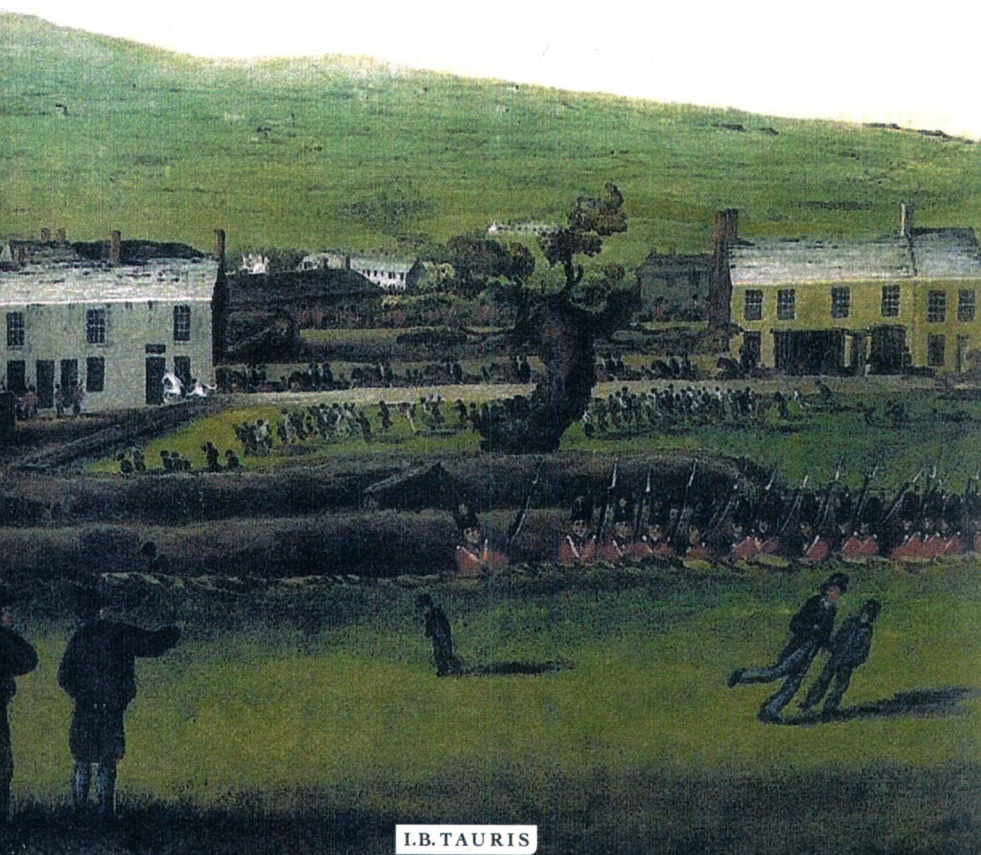# SOCIAL DISORDER
IN BRITAIN, 1750-1850

The Power of the Gentry, Radicalism and Religion in Wales

J. E. THOMAS

I.B. TAURIS

SOCIAL DISORDER IN BRITAIN 1750–1850

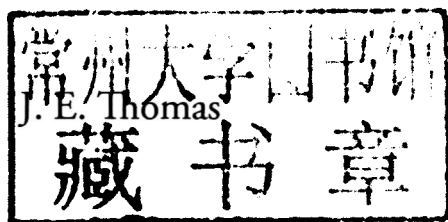## The Power of the Gentry, Radicalism and Religion in Wales

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LONDON · NEW YORK

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Professor J. E. (Teddy) Thomas was born and brought up in Haverfordwest, Pembrokeshire. He is a graduate of the Universities of Oxford, London, York, and Nottingham (D.Litt). During his time at the University of Nottingham he has been the Robert Peers Professor of Adult Education (now Emeritus in the Name), Dean of Education, and Senior Pro Vice-Chancellor. He has written twelve books and many articles on a variety of historical topics. These include histories of penal systems, of Adult Education, of Japan, of Australia, and of Wales.

For Olwen

I loved you, so I drew these tides of men into my hands
And wrote my will across the sky in stars
To earn you Freedom, the seven pillared worthy house,
That your eyes might be shining for me
(TE Lawrence)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

This is an account of the social unrest which was such a prominent feature of life in Britain in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and the means by which this unrest was contained. Some emphasis will be placed on Dyfed,[1] which provides such excellent examples of every aspect of the phenomena being discussed. The disturbances in Wales in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were on a smaller scale than they were in industrial England. Neither can be found the violence which attended such events in Ireland, nor the plethora of organisations to undermine authority with which Ireland abounded. But the passions were as strong, and the privations were as bad as any.

