

'A wondrous gaol is the emigrant ship': shipboard experiences of Welsh migrants in the nineteenth century

I want to begin by thanking MOROL for the great privilege and honour of being invited to deliver this Aled Eames Memorial Lecture. My aim this evening is to present glimpses of some of the experiences of nineteenth-century Welsh emigrants as they crossed the oceans on their way to new lives overseas. I want to discuss also some themes that original sources reveal about the relationship between emigration, emigrants and the sea. For example, what were the attitudes of emigrants and prospective emigrants towards the sea and what effect did their ideas and anxieties about voyages have on the decision whether or not to emigrate? It is a topic in which Aled Eames himself was very interested. His pioneering works include one of great relevance to my topic, that is *Y Ffordaith Bell*, published in 1993. The book discusses and reproduces diaries and letters of Welsh people who sailed to Australia during the gold rushes of the mid-nineteenth century. I want to take this opportunity also to pay tribute to Robin Evans, founder and first chairman of MOROL, who died earlier this year. Like Aled Eames, Robin inspired a host of people in many fields, and especially relevant to us here this evening is his contribution to developing the maritime history of Wales, including establishing this memorial lecture. Robin, too, had a great interest in my subject this evening. His pioneering book *Merched y Môr*, published last year, contains an important section on another aspect of our history that has been vastly neglected, that is the experiences of Welsh emigrant women. I will refer to his work later on in the lecture.

My lecture this evening concentrates largely on Welsh people who crossed the Atlantic in the second half of the nineteenth century in order to settle in the United States of America, the most popular overseas destination of the emigrant Welsh in this period.¹ As Aled Eames did in *Y Ffordaith Bell*, in part I will let ordinary Welsh migrants tell their stories in their own words, by quoting extensively from their writings.² And here, to begin, is one of them:

MR ED. – When I was departing from Aberdare I promised my many friends that I would send my news to Y Gwladgarwr, so that everyone could read it and judge for themselves. A journey from Liverpool to New York has now become very commonplace in comparison with our fathers' day though we still have the same number of miles to travel and the same dangers to face as they did. It is the technological improvement which makes all the difference, that we in this age can cross the Atlantic in as many days as they took weeks. The power of steam drives us from the one continent to the other in a straight line across the great ocean, like the one on which the steam engine drives us across the country. But, Mr Ed., I was thinking of saying a little about the journey. Accounts of voyages have become so commonplace.³

This is how John Davies of Brookfield, Ohio opens his letter that was published in *Y Gwladgarwr* in April 1868, about a fortnight after he had emigrated to America aboard *The City of Baltimore*, one of the Inman Line steamships. He mentions several

¹ See *'Raising the Wind': Emigrating from Wales to the USA in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries*, Bill Jones (2004)

² *Y Ffordaith Bell*, Aled Eames (1993), [p. 7]

³ *Y Gwladgarwr*, 25 April 1868. Translations from original Welsh sources are by the author. A translated edited extract from this letter is included in *The Welsh in America: Letters from the Immigrants* (1961), Alan Conway (ed.), pp. 45-6.

aspects that I will explore in more detail in this lecture. Note first that he wonders at the great changes that had occurred in the shipboard experiences of Welsh emigrants to America in the middle years of the nineteenth century. There were important and far-reaching transformations in the organisation of European emigration to America in this period, including the substantial growth of the ‘emigration business’, the activities of emigrant shipping companies and emigration agents. Emigration was facilitated by key developments such as the switch from sail to steam in the late 1850s, the growth of emigrant steamship lines like Inman, Cunard and Guion, the construction of railways and the introduction of regular timetabled departures and through tickets to overseas destinations. Liverpool emerged as a European centre for emigrant ships, displacing the earlier pattern where Welsh emigrants departed from any number of small ports on the Welsh coastline. A series of Passenger Acts were also passed throughout the century.

No doubt it was an exaggeration on the part of one commentator in 1867 to suggest that by then the journey to America was ‘little more than a journey from Cardigan or Newtown to Merthyr Tydfil’.⁴ But there is no doubt that there was a great change in the nature of life on the emigrant ship as a result of all these developments. The improvements in transportation and communication networks in the 1860s led to a significant decrease in the cost of emigration while the journey was now generally faster, safer and more comfortable. Even so, as John Davies emphasized, the perils remained (as did the distances, of course). And as we shall see later, the difficulties that emigrants in the age of sail had had to face did not disappear either.

