“Of Men and Stones”: Radicalism and Protest in North Wales, 1850–1914

R. Merfyn Jones

North Wales is a recognizable geographical area defined by the sea to the north and west and by the English border and the empty heaths of mid-Wales to the east and south. But it is an elusive notion which lacks the regional coherence and cultural and other associations of “South Wales”; moreover, definitions which might apply to one part of the area are hard to enforce elsewhere. And over it all extends the massive influence of the urban presence of the great English cities of Liverpool and Manchester; in many respects North Wales, like its coalfield which passes under the Dee to reappear in the Wirral, has to be considered, not only in a Welsh, but also in a north-west of England, context. For the purposes of this study, however, the region is limited geographically to the area presently included in the counties of Clwyd and Gwynedd. During the period under discussion people would have recognised this area under the names of the historic counties of Merioneth, Caernarvonshire and Anglesey, in the west, and Denbighshire and the severed county of Flintshire, to the east.

The differences between the eastern and western poles of this northern axis are sharp, not least in linguistic characteristics and population trends. The population curve of steady growth was the same in the somewhat more urbanised east as in the west during the nineteenth century but, whereas population stagnated, or even declined, in the western counties during the twentieth century it continued to increase, except during the thirties, in the east. Culturally an opposite curve prevailed with a marked downward dip in the number of Welsh speakers along the west-east axis. The counties which now constitute Gwynedd had very high percentages of Welsh speakers and, until recent times, minimal immigration from outside; in the area now known as Clwyd, however, the proximity of English towns and cities, particularly Chester and Liverpool, and a fair degree of movement across the border, ensured lower numbers of Welsh speakers. In 1901 almost 90% of the population of Caernarvonshire was Welsh speaking, in Denbighshire the total was 62% and in Flintshire the figure fell to 49.1%. This was still a substantial number of Welsh speakers, however, at almost exactly the same as the average for the whole of Wales, and parts of the eastern border area, particularly some of the coal mining communities,
remained impressively resistant to anglicisation despite the fact that the main town of the area, Wrexham, situated virtually on the English border, was already significantly anglicised when visited by George Borrow in 1854, "The town is reckoned a Welsh town, but its appearance is not Welsh—its inhabitants have neither the look nor language of Welshmen", he commented then.³

The differences between east and west were marked, therefore, but these should not be overestimated, certainly not in the nineteenth century. Far more striking are the similarities in economic development, political response, and cultural construction which united the two corners of North Wales. "How odd", commented the American consul to Liverpool, the novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne, on a visit to Denbighshire, "that an hour or two on the railway should have brought me amongst a people who speak no English." On an excursion in 1854 to Ruthin from the seaside development at Rhyl he wrote, "It was quite unexpected to me to hear Welsh so universally and familiarly spoken; everybody spoke it. I had an idea that Welsh was spoken rather as a freak, and in fun, than as a native language; it was so strange to think of another language being the people's actual and earnest medium of thought within so short a distance of England."⁴

In just the same was as the Welsh hills which dominated, at varying altitudes, the whole area (except for the island of Anglesey), abruptly ceased on the edge of England and the Cheshire plain, so also characteristically and intensely Welsh phenomena like the religious revival of 1904–5 stopped equally suddenly on that same border and failed to effectively travel the next fifteen or so miles to affect the city of Liverpool, or merely cross a river to infect the border town of Chester. It was the same pattern, as we shall see, which affected the political map as a Liberal Wales gazed wonderingly over to the Tory citadel on the Mersey.

From the late eighteenth century parts of North Wales were extensively developed for industrial production and mineral exploitation.⁵ These developments were not bunched together in one zone but rather were they scattered throughout the region. They were as geographically separate as the Parys copper-mining complex in Anglesey and the textile and related industries in the Greenfield valley of Holywell; the pioneer iron making industry in Bersham, the slate industry of Snowdonia and the coal of Flintshire and Denbighshire; the myriad burrowings in the ground from which lead and limestone and gold (in Merionethshire there were, at the turn of the century, more than five hundred men working in the Dolgellau goldfield) were dragged; the ports along the coast which exported mineral products or led, from Holyhead, to Ireland. Because of this relatively early and impressive degree of industrialisation, which dominated the local economy, the present author has argued elsewhere that it is not useful to characterise the region as an uniformly backward one.⁶ Economic and social change, characterised by large scale investment, affected North
Wales as early as elsewhere and, for some communities, with the same devastating effects as experienced by more recognisably industrial areas.

