral and political ascendancy of the 'squirearchy' was bound-up with the discourse of the country gentleman, which allied wealth and status with chivalric codes of fidelity, judgement and 'noblesse oblige' (Skiffington 1991). Positions of power were bestowed by birthright and came with a duty to manage and care for the landscape and community, with a natural order being rhetorically mirrored by a social order with the gentry at its apex (Taylor, 2004). Although the power of this discourse rapidly eroded in the early 1900s, the capacity for the old guard to assert their hold over rural affairs was still very much in evidence in the later part of the 20th century. This rested on their ability to actively reproduce discourses of power and place and, more specifically, to assert the pervasive myth of the country gentleman, aristocratic rule and a 'natural order' in society and nature (Woods 1997, p. 454). On a more practical note, the positioning of the gentry as key political actors also wrested on their control of the landscape and associated employment.

With the discourse of the country gentleman being bound up with the notion of stewardship of landscape and community, and farmers' political claims being derived through equating rurality with agriculture, Woods (1997) makes the key point that these discourses are idealized forms such that 'individuals' social constructions of rurality have drawn variously and selectively upon elements of both. Allowing for members of the agricultural community to appropriate and embody aspects of paternalism and stewardship associated with the gentry, this mélange undoubtedly underpinned the popular and political rise of the 'gentleman farmer' in the early 20th century (Newby et al. 1978). This ascendancy was cemented by transformations in local government which brought new scrutiny and opportunities for public appointments, and by the Second World War in particular which ensured that food production remained a critical concern of policy makers (Cox, Lowe and Winter 1991). This reinforced the claim of farmers and landowners to rural leadership and was commensurate with the rise of the Farmer's Unions as a significant political force, including the National Farmers Unions and the Farmers Union of Wales.

The relative power of the squirearchy, the gentleman farmer and the landowner was in turn challenged and eroded in many rural communities, and from the 1980s onwards the literature has widely identified the 'new middle class' and 'service class' as being significant in shaping rural affairs at local and national levels. A significant area of debate within rural studies emerged concerning the prospect of a 'middle class countryside' (inc. Burchardt 2012; Marsden 1995) and also in respect to the process of gentrification. Set in contrast to urban gentrification, this research initially focused on the displacement of the rural working class by the middle class in specific parts of the UK (see Phillips 1998a; 1998b; Heley 2010). In time, analyses of this trend have focused on: the role of different types of capital in facilitating and impeding this process (Phillips 1993); counterurbanisation (Phillips 2010); and associated patterns of conflict, notably in terms of planning and housing costs (Phillips and Smith

2018; 2022). The net result of these contributions is a much more nuanced appreciation of 'the gentrifier', their intentions and their lifestyle choices.

In this context a series of 'sub categories' have emerged, including two which correspond to elite rural identities of the squirearchy and gentleman farmer as discussed. Emerging in practice and pastiche, these have been variously identified and discussed in Bourdieusian terms and in reference to their engagements across multiple fields; including the village and the boardroom. Here Heley's (2010) study of the 'new squirearchy' in Southeast England has explored the activities of a cadre of financiers, entrepreneurs and business owners who are adopting the trappings and pursuits historically associated with the landed gentry. Inclusive of owning large properties and land holdings, shooting and equestrianism, their involvements in agricultural sales, 'county shows' and other aspects of farming life have led them to be labelled 'plastic farmers' by some observers, implying an inauthentic claim to rural identity, knowledge and labour. Acts of symbolic violence and boundary drawing within and between cohorts is also evident in Sutherland's account of agricultural gentrification in Scotland. Exploring the emergence of 'new gentleman farmers' in the Scottish northeast, this is characterised by an 'influx of wealth generated from non-farming activities' allied with and 'associated alteration of cultural symbols being expressed on the farm' (2012, 570).

The 'return of the gentleman farmer' and the emergence of 'new squirearchy' - both of which might usefully be captured by the term 'gentrification' - are suggestive of an emerging power base in the British countryside which is recreating the role historically associated with a landed gentry, and whose position at the apex of rural society has passed. This assumption is, however, problematic. Firstly, both Sutherland and Heley's studies identify these gentrifiers operating within a broader 'post-modern habitus' (after Harrison 1991), variously assuming and embodying the persona of farmer, squire, 'jet-setter', 'city boy' and entrepreneur across alternating fields. Secondly, these agents remain largely absent from local politics more generally. These findings are supported elsewhere in accounts of so-called 'super-gentrification' which tend to emphasise a desire for seclusion rather than public engagement and patronage (Phillips and Smith 2022; Sheppard and Pemberton 2023). The notion that the traditional squirearchy and gentleman farmer no longer feature in country life is presumptuous.

If the 'deferential' model of rural power relations centred on landownership and 'gentry class' has largely disappeared (Wahrman 1992), it does not automatically follow that those forms of capital and moral consistent with this elite have disappeared, or that they have failed to transform or transfer. Few empirical studies have directly addressed this issue in recent times. Woods' account of rural politics in Somerset in the 20th century indicated that aspects of feudalism persisted in some communities; or at least did a quarter of a century ago, wherein the 'county set' were still deeply embedded in social and political networks in the Southwest of England (Woods 1997;1998). Sam Hillyard's more recent ethnographic account of a 'rural putsch' in a village in the East of England, however, provides clear evidence of the diminishing influence of a select group of landowning families over local affairs and institutions (including Parish Council, School Board of Governors), and a new 'distribution of officialdom roles ... widespread across types of villager' (Hillyard 2015, p. 48).