To understand the subject it is necessary in this Introduction to set out a few details of the social and historical context of the events which are the substance of this book. It is especially important to understand the fundamental changes which were consequent upon the Tudor usurpation, since this was to affect many aspects of Welsh life, including attitudes to the Crown and authority in the following centuries.

We begin with a note of the numbers of people who lived in Wales in the period we shall be discussing. One estimate of the population size of Wales in 1750 is 489,000.[2] At the beginning of the nineteenth century it had risen to 'nearly 600,000'. At that time only thirteen towns had a population of over 3000, while seven only had 5000.[3] Although from time to time there has been modest amounts of industrial activity, for example in coal mining in Pembrokeshire, or lead mining in Cardiganshire, Dyfed, like most of Wales has always been predominantly rural, and furthermore sparsely populated, as may be seen from these Census figures:

	1801	1831	1851
Cardiganshire	42,956	64,780	70,796
Carmarthenshire	67,317	100,740	110,632
Pembrokeshire	56,280	81,425	94,140

It is an area too which historically has, by common consent, been one of the poorest in Britain, and as we shall go on to see, observers have often looked to Ireland as an analogue, with conditions in the latter sometimes being pronounced superior. Although there were differences in the style of life, the methods of agriculture and so on in the three counties, these were slight, and it may fairly said that the overall social pattern was coherent. There is one notable exception, and this has to do with language.

This arises from the fact that south Pembrokeshire was settled by Normans, and famously Flemings, in the years after the Conquest. The result was, and is, that Pembrokeshire came to be divided linguistically by a demarcation called the Landsker. North of this line, which roughly cuts the county in half from Solva to Tenby, Welsh is the first language, while to the south only English is spoken. This phenomenon has always fascinated the visitor, and many diaries as well as official reports discuss it, sometimes in slightly, but only slightly, exaggerated terms. In 1804 Malkin wrote of Pembrokeshire:

> So different were the manners, arts, and agriculture, of the two peoples, that they have scarcely made an advance towards assimilation, in the space of nearly seven hundred years. So estranged are they from each other, that although they are only separated in some instances by a path in the same village, the common people do not intermarry; and it has singularly happened, on more than one occasion, that men from the same parish have been on a jury together, without a common language, in which to confer on the matters submitted to their decision.[4]

In the Reports of the Commissioners into the State of Education in Wales some forty years later, one noted that 'I found in the purely Welsh parishes about St. David's that a Roos or Castlemartin man was spoken of in much the same manner as we do of a Yorkshireman'.[5] In 1866 Mr. Culley also writes of Pembrokeshire:

> As an instance of how completely apart the English and Welsh races have kept themselves, I may mention that I have visited two cottages within about 100 yards of each other, in one of which I was not understood because I could only speak English, while in the other I should have been as little understood if I had spoken Welsh.[6]

It is a commonplace of Welsh history that there had been gradual erosion of the autonomy of Wales beginning with the Conqueror's encroachment in south Pembrokeshire. Then came the attacks on Wales by Edward I and his Statute of 1284 in which Wales was annexed to the English crown, and the penal legislation enacted by Henry IV after the defeat of Owain Glyndwr. Between 1400 and 1402 fourteen such Acts were passed. These, variously, forbade Welshmen to buy land in the Marches or in England, to own or carry arms or armour, or to hold office as justice or sheriff. Further, no Englishman could be convicted at the suit of a Welshman unless the justices were English, the *cwmwrth*, a tax levied for the support of bards was suppressed, and it was enacted that any Englishman who married a Welsh woman could not hold office in Wales or the Marches. But the greatest political changes, accompanied by massive 'cultural imperialism' came with the seizure of the throne by the Tudors. The consequent nature of Welsh society forms a continuing backdrop to the events dealt with in this book.

Henry VII was born in Pembroke castle and lived there for the first fourteen years of his life. According to Gwyn A Williams he spoke Welsh, and when he spoke English, he did so with a Welsh accent.[7] This claim, which is not attributed, may be fairly regarded as fanciful. but it is commonly made. Coupland, in pointing out that Henry had spent the first 14 years of his life in Wales, added that he was 'tended by a devoted Welsh nurse from Carmarthen, learning from her to speak Welsh as much as English'.[8] Nor does Coupland name a source for this claim. Chrimes in the standard work on King Henry VII gives a more impartial view:

> The Welshness of Henry Tudor can easily be, and often is, exaggerated... There is no evidence one way or the other that he ever spoke or understood Welsh even though it is true that he was brought up for the first fourteen years of his life in Wales... his father was only one third Welsh, and his mother was English. Owen Tudor, his grandfather was Welsh, but his grandmother Catherine was French and Bavarian.[9]