But this development does need to be put into perspective: to conceive of the matter in terms of species there were, in the 1890s, almost three times more sheep in North Wales than there were people (1,135,268 sheep in 1892 and 383,793 people in 1891); in the Southern counties of Glamorgan and Monmouthshire there were twice as many people as there were sheep (968,314 people and only 540,285 sheep). There was coal mining in both North and South Wales but the scale of the operations hardly bears comparison: in 1891 12,789 miners in North Wales were producing 3,152,000 tons. By the outbreak of world war one there were 234,117 coal miners in South Wales; there were 16,257 in North Wales.

The degree of urbanisation in North Wales was also unimpressive. By the late nineteenth century by far the largest town was Wrexham with its brewing and tanning industries. The town itself had a population of 15,000 but it was the centre of a substantially larger urban and mining area of perhaps 30,000 people. Four miles away there was the “largest village in Wales”, the coal-mining town of Rhosllanerchrugog with a population of almost 9,000 people. It was described, in 1847, as having worse social conditions than Merthyr Tydfil with families, with an average of six children each, living in one and two roomed cottages with earth floors and peat or straw roofs. A Welsh speaking town, despite its proximity to the English border, it was to become a Liberal and later a Labour citadel with a lively political life. By the Second World War there was Labour, Communist and Welsh nationalist organisation in the village and a miners’ institute of gargantuan proportions with library, billiards and choirs.

There were no other towns which could compare with the Wrexham-Rhos area. Other industrialised towns in the east such as Ruabon (mining and brick and tile manufacture), Mold (lead mining, tinplate and smelting works), Flint (paper mills and chemicals) and Brymbo (collieries and iron works) were still relatively small centres of population at the turn of the twentieth century with populations of under 5,000 each. Only Buckley (mining and brick and tile manufacture) was larger.

Further west many of the larger towns had relatively little industry and possessed very diverse economic rationales. As the nineteenth century progressed, and especially after the development of good railway links after 1850, few towns, however industrial in origin, evaded the influx of tourists and the infrastructure of that industry. From the late eighteenth century onwards North Wales (particularly, but by no means exclusively, in the mountainous west) attracted a substantial tourist trade; people flocked to the area for the physical beauty of mountain and sea. This juxtaposition of significant, if small scale, industrial development with the language of tourism and of the ‘picturesque’, can be disorientating. Bangor’s economy was described in 1899 as: “the chief industry of the town is the export of slate, obtained from Lord Penrhyn’s quarries. There is also a large influx of
visitors and tourists during the summer months”. Even the grim, grey, slate mining town of Blaenau Ffestiniog, with a population by the turn of the century of 11,000 (thus making it one of the largest towns in North Wales) could be perceived as both an industrial and tourist centre. As one guide commented, “During the past twenty years over 2,500,000 tons of manufactured slate were shipped from Blaenau Ffestiniog alone, and during the same period about 36,000,000 tons of rock were removed. The Vale of Ffestiniog is well worth a visit; the scenery is romantic.”

From 1896 the rack-and-pinion mountain railway which took passengers to the summit of Snowdon, a hugely popular tourist attraction, started its journey from the industrial village of Llanberis. Across the lake stood one of the two largest slate quarries in the world which, employing three thousand men, had completely transformed the mountainside. This village had, in 1874, tenaciously fought to establish trade unionism in the slate industry, and had subsequently witnessed a further ferocious industrial dispute. But it was also a popular tourist centre with several large hotels; it could be described by a mountain climber in 1895, before the Snowdon railway attracted even more people, as “intolerably overrun, especially during the late summer and autumn, the true lover of the mountains flees the spot, for the day-tripper is a burden and desire fails.”