That other rural regions in the UK have likewise experienced a 'bloodless coup that marked the political transition from the dominance of a farming orientated group to a new axis of villagers' (Ibid, 44) is, however, far from certain. Regarding property, it is important to note that of that rural land in Britain currently owned by private individuals, a significant proportion is in the hands of a few owners. Whilst the incomplete status of the Land Registry precludes exacting data on this issue, it is certainly the case that a significant proportion of this land is comprised of large rural estates, held in family trust, and managed under the landlord-tenant system. On this point Richard Munton notes that 'since the end of the 19th century, the great majority of these estates have declined substantially in area,

and many have ceased to exist, but the largest have, in general, been the most able to resist decline' (2009, p. 556). Elsewhere, Sally Brooks makes a cogent argument for the ongoing ideological potency of Conservatism in the governance of rural affairs, wherein property rights and the maintenance of a social hierarchy with a landowning elite at its apex is still very much evident in public and policy discourse. Evident in the emergence of the Countryside Alliance as a defender of 'national values' under threat from an urban, Labour elite and, Brooks also notes that UKIP has occupied a discursive space which elides 'race, rurality and nation' which is reflective 'of the landed classes historical connection with empire ... and ancestral control over pastoral landscapes back home' (Brooks 2019, p. 804).

A landed elite undoubtedly remains within parts of England, Scotland and Wales, but the manner in which economic capital interacts with contemporary social and cultural process requires more scrutiny. To this end our attention now turns to those analytical approaches adopted by scholars of rural elite reproduction.

Approaches to analysing elite reproduction in rural studies

Phillips (2014) and Shucksmith (2012) have been key architects of a 'third way' model of rural class analysis which avoids an antecedent privileging of either 'structure' or 'agency' (Phillips and Smith 2018), drawing upon Bourdieu's theory of practice in fashioning a more reflexive notion of class as manifest in everyday life. Attuned to concerns of symbolic capital, Phillips (1998a; 1998b) has also been strongly influenced by Michèle Lamont's corresponding attention to acts of boundary reproduction, inclusive of; 'socio-economic boundaries' (including wealth, autonomy, and professional credentials); 'moral boundaries' (including work ethic, integrity and honesty); and 'cultural boundaries' (derived from education, intelligence and taste/command of culture).

Framed explicitly around Bourdieu's notion of habitus, this 'third way' analysis has been employed in distinctly agricultural settings. This includes Burton's research on the reproduction of productivist tendencies in livestock management (Burton 2004; Burton and Wilson 2006) and Sutherland and Darnhofer's (2012) exploration of 'good farming' ideals in rural England; both of which call attention to 'rules of the game'. Demonstrating a link between agricultural transitions and shifting claims to capital across the farming sector this study effectively illuminates a complex symbolic terrain of identity politics revolving around production of goals, business acumen, environmental citizenship and landscape maintenance, amongst other (often competing) agendas. This research overlaps with a parallel literature which explores the appropriation of farming practices and identities by groups outside of traditional agricultural spheres who engage with the land for amenity purposes, including 'hobby farmers' and 'small holders' (Holloway 2002; Sutherland et al. 2014), 'back-to-the landers' (Halfacree 2006) in the UK and Europe, and amenity-orientated 'trophy' and 'lifestyle' ranchers in the American West (Gosnell and Travis 2005).

Taken together, these studies demonstrate consolidations and reconfigurations of production and consumption in the countryside, and the field-specific deployments of capital within agriculture and land use. However, they are largely confined to discussions of interactions within and across different facets of the farming community, and the functioning of elites therein; as opposed to the status of agricultural elites and landowners in wider rural civil society. This has, however, featured to a lesser extent as part of an enduring interest in the role of volunteers in underpinning community institutions in the countryside. Work of this type includes explorations of an 'rural/urban volunteering divide' (Paarlberg et al. 2022) and the function of volunteering in underpinning an array of rural services (Davies et al. 2021) including education (e.g. Colibaba and Skinner 2019) and healthcare (e.g. Kelly et al. 2019). There is also a burgeoning international literature on the role of senior citizens in maintaining service provision and in rural communities (e.g. Burr et al. 2021; Yarker et al. 2020), with

some studies directly addressing the corollary between volunteering, social capital and self-identity among older rural residents (Jones and Heley 2016; Lundgren and Nilsson 2023).

In summary, we have considered the gap in extant voluntary sector studies on the relationship between elite volunteering and the reproduction of privilege. Connecting these themes through reference to Bourdieu's work on capital and habitus, we argue that there is scope for further research which explores the shifting profile of rural elites and agricultural identities through this analytical lens, and with specific reference to volunteering and processes of patronage. Specifically, we ask; how do patterns of patronage play out in the context of rural civil society and intersect with social and cultural capital?; and to what extent is there a perceived change in the rural elite?

The Welsh Case Study

Setting the scene: Welsh rural elites

As with the UK more generally, there is modest degree of contemporary research on rural elites in Wales, although the theme of class in rural Wales is well covered in a series of influential community studies published in the 1950s and 1960s (including Emmet 1964; Frankenburg 1957; Jenkins 1960; Rees 1950). In their overview of this body of work, Owen identifies a historical disconnect in accounts of Welsh rural elites from this era, between an embedded local gentry in some localities and accounts of an absent landowning class that is 'estranged in language, religion and politics from the rest of Welsh society in such a way as to prevent it from performing the normal functions of a local aristocracy' (Owen 1985, p. 33). This chimes with work by Jenkins on the Welsh gentry which delineates between patricians of the; 'great tradition', a cohort more keenly positioned within a British 'top stratum'; and members of the 'little tradition', who were more embedded within Welsh literary culture and community life (Jenkins 1971, p. 33).