⁴ *Y Drych*, 26 September 1867

Note also that John Davies's main purpose in writing was to give an account of his journey, and his belief that such an act had become very popular among Welsh emigrants by the 1860s. Indeed, letters like these were a very familiar feature of the columns of the press in Wales in the second half of the nineteenth century.⁵ Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of them appeared in local newspapers throughout Wales. In 1881 one emigrant went so far as to say that 'writing accounts of journeys from Wales to America has become such a common thing that people regard the medium as being nothing better than inferior rubbish'. But he immediately went on to say that that was not true of everyone:

If the majority regard them as useless and unnecessary things, the many friends of the writer consider them from the other point of view, with a degree of fondness and enjoyment. Therefore, these few notes are being written primarily for them, in the hope that they will receive some idea of the subject, together with some guidance for those who intend to come to this country.⁶

In essence, therefore, letters like these were a blend of literary forms, combining elements of autobiography, a diary and a guide book for prospective emigrants. There was no limit to emigrants' eagerness to write accounts of this kind, either, or to interest in them on the part of newspaper readers, and they continued to appear regularly in the press until the start of the First World War. The vast majority of the letters cited the same justification for writing: that accounts of journeys, and

⁵ See '“Going into Print”: Published Immigrant Letters, Webs of Personal Relations, and the Emergence of the Welsh Public Sphere', Bill Jones, in *Letters Across Borders: the Epistolary Practices of International Migrants*, Bruce S. Elliott, David A. Gerber, and Suzanne M. Sinke (eds), (2006); 'Y Gwladgarwr a'i Ohebwr', Huw Walters, in his *Cynnwrf Canrif: Agweddau ar Ddiwylliant Gwerin* (2004)

⁶ *Tarian y Gweithiwr*, 21 January 1881

especially voyages, were interesting and acceptable to newspaper readers and that the writers were fulfilling promises they had made to relatives, friends and editors before departing.

We are very fortunate that there survives a splendid wealth of evidence regarding the shipboard experiences of Welsh emigrants in the nineteenth century. As the historian Marjory Harper notes, ‘the actual process of emigration was always a subject of great human interest, lending itself particularly readily to eyewitness accounts’.⁷ The subject was also of great human interest to a significant number of emigrants themselves. The act of emigrating was a spur to ordinary people to record their own experiences, people who would never have put pen to paper if they had stayed in Wales. In the case of Welsh emigrants, first hand evidence can be found in several forms, in Welsh and English, and in public and private original sources: in newspaper articles, emigrant guide books, speeches, letters, diaries, reminiscences, memoirs, and also in ballads and poetry, as we shall see in due course. Describing experiences on the sea was an integral part of the majority of emigrant writings, especially those written either during the voyage or very soon after the emigrants had reached their new homes.

It has to be acknowledged that this is a large and diverse subject and it is impossible to do it justice in one lecture. It is important to note, therefore, that there are several excellent studies of the shipboard experiences of emigrants from Wales, and Britain generally, in the nineteenth century. I have already referred to the work of Aled Eames and Robin Evans. Lengthy quotations from Welsh emigrants’ personal

⁷ *Adventurers and Exiles: The Great Scottish Exodus*, Marjory Harper (2003), p. 198

writings can be found in *Australians from Wales* (1988) by Lewis Lloyd, a close friend of Aled Eames, and in the letters collected and edited by Alan Conway in his *The Welsh in America: Letters from the Immigrants* (1961). Susan Wilkinson has published (in 2007) a detailed account of the experiences of the pioneers of the Welsh settlement in Patagonia aboard the *Mimosa* in 1865, one of the most famous voyages in Welsh history. Among the works not specifically on Welsh people, one should mention Terry Coleman's book, *Passage to America* (1992), and a number of valuable volumes on the voyages of British emigrants to Australia such as Don Charlwood, *The Long Farewell: The Perilous Voyages of Settlers Under Sail in the Great Migrations to Australia* (1981), Robin Haines, *Life and Death in the Age of Sail: The Passage to Australia* (2003), and two books by Andrew Hassam, *Sailing to Australia: Shipboard Diaries by Nineteenth-Century British Emigrants* and *No Privacy in Writing: Shipboard Diaries 1852-1879* (both published in 1995).

Before going on to explore some aspects of my topic tonight in greater detail, I must first note some fundamental considerations. They are rather obvious ones, perhaps, but important nevertheless. First, we should not generalise too much regarding Welsh emigrants' voyage experiences. Needless to say, their fortunes varied according to each individual and each ship. The nature of daily life on board the emigrant ship depended on a number of other factors that could determine significant variations. As we have already seen, there were great changes in ship technology and the emigrant trade during the nineteenth century. Emigrants' experiences were thus determined to a great extent by when in the century they sailed. Emigrants' experiences also diverged according to their destination. This fundamental factor determined how much time they had to spend on board ship and greatly influenced the conditions they had to

endure. Sail ships dominated the Australian run until the 1880s, and emigrants on the ‘distant voyage’ could spend between three and a half to five months on the sea. But even though the voyage to Australia was much longer than that to America, it was not necessarily less comfortable. To the contrary, one of the most important features of the nineteenth-century emigrant trade was that conditions bound for ships to Australia were generally better than those which sailed back and fore across the Atlantic.