Along the coast the new towns of Rhyl, with “sands...equal in solidity and smoothness to any in the kingdom”, and the gracefully planned Llandudno and Colwyn Bay, favoured by invalids in winter, were all significant centres of population, and had been created specifically as fashionable Victorian watering places with their large hotels, iron piers, promenades and marine drives. On the west coast there were similar but smaller such developments in Barmouth, Cricieth and elsewhere. The proximity of the huge urban populations of Lancashire, and, slightly further away, of the Midlands, was, of course, a key factor in these developments in North Wales.

Furthermore, there were few uncomplicated capitalists in the area; the most powerful dynasty, with interests in many mineral exploitation ventures as well as massive land holdings, was that of the Williams-Wynn family of Wynnstay, near Ruabon: in 1873 it was recorded that the family owned 87,919 acres, most of them in Denbighshire, Merioneth and Montgomeryshire; in 1883 Bateman estimated the acreage as extending to 145,770 acres; on either count this was by far the largest landed estate in Wales and the Wynns expected to exercise the political power commensurate with their land holdings. In the west the largest slate mines and quarries were all owned by families who also possessed massive landed estates and lived in pseudo-baronial style. Lord Penrhyn surveyed the business possibilities offered by his extensive slate quarry from the pretensions of his enormous mock castle and the security bestowed by his 49,000 acres.

The Assheton Smiths, who owned the Dinorwic quarry in Llanberis
interested themselves in fox-hunting, sailing, and in their own estate menagerie. Thomas Assheton Smith and his wife had been reluctant to leave the fox-hounds on their country seat in Tedworth in order to take up his inheritance in the thin soil of Snowdonia: "Both were unwilling to leave. . . where each had so many objects of interest and enjoyment — he is favourite sport, and she her schools, her poor, and the management of the house and yards". But move they did, albeit only for relatively short stretches at a time, because of the apparently limitless wealth located in the slate mountain which he had inherited: "the mountain," his biographer commented in 1860, "has the appearance of a colossal plum cake out of which two boys are each trying to take the largest slice he can." To walk the five miles from Llanberis to the summit of Snowdon required every step to be taken on Vaenol soil. Even the indigenous fortune made by Thomas Williams and Edward Hughes from the copper deposits of Parys mountain was, by the mid-nineteenth century, expressed in the absurd folly of Kinmel castle, seat of the genealogist Hugh R. Hughes and a favourite retreat of minor royalty like H.R.H. the Duke of Sussex. Few areas in Britain were so dominated by landlordism and the social imperatives of that system.

**Protest**

Given all these factors — relatively small scale industrialisation, mostly in the east; little urbanisation; the prevalence of a tourist infrastructure, mainly in the west and along the coast, but not exclusively so; the overwhelming presence of landlordism and of related systems of patronage and power — then the persistence of protest and the emergence of an influential labour movement are an unexpected feature of North Wales' past which require some explanation. In the remainder of this paper we shall be concerned with the provenance, and even more so with the expression, of protest in this area and with the way in which this led North Wales to become a Liberal province out of which developed a significant, and well organised, trade union and labour movement which remained strong, if not dominant, until the 1970s. Finally the relationship between the traditions of protest and the strategies of Labour, which was not without contradictions, will be briefly considered.

During the nineteenth century at least two crucial tendencies can be discerned: first a tradition of direct protest and action which affected equally rural and industrial communities and, secondly, the growing influence and volubility of an indigenous middle-class radicalism which expressed itself most forcefully in electoral politics. Together these developments gave North Wales a reputation for both radical politics and social disorder.

In the extractive industries the tradition of strike action, often associated
with other forms of direct, and sometimes violent sanctions, was firmly rooted. Trade unionism was as well established in North Wales as in any other coalfield (partly the result of the influence of Lancashire radicals and organisers), but even if the union's presence came to be intermittent the level of conflict in the industry remained constant; this was most tragically displayed in the Mold riots of 1869 which led to the military shooting on a crowd of miners and their families; two colliers and two women were killed by the fusillade.\(^4\)

