

Unfee'd Advocate of the Disinherited

'Again have the starving weavers of Lyons raised in insurrection and seven days fighting and the slaughter of six thousands of its inhabitants have been the answer to their demands for food . . . Oh! these Kingly Governments! Hell upon earth seems to be embodied within them . . . But retribution will come . . . it will come, it will come!'

I quote these words from the very first Welsh journal to advocate the cause of working people and of popular democracy. It was a bilingual, four-sheet monthly called **Y Gweithiwr/The Workman**. Only one number survives, number four. It is dated 1 May 1834, May Day, and its Welsh-language section is a eulogy of the Tolpuddle Martyrs. How traditional can you get?

All traditions are manufactured. For a tradition to be disinterred from what Gramsci called the 'folkloric passive', for an idea to become what Marx called 'material force', what American Indians called an Idea-That-Walks, it has consciously to be identified, elaborated and established.

We on **Radical Wales** need to seek our kinsfolk in the past. We do this in no anti-quarian manner, but in the manner in which the Welsh people itself, as an historic people, has recreated itself in every generation, using the past as an instrument with which a present can build a future.

If we on **Radical Wales** look for a foundation text of our movement, however remote, it is on **The Workman** we must settle.

Its origins lie in that natural justice rebellion which was the Merthyr Rising of 1831. It shares the internationalist tone of that rebellion — 'Remember Paris! Think of the Poles!' they shouted, with the French Revolution of 1830 and the Polish Rebellion of 1831 their points of reference. **The Workman** draws a direct parallel between the French suppression of the Lyons weavers in 1834 and the Whig campaign against the first trade union, indeed syndicalist, movement to embrace the Island of Britain, the Grand National Consolidated Trades Union led by Robert Owen the socialist. It was in that cause that the farm labourers of Dorset suffered deporation.

It was in that cause that **The Workman** appeared. **WORKMEN OF ENGLAND STAND BY YOUR ORDER!** shouted the protest posters from half the walls of the North of England. The Order of Workmen of Wales swept into action over the whole coalfield, unifying its workers as the terrible Merthyr lock-out and the National Union of Working Classes had unified them in the autumn of 1831. **The Workman** came out in February 1834; by June, managerial authority had been eclipsed and governmental authority paralysed throughout industrial south Wales.

Government sent the troops flooding back into the area; they mobilised an armed Mountain Police, 450 strong, they issued cutlasses to a special constabulary staffed by shopkeepers. They turned a blind eye to the

intimidation practised by the Orange Order, strong in south Wales, with concentration around Tredegar. The Welsh at the Varteg, in the cause of workers' control, drove out the Irish.

The unionists had a fight on their hands in that drive for **control**, over their workplaces, their communities, their lives, which was the main thrust of the movement and had been since 1830. Their success was striking. At the funeral of one Owenite in Newport, all the crafts marched in their own livery, wearing white surplices, preceded by an open bible on a black velvet cushion. This was a movement which sang hymns to Community.

Community is labour blessed,
Redemption from the Fall,
The good of all by each possessed,
The good of each by all.
Community does all possess
That can to man be given;
Community is happiness
Community is heaven.

What broke them in the end was sustained terror by employers and government, the 'document' enforcing a renunciation of trade unionism, blacklisting and mass victimisation.

It broke **The Workman** too. As early as May, the Merthyr magistrate was demanding a prosecution for sedition against it; by the end of the year it had gone. It remained a living force, however, in the critical Merthyr election of January 1835 when it figures



constantly in election speeches and when Josiah Guest was saved from the Tories only by an organised, mass intervention of voteless workers who threatened Tory shopkeeper voters with a boycott.

That decisive intervention was organised by the leading editor of **The Workman**, Morgan Williams. He came of rooted Merthyr stock, a master-weaver who was the leading light in a family of harpists and was known as the Young Mountain Solomon for his mathematics. He went on to become Wales' most distinguished Chartist leader.

His fellow-editor, who handled the Welsh section (though Morgan's own Welsh was excellent) was equally striking. He was John Thomas, Ieuan Ddu, a schoolteacher and musician from Carmarthen where he had started as an artist. The foremost music teacher of his day, he was a fierce critic of the Eisteddfod, a writer and collector of folk-songs. He bears a heavy responsibility. It was he who introduced Handel's Messiah to Welsh choirs. He had worked as a clerk in Nant-y-Glo for Zephaniah Williams (future Chartist leader), who was a notorious free-thinker, and Thomas was the moving spirit behind the eisteddfods of freethinkers — The Free Enquirers of Merthyr in 1831 — who were affiliated to Richard Carlile's celebrated journal **The Republican**.

Both these men were Unitarians and direct inheritors of the Jacobin tradition of the 1790s.

This is significant. Working-class thinkers come into Welsh, as into British history, charged with Tom Paine democracy, directed

against Aristocracy, Priestcraft and Privilege. They had difficulty in adjusting to the realities of an industrial society.

The Workman is steeped in the older tradition. It dated the land's misfortunes from Pitt's war against Liberty (i.e. the French Revolution). On to this old root was grafted the new labour theory of value — witness **The Workman's** peroration in its defence of trade unionism and Community —

The crisis is coming. What then? Why, the warm sun will shine as bright and the green earth be as beautiful for Painter's pencil or Poet's song as they were after the French Revolution of 1789 which crushed with one blow a tyrannical Aristocracy and destroyed at an effort a licentious and fanatical Priesthood. But labour cannot be destroyed, for it will produce, it will create, it will fashion into every shape the rude ores of Nature, and whether untaxed Bread or a social revolution be Britain's destiny, after all, labour will be the source of wealth.

Morgan Williams's own father, after all, had been one of Merthyr's 'sturdy old Republicans' in the age of the French Revolution.

The ideology of democracy is pre-industrial. This is a truth we have not fully thought through. Since we are entering an epoch which has been called 'post-industrial', it will be necessary for us to think it through, to detect what connections there may be, if any, between democracy and work.

What is certain is that the source of the tradition which informs us is earlier than, and independent of, that industrialisation which may now appear to have been an historically transient phenomenon. It lies in the epoch of the first European, indeed Atlantic Revolution, a time, to quote a poet . . .

When Death was on thy drums, Democracy,
And with one rush of slaves, the world was free . . .

Gwyn A Williams

FINAL WORD

Third class citizens?

" . . . Mid Glamorgan has the lowest number of households in social class 1 and 2 in Wales and has the second lowest rate in the whole of Great Britain. The county therefore does not enjoy that mix of social classes and of talents which provides naturally for the emergence of leadership and the taking of initiatives on a broad front of issues." (Anonymous "Opinion" in *Network Wales*, magazine of the Wales Council for Voluntary Action.) Funny how Mid Glamorgan communities managed during the Miners' Strike.

Tory Values

"We are also concerned that standards of personal and social development should be improved. We believe that certain standards are common to all civilised societies: self-discipline and self-respect, smartness in dress and appearance, courtesy and concern for the well-being of others". Wyn Roberts MP, Under Secretary of State for Wales in a speech in Trefforest, shortly before his departing car bowled over and seriously injured Cymdeithas yr Iaith protestor Steffan Webb. Well, at least Mr Roberts wore a suit and brushed his hair for the occasion — would have been awful for Steffan to have had an arm and a leg broken by a Yob.



Isia.