

'Wales and the movement against the First World War'

by Aled Eirug

A lecture commissioned and delivered at Holy Glimmers of Goodbyes, a day of reflection on the poetry of war and peace in Wales, organised by Literature Wales with support from the Welsh Government's Cymru'n Cofio Wales Remembers 1914-1918 First World War Centenary Programme.

At the beginning of the War, the objectors were a comparatively small and insignificant minority, but as the opposition gained momentum from January 1916, in the wake of military conscription, south Wales, in particular, became one of Britain's most ardent anti-military regions. This opposition was voiced partly through the Independent Labour Party's publication, *The Pioneer*. The paper, produced in Merthyr, with an average weekly circulation of ten thousand copies, consistently opposed the war.

The two primary anti-war movements were the Fellowship of Reconciliation and the Independent Labour Party (IPL). The IPL was particularly influential in the old industrial areas where the party had its historical roots, including Merthyr and Aberdare, the Swansea Valley, the Afan Valley, Port Talbot and the principal coastal towns of the south, Cardiff, Newport and Swansea. For others, political opposition to the War was based on Marxist and Syndicalist views within the South Wales Miners' Federation, viewing it an imperialist war waged in the interest of capitalism and believing the primary role of workers was to bring down the capitalist regime.

Many members of the IPL professed a political creed that was a blend of moral and Christian values founded on the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount, and there were close links between the leaders of the IPL and the minority of religious leaders who voiced objections to the war. These objectors were led by Christian pacifists such as George M. Ll Davies, one of the principal organisers of the Fellowship for Reconciliation and Professor Thomas Rees, Principal of Bala-Bangor College. The latter became a strong influence on a generation of theological students at Bangor and in wider spheres and was one of the founders of the Fellowship for Reconciliation

in Wales, editing the only publication specifically produced to voice opposition to the War, entitled *Y Deyrnas*.

Conscientious objectors were described as 'a rope made up of numerous strands' as their opposition was based on so many different grounds and their attitudes towards the demands of the authorities were so diverse. A substantial minority of objectors, such as the Quakers, Jehova's Witnesses and Christadelphians argued that their religious beliefs prevented them from accepting the authority of the state, and some religious sects were given exemption from conscription. Others from the traditional Nonconformist denominations were far less likely to be exempted from military service based on their conscientious objection.

Opposition to the war extended to the left wing of the South Wales Miners' Federation whose membership reached nearly a quarter of a million, namely the syndicalists, a substantial and influential faction throughout the South Wales coalfield, and also to members of the Independent Labour Party who played an important role in organising opposition to the War. Although this opposition was politically motivated, most conscientious objectors opposed the war on the grounds of their religious conviction.

The category of men known as conscientious objectors was formally created by means of the Military Service Act introduced in January 1916.

These were men who had decided to object to military service and abstain from serving. This was a diverse group of men from extremely varied backgrounds. Their conscientious objection might have been motivated by numerous issues - but they generally fell into four categories:

- Objection on Christian grounds, opposed to joining the armed forces and the war effort
- Objection on moral grounds, opposed to the taking up of arms and the taking of life
- Objection on international socialist grounds, opposed to the taking up of arms against comrades
- Objection to the state's right to demand that one should go to war.

The state had great difficulty deciding how to evaluate the gravity of conscience and assess the eligibility of objectors for exemption. John Rae, in the authoritative work on the Government's treatment of objectors, offers as a definition conscientious objectors: 'those men who were either accepted as conscientious objectors by a tribunal, or if they failed to persuade the tribunal of their case, continued to reject conscription on the basis of conscience.'¹

Following the introduction of the Military Service Act, there were at least 16,500 conscientious objectors throughout Britain (military conscription was not introduced in Ireland), and of those, it is estimated that 893 were from Wales.

