Preface

In April 1987 an unusual conference took place in the beautiful setting of Gregynog Hall near Newtown in Mid-Wales. A group of Welsh and Canadian historians met to discuss the comparative industrial histories of their two countries and to attempt to establish a basis for further study. The choice of countries was the unusual aspect; after all, Canada and Wales differ somewhat in size and location. And yet, there were obvious starting points for the comparison; the issue of bilingualism, the proximity of both countries to larger, expansionary neighbours, and the internal contrasts between intense industrialisation and rurality. Both countries moreover have seen a resurgence in Labour historiography in recent years. Coincidentally, both the Committee for Canadian History and the Society for Welsh Labour History were formed in the same year, 1971, and it was appropriate that 15 years on, the two societies should meet in conference. This volume is the result.

Most of the papers given at the Gregynog conference are included in this book, together with introduction by David Montgomery based on his splendid end-of-conference summary. Some valuable contributions are missing: Ian McKay’s comprehensive account of the Nova Scotia miners, Bryan Palmer's stimulating exploration of workers’ communities in Ontario, Gerry Friesen’s trenchant account of the activities and impact of R. B. Russell, the Scottish immigrants who played such a central part in the working class struggles of Winnipeg; from the Welsh side, Dai Smith’s characteristically challenging analysis of Anglo-Welsh culture, Paul O’Leary’s highly original account of the political role of the Irish in Wales and finally Hywel Francis’s fascinating accounts of the contacts between Welsh and Canadian mining leaders, of which his father was so central a figure. All of these are expected to appear elsewhere in due course and will no doubt be enjoyed as much as they were at the conference itself.

The papers that are included deal with a range of factors reflecting both the special interests of the historians themselves and the common issues with which all of us are concerned. Naturally, there are gaps and omissions and it may well be concluded that there were more explorations than explanations. Yet, some important methodological issues were confronted, not least the capacity of the historian to recapture the experience of workers and their organisations. In this respect the disparities of size or geography between Wales and Canada were less important than the quality of source material, the techniques of the historian and the nature of historical synthesis. The conference revealed some interesting differences in the historical practice of the two countries, the scope and range and scope of their respective labour historiographies.

What, of course, cannot be conveyed in a volume such as this is the quality of the debate and discussion which accompanied the papers, both at the time and in informal gatherings afterwards, or the character of the relationship which quickly developed between the Canadian and Welsh contingents, as well as the other historians who were present, some from as far afield as Australia. Links between Wales and Canada have, in any case, been growing in recent years, largely as the result of the activities and publications of the Canadian Studies in Wales Group, who acted as the intermediaries for the Gregynog conference.

The editors, who also organised the conference itself, wish to thank a number of organisations and individuals. The treasurer of CSWG, Denis Balsom was an inspiration in the planning and resourcing of the conference. We are indebted, moreover, to the CSWG itself for direct and generous financial support. For their part, the Canadian participants received valued support from the Social and Humanities Research Council of Canada and from their own institutions. We are also grateful to the Canadian High Commission, and especially to Michael Hellyer and the Academic Relations section, for their usual generosity and encouragement. Thanks are also due to Marc Boucher of Quebec House, London.

Special thanks are due to Dr Peter Denley of Westfield College for his expertise and industry in preparing the manuscript for laser production and to Oxford University Computing Service for their promptness and efficiency. Finally, the committees of the two societies are to be congratulated for showing confidence in this project, the first joint production. We hope they will approve of the product.