In the slate industry the first recorded strike was in 1825 and, although the next half century was relatively quiescent, for the quarter of a century from 1874 the slate quarrymen of Snowdonia, who never numbered more than 14,000, were involved in a series of remarkable industrial disputes which caught the national imagination. In 1874 they defeated the main employers in the industry and established an union; in 1885 there was a strike in Llanberis, in 1892 in Blaenau Ffestiniog, and then, for eleven months in 1896-7 and for a further three years, from October 1900 to the Autumn of 1903, the three thousand quarrymen at Lord Penrhyn's quarry in Bethesda were locked out. During these disputes boycotts, picketing, and, on occasion, riot, were employed to enforce collective discipline; the military twice cantered through the streets of Bethesda.\(^5\)

But the other extractive industries, with no history of trade union organisation, were also far from being immune to action. Disputes occurred in both the copper and the lead mines of North Wales, particularly in response to employers' attempts to lengthen hours of work, traditionally very short, or change the wages system: Halkyn miners rioted in 1822 and in 1850 miners armed with sticks won a reduction in hours in Holywell.\(^6\) In 1853 there was a year-long strike in the Llandudno copper mines but the most dramatic conflict was that of the 500 miners at the Talgarth lead mine in 1856 which witnessed the arrival of the military to counter the increasingly violent attacks of groups of strikers: the incumbent of the parish wrote to his bishop "the first act of violence .. was the pulling down at night of a fence .. the next act of violence.. was the surrounding of Dyserth Hall the residence of the late Agent.. by some twenty or thirty persons, some of whom were dressed in women's clothes, and carried firearms, which they fired.. on the 21st October last, between 10 and 11 o'clock at night, a number of men, supposed to have been 30 or thereabout, went in a body to the Talargoch Works; and some small shot were fired into the Engine-house.. the watchman was also fired at by one of the crowd, and several small shot entered his feet and legs".\(^7\)

In the countryside, too, squatters, cottagers and tenant farmers were involved in a variety of different struggles particularly against enclosure, the sale of Crown land or the perceived injustices of the landlord system and of the Anglican church. These reached their highest pitch in the famous "Tithe War" of the late 1880s which witnessed a cat-and-mouse campaign of defiance and ambush, conducted by farmers opposed to the payment of
tithes. Redcoats in the Denbighshire hills seemed to bring the methods and passions of Irish land reformers to Wales. A lesser known example of rural discontent was the ten-year long campaign of 'outrages' conducted by cottagers and others in the parish of Caerhun, in the mountains above Conway, to prevent the stone walls of landlordism from locking out their sheep from the mountainside. The land in question had been enclosed in 1858 and two thirds of it had gone to just two landowners; the cottagers, who depended on access to the mountainside to graze their flocks of sheep, persistently knocked down during the night the high boundary walls built during the day. These massive dry stone walls which enmeshed the North Wales hills and ascended the steepest and rockiest of mountainsides in an eloquent testimony to the possessive impulse and the territorial imperative, were, along with Edward I's castles, arguably the most visible and impressive architectural features in North Wales. They required endless labour to build; they could be knocked down with ease. In 1867, nine years after the original protests, the magistrates were still debating whether to make the area into a special police district in order to "curb the lawlessness of the district".

Uneasily, although at times intimately, associated with these popular protests were the campaigns of radical Liberalism developed in pulpit and newspaper column and aimed at the power of landlordism and the Anglican church. Profiting from the 1867 Reform Act, the 1870 Ballot Act and, particularly, from the 1884 Reform Act, the Liberals had wrested control of the electoral representation from the landowners and their scions. In the general election of November 1885 the Liberals won thirty of the thirty-four Welsh parliamentary seats; in North Wales their victory was even more emphatic and they carried the day in nine out of the ten constituencies, only Denbigh Boroughs remained in Tory hands. In 1886 Tom Ellis, the son of a poor tenant farmer, won in the Merioneth constituency. A young radical lawyer called David Lloyd George was travelling the meeting halls of Caernarvonshire and Merioneth, gaining a reputation for tempestuous oratory and cool calculation and sharpening his ambitions the while. He was narrowly elected to Parliament for Caernarvon Boroughs in 1891. With the first County Council elections in 1889 the Liberal political revolution was confirmed as the Liberal army of businessmen and ministers swept to power. Following the 1885 elections the Times had noted that nonconformity and radicalism had become synonymous in Wales and that this had resulted in "that curious unanimity which is the characteristic feature of Welsh politics", a consensus which had rendered the Tories "so absurd a minority". For a generation and more Wales was not to be a place but an idea, it did not have citizens, rather did it have adherents to the tenets of radical Liberalism and its all-embracing explanatory formulations. If there is some doubt about the scope of the democratic revolution in England during the nineteenth
century, and about the survival there of aristocratic influence and patterns of allegiance, there can be no such doubt about the political process in Wales.