The introduction of military conscription in January 1916 was the most extreme course of action that could have been taken to deal with the military crisis facing Britain. Following serious losses on the Western Front in France throughout 1915, and the failure of Lord Derby's Committee's voluntary scheme to urge men to attest to their willingness to join the forces, the Coalition Government decided to introduce military conscription for unmarried men between the ages of 18 and 41 and this was extended to include married men up to 41 years of age by May 1916. The age was then raised to 50 by 1918, and between January 1916 and the end of the War, approximately 124,000 were recruited through conscription in Wales to serve in the armed forces. By the end of the War, 1.35 million men had been conscripted to enlist, many of them unwillingly but not having adequate reason to claim exemption.

Principal Thomas Rees, the Principal of Bala-Bangor College, the theological college of the Congregationalist denomination in Bangor, had already made a name for himself as a prominent theologian and scholar. His militant pacificism was deeply rooted in his conviction that War was totally at odds with the teaching and spirit of Jesus Christ. He was without doubt the most influential figure in the peace movement in Wales.² He was the first public figure to venture to state his objection to the War on the grounds of religion and Christianity.³ He wrote a letter to *Y Tyst* on 30 September

¹ John Rae, *Conscience and Politics: British Government and the Conscientious Objector to Military Service 1916-1919* (London, Oxford University Press, 1970), 70.

² *Welsh Outlook*, Obituary to Thomas Rees, by Miall Edwards (July 1926), 185.

³ *Welsh Outlook*, Obituary to Thomas Rees, by Miall Edwards (July 1926), 185.

1914 in the midst of the most prolific recruitment period of the War, criticising in the most damning terms the activities of those men of religion who supported the War campaign, and those politicians who urged men to join the forces. He asked his readers to abandon hope that this was a war to end all wars pleading with them not to believe the rumours about the barbarism and cruelty of the Germans:

at the end of the day no one army is likely to be able to throw a stone at another; and it is unfair to condemn a nation because some rascals lose their humanity on the battlefield.^{4*}

He cautioned against 'cloaking the War in sanctity', especially by those - he did not name Lloyd George - who claimed this was a sacred war fought on behalf of small nations. He referred to the hypocrisy of Britain, refusing on the one hand to defend Luxembourg, yet on the other, rushing to defend Belgium.

What kind of defenders of small nations are those countries who today plunder Persia, Finland, Egypt and Brittany? Let them admit honestly that England is fighting for its trade, its position and its influence amongst the nations of the world. But that does not mean that the Church of Christ should be called upon to become a 'recruitment agency' to persuade people to go to war.*

Following his letter, he was branded a traitor by the Anglican publication *Y Llan*, and the *Western Mail* accused him of a lack of allegiance to Britain in suggesting that it was not without blame in the crisis:

These ridiculous perversities would not claim a moments attention but for the fact that they appear over the signature of a leader of Welsh Nonconformity and a burning and shining light among Welsh Congregationalists. If his statements are not publicly repudiated by those who can speak in the name of Welsh Nonconformity serious harm may be done to the national and patriotic movement in Wales initiated by Mr Lloyd George and Mr Asquith...The need for official action to counteract the pernicious effects of the Rev. T. Rees letter is the greater seeing that in Wales...the popular leaders are the religious leaders.⁵

⁴ *Y Tyst*, 30 September, 1914

⁵ *Western Mail*, 7 October, 1914.

Principal Thomas Rees was born in the parish of Llanfyrnach, Pembrokeshire, the native county of T. E. Nicholas, or 'Niclas y Glais'. The two men became friends and fellow anti-war campaigners. Rees was recognised as one of the Labour party pioneers in North Wales⁶ and Niclas⁷ bridged the political and religious aspects of the opposition to the War. As well as being a Congregationalist minister, he was a tireless propagandist on behalf of the IPL, and a close friend of the first leader of the Labour Party and its Member of Parliament for Merthyr, Keir Hardie. Niclas was the most prominent Welsh speaker in the IPL and gave Hardie's funeral address. He stood unsuccessfully on behalf of the IPL in the Merthyr constituency in the 1918 Election. Niclas y Glais was hailed as a hero by Gwenallt and his young co-members of the ILP:

The three we respected most for their integrity were Keir Hardie, George Lansbury and Niclas y Glais. There were many 'scoundrels' in the Labour movement, men who founded their hopes on the fluency of their hypocritical rhetoric, and when given the opportunity to kiss the hand of the King, became Tories and were in seventh heaven kissing the capitalist lips of London's ladies.^{8*}

Niclas y Glais was one of the founders of the IPL branch in Glais in 1906, and was a member of the Labour Party in Ystalyfera for the Gower constituency.⁹ In 1908, he became the Welsh language editor of the ILP's publication, *The Pioneer*. He wrote frequently in pamphlets, composing poetry and political articles for Welsh language publications such as *Y Geninen*; this meant his work was familiar to audiences throughout Wales. After War broke out, this activity continued although he had moved from the Swansea Valley to Llangybi in Cardiganshire in January 1914;¹⁰ he was one of the most eloquent and popular speakers at peace and anti-war meetings during the War. Following the introduction of military conscription in 1916, he became secretary of the Cardiganshire branch of the No-Conscription Fellowship

⁶ J. Rhoose Williams, *T.E. Nicholas: Proffwyd Sosialaeth a Bardd Gwrthryfel* (Bangor, Sackville Press, 1970), 2.

⁷ J. Rhoose Williams, *T.E. Nicholas: Proffwyd Sosialaeth a Bardd Gwrthryfel*,

⁸ T.E. Nicholas, *Llygad y Drws: Sonedau'r Carchar*, introduction by Gwenallt (Dinbych, Gwasg Gee, 1940), 11.

⁹ David W. Howell, *Nicholas of Glais: The People's Champion* (Clydach History Association, 1991), 12.

¹⁰ Howell, *Nicholas of Glais*, tt.13-15; Williams, *T.E. Nicholas: Proffwyd Sosialaeth a Bardd Gwrthryfel*,

(NCF), a movement urging young men to refuse to enlist and supporting any objectors. Police and security services kept him under surveillance, following him and regularly opening his mail. The Chief Constable of Glamorganshire attempted to arrest him on numerous occasions but was prevented from doing so due to pressure from Special Branch and MI5 Secret Services, who were keen to avoid causing unnecessary antagonism.¹¹

A number of other ministers were also brave enough to announce their opposition to the War, including the blind genius, the Rev. J. Puleston Jones, the minister of Penmount Pwllheli, in his weekly articles in the *Goleuad*. He too was responsible for the motion passed at the Calvinistic Methodists' Association held in Caernarfon in August 1917, rejoicing in the peace movement, and urging the Government to grasp any opportunity to hold peace negotiations.

The organisation founded to oppose the War on Christian grounds was the Fellowship for Reconciliation, established in Cambridge in October 1914 with the aim of 'bringing together men and women who believe that the spirit of strife, whether national, personal or economic could never be conquered but through the practical belief that Love, as demonstrated through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, is the only true foundation for Society, and are prepared to accept the consequences of such a belief.'^{12*} Its first organiser was the Reverend Richard Roberts, originally from Blaenau Ffestiniog, who at one time was a minister in the English Presbyterian chapel of Crouch Hill, but became disheartened by his congregation's objections to his pacifism. He started editing the Fellowship's publication, *The Venturer*, establishing a monthly circulation of three thousand copies. He was joined by George M. Ll Davies in September 1915, carrying out the role of unpaid assistant secretary (apart from ten shillings a week expenses), and editor of *The Venturer*. He became a bank manager in Wrexham, and ironically, a lieutenant in the Territorials for a while, before resigning, deeming the position at odds with the Christian spirit. Under the influence of David Davies, Llandinam, he became secretary of a new philanthropic Central Trust, namely the Welsh Town and Planning and Housing Trust in Cardiff. He was also offered the

¹¹ National Archives, Home Office Papers, HO45/10743/263275, correspondence between the Chief Constable of Glamorganshire, Capten Lionel Lindsay and the Home Office.