Aside from another important distinction concerning religion and nonconformism, the phenomenon of the absent aristocratic landowner, distant in body and worldview, features in accounts gathered from other parts of the British countryside in the late 19th and early 20th century (see Taylor 2004). Similarly, the growing political and economic importance of 'larger' local farmers in the economic and political life of many localities in the mid 20th century onwards is evident in Welsh studies, as per their English equivalents (Ibid). Corresponding with the observations of Madgwick, they took issue with a critically unsubstantiated penchant for describing Welsh rural society as classless (Madgwick et al. 1973, p. 142). A narrative at once naïve and politically motivated, it is argued that this view was 'unacceptable' and that there existed hierarchal processes allied to social class alongside 'Welshness, age and religion in the countryside' (Ibid). In this regard, they emphasised the standing of larger scale landowners and 'gentleman farmers' as employers and holders of public office, and high levels of organisation among farmers for 'political purposes' (Ibid, p. 165). These findings resonate with Jenkins' (1960) earlier study of Aberporth in mid Wales, which detailed an 'almost feudal' patron-client relationship between some farmers and villagers.

As rich as they are, these accounts of rural life in Wales cannot be considered apropos in depicting and understanding social relations in the contemporary Welsh countryside. Nonetheless, these narratives are of value when considering constructions of rural elites; facets of which may continue to shape practice and feed into current socio-cultural and political processes. Edwards and colleagues have similarly noted the relative power of the FUW and NFU Cymru in shaping rural policy and their persistence in 'reminding other partners that it [mid Wales] is an agriculturally dependent region' (Edwards et al. 2001, p 302). Elsewhere, Midmore – whilst labelling the characterization of farming as

the 'backbone' of the Welsh rural economy as a 'myth' – has nevertheless recognised the 'surprising potency', longevity and pervasiveness of this rhetoric (Midmore 2018, p. 22).

The Royal Welsh Agricultural Society

If the centrality of farming and farmers in the popular politics of social and economic life in rural Wales is well established, it is also reproduced and embodied in everyday spaces and events. This includes country shows, which are annual spectacle at local and regional levels. At the national scale the Royal Welsh Show (RWS) looms large. Established in 1904, it has been described by the Welsh Government as a 'signature showcase event for Wales' (Welsh Government 2010), by Parker as the 'nation's true cauldron' (Parker 2011), and by Thomas as 'an annual pilgrimage... the event for the farming industry in Wales and something that must not be missed' (Thomas 2016, p. 430). Thomas's work demonstrates the rhetorical power the RWS commands in terms of representing agricultural interests and those of the Welsh countryside broadly, inclusive of the needs of communities, people and culture in rural Wales. Crucially, the shifting form and function of the RWS and its parent organisation, the Royal Welsh Agricultural Society (RWAS), is a reflection and manifestation of rural power relations and social hierarchies, as well as space in which patterns of volunteering and patronage are embedded and asserted in rural space.

The official history of the Royal Welsh Agricultural Society - published by the society on the eve of its centenary in 2004 - makes clear the instrumental role of the Welsh landed class in founding the organisation. With a Forward by the-then Prince of Wales, the somewhat turbulent beginnings of the RWAS and associated political intrigues are adeptly set out in the early chapters of the book. In their opening sentence the author, David Howell, suggests that the continuing success of the Society 'as it celebrates its centenary year ... could hardly have been anticipated by the handful of individuals who founded Welsh National Agricultural Society [as it was established] a hundred years earlier' (2003, p.7). These figures included its original 'brainchild', Sir Lewes Lovedon Pryse, future heir to the Pryse Baronetcy of Gogerddan and first Director and Secretary of the Society.

One of several 'gentleman exhibitors' who sought to elevate the North Cardiganshire Agricultural Society's yearly show to the status of a national event, Lovedon Pryse made use of their select social and political networks and approached 'certain people whom he considered to be representative of agriculture in Wales' (Ibid. 8), several of whom took roles in the nascent organisation. These were principally derived from landowners and established political figures including George Herbert, 4th Earl of Powis (President) and Godfrey Morgan, 1st Viscount Tredegar (Vice-President). These founders, notes Howell, were 'sustained by the conviction' that the support would be forthcoming and, by and large, it was, with 'many well-known landowners and agriculturalists in Wales, as well as twenty-seven of the thirty-three Welsh MPs' getting behind the venture from an early stage' (Howell 2003, p. 10). The status of the Welsh National Agricultural Society as one overseen by elites during this early period is further supported by a swathe of other figures who feature in the early pages of Howell's historiography, the biographies of which detail a significant level of influence and interaction. These include: multiple peers of the Realm; Members of Parliament; holders of public office, including High Sheriffs, Lords Lieutenants and Justices of the Peace; those with involvements in Higher Education; and members of the Council of the Royal Agricultural Society of England.

Reflecting on the (then) current shape of the RWAS a century later, Howell's epilogue underscores the importance of the voluntary efforts of a dedicated band of officials and stewards, and the crucial role of the 'old landed families of Wales' in this context. Writing in 1954, Dr Richard Phillips - a prominent post-war member of the Society – highlighted the vital role of the Welsh rural establishment in ensuring the survival and success of the RWAS: 'They played their part on the County Councils and took the leadership in every new movement, counting it a duty and a responsibility to care for the

welfare of their tenants. To them we are principally indebted for the foundation of this Society, and the decedents of many of them continue to work loyally for it' (Phillips in Howell 2003, p. 252). An insightful passage in that it sets out a system of patronage, political capital and deference going beyond the RWAS and into other institutions (i.e., County Councils). It's inclusion in Howell's history is also telling insofar as it is taken as characteristic of a more bygone, more simplistic era: A Royal Welsh as *was*, rather than *is*.

The RWAS of today has a complex committee structure commensurate with this long history, and the scope and scale of the activities it hosts (see figure 1). This includes an overarching structure in the form of the RWAS Council (approximately 130 members) and 13 County Advisory Committees (reflecting a previous local authority structure in Wales). In 1963, a permanent site was acquired by the RWAS for the annual Society Show in Llanellwedd, Builth Wells. Previously it had been peripatetic, rotating amongst the old Counties of Wales. This was replaced with a system in which the role of 'host' is shared in turn by each of the 13 counties, which helps to ensure an ongoing engagement with the process among the wider membership. In addition to the ceremonial roles and prestige associated with this system, the so-called 'Feature County' is responsible for fundraising for the RWS two years prior to 'their' show, enabling each county to contribute to, and to take ownership of, specific buildings and facilities on the showground.