This period in the late nineteenth century has been described by one historian as "a surge of Welsh organizational activity which amounted to a national renaissance": Cymru Fydd, the nationalist wing of Liberalism, began on its contradictory and ultimately ineffective path in 1886, its journal was founded in 1888; the Society for the Utilization of the Welsh Language was founded in 1885; in the following year, and of particular importance in North Wales, Thomas Gee and his tenant farmer allies launched an anti-tithe organization which, in 1887, became the Welsh Land League. A pack of radical Welsh language newspapers snapped at the heels of Tory landlordism and ultra radicals, like the Rev. E. Pan Jones, Mostyn, travelled the county calling for fundamental land reform.

The relationship between this nonconformist Liberalism and, in particular, the tithe reform campaign and other anti-Anglican and anti-landlord initiative, was relatively straightforward. When it came to matters of labour mobilisation and organisation the relationships with the middle-class advocates of radical Liberalism were not so uncomplicated but they could still be intimate. Electorally this can be seen in the long adhesion of the North Wales colliers to the Liberal Party. Further west the middle-class activists were even more integrated. It was a radical journalist, Ap Ffarmwr, who attempted to organise Anglesey farm workers in the 1880s. Even more dramatic was the role of middle class Liberals in the affairs of the North Wales Quarrymen's Union which was established in 1874 under direct middle-class control, a control which was to remain relatively unchallenged until the turn of the century. The two key figures in the union were the radical businessman, W. J. Parry, and W. J. Williams, who, as General Secretary of the union, also ran an accountant's firm from the union's headquarters.

The violence of some of the protests of the closing decades of the century attracted the nervous censure of Liberal leaders at times but, on the whole, they successfully recruited these struggles, whether in mine, quarry or farm into their own campaigns against the twin enemies of Anglican Church and landowners. In the slate industry the language of industrial relations — contracts, combination, bargains, wages, supervision, managerial prerogatives, the rights of workers — jostled with the vocabulary of radical Liberalism: religious discrimination, land rights, the rights of Welsh workers, universal human demands.

It was little wonder, therefore, that the besieged defenders of the old order felt that their paternalistic relationship with tenants, parishioners and workers were being disturbed by a "gang of Bethelite preachers" intent on disturbing the social peace and grabbing the political spoils. Strikes were blamed on "socialistic" plots, rural discontent on agitators inspired by the Irish example; the Welsh-language press was accused of pouring out spite
and libel and was closely monitored by its opponents. For Lord Penrhyn, appearing before the Land Commission in 1893, "the Welsh Land Question was unreal in origin, and had not its source in any genuine sense of grievance on the part of the agricultural community"; for him, as for a recent historian of the land in Wales, the grievances of tenant farmers and others were a "figment of the political imagination".

It was no such thing, of course; the police files of North Wales contain plenty of evidence to the contrary. The tradition of popular protest, be it in the countryside or in the mines and quarries, was securely based on an endemic sense of injustice and a sure knowledge of the means by which oppression might be resisted. What is undeniable, however, is the success with which radical Liberal propagandists harnessed so many of these protests to their own world view, even while maintaining a discrete distance between themselves and these manifestations. They created, in North Wales, an all-pervasive radical vision, an alternative 'common sense' which aspired to hegemonic proportions.