The shipboard experiences of women were often different to those of men, and those of married couples compared to single people. As Robin Evans noted in *Merched y Môr*: ‘although to all intents and purposes the conditions emigrant women sailed under were the same as those for men, women’s experiences on the emigrant ship were an extension of their role and what was expected of them at home: more particularly cooking, cleaning and responsibility for the children.’ He went on to raise an important and intriguing question that merits much greater research, that is did emigrant women’s experiences during the voyage make them more independent?⁸ To males and female emigrants alike, what happened to them could clearly vary because of the weather during the voyage and the fate of the ship. A substantial number of emigrants lost their lives at sea in pursuit of realising their dreams of a better life beyond Wales. On the other hand, the vast majority of Welsh emigrants reached the end of their journey safely. There were great differences between the experiences of those emigrants who were fortunate enough to have enough money to pay for a cabin and the great majority who had to suffer – and survive – the steerage. Experience varied according to the individual’s constitution, especially regarding seasickness. As Daniel Griffiths of Braidwood, Illinois, acknowledged in a letter in 1879:

⁸ *Merched y Môr: Hanes Merched Cymru a'r Môr, 1750 hyd heddiw*, Robin Evans (2013), p. 255

‘Seasickness is rather tiresome; its duration fluctuates according to the person.’⁹

Indeed one of the favourite talking points of most surviving accounts of emigrant voyages is seasickness, as might be expected perhaps, given that it was the first and often the most uncomfortable problem emigrants had to face. The vast majority of them were unlikely to escape its clutches. It would seem that emigrants who were unfamiliar with the sea took great delight in portraying vivid scenes of the effects of this malady. Here is an extract from a letter Margaret Roberts sent to *Y Gwladgarwr* in 1862. Originally from the Cynghordy area, near Llandovery, she emigrated that year to Coal Valley, Illinois, where her husband William had already settled. It was uncommon for women to travel alone, but Margaret did so, as was appropriate perhaps for one as highly independent as she, and one who later became an enthusiastic and energetic campaigner for women’s rights in America. Although she had had to leave friends at Merthyr station in order to catch the train on her own, she was not afraid:

I felt singularly content and confident that the omnipresent friend would protect me from all harm.

October 2nd, starting for the ship, and about 4 o’clock in the afternoon I was on the ship, and travelling on the waves, the wind and sea were quiet ...

4th extraordinarily rough during the night, the wind and sea as if they were in an alliance aimed at getting us to the bottom, and all the travellers were lying

⁹ *Tarian y Gweithiwr*, 12 December 1879

on top of each other as if they were dead, not one able to help the other. Oh, what a heart-breaking scene! I think that if one of us had happened to die in this state, not one of the travellers would have been able to throw the corpse overboard.

6th very stormy, with me continuing to be very ill; but on the whole I was feeling exceptionally comfortable and content to be in the will of the great Ruler of the worlds.¹⁰

I will return later to the religious element, highlighted very strongly in this quotation.

Nevertheless, however diverse experiences on the nineteenth-century emigrant ship could be, accounts in private letters and those published in newspapers, and in other personal documents are strikingly similar in many important ways. The majority follow manifest conventions. A very popular feature was to structure the account day by day, like a diary. Almost without exception, these writings also have a number of common elements as far as content is concerned. I have already mentioned one, seasickness. This commonality ought not to be surprising, either. Crossing the oceans was a mass experience, lived by a large number of emigrants in similar circumstances. We should also remember that for the vast majority of ordinary Welsh people who took this massive step to change their world, the voyage itself was a great and possibly terrifying undertaking, let alone the whole process of emigrating, whatever the ultimate destination. These emigrants had to face situations that were wholly new to them. This was particularly true of the large number of them who were on a voyage

¹⁰ *Y Gwladgarwr*, 6 December 1862

for the first time in their lives, and who would otherwise have never gone aboard a ship had they not had to do so in order to emigrate. It is likely that many of them had not even seen the sea before.

First hand reports thus contain a large number of issues, topics and comments that appear time after time and characterise the texts. As I do not have time to discuss them all, here is a list although by no means a complete one. To begin with, the great dangers, fear and bad experiences caused by rough storms and seas and strong winds; rites of passage during the voyage, and the emphasis on recording births, deaths and burials, and occasionally marriages. Women had to overcome extremely challenging difficulties when giving birth and raising children in the conditions common to most emigrant voyages. A great many emigrant accounts include comments on the treatment they received during the voyage; some complained that they had been mistreated by the captain and crew while others praised the staff on their ship. The vast majority of writings contain descriptions of myriad discomforts and inconveniences, and of hard and primitive conditions, even after the advent of the steam ship. Very common are complaints of overcrowding in the steerage, the lack of space and emigrants having to live on top of each other. Few had a good word for the food provided for them, either, the vast majority hating its poor quality and monotonous nature and the lack of fresh food and pure water.