The RWAS Council is largely ceremonial, and the actual lead decision making body of the RWAS is the Board of Directors. In 2023, there were 39 attendees of the board. The number of directors associated with each County Advisory Committee depends on the size of their membership (1 director per 1000 members). The directors include 12 co-opted directors selected for their specific skillset in addition to the County representatives. Furthermore, there is a plethora of themed committees and sub-committees (at least 38 at the time of data collection), of which many of the directors are also members. These committees are either concerned with the three main RWAS events directly (the RWS, The Winter Fair and the Smallholding Festival), with governance matters, or with specific agricultural sectors. It is this Board of Directors that was of principle concern in the present study. Senior positions within this structure include the Chair of Directors, the Vice Chair of Directors, Honorary Treasurer, Chair of Council, Vice-Chair of Council, Honorary Show Director, Honorary Festival Director, and Honorary Winter Fair Director (see Figure 1).

***INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE**

Study and Methodology

The qualitative material presented in this paper is drawn from a study of patronage and elite production in Wales which involved 84 semi-structured elite interviews with patrons of 18 Welsh charities operating across a range of sectors. The RWAS was one of these charities. Participants were identified through purposive sampling to identify the elite patronage roles within these charities, and our approach to this process was informed by that distinct strand of sociological literature concerned with researching elites. Following Smith (2006) and Harvey (2011), elite interviewees were undertaken with those that are party to strategic decision-making within organisations, including those who occupy senior and/or board level decisions. Board members were included, which differs from the definition of patron in common usage within the charitable sector (Tribe, 2020). Patrons were identified for the purposes of our project as those individuals embedded within corresponding policy circles and networks, inclusive of those holding honorary positions, trusteeships, ambassadorships, elected roles, and non-executive positions (Woods 2017, p. 60).

This paper reflects our interactions with members of the RWAS ($n = 15$). Recruitment focused on the Board of Directors alongside senior honorary roles connected with various committees featuring in Figure 1. One of the key challenges of recruiting elite actors in public-facing organizations such as the RWAS is preserving anonymity (see also Odendahl and Shaw 2001). We have therefore labelled extracts with numbers to distinguish interviewees and have been intentionally vague when describing specific roles. For example, there are 7 female board members among 39 in total ($n=5$), and the majority of the Board are aged over 50 ($n=2$). In contrast to other types of survey, issues of control and the interactional dynamics are often different in elite interviews since respondents are more accustomed to exercising authority and more likely to deploy strategies to assert their power [inc. not responding to questions (Flick 2009; Yin 2014)]. This was not apparent with RWAS interviewees, who were collectively open, responsive and frequently gave fulsome, deeply personal answers. Our experiences reflected those of Smith (2006), and we are likewise mindful that elite interviewees are susceptible to feeling exposed and that the researcher must be mindful of constructive reassurance as much as with any participants (Ibid).

It is important to note that a significant proportion of the recruitment and interview process was undertaken online given social distancing measures in place when social distancing measures were in place. This presented a series of challenges to the research process, as detailed in a separate publication (XXXX). As the pandemic progressed, outside interviews were introduced, which was the preferred option of four RWAS participants. The average interview duration with RWAS participants was 65 minutes and were often much longer. This is in contrast to other experiences of elite interviewing wherein access is limited and schedules are shorter than desired (Odendahl and Shaw 2001). The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. A total of 16 hours and 9 minutes of interview data were collected.

Conversations with stakeholders focused on duties, motivations, and personal backgrounds, inclusive of family ties, education, and career trajectories. In keeping with the Bourdieusian framework, our interview schedule and subsequent analysis were attentive to the interactions between patronage and forms of economic, social, and cultural capital, and with the interaction between the RWAS and educational, professional and domestic fields. The interview schedule also prompted responses in respect to national identity and 'Welshness'.

The project team made use of Nvivo software and we employed a problem-orientated, critical discourse analysis attentive to structural forms of power in social life and the reproduction of inequality (Wodak and Meyer 2011). Thus, this analysis explored how senior volunteering roles were constructed and related to different forms of symbolic capital, and the part these played in establishing, maintaining or reshaping the rural elite. By extension, we also explicitly considered the discourses of change connected to seniority and imperatives for transformation.

Results

Pobl lleol (Local people): Perception of change

The shift in representation and membership in the governance of the RWAS was a common thread among our interviews. Several respondents spoke at length about the declining relevance of class and influence of landed elites over the governance of the organisation through the years:

"We've managed change and driven change ... You can see the change from Lord, Brigadier, Captain ... The President was always the landed gentry or the lord of the manor, you know ..."
(Participant 32)

“The history of [agricultural] societies was very much [about] landlords wanting exhibitions to promote new machinery, innovative approaches ... improved breeds, improved agriculture, so that their tenants would become better farmers and, possibly, they could pay more rent. If you look at the history of the Royal Welsh Agricultural Society, and the plaques of past Presidents ... they were very much the landed gentry. There has been a conscious move by some people – and there's no doubt about that - to make sure that it's the show of the people. The Weryn as we call it in Wales, and less so now of, if you like, the landowning gentry.” (Participant 35)

These commentaries specify a substantial shift in organisational form and practice, one characteristic of shifting power relations and patronage in rural society and positioning the RWAS as a driver of change, rather than as a passive conduit of socio-political currents in wider society. This transition is also apparent in listings of official positions in the RWAS over time, inclusive of Chairmen, Directors, Presidents, Executives, Secretaries, Treasurers and assorted committee leaders. A range of titles that illustrates the complex nature of the institution, the titles, prefixes, and suffixes in these entries reveals a class dynamic, including peerages (Earl, Lord, Marquess, Sir) and holders of public office (Minister, Honourable, Right Honourable). Many senior military titles (Major, Lieutenant Colonel, Colonel, Brigadier) are also prominent in the past governance of the RWAS, the gentry historically making up a significant proportion of senior ranks in the armed forces.