¹² Gwynfor Evans, *Pererin Heddwch* (Fellowship of Reconciliation in Wales), 1980.

post of editor of the *Welsh Outlook* but declined the offer, deciding to join the Fellowship of Reconciliation.

In Wales, the Fellowship of Reconciliation adopted its own unique and spirited character as the movement was developed by key individuals, mainly Nonconformist Welsh-speaking ministers, based in north and west Wales. It is striking that the activities carried out by the Fellowship of Reconciliation in Wales through the medium of English were on a comparatively small scale and very limited.

The first branch of the Fellowship in Wales was founded in Bangor in June of 1915.¹³ The founding meeting at Tabernacl chapel in Bangor was addressed by the local minister, Reverend Hywel Harris Hughes. Richard Roberts of London, and Principal Thomas Rees. The audience comprised dozens of students from the town's theological and university colleges, many of whom became conscientious objectors in 1916. At a further meeting, a decision was taken to set up a regional Fellowship of Reconciliation, consisting of branches at Bangor/Bethesda, Caernarfon/Penygroes, Blaenau Ffestiniog and Pwllheli.¹⁴

The second region in the Wrexham area was set up on June the second 1915, when meetings for peace were held in the Ponciau and Rhosllannerchrugog areas, addressed by G. M. Ll. Davies, Reverend Herbert Dunnico, secretary of the Peace Society, Reverend D. Wyre Lewis and Reverend E. K. Jones, a Baptist minister at Cefnmawr near Wrexham.

In south Wales, the Fellowship for Reconciliation joined the alliance of organisations in active opposition to the War, including the IPL, the No-Conscription Fellowship (NCF), the Union of Democratic Control (UDC) and colliery lodges within the South Wales Miners' Federation. The hub of this opposition was Merthyr, where the 'Merthyr Peace Council to Stop the War' was founded. Crowds of more than three thousand flocked to their public meetings,¹⁵ but very few branches were set up in other parts of

¹³ Aled Eirug, 'Agweddau ar y Gwrthwynebiad i'r Rhyfel Byd Cyntaf yng Nghymru', *Llafur*, 62, Volume 4, Number 4, 1987

¹⁴ Rees, *Dal i Herio'r Byd* (Liverpool, Cyhoeddiadau Modern Cymreig, 1983), 116.

¹⁵ *Pioneer*, 22 April 1916.

Wales. By January 1918, only eleven had been established and in south Wales, these included branches in Cardiff (including a student branch), Swansea, Merthyr, Nelson in the Rhymney Valley, and Aberystwyth.¹⁶ In November 1918, a branch of the Fellowship for Reconciliation was established in Trawsfynydd with fifty members, angry at the ill-treatment of conscientious objectors,¹⁷ but this was the exception and the energies of the most active members were directed towards collaboration with organisations such as the IPL or through their respective denominations.

The publication *Y Deyrnas*, under the leadership of Principal Thomas Rees, was Wales' most notable contribution to the movement in opposition to the Great War on Christian grounds. It had a circulation of three thousand copies at its peak and was an important medium for the dissemination of perilous anti-war sentiments throughout Wales. The publication was established in October 1916, 'because a small group felt that the Welsh press afforded neither a voice nor space for his views on the Principles of Christ's Gospel and their application to the uncommon circumstances of the day.'^{18*} For a period of three years, *Y Deyrnas* sold a monthly average of 2,750 copies throughout Wales and attracted contributions from some of the most notable young authors of the day, including T. Gwynn Jones, T.H. Parry-Williams, Davies Thomas, Tegla Davies and T. E. Nicholas. It was established following a meeting held at Barmouth in March 1916, as the first conscientious objectors were being imprisoned. Amongst the founders were T. Gwynn Jones, T. H. Parry-Williams, Reverend John Morgan Jones Merthyr, Reverend John Morgan Jones Bangor, Reverend Tegla Davies, and the Reverend J. Puleston Jones, Pwllheli. Also present was the talented author, Eluned Morgan, Patagonia, and four students from Bala-Bangor College. Thomas Rees was at the heart of the venture, as its editor in chief, and he was an inspiration to a cohort of young students and ministers, who secured contributions from gifted authors such as David Thomas, T. E. Nicholas and Wil Ifan.