He might have added that Pembroke is right in the heart of the area which had for several hundred years been settled by those non Welsh speakers, whose lack of knowledge of Welsh has already been noted above. Chrimes also points out that Henry Tudor would have been unwise, at least in the early stages of his rebellion, to underline any relationship with Owain Glyndwr, since the latter had engaged 'in a prolonged and disastrous rebellion

against the first of the Lancastrian kings'. It would have been impolitic for Henry to stress such a relationship when his claim was that he was the right-ful heir of the House of Lancaster.[10] In point of fact 'Henry's VII's regality was not altogether unimpeachable and therefore the imagery and symbol-ism of his public shows aimed at emphasising his claims to the throne' but 'this official Lancastrian descent was unsound and was, accordingly, rein-forced by another genealogical argument tracing the Tudor descent, through the Welsh princes, back to the primitive British kings'.[11]

His birthplace was the key to the development of a culture which centred upon the return of what Henken calls the 'National Redeemer'. Once again it should be noted that the Welsh poets, since Glyndwr, had been prophesy-ing, and from time to time identifying, a Welsh redeemer. Edward IV was regarded as a 'royal Welshman' by Lewis Glyn Cothi, who claimed that he was a descendant of Llewellyn the Great. So 'too much should not be made of the eulogies of Henry as the example of a new cult; rather they were part of a long tradition'.[12] But he was regarded as a reincarnation, and the bards soon rallied round with exhortation to come as the new mab darogan (predicted son): 'Tear of Cadwaladr, come and take the hand of your grand-father. Take your kinsmen's portion, make us free from our severe bondage'. And again: 'Cadwaladr will come home… Jasper will raise for us a dragon, blood of Brutus, happy is he'.[13] '" The Welsh"' said the Venetian ambassador '"may now be said to have recovered their former independence for the most wise and fortunate Henry VII is a Welshman"'.[14] The same enthusiasm was on display upon the restoration of Charles II: he 'arrived by divine interven-tion: "God of Heaven by his power has brought the bones of Cadwaladr home"'.[15] Immediately after Bosworth in 1485, the Welsh no doubt felt that Wales had recaptured London. Cadwalader's red dragon flew, although the 'weight of evidence is against a Cadwalader dragon'.[16] And after the birth of Henry's first son, significantly called Arthur, poets engaged in a 'burst of enthusiasm'. '"A new age of peace is at hand and the great King Arthur, buried for so many centuries, now returns as prophesied."'[17]

But whatever the Welsh people expected by way of reward for their en-thusiasm and loyalty they were due for another kind of reawakening, since the reign of the 'Redeemer's' son, Henry VIII, saw a studied attempt to end any Welsh ambitions once and for all. Henry VII never went back to Wales, and 'Henry VIII seems to have been less concerned than his father to proclaim his British descent'.[18] Nor did any of the Tudor monarchs visit. This made them unique, because they 'were the only dynasty of English sov-ereigns since the Norman Conquest not to set foot in Wales.'[19] It should be remembered as some kind of a consolation that it was in the reign of another

Tudor, Elizabeth, that the bible and other religious books were translated into Welsh including that by William Morgan in 1588 which was to be so important, not only as saviour of the language, but in establishing a whole tradition of Welsh writing. Morgan's bible:

> rescued (Welsh) from vulgarisms and anglicisms, from dispersal into local dialects, from a general decay. It made it uniform, classic, permanent. And already in the earlier years of the seventeenth century more Welshmen were writing Welsh and it was better Welsh.[20]

Henry VIII passed two Acts in 1536 and 1543, which are commonly called Acts of Union. Under these all legal and commercial barriers between the two countries were to be removed. The counties of Wales, which survived until 1974 were created, and the Great Sessions were established which was a system of higher courts. And then the Act of 1536 turned its attention to the language. The Welsh, it was announced:

> have and do daily use a speche like ne consonaunt to the naturall mother tongue used within this Relme, some rude and ignorant people have made distinccion and div'sitie between the Kinges Subjects of this Realme and hys Subjectes of the said Dominion and Principalitie of Wales, wherby great discorde variance debate division murmur and sedicion hath grown betwene his said subjectes.