Characteristic of the historical interplay between the upper class and the fields of academic, politics and the armed forces, the appearance of these honorifics in the RWAS has diminished over the years. This signifies that individuals with these titles are less prevalent within the organisational hierarchy (or rather less likely to deploy them in these settings). This has reportedly involved moving beyond a system centred on title, land, and the discursive figure of ‘squirearchy’, to a system revolving around merit, “normal people” and “grassroots”.

“Go back to the [19]40s and the [19]50s. You didn't have people like me on the Board. They were the gentry that were on the Board. Now it's families that are Members which are on the Board. It was landlords that were running it. Exactly the same as [in] England where, you know, you've got your snobbery. But that's gone. It's a family thing that's running the Royal Welsh now. It's not your elite people in the country... It's the grassroots.” (Participant 56)

In conjunction with a ‘post-class’ rhetoric, national identity politics were widely mobilised during the interview process, often taking aim at the cultural trappings of the English upper- and upper-middle class ‘county set’.

“People talk about the Bowler hat brigade. That's a very English thing. We have people who wear bowler hats, but we don't have that hierarchical structure here. Because we [are] Welsh. It's a sense of community. It's not like Chelsea flower show. Very grand, very posh. We are very much normal people ... pobl lleol, the local people. It's not flash. It's not super posh. We haven't got Moët & Chandon stands on every corner.” (Participant 32)

In keeping with Jenkins’ (1971) notion of a ‘little tradition’ embedded in Welsh culture and community life, the above quote reproduces claims to Welsh exceptionalism and ‘classlessness’ (Madgwick 1973) which were evident in our interviews.

Denials of privilege and the active deployment of the rhetoric of classlessness when characterizing Welsh civil society has been discussed by the authors elsewhere (XXXX). There were, however, indications that senior positions within the RWAS were not as egalitarian as interviewees suggested. One interviewer was invited to a champagne reception hosted in the heart of the showgrounds during the RWS. Moreover, the most senior positions within RWAS were still populated by people conscious of their hereditary privilege. As this interviewee explained:

“to be brutally honest with you, there aren't that many people who can fulfil the role... because of the amount of time that one has to give up. And I don't know how I can put this... I can slightly afford to give up the time... I'm a landowner, I'm an estate owner... As a family, we've been on this same patch here for 500 years... I suppose I've grown up with my father, and the kind of sense of history and that kind of sense of the estate needing to look after Wales and any important cultural events that might happen to reinforce the Welsh” (Participant 57)

Although a select few attributed their position to hereditary privilege, there were other mechanisms by which standing and pedigree could be gained, which we consider below.

“Matchmaking behind the scenes”: Cultural capital of honours and awards

Even where the gentry no longer dominate the RWAS, it has continued to be an organisation shaped by those with a noted cultural and political pedigree, and one which is characteristic of the growing role of ‘professionals’ in rural society in the postwar era. This is apparent in the postnominals and honorifics listed in the catalogue of RWAS Directors and Chairmen, and Board and Committee leaders, Officers and Secretaries. Between 1950 and 2000, this included seven Members of the Order of the British Empire (MBE), nine Officers of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) and eight Commanders of the Order of the British Empire (CBE). Other awards include: one Member of the Royal Victorian Order (MVO), a Distinguished Service Order (DSO) and holders of the Military Cross (MC), multiple Deputy Lieutenants (DL), a Lieutenant of the Royal Victorian Order (LVO) and Commander of the Royal Victorian Order (CVO), Master of Foxhounds (MFH), and Members of the Order of Bath (CB) and the Order of Saint John (K.St.J). These titles convey esteem and constitute a form of institutionalised cultural capital. They are also indicative of organisational connections beyond the RWAS, with these circuits of social capital no doubt influencing the allocation of roles within the organisation. Moreover, a number of those receiving these awards have been nominated on the grounds of their contribution to Welsh farming, rural life and the RWAS specifically.

In addition to these markers of esteem, a significant proportion of individuals who have taken on positions of leadership in the RWAS have also held professional qualifications, some of which correlate with their activities within the organisation. These honorifics include Fellows of the: Chartered Institute of Bankers (FCIB), Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors (FRICS), Society of Actuaries (FSA), and Institute and Faculty of Actuaries (FIA and FFA). Taken together, the increased presence of these titles among the RWAS leadership resonates with those studies which identified the growing influence of the middle class in rural affairs from the 1970s onwards (Burchardt 2012), wherein the social ties, linguistic skills, and professional resources allied to these credentials often represent significant accumulations of social capital (Goodwin-Hawkins and Jones 2022).

The most prominent markers of distinction as held and discussed by RWAS leadership were Associateship and Fellowship of Royal Agricultural Societies (ARAgS and FRAgS). Administered by the Council for Awards of Royal Agricultural Societies (CARAS) (including England, Highlands and Scotland, Ulster and Welsh), these awards recognise individuals who have made ‘outstanding contributions to UK agricultural progress, beyond simply doing their jobs well’ (CARAS 2023). Candidates are invited to apply and make a ‘submission of their work and community activities’ by the Chairman of a National Panel and supply the names of two existing FRAgS as sponsors.