This paper was Wales' unique contribution to the anti-war campaign on Christian grounds, and with a circulation in excess of three thousand at its peak, *y Deyrnas*

¹⁶ *The News Sheet of the FoR*, 1918).

¹⁷ National Library of Wales, Papers of E.K. Jones, Box 6, letters from Owen Owen, Trawsfynydd to Jones, 8 February 1918, 4 November 1918, 22 December 1918.

¹⁸ *Y Deyrnas*, November 1919.

became an important medium for the dissemination of perilous anti-War sentiments. It is striking that this Welsh language publication attracted as many readers as did *the Venturer*, an English language publication circulated throughout Britain. In its first issue, Thomas Rees laid out clearly the mission of Welsh pacifism, deploring the fact the Christianity in Europe had failed:

to provide a robust enough barricade to withstand this destructive cataclysm. Yet, having considered the matter, this slaughter, it seems, is merely one outcome of the spirit of the Anti-Christ; social, national and international ills of our age can surely be traced to the same cause. In the face of all this, there must be something to which we can bear witness in the name of the Kingdom of God.^{19*}

The political organisation most strongly opposed to the War was the Independent Labour Party (the ILP). ILP members objected to the War on a synthesis of moral and political grounds. For them, the Sermon on the Mount was in line with their belief in socialist brotherhood. Rae summarises this opposition as 'fusion of the political and the moral: socialist opposition to militarism, to restrictions on personal freedom, to undemocratic diplomacy, and to the capitalists interests invested in the war, was expressed within the context of a moral concern for the sanctity of human life.'²⁰

Percy Ogwen Jones was raised in Llaneilian on Anglesey, and he described his friends as men who opposed the War;

'but with little conviction. Only two or three of us held strong beliefs. I was one of those for several reasons. One reason of course was the religious aspect. But another reason was that war in my eyes is intrinsically evil - and that too much armament, partly by those who were keen to profit from it, had led to the war. From the very outset then, my objection was more on moral and political grounds than religious. It all came together to form an anti-military stance or position that was pretty unquestionable.'^{21*}

¹⁹ *Y Deyrnas*, October 1916.

²⁰ John Rae, 'Conscience and Politics', Oxford University Press, 1970, p.82-83

²¹ **An account by Percy Ogwen Jones in the hand of his son, Geraint Percy Jones**

The Marxist standpoint was reflected by Arthur Horner, one of the young charismatic leaders of the Miners' Federation; "I saw in the coal owners and the Government that supported them a nearer enemy than the Kaiser."²²

The Independent Labour Party was the most influential body within the Labour Party at the time until 1918, representing the only means by which an individual member could join the party. Although the Labour Party was divided on the issue of the War in August 1914, the ILP, on the whole, consistently opposed it, although even Hardie and Macdonald weakened a little in the face of the fierce response of their adversaries.

The ILP was at its strongest in the south, and the opposition to the War consequently at its most visible and zealous in its strongholds, namely in the Aman and Swansea valleys, in the Cwmafan, Burry Port and Port Talbot areas, as well as in Merthyr, Aberdare, the Rhymney Valley and the western valleys of Monmouthshire. It had flourishing branches in the slate-mining areas in the counties of Meirionnydd and Caernarfon at the beginning of the War, before the economic downturn ushered the closure of quarries and dispersal of the workers from 1915 onwards.²³

The nature of the conscientious objectors

Percy Ogwen Jones describes the objectors as 'mixed strands - "The fact that some are members of the same organisation does not necessarily reflect the same motivation or cause. Neither do they always have the same objectives. One could describe a movement a rope; it is made up of numerous strands, and not all those strands have to be identical". *

Of the 893 objectors, 85 were absolutists, and of those, 31 appeared once before a military court; 32 twice, 15 three times; 5 four times; 2 five times.