And so the point was made that all courts shall be kept:

> in the Engliss Tongue – and also that – no psonne or psonnes that use the Welsshe speche or language shal have or enjoy any man (sic) office or fees within the Realme Englond Wales or other the Kings Dominions, upon peyn of forfaiting the same offices or fees, onles he or they use and exccise the speche or langage of Englisshe[21]

There are two incompatible assessments of the reasons why this legislation was passed, and the effect it had. The first is that the Acts were the proof of the generosity of the king towards Wales. This perception is that he was conferring the same benefits on Wales which were enjoyed by English people, and that there was an end to the anarchy with which Wales had been afflicted. Rhys Meurig of Cottrel was certain of it:

Now, since Wales was thus, by gracious Henry VIII, enabled with the laws of England, and thereby united to the same, and so brought to a monarchy, which is the most sure, stable and best regiment, they are exempted from the dangers before remembered; for life and death, lands and goods rest in this monarchy, and not in the pleasure of the subject… The discord between England and Wales, then, procured slaughters, invasions, enmities, burnings, poverty and such like fruits of war. This unity engendered friendship, amity, love, alliance… assistance, wealth and quietness. God preserve and increase it.[22]

The Pembrokeshire historian George Owen was another who detected great benefit from the embrace:

But sithence the time of Henry VII and Henry VIII that we were emancipated as it were and made free to trade and traffic through England, the gentlemen and people in Wales have greatly increased in learning and civility… no country in England so flourished in one hundred years as Wales has done sithence the government of Henry VII to this time.[23]

To progressive landlords, entrepreneurs, merchants, and religious reformers, belief in the merits of political assimilation with England was a sine qua non. In their eyes the Union of 1536-43 was a "remarkable deliverance". One believed that: The Lord had planned the marriage between England and Wales just as he had watched over Israel in the days of Ahasverus and Esther.[24] Lewis Morris spoke of 'the happy union with the valorous English' and Richard Morris thought that 'there should be no distinction between an Englishman and a Welshman in our day'.[25]

There are modern writers who appear to hold similar views, Coupland being an example:

To that must be added the greatest service the Tudors rendered to Wales. Taken as a whole and including as one essential factor in it the Welsh allegiance to the House of Tudor, it was the settlement of 1536 that saved Wales from the fate of Ireland – from taking, as the Celtic Irish took, the losing side in the two historic conflicts which rent and shook the British Isles in the course of the next hundred and fifty years and suffering the inevitable consequences.[26]

Lloyd too points out a desirable effect: 'The Act of Union gave Welshmen, now that they were emancipated, their first real parliamentary opportunity'.[27]

By the 1590s, when Owen was writing, there had been a considerable exodus of the more educated and the affluent in Wales to England, especially London, many to the Court. They revelled in their new status, and of course gained considerable material benefits. Welsh poets of the time 'did not disapprove of the acquisition of lands and offices by their patrons'.[28]

The alternative perception of the Union is that this was a final effort to destroy the Welsh people. How else, the argument is made, can be explained the studied banning of the Welsh language? The furore (and no other word will do) over the Welsh language has raged ever since, and in a later chapter some of the relevant arguments will be rehearsed. Certainly the banning of Welsh was an instinctive recognition that to destroy the integrity of a people the first target must be their language. Indeed it is the first stage in the process of what has come to be called 'cultural imperialism', and examples of studied attack upon the bastion of language are plentiful. One is the behaviour of the Prussians in 1864 after their conquest of Denmark. In what had been Danish territory German became the official language, and the teaching of Danish was forbidden.[29]

Another important view of the significance of the Acts is that they are called Acts of Union in error. This view is that the real engine of unification lies in Edward I's statute of Rhuddlan or Wales of 1284. Following the 'irresistible' conclusion of Goronwy Edwards', Chrimes states that the words of 1284 are 'perfectly plain on the point'. Wales was annexed to England. What the act of 1536 did was 'to unify Wales politically within itself'.[30] And yet the Welsh people, or more correctly the new Welsh oligarchy, continued to support the monarchy, and apart from the strange case of the Cycle of the White Rose, and the Sea Serjeants, which will be discussed, and where in any case they supported a different monarchy, evinced sympathy and affection for it.

The Welsh paper Seren Gomer for example published a number of englynion (an ancient form of Welsh poetry) in praise of William IV 'and acclaimed him as "the best representative of the Hanover family to have occupied the British throne"'.[31] The persistence of this support for royalty is the more remarkable because successive monarchs, even as princes of Wales, showed no interest at all in Wales or its people. James I, and James II visited briefly, and Charles I had his headquarters in Raglan for a few weeks, obviously for strategic reasons. There were no royal visits in the eighteenth century. George IV visited Holyhead, and Pembrokeshire, on his way to and

from Ireland, and on one occasion he planted a tree in Montgomeryshire. Victoria 'spent a total of seven years in Scotland, seven weeks in Ireland, and seven nights in Wales'. Looking at these figures it is difficult not to agree with David Williams when he writes 'Her Majesty was always disdainful where the Principality was concerned'.[32]