“This is quite an elite club. I can go to ... the Great Yorkshire Show, the Highland show in Scotland and the Northern Ireland show in Belfast so long as I notify them that I'm coming. [At] every show they have a FRAgS evening ... the Tuesday night of the Royal Welsh, they have a FRAgS society gathering. A glass of wine, a bit of food. Anyone who is going to be presented with an Associateship certificate or a Fellowship certificate are there on the night”. (Participant 53)

“The Council of Awards of the Royal Agricultural Society. You have these letters after your name. I've got so many now that you don't put them in, which appears false modesty. But it isn't. ARAgS are Associates of the Royal Agricultural Society, or Fellow [FRAgS]. So ... each of the four home societies nominate people, they have a committee. And then we have a King's Council who decides things... So, there is that link.” (Participant 35)

There exists, then, an important relationship between CARAS and RWAS. Another prestigious award that featured within the discourses of the RWAS patrons was the Nuffield Farming Scholarship Trust, which supports innovation in farming through bursaries, professional development events and regional networks that pull together alumni:

“[A senior RWAS volunteer who is] our neighbour from home, he rang me up and said... “Your name's come up as somebody that perhaps we'd like to sponsor for Nuffield... you have to apply for it and if you get an interview we might sponsor you... because the Royal Welsh does sponsor a Nuffield scholarship... I didn't appreciate the process behind the scenes: the [Nuffield] director does this sort of matchmaking behind the scenes... And after the interview is concluded [the director] will ask each sponsor if they'd be interested in sponsoring the candidate or not.” (Participant 54)

Elsewhere the overlap between the activities of the Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution (RABI), the FUW and Young Farmers Clubs also emerged during the interview process, as did more general claims regarding the overlap between the field of business and social networks:

“Networking with people that are so influential in the agricultural scene ... I think is probably the biggest benefit ... Being able to call those people friends and working with them in committees ... the friendship and what I've learned from high-fliers within the industry, board members and committee members that I've been able to work with”. (Participant 39)

Positioning the RWAS within the broader, international political economy of agriculture and food production, statements such as these emphasised the importance of expertise and information sharing across the sector and contrasted with those narratives which conflated Welsh Farming and rural life.

This section has set out characteristics of the leadership within the RWAS in the form of cultural capital, inclusive of titles, qualifications, and professional accreditations. It has also addressed the role of social capital in the form of wider business networks and events which sustain relationships between senior representatives of the RWAS. This narrative is nonetheless partial: it establishes aspects of elite reproduction, but it does not adequately account for how its membership is secured and sustained. This will constitute the focus of the remainder of this paper.

“You can't bottle that”: Social capital of family and friends

In contrast to a reported downturns in formal volunteering in the UK in recent years (Lim and Laurence, 2015), our interviewees highlighted a strong membership and a healthy competition for roles at the county- and national level:

“Well, my role is I'm chairman of [county] Advisory Committee and I [have been] co-opted on to the board of the Royal Welsh ... about 12 years or 14 years ago. I've been on the [county] Advisory Committee for about 30 years. About five years ago, I was made Vice Chairman. And then the chairman decided to give up, so I became Chairman in the last round of meetings. ... It's an honour to be Chairman of [county]. [County] is a show county ... and it's in their blood. It's pretty hard to get on the committee. It means so much to us.” (Participant 56)

This passage is indicative of a strong membership base and support for the RWAS. It also is representative of a type of volunteering career within the organisation common among those patrons we interviewed, many of whom identified family legacies and childhood experiences as important factors in shaping their involvements:

“I haven't missed the show in my life... So, it's a family thing. I remember [attending] as a five-year-old. When it used to travel around Wales, with my grandfather, my mother, my father, my uncle. And I learned so much off him, I can remember sitting in the members' pavilion on his knee, watching the Grand Parade”. (Participant 56)

“I actually inherited [role] from my dad. The family have always been involved. My wife does some stewarding. My sons, they've all done some stewarding. So it's always been a family event ... I've been on my dad's shoulder for many, many years, seeing what he had done and how he ran things. And I just took over ...” (Participant 47)

Testimonies such as these stress a strong intergenerational aspect to the RWAS and the role that this has in pulling people into associated social networks from a young age. When prompted to expand on this theme during the interview process, multiple respondents portrayed the RWS as providing a valuable opportunity for people to build and sustain relationships that would not otherwise be possible given the constraints of farming:

“You know that - pretty well - every farmer in Wales takes that week off, unless the weather's been terrible ... But generally, it's regarded as the holiday week of the year ... I've made friends through the society and there are certain people that you only see for that one week of the year” (Participant 57)

“Yeah, I do get something out of it. We have local friends, and we have the Royal Welsh friends. And they're quite separate, because they're all from all over Wales ... You're not only making friends with fellow directors ... you're making friends with exhibitors. That's what it's about. People. Volunteers are taking holiday time off from their work... We all get together in a caravan, have a couple of glasses of wine, and just have a chat. 'What have you done today?' 'Any important visitors?' 'who've you met today?' ...you can't bottle that. Over the years, [you] become friends and you want to know 'well how are the children doing? how's the wife doing? how's that new job going?’” (Participant 47)

These extracts encapsulate a common sentiment among the patrons of the RWAS concerning the importance of the show in pulling rural society together as a whole. This is a narrative that is propelled through the wider media, which tends to depict the RWS as a microcosm of the Welsh countryside (Thomas 2016). However, several respondents noted the presence of “cliques” within the RWAS and concomitant processes of nepotism:

“The first question I ask anybody if they ask me for a job, is who's your father? Who's your mother? You know, because it's a good chance if the breeding was good between a good father and good mother there's a good chance that who is in front of you is a good one as well. People, you know, will laugh at that when I say that, but it's important”. (Participant 58)

Narratives such as this all at once correlate status, hereditary recruitment and (implicitly) a natural order in nature and society (Taylor 2004), but also the important role intergenerational links played in maintaining the RWAS, for better or worse:

“There are a few dynasties around the place where family member after family member have been a steward... It can be a negative thing. Because you know that it isn't always right. The

next person should be the best person for the job... I know a whole list of families who have been involved here for years... and looking at their children and knowing that they will be... as well in the future" (Participant 32)

This interviewee recognises the limitations of people inheriting roles from their parents, but also recognises how central this is to sustaining volunteering levels. It should be noted that overtly negative reports of patronage and recruitment processes within RWAS were infrequent and, when raised, they tended to be bookended by optimistic accounts of change. This was anticipated given the role of our interviewees as organisational ambassadors, as was the tendency for these stakeholders to portray the key challenges for patronage within the RWAS as those embedded in wider public debates on diversity and representation. These centred on gender and age.