Llanddulas, 1885-86

An example of the role of this ideological construct in the context of an industrial dispute is provided by an event such as the Llanddulas limestone quarry dispute of 1885; neglected hitherto by historians it is described in detail below in order to identify the characteristics of the consciousness discussed above in the context of a labour dispute. There was no visible middle class involvement in this conflict, and neither was there any outside organisational interference, not even from a trade union. And yet the instinctual reflexes of the radical world view were manifest, particularly in the ethnic dimensions of the dispute and in the determined resistance to the military occupation of the village. (Fifty five years earlier, in 1829, a previous rebellion of the villagers, a protest against the enclosure of common land used for quarrying, had been quelled by the intervention of Fusiliers from Chester). A description and analysis of the dispute of 1885-86 should serve to illustrate the argument adumbrated above for it took place at a time when conflict in North Wales was attracting a good deal of national attention. This attention was largely focussed on the fifteen-week lock-out at the Dinorwic slate quarries which involved some three thousand men but equally dramatic was the remarkable, if small-scale, strike which broke out in November 1885 in the limestone quarries of Llanddulas, situated on the North Wales coast of Liverpool Bay near the town of Abergele.

Limestone was present near the coal seams of the Denbigh coal field and lime from the large Minera deposits was used locally in the iron industry. Limestone was also found along the coast from Abergele to the Ormes at Llandudno and was worked throughout the nineteenth century. The
produce of this coastal area was taken by sea, and after mid-century by rail also, as building stone for the construction industry in Birkenhead and Liverpool, but increasingly it was processed into lime for use in the chemical industry of the upper-Mersey estuary, St. Helens and also of nearby Flint. Llanddulas was one of the centres of production in Wales and a railroad and pier had been constructed for the transportation of the limestone as early as 1822; a further jetty was extended into the sea in the mid-1870s. The companies operating in the small village were Kneeshaw, Lupton and Co.; Raynes and Co.; and the Llanddulas Quarry Co. Some five to six hundred men were employed in the quarrying of the limestone, treating it in kilns to produce lime and then transporting it to ship or train.

In November 1885, Kneeshaw, Lupton and Raynes persuaded their workers to accept a reduced price, per ton, in the piece work system which operated. The men agreed to such a reduction in recognition of the depressed state of the market but they refused to sign contracts of employment which would freeze payments at the lower level for the following twelve months. They first refused to load ships already arrived at the jetty and then the men at the two quarries struck work on the Monday morning of November 23rd. When they finally produced their “manifesto” in the new year they rejected the idea of a twelve month contract as “they will not submit to be tyrannized by industrialists who neither care for their welfare nor consider their contracts in any way”. If they agreed to the new contracts then they feared that “they would be abandoning themselves to a new form of slavery”. The main burden of their complaint concerned wages and working conditions; particularly the fact that they often had to work at night in order to meet the demands of ships which were themselves dependent on the tides, but even these matters were expressed in the language of radicalism.

The employers contradicted the strikers’ figures and claimed that the men, who worked in gangs, could, on average, earn eighteen shillings to one pound a week. The men replied that they would need to be breaking rock for eighteen hours a day if they were to earn such wages. The employers responded by claiming that even though the quarries were open from six in the morning until half past five in the evening “our rockmen seldom come until 7:30 to 8:00 and leave between 4:30 to 5:00pm.” When asked to work longer hours “they have invariably refused”. Many of the issues common in other disputes in extractive industries concerning piece-work rates and work discipline were, therefore, important issues but other matters more central to Welsh radicalism also came to the surface. These were matters which charged the dispute with all the tensions of a clash between nationalities and between people and soldiery.

The major employer, Henry Kneeshaw, lived in nearby Penmaenmawr where his company also owned the Graiglwyd ‘setts’ quarry (he also had other quarrying interests in North Wales including the Port Nant quarry
near Llithfaen in Llyn). He was a local magistrate and a prominent supporter of the Tory party. Despite his local interests, however, he was unmistakably English and his business ventures were run from offices in Liverpool. His partners, the Luptons, were both Liverpool merchants living in Oxton, Wirral. Raynes and Co. had also ventured into the quarrying business with the Luptons but in Llanddulas they were involved independently; the three Raynes partners all described themselves as merchants and also lived in Wirral. All three companies operating in the village had their offices in Old Hall St., in the Liverpool business quarter. The limestone workers, therefore, were employed by Liverpool-based employers and almost all of the lime which they produced was sent direct to the Mersey.27

The limestone workers and their families, on the other hand, were overwhelmingly Welsh in origin