John Davies reviews royal contacts with Wales, including the excess of fawning articles about Victoria. There are a very few honourable exceptions as when Thomas Gee declared '(praising her) would make us contemptible lapdogs, ready to kiss every scourge-and the scourger too'.[33] Her son, as Prince, made a few short visits to Wales, including one to the National Eisteddfod at Bangor in 1894. On this occasion a poet wrote an ode which noted that 'after six hundred years, the Prince of Wales comes home'.[34] Indeed one of the more inexplicable, and distasteful phenomena of the relationship between the Welsh elite, and the intelligentsia, especially in London, is the persisting, almost relentless determination to curry favour with the monarch and the Court. This curious relationship between some of the people of Wales and the monarchy has been dwelt upon here because it remained a cardinal cause of their conservative stance, in the face of any threat to social stability.

The explanation for this is that there were, in post Tudor times, not the simplistic majority of Nonconformists ranged against the Anglican landowners, but as we shall go on to see, several societies. If the dynamics of Welsh society in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are to be understood, then the central role of a theocratic elite has to be examined. This theocracy somehow managed to use Welsh history so that it has appeared as its hero against tyranny. In fact it never championed the cause of the poor, and quite the reverse, opposed it, but by the subtlest of means: for example by championing the cause of language, and above all the nurturing of a hatred against the church of England. And so they were able to deflect interest away from the concerns of the wretched of Wales.

The book begins with a discussion of Welsh society in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, concentrating on the contrast between the opulence of the landowners, and the pitiful situation of the peasantry. I go on to give an account of the considerable social unrest in the area, and from time to time, in other parts of Britain. I then examine how 'political' this was, arguing that despite the wretchedness of the ordinary people, they were well aware of what was going on in the world at a time of momentous upheaval: a matter upon which historians differ. But discontent was curbed. The means used ranged from the manifest use of force to more subtle and complex phenomena which will be explained and analysed. Naked force included the use

of the militia, who were never quite reliable, except in the case of units from Carmarthenshire, and the deployment of the newly formed Yeomanry, the first in Britain being established in Pembrokeshire in 1794.

But there were other less visible ways in which control was exerted. These included the exodus, through migration, of arguably the people of best quality, with a consequent diminution of the vitality of resistance to oppression. Then a mature account has to be given of the question as to whether the inability to speak or read English was a factor in the impeding of challenging ideas. Yet another discussion will be about the abject failure of powerful Welshmen, especially in London to support the protests of their poorer countrymen. And finally one of the most important questions in this regard is the role played by religious bodies, especially Nonconformists, and how their considerable power was deployed in Wales, and how, over the course of time they became a theocracy albeit a highly factional one. The book concludes with an epilogue, describing how the events of the later nineteenth century led to little improvement, and finally asking whether the twentieth century changed the orientation of power in Wales.

1

THE WELSH SQUIREARCHY

'This whole country is governed by fear'.[35]

After the ascent of the Tudors society in Wales began to change, until it consolidated in all important respects into that structure which remained fossilised for some three hundred years. The essence of the process developed until by the eighteenth century the country had settled into the four hierarchical divisions described by Jenkins. These were, firstly, the *uchelwyr*, a group and a term which is usually translated as 'gentry' in textbooks, but in south Pembrokeshire were called, in living memory, 'gentlemen'. Then came the yeomen, who were the more prosperous of the farmers: next the ordinary farmers, and finally the labourers. There were also, especially in the towns professional men such as lawyers, and tradesmen such as tailors and saddlers. There was also, of course, as in any society an underclass of paupers.[36] Perhaps a measure of the particular poverty of Dyfed is the fact that in 1776 of the 19 workhouses in Wales, 11 were in Pembrokeshire.[37] These were the people who, famously, were hounded from parish to parish, and like the old and disabled woman in Tintern Abbey had nothing 'except her cell of misery'.[38] Even this brief recital is enough to support Philip Jenkins' summary that 'early modern Wales was far from being the simple peasant land of legend'.[39]

Like all social divisions these were not rigid, there being especial blurring between some of the ordinary farmers, at some times and in some places, and the labourers. The descent by the small farmers into the ranks of the paupers was also a normal occurrence. This tendency was noted at the time of the Rebecca riots by one of the most perceptive of commentators, Thomas Campbell Foster, *The Times* correspondent, who wrote in the issue of 1 September 1843 about 'The poor farmer, who is in reality nothing more than a farm labourer, having no money to purchase food, much less