The first hand accounts of emigrant voyages that survive are replete with evidence that reminds us that, whatever its mass nature, emigration was a remarkably human, personal and individual phenomenon. They reflect a potent mixture of negative and positive feelings. Emigrants reveal the pain and longing they felt at leaving Wales and

having to say goodbye to relatives and friends. We hear hopes for, as well as fears of, the future. Amid all the complaints there is also testimony to the enjoyment emigrants experienced during the voyage, as they described the pleasure they derived from communal singing, dancing, playing cards or holding religious services. As might be expected, as the voyage neared its end the majority of emigrants declared their joy and relief at reaching their destination, but at the same time they often reveal their anxieties regarding what lay ahead.

One of the most conspicuous of themes in emigrants' accounts is their efforts, especially on the part of those bound for the furthest destinations, to cope with the monotony of life during the voyage, and to overcome the daily challenge of coming to terms with the boredom and finding ways of entertaining themselves and passing the time. Or in the words of David Samuel, headmaster of County School, Aberystwyth, who went to America on the *Majestic* in the late 1880s: 'There is much enquiry – How do you fend for yourselves on board for a week without anything around you but sea and sky?'¹¹ In his useful study of letters published in *Y Gwladgarwr*, Huw Walters writes that the voyage was often tedious and it appears that this is the main reason why in their letters these correspondents noted every trivial and commonplace incident.¹² Trivial and commonplace to us, perhaps, but full of importance to the writers. Some of the letters demonstrate plenty of curiosity on the part of Welsh emigrants, and of their wonder at new things, especially while recording seeing whales, seals, and other ships. Here is James and T. Owens, in a letter published in 1881:

¹¹ Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru, MS 2834B, p. 4

¹² 'Y Gwladgarwr a'i Ohebwy'r', p. 156

September 28 – ... We saw several fish that looked like pigs. They were jumping after the ship like dogs in the old country with their ears up straight ...

September 30 – A delightful morning, like mid-summer. Shortly after two in the afternoon we saw a large whale appearing. It was enormous in size, and throwing up water like smoke. It seems to us that it was bigger than the largest elephant we had ever seen. We also saw many smaller ones together. They surrounded the big one like suckling pigs encircling their mother– the sow. The Great Eastern passed us. The Welsh people held a singing meeting today as usual.¹³

After all, the emigrants were venturesome Welsh people. Huw Walters rightly emphasises how hard it is for us today to realise how much of an enterprise it was for ordinary Welsh people to emigrate to a foreign country during the nineteenth century.¹⁴

In an attempt to bring alive the bare list of main themes that characterise the letters and other documents in which Welsh emigrants recorded their shipboard experiences, I would like now to quote from two texts; they are different in form but very similar in content. First, more from John Davies's account of crossing the Atlantic on *The City of Baltimore* in 1868. It is worth quoting at length from this very interesting and revealing letter because it demonstrates very effectively how engaging, colourful and valuable the personal testimony of nineteenth-century Welsh emigrants can be. Indeed, an indication of this is the fact that Alan Conway included the letter in his

¹³ *Tarian y Gweithiwr*, 14 January 1881

¹⁴ 'Y Gwladgarwr a'i Ohebwy'r', p. 152

collection *The Welsh in America*, and there is also a sizeable quotation from it in Huw Walters's study of correspondence that appeared in *Y Gwladgarwr*:

We left Liverpool at midday Tuesday 11th March, 1868, aboard the 'City of Baltimore', one of the *Inman Line* steamers. She is an iron vessel, strongly and sturdily made, and one of the dirtiest I have ever been aboard. As we were steerage passengers we had every opportunity to see the dirt ... The treatment received by the travellers on board the City of Baltimore is very poor and ordinary if they are so unfortunate as to be steerage passengers. It is said that the passengers number 760, apart from the vessel's hands and officers, and they have come from various parts of Europe – having left the land of their birth, broken up their old homes, left behind beloved relatives and their host of friends; most of them had turned their backs forever on their land of their birth – to look for homes and friends in the land of the West. It is no small thing to feel we are on the great and wide ocean without a home to draw towards. The word *home* is a dear one to a man; the more he thinks about it, the fonder his feelings for it. But nevertheless, the vast majority of our fellow passengers are creatures without any home. We had three very rough days at the start of our voyage ... When a man has seasickness it is as if he is at war with himself, and he devalues himself, and does not know how to make peace. Whatever food is offered to his stomach he throws it all up with contempt. ... The general complaint about the food is not that there is not enough of it but that it is not of the right kind and not given at the right time to satisfy one's hunger; but despite all the sloppiness, the desire for food makes a man eat the foulest things. The food that was despised the first day is eaten with relish

before the end of the journey. The Welsh regard Fish Friday as a day of fasting; to us no food is more hateful or foul than the half-filling, stinking codfish. The Irish eat it up as being the most delicious treat.