The two imprisoned on 5 occasions were Ithel Davies and Emrys Hughes, both socialists but from very different backgrounds. Davies was a farmer's son from Mallwyd a shepherd responsible for hundreds of sheep, while Hughes was a trainee

²² Horner, Arthur, 'Incorrigible Rebel', Press ? p.9, 1960

²³ Cyril Parry, 'Y Blaid Lafur.', Cylchgrawn Hanes Cymru, 19 ?

teacher active in the ILP in the south.

The others included literary men and journalists such as Gwenallt, T. H. Parry-Williams, Percy Ogwen Jones and David Thomas, and from the political sphere, there were a number who became Members of Parliament, including Ness Edwards, Emrys Hughes, Morgan Jones, Thomas William Jones (later to become Lord Maelor), George M. Ll. Davies, and leaders of the labour movement, such as Arthur Horner and Mark Starr.

The Home Office Scheme

The Government's response, to the flood of conscientious objectors imprisoned by midsummer 1916, as expressed by Lloyd George, the War Minister, was to refuse to yield an inch to those objecting on absolute grounds, whilst offering objectors the opportunity of working in special camps run by the Home Office.

Dartmoor

George M. Ll. described the variety and diversity of conscientious objectors at one of these centres in Dartmoor prison;

'Here in the prison there are about 600 of us who have been adjudged conscientious objectors to the War. Never since Corinth has there been seen such diversity of beliefs and opinions - Churchmen, Papists, Presbyterians, Methodists, Christadelphians, Plymouth Brethren, Marxian Socialists, Anarchists, Irishmen, Englishmen, Scots, Welsh, Jews, Russians, painters - living, eating and being within the high walls of this house of captivity. On the door of one cell is written the Warning, 'Blood. How might one flee.'*

In the Catholic's cell, there is a cross and candles; in a room to the side, the Quakers meet in a spirit of silence and brotherhood, in an act of a worship open to all. In another place, the Plymouth Brothers sing loudly of Christ's love, but refuse to allow a Christian of another denomination to join their service. The

Socialists are similarly divided: one school argues the case for the Class War - Worker against Master - deriding and condemning the Socialists of the ILP, those who believe that gaining control of capital is the Alpha and Omega of all labour efforts. The Anarchist shakes his head at both and asks why they pay such homage to government, trying to gain and implement its authority, rather than trying to convince ordinary people that government is the root of evil - and the power given to them to oppress people by the people.*

Other *centres* were established, including a number in Wales, in Llanddeusant, Llangadog, Llannon near Llanelli, Penderyn where a dam was built, and Talgarth, where work was provided to build a sanatorium.

What was the significance of the conscientious objectors?

To many, of course, they were traitors and cowards deserving neither respect nor acknowledgement. Another interpretation – offered by the Member of Parliament, Llewellyn Williams, for example, is that they were martyrs, facing persecution, contempt and scorn – and comparing them to John Penri or the early Quakers.

E.K. Jones described the three years of persecution as a golden chapter; 'the prayer meetings in a locked cell; the spiritual conversation; the tracts written on a wall of steel; the grief for the superb soldier sacrificed in vain; the meek demeanour of our men at the Court Martial; the bravery in the face of sickness, and when reason failed, a joyous willingness to die for the faith'.* Objectors found it difficult to gain employment at the end of the War.

The consequence of this experience was that by the Second World War, regulations governing conscientious objectors became far more liberal. The recruitment system was changed as early as 1917, transferring the recruitment procedure from the War Office to the Ministry for National Service, establishing the principle that recruitment was now the responsibility of Civil Government rather than that of the Armed Forces. By the Second World War, tribunals were more professional, administered by legally

trained staff. Individuals could also be granted exemption on several grounds. A principle was established that differentiated between absolute objection whereby individuals were prepared to carry out work of national importance, provided it had no links with military service; and another less extreme category, whereby individuals were prepared to carry out work in the armed forces, provided such work did not involve the carrying of arms.

Aled Eirug, February 2019

* Translations by Literature Wales