"Lots of men in grey suits": Addressing age and diversity

In line with the eclipse of landed power in the British countryside and the discursive decline of the 'Tory view of the landscape' (Woods 1998), attendant shifts in attitudes towards rural governance, patriarchy and the role of women emerged during the interview process. The historical dominance of men on the RWAS board and executive was discussed at length by several respondents. For instance:

"You can see more recently, Mrs. We've got Lady President. From white aristocratic middle-aged men to a local lady who was the President in 2015. ... The world's changed, isn't it? The sort of aristocracy ... is less powerful now than it was. More normal people, you know."
(Participant 32)

Identifying the election of a 'lady President' as a key moment in the history of the RWAS, this participant posited this event as a signifier of change to come, more so than a reflection of broader organisational change. The RWAS hierarchy remains overwhelmingly male; this is something that the organisation is aware of and is ostensibly looking to address. This point was made by a female patron who made a case for the benefits of a more balanced gender profile at the executive level:

"It's male orientated. It tends to be. There are few ladies there... I'm used to that. They think it might bother me. It doesn't ... It is what it is. They do act differently to women. I have found that, maybe, more staff members have come to me and talked to me, which is nice... Perhaps a woman is more approachable than men? ... It is definitely a male orientated society. And they have some funny ideas, but I'm not afraid to tell them that is a very antiquated idea, perhaps we shouldn't be thinking [like that]." (Participant 38)

The need for more female board members was identified by other interviewees:

"Maybe there could be a better gender balance ... you tend to get lots of men in grey suits, rather than the gentler touch, and obviously, the ethnic is maybe not so relevant for the Royal Welsh at this stage. But it's something that could be I suppose." (Participant 35)

This statement is problematic when taken in isolation: it uses language which reinforces a view of women as inherently more sensitive and pliable than men (Price 2010), and it infers that social institutions in rural Wales need be less concerned with debates on ethnicity and inclusion. This viewpoint chimes with a range of critiques concerning the 'sanitization' of the British countryside and 'the folding of the rural into a white, monocultural space' (Neal et al. 2021, p. 179).

The need for a more diverse leadership at the RWAS was widely acknowledged, but this was effectively restricted to age and gender. Moreover, there was no consideration of diversity with respect to religion, disability, sexuality or any other identity category or intersectional sub-category (Zaidi and

Pitt 2022), which reveals the limited view of diverse representation within RWAS. Rather, concern about inclusion of younger people dominated the discourse:

“We want to keep moving with the times. That's the big challenge for us. As a society we have a very traditional structure of trustees and volunteers. They always like to do things in a way they've always done them ... You've got the need to move with the times to make sure that we are relevant to the next generation that only live on social media ... to volunteer to come to these things ... to engage in some of these more boring structures. You know, come ‘to a meeting at 7.30 on a Tuesday night’. It's not the way things are done, is it, if you're 18?” (Participant 32)

“A lot of volunteers at the senior level don't tend to get involved until they are retired. They've got that time on their hands and they are reluctant to let it go. The number of people that we've got on our Board of Directors that are 80-plus is really ridiculous. And they are hanging on. Yes, there is a wealth of experience - and you wouldn't want them all to go at the same time - but I think it is noticeable ... My colleagues on the board are – well - not always in touch, which makes me think they shouldn't be there. Some insist on having their board paper sent to them, rather than sent electronically, because they're either not on email, or they don't want to be on email. In this day and age. It's slowing things down, isn't it? (Participant 39)

These commentaries seemingly fit with those critiques on volunteering outlined earlier in some respects, but not all. For example, several interviewees noted that that younger people lack material resources in the form of time corresponding with research on volunteering elsewhere (Warburton and Crozier 2001). There was also widespread reference to the work of the Young Farmers Club across our interviews, which runs counter to findings on a lack of social and symbolic capital amongst junior cohorts (cf. Dean 2016).

The dominance of older volunteers in the RWAS hierarchy was noted on multiple occasions and this is ostensibly in line with accounts of the importance of ‘grey volunteering’ in sustaining rural institutions (Jones and Heley 2016). The correlation between age and the seniority of board members also fits with the egalitarian discourse, where the position is offered as a reward for years of service. There was not, however, a sense that this was widely attributable to feelings of obligation and a lack of succession as reported elsewhere (e.g. Yarker et al. 2020). Rather, several respondents referred to an unwillingness of older patrons to step aside and create opportunities for younger members. Others highlighted a lack of institutional change in the committee and communications structure of the RWAS.

Echoing with recent work on the relationship between volunteering, aging and technology (Heley et al. 2019), a reluctance or inability among some board members to make use of online opportunities was portrayed by several interviewees as symptomatic of some patrons being ‘out of touch’ and unwilling to accept and institute changes that might attract and facilitate younger peoples’ involvements at the executive level. Our interviews indicated that the RWAS board are acutely aware of the dominance of older members amongst its ranks and that it is taking steps to address this. This included an identified need to create new opportunities for young people and, on this theme, several respondents called attention to the Future Generations Committee:

“[There was] this little committee in the Royal Welsh... the young persons’ forum... We asked if we could become a committee, which the board agreed to, so the Future Generations Committee... Where the Future Generations sort of sits is that there'll be people that come out of the YFC [Young Farmers’ Club]... and the Royal Welsh means something very different to them... they might be doing it out of love.” (Participant 54)

This passage reflects a wider discourse of succession planning and further emphasised the importance of the Young Farmers Club as a training ground for future leaders among the RWAS.

Conclusions

Drawing on interviews with a range of senior board members and volunteers of the RWAS, our research provides an insight into processes of patronage and elite formation in rural settings. Positioning the RWAS with a network of interrelated fields including those of business, politics and academia, our data reveals the reproduction of elites through a complex web of cultural capital in the form of honours, royal appointments, awards and claims to Welshness, alongside the institutional forms of social capital built around ties of family, friendship and professional networks.

Placing the form and function of rural elites in historical context, our interviews indicate a rhetorical reorientation of leadership away from the gentry towards an ascendant political and professional elite: although the extent to which this shift constitutes a wholesale transfer in power is less compelling. On the one hand, our respondents tended to employ a rhetoric that identified senior positions in the RWAS, and rural society in Wales more broadly, as a reflection of ability, service and an embedded 'localness'; as opposed to upper middle class privilege and noblesse oblige. There was also a widely articulated desire to address diversity within the Boardroom and across the committee structure, but these sentiments were largely limited to gender and age.

The ascendancy of older white males is both characteristic of the landed gentry and rural elite of the past, and of boardroom settings in the voluntary sector in America and Europe (e.g. Meyer and Rameder 2022). Addressing this crisis of representation remains a difficult task, and our research indicates that this is true of rural settings and institutions in contemporary Wales. A failure to engage with 'race' or religious inequality in representation is itself a significant finding that feeds into the emerging literature on black or Islamic representation in Welsh rural settings (Walker 2022; Issa 2022). Thus, the RWAS has further to go than many charitable institutions with regards to diverse representation, but its leaning towards change, alongside its commitment to instal a classless *pobl lleol* [local people] is indicative of its drive to advance the *Sioe ar Bobl* [people's show] agenda.

These sentiments are very much in line with those constructions of communities in Wales as classless, and of rural social relations as more egalitarian than elsewhere in the UK (see Jenkins 1960), but this rhetoric was not fully aligned with the credentials of the RWAS leadership; certainly not in the past, or even today. The apex of the organization today is not the domain of the aristocracy, but it is more suitably typified as a constellation of smaller landowners, farmers, employers and middle-class professionals. This corresponds with those accounts of rural political elites in the mid-20th century British countryside (e.g. Cox, Lowe and Winter 1991; McGovern 2014), but contrasts markedly with Heley's account of a New Squirearchy (2010) and Sutherland's 'new gentleman farmers' (2012), with limited evidence of agricultural gentrification and associated alterations of cultural symbolism. In juxtaposition to Woods' earlier work in Somerset (1997), the legacy of feudalism within the RWAS is more figurative than performative; yet aspects of the discourse of the country gentleman and associated forms of capital remain. With many senior volunteers continuing to hold a range honorific and professional titles and qualifications (OBEs, MBEs, FRICS, FRAGS etc) the connections to the fields of business, politics and the British establishment are still very much apparent. This is at odds with the discursive contrast drawn by respondents between the Royal Welsh Show "family" and the "posh", "Bowler hatted", "champagne drinking" English elite.

This analysis of symbolic capital must not be limited to the individual beneficiaries. As an organisation that depends upon a large contingent of volunteers, its ongoing survival and success is premised on its continued appeal to these individuals and the many thousand RWAS members and show-goers. While processes tied to symbolic capital certainly play a part in sustaining elites' positions within a

restricted group of Welsh rural elites, these also play a part in securing the sustained commitment to volunteering for the institution, where position is the reward. This supports the view that symbolic power is a reasonable tool which enables charities to work (Dean 2020). Crucially for the RWAS, where the wider charity sector is reported as suffering a crisis of volunteering, the sustainability of this institution is well served by the exercise and reproduction of social and cultural capital through membership. Moreover, where other national Welsh charities face the accusation of failing to achieve geographical representation (Sanders 2022), the RWAS is well served by modes of governance that valorises local representation.

This study also demonstrates the role of family in instilling charitable activities amongst the elites, evident in references to upbringing, responsibility and the notion that volunteering and leadership in the RWAS is “in the blood”. This was apparent in those interviews where respondents referred to prevalent families and dynasties within the RWAS, and where volunteer career pathways had (potentially) been expedited by pedigree as much as ability. While interviewees were wary of portraying nepotism, these commentaries reinforced the importance of moral boundaries (obligation, integrity), social capital (family and friendship ties), and cultural possessions (embodied knowledge of the show) in the fashion of a ‘show habitus’. This finding is also important given that the role of family in shaping pro-social activity has been somewhat neglected in civil society literature (Muddiman et al. 2020; Power et al. 2018). Here our study suggests that concerns about succession planning to ensure the long-term sustainability of charities drive inter-generational civic activity, thus perpetuating the relationship between civil society and family. However, attempts to tackle diversity in senior volunteer roles which do not address the importance of familial ties as a charitable resource will likely fail to address structural inequalities and organizational sustainability.

In conclusion, our research would suggest that elite research in rural contexts is not anachronistic. Rural elites in the UK are not the same today as they once were, but they remain evident and influential within institutional contexts. This includes the RWAS, where patronage and the notion of service underpins both its resilience and organizational hierarchy. To return to Lockwood’s conception of civic stratification, analyses of civic expansion and civic deficit must obviously look to contemporary transformations of class structures in urban and rural spaces. They must, however, also be mindful of legacy and the ongoing power and influence of the ‘traditional’ middle and upper classes as reproduced through entrenched forms of economic, social and cultural capital.

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