It would be well for everyone to remember that all the room a passenger can claim for himself is about two and a half feet in height, two in width and six in length; and in this small space, he eats, lives, sleeps, etc. When it is mealtime the steward comes past each man and gives everyone his share in his tin in bed. It is the nearest thing in the world to Wombwell's animal show; the only difference being that Wombwell gives different food to the different animals according to their natures and kind, but on the City of Baltimore the same kind of food goes to everyone of every age, country and climate ... After all the blaming and grumbling ... through our heavenly Father's leniency and care, here we all are having arrived in the land of the West quite safely, in 13 and a half days, without losing one life, but we heard that there had been one birth on deck.¹⁵

As Marjory Harper notes: 'a voyage in an emigrant ship was no luxury cruise ... It was rather a test of endurance that did nothing to build up the passengers' strength for the challenges of the new life that lay ahead. This was especially true in the steerage'.¹⁶

In his book *The Long Farewell*, Don Charlwood suggests that 'shipboard existence [became] a life within a life with its own rules and priorities'. He cites Geoffrey

¹⁵ *Y Gwladgarwr*, 25 April 1868

¹⁶ *Adventurers and Exiles*, p. 198

Blainey's view in *The Tyranny of Distance* that '[f]or all its discomforts, the ship offered a degree of security: one had few decisions to make ... Among steerage passengers life was probably closer to a welfare state than anything known until that time'.¹⁷ A rather different picture to that of Blainey's is presented by the poet Richard W. Jones, Y Cymro Cloff (The Lame Welshman) who emigrated in the 1850s from Glyn Tarell, Defynnog, to Wisconsin, where he later became a successful farmer. His volume *Caban y Cymro* (The Welshman's Cabin), published in Merthyr Tydfil in 1873, contains several poems on the theme of emigration and also a guide book for prospective Welsh emigrants to the United States. It is worth noting in passing that 'Y Llong Ymfudol' (The Emigrant Ship) was sometimes chosen as a subject for poetic competitions in *eisteddfodau* in America in the late nineteenth century. R. J. Owens (Gwerinog) of Racine, Wisconsin, won first prize in an eisteddfod in that place in 1879 for his poem 'Y Llong Ymfudol', which was later published in the periodical of the Welsh Independent denomination in America, *Y Cenhadwr Americanaidd*, in the same year.¹⁸ But back to Y Cymro Cloff. In his poem 'Darluniad o Long Ymfudol' (A Picture of an Emigrant Ship) he agreed that crossing the Atlantic had become much easier by the 1870s but he insisted that nevertheless the emigrant ships were still like a 'wondrous gaol'. What follows is a rough translation for impressionistic purposes:

A wondrous gaol are the emigrant ships
 A hotchpotch of humans, or a Babel of people –
 A crew of all classes in trade and morals,
 An unending crowd, like bees in hives;
 There all at once every language and nation,

¹⁷ *The Long Farewell*, p. 213

¹⁸ *Y Cenhadwr Americanaidd*, 40:12 (December 1879), pp. 373-4

Shouting like geese, out of control;
Each one the boss, and each one with their opinions –
Each one busy, and all with their own ways;
Some singing, some complaining, some poorly, some crying;
Some swearing presumptuously, and some praying
To Mary and to Peter, St Patrick, and the paternoster,
And everyone to someone according to their custom.
Inside the beds, some lying in heaps,
And many lying docile stretched out on the floor;
Some giving birth, some dying, some playing, some resentful;
Some amusing, some earnest, some soppy, some drunk;
Some loving, some knocking, some struttingly dancing;
And some like wolves incessantly howling;
And also, not a few can be seen throwing up,
And something that's worse, but it's wiser I be silent ...¹⁹

In the remainder of the lecture I want to comment briefly on a few more prominent themes such as fear of the sea, the religious dimension that is revealed in many of the accounts, and the mixture of nationalities and languages among passengers on the emigrant ships. But before that, in order to highlight the gap that could exist between the ideal and the reality, it is intriguing to compare the pictures painted by Y Cymro Cloff and John Davies with one example of the kind of advice regarding the voyage that was available to emigrants in a wide range of contemporary sources. Here is an

¹⁹ 'Darluniad o Long Ymfudol', Y Cymro Cloff, in *Caban y Cymro* (1873), pp. 68-9

extract from the relevant section of *Yr Ymfudwr* (The Emigrant) by the Revd Robert D. Thomas (Iorthryn Gwynedd), first published in 1854:

Instructions for Emigrants 3. The Voyage: Do not be agitated if you have seasickness because no-one has ever died of it, but thousands have derived great benefit from it. It is unpleasant, and makes you very ill for some time, but once you have got over it you will want to eat not only the meat but the bones too ... It would be better if you did not talk a lot to the sailors and emigrants who are strangers to you. Keep your mind to yourself; but behave seemly towards everyone ... Beware of the immoral and ungodly; but delight in the company of the sober, moral and godly. Get up early; keep yourself, your rooms and your clothes clean; walk a lot on the outside deck every day; read the Bible a lot; and entertain yourselves by singing, praying, and listening to the gospel. Generally voyages are pleasant and safe; but sometimes there are storms and accidents.²⁰

R. D. Thomas's statement that the majority of voyages were safe ones raises an important question; that is, to what extent did dread of the sea act as a powerful deterrent to people who were considering emigrating. Before they could settle in America or Australia, emigrants obviously had to survive the voyage there. As we have already seen, far-reaching transformations in the nature, patterns and conditions of sea travel during the nineteenth century had an enormous effect on the process of emigration and life on board ships. Possibly a further important consequence of these changes is that they may have persuaded sceptical individuals that crossing the seas

²⁰ R. D. Thomas, *Yr Ymfudwr; Yn Cynnwys Hanes America ac Australia yn nghyda Phob Hyfforddiadau i Ymfudwyr* (1854), p. 112

was far safer than it had been – as indeed was the case, after all – and that technological and infrastructural changes had eroded one of the most obvious factors that hindered emigration. There is no doubt that the sea and the voyage were terrifying prospects that in themselves were sufficient to persuade some to stay in Wales, people who would otherwise have emigrated were it not for their fears. Original documents from the period suggest that to an extent this was a public fear.

Evidence of the influence of anxieties about the sea and voyages can be found in Welsh-language ballads of the period. Perhaps some of you are familiar with Rhiannon Ifans's interesting study of those describing voyages to Australia during the mid-nineteenth-century gold rushes, *Awstralia, Gwlad yr Aur: Teithiau i Awstralia drwy lygad y baledwyr Cymraeg* (2008). There survives a substantial number of ballads along these lines and, as can be expected, most of them contain references to the voyage and the perils of the sea, and to fear and anxiety on the part of emigrants. Especially noteworthy forms in circulation during the late eighteenth and throughout the nineteenth centuries are the small number of Welsh-language ballads and poems in which two people debate the pros and cons of emigrating to America or Australia. Among them is *Cân Newydd: Ar Ddull o Ymddiddan rhwng yr Anesmwyth a'r Esmwyth; sef y rhai sydd yn bwriadu cymmeryd eu Taith tu ag America, ag eraill sydd yn boddloni yn ngwlad eu Genedigaeth*, written by Thomas Francis and published around 1800.²¹ Another example is *Ymddiddan Rhwng Robert ac Ifan ynghylch ymadael â'u gwlad a myned i'r America* by Ywain Meirion (Griffith Owen, 1803-68), one of the most productive and popular balladeers in Wales in the nineteenth

²¹ See ‘“Very Different Springs of Uneasiness”’, Hywel M. Davies, *Welsh History Review*, 15:3 (June 1991), pp. 389-91; *Calvinists Incorporated: Welsh Immigrants in Ohio's Industrial Frontier*, Anne Kelly Knowles (1997), pp. 228-9

century.²² Texts such as these reveal popular understandings of the meaning of emigration and offer insights into the content of debates those people considering emigration were sure to hold as they decided whether to emigrate or not. It is significant, therefore, that in these ballads the protagonists either paint up or downplay the perils of voyages. In *Ymddiddan* Robert tries to frighten Ifan by describing the terror of the voyage and asserting that bad weather would cause Ifan to regret a thousand times that he had ever left Wales. Ifan's response is to accept that there would be dangers but to stress also that God's blessing, a sturdy vessel and skilled seamen would ensure that he would reach journey's end safely. The same elements can be seen in *Cynadledd Rhwng Un am Fyned i Awstralia, a'r Llall am Aros Gartref* (1857) by Dewi Isan. Here again, the long voyage and its perils are listed among the reasons put forward against emigration while faith that God would keep emigrants safe during the voyage is used to argue in favour of moving to Australia.²³

Other nineteenth century sources also refer to travellers' fears before and during the voyage and offer advice on how they could ease their dread. In a letter to his sister in 1874, William Austin wrote from Patagonia: 'Possibly you are scared of the sea; if so, you need not be, the voyage is agreeable'.²⁴ To the poet Y Cymro Cloff yn 1873, the sea was 'the big bogey which stands in the way of the majority undertaking the venture; but the voyage [to America] is but nothing nowadays, compared to what it was years ago'.²⁵ We might speculate that statements such as these offer one

²² See also, *Baledi Ywain Meirion*, Tegwyn Jones (ed.) (1980); 'Awstralia: Gwlad Lawn o Drysorau', Huw Walters, in *Cynnwrf Canrif*

²³ See also 'Cynhadledd: Pa Un Orau? Myned i Awstralia Neu Beidio', William Lewis, in his *Gardd Aberdâr* (1855)

²⁴ *Y Dydd*, 29 January 1875

²⁵ *Caban y Cymro*, p. 20

explanation for the vast number of accounts of voyages that were sent from America and elsewhere to newspapers in Wales during the nineteenth century. I suggest that as well as aiming to comfort family and friends back in Wales, to keep in touch with them and give them advice, these letters were also written to put minds at rest, to prove that emigrants could cross the Atlantic or sail to Australia safely. Here is Daniel Griffiths of Braidwood, Illinois, again: ‘Therefore you will find [in the letter] some of the things of most relevance to us. First, the journey. There are not many emigrants who are not very frightened when they contemplate crossing the mighty ocean; but this is merely an imaginary fear. When a man finds his feet on board one of the Liverpool ships, he naturally forgets all his fears.’²⁶

Even so, it would be unwise to exaggerate the degree to which the great transformations in the emigration business in the mid-nineteenth century succeeded in removing fears of the sea and its perils. In Aled Eames’s words, ‘it must be remembered that the travellers were very conscious of the dangers of the voyage, many of them having heard of disasters ... There was the occasional frightening and dramatic illustration to add to their fears’.²⁷ News of shipwrecks could kill eagerness to emigrate in the wink of an eye. According to one correspondent in May 1863, many emigrants from Merthyr Tydfil were among the 237 who lost their lives when the *Anglo-Saxon* wrecked off Newfoundland the previous month. News of the disaster had a profound effect on the town, removing completely ‘the mania for emigration that has lately raged to such an extent in this place; a solitary one is all that can be seen now’.²⁸

²⁶ *Tarian y Gweithiwr*, 12 December 1879

²⁷ *Y Fordaith Bell*, pp. 37-8

²⁸ *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian*, 22 May 1863

We saw earlier that the religious element is strongly evident in probably the majority of Welsh emigrants' personal accounts. We would expect that, given how central the Christian faith was to the way of life of a great many Welsh in the nineteenth century and to their way of seeing and understanding the world. To a small number of Welshmen, what they witnessed on board the emigrant ship caused them to start preaching and become ministers of religion. That was the experience of the Revd William Meirion Evans, of Llanfrothen, one of the most important and influential Welshman in Australia in the second half of the nineteenth century, and a minister of Welsh Calvinistic Methodist churches in the Victorian goldfields and Melbourne. He sailed from Deptford to Adelaide in 1849, and during the voyage 'his very soul was racked within him while observing the reckless wickedness around him; the screeching of the fiddles; the dancing and drinking'.²⁹ Without doubt, his disgust at the behaviour of his fellow-travellers was a key factor that stimulated to spread God's Word. The same thing occurred to David Stephen Davies, 'the great Apostle of Patagonia', while emigrating to America in 1857. He came to consider ships as a promising field for preachers: 'on board ship is a good place for preaching; the people there are together and compact; everyone there is equal in a sense, and everyone is fearful, to some extent, in stormy weather'.³⁰

Comparisons of the emigrant ship to the Tower of Babel are very frequent, as are references to the mixture of peoples from all over Europe who had come together on board ship with the sole purpose of crossing the Atlantic in search of a better life in the West. This experience had a significant effect on the Welsh emigrants' sense of themselves and their national identity. As everyone here this evening will know,

²⁹ LLGC Facs 680 'Memoir of the Rev. William Meirion Evans', p. 18

³⁰ 'Y Parch. D. S. Davies', Evan Pan Jones, *Y Geninen*, 17:1 (1899), p. 57

Protestant Nonconformity was a powerful force in the nineteenth century not only as a creed but also as a characteristic that defined Welshness. The voyage created conditions that enabled Welsh emigrants to affirm their convictions regarding the religiosity of the Welsh nation, especially in comparison with other nationalities. The same was true of singing on the voyage; one could be excused for assuming from some of the letters that the emigrant ship was a *Cymanfa Ganu* or even ‘The Land of Song’ floating on water. ‘After reaching the ship’, declared Edward John, Joseph Richards and William John in a letter published in 1895, ‘what a place for chattering; talk of the Tower of Babel, here was the second Tower of Babel on the *Umbria* today. We were a mixture of every tribe and language under heaven, and everyone chattering ... all of us Welsh who were on board were singing the old delightful hymn “O Fryniau Caersalem ceir gweled”, until everyone was thrilled.’³¹

In addition to being a means of strengthening their Welshness, it was on board the emigrant ship that Welsh emigrants encountered America for the first time. On the voyage, too, began the process of adapting to new cultures, languages and strange faces. Or in the words of David Samuel:

In truth I saw an outline, or a miniature, of the population of America on the voyage on board the ‘Majestic’ while going out – and before reaching the country. That’s the population of the United States, a mixture of every nation under the sun – the nations of Europe and Asia, and Indians and Chinese amassed together. In order to see the population of the macrocosm or the great

³¹ *Industrial World*, 24 May 1895

world of the American continent, one need only take a look at the microcosm or the small world on board one of the Ocean Liners.³²

This contact was not necessarily an easy process for Welsh people. As Huw Walters notes, ‘compelling Welsh emigrants to have dealings with wild Irish and surly Germans was a shocking experience for many of them’.³³ A large number of shipboard accounts recorded that their ship had landed at (Cobh today), as was the pattern, and had picked up crowds of Irish who were also emigrating to the new world in the west. Usually the Welsh documents also refer to, to quote Huw Walters again, ‘the great friction that existed between the Irish and their fellow travellers, and the Welsh could not at all put up with “Mary’s children” or “the children of the Bog”, or their religion’.³⁴ Here is another extract from the letter of James and T. Owens, published in 1881:

We reached Queenstown on Sunday morning, September 26th. A delightful morning, the vessel sailing splendidly, and we, the Welsh, sweetly singing sacred pieces on deck.

Monday 27. – ... in the evening a strong wind came up until it clumsily threw the ship up and down. Everyone had to go down to the bunks early. The children of the Emerald Isle were shouting loudly and taking turns to pray to the ‘Holy Virgin, the mother of Jesus.’ They had gathered together in one heap, and one of the old mothers was in the

³² LIGC MS 2834B, p. 5

³³ ‘*Y Gwladgarwr a’i Ohebwyrr*’, p. 152

³⁴ ‘*Y Gwladgarwr a’i Ohebwyrr*’, p. 155. See also ‘A tolerant nation?: anti-Catholicism in nineteenth century Wales’, Paul O’Leary, in *From Medieval to Modern Wales*, R. R. Davies and Geraint H. Jenkins, (eds) (2004)

middle trying to say a little on behalf of them all ... The old woman had believed that we were all done for. But one of the crew came down from the deck, and said 'Leave off your noise, it is alright.' The prayer was ended on the spot, and the old woman told him 'God bless you,' and started dancing. I never saw such a nation as Mary's children ...

September 29. – Yet another delightful morning, everyone coming on deck to quaff the fresh air. We Welsh spent the day close together singing sacred pieces, and about 8 o'clock in the evening, the Irish started their meeting by singing comic songs, Irish songs, dancing, and making merry. The children of the Emerald Isle succumb to all filth.³⁵

These words make uncomfortable reading today, perhaps. But, of course, there were also plenty of other Welsh who were 'succumbing to all filth', delighting in the dancing, the drinking and the jollification, and being very willing to get on with the Irish and share in the fun, as they saw it.

In conclusion, whatever were the fortunes of Welsh emigrants aboard the 'wondrous gaol', the voyage was certainly a great milestone in their lives, and had a far-reaching influence on their experiences in their new homes. The crossing from the old world to the new was not a marginal event but rather the beginning of the process of coming to terms with America and of familiarizing themselves with other nationalities as well as strengthening their awareness of being Welsh. To David Samuel, the Atlantic was 'the great separatist. This is what prevents a great many of us from going over. Its name

³⁵ *Tarian y Gweithiwr*, 14 January 1881

suggests all sorts of terrors in our breasts – its winds, waves and perils’. At the same time he believed that the Welsh in America ‘were all the more dear to us because the sea was between us’.³⁶ On the one hand the sea served to impede emigration from Wales while on the other it facilitated it. In the same way, the sea divided and united the Welsh people.

In his preface to *Y Ffordaith Bell* Aled Eames declared that the Welsh emigrants who wrote the letters and diaries reproduced in the volume were ‘extraordinary ordinary Welsh people’ who ‘guided us during the voyage – sometimes in anxiety and sadness, sometimes in hope and full of confidence’.³⁷ The same could be said of the letters discussed in this lecture. This evening I have presented only a superficial and impressionistic introduction to the shipboard experiences of Welsh emigrants in the nineteenth century but I hope I have succeeded in conveying a little, at least, of the history of these adventurous Welsh. I hope also that the lecture has been a worthy tribute to the contribution of two other extraordinary ordinary Welshmen, that of Aled Eames and Robin Evans, who both did so much to bring the history of the relationship between Wales and the sea alive, and to ensure that that rich and important history will no longer be neglected.

³⁶ LIGC MS 2834B, p. 5
³⁷ *Y Ffordaith Bell*, [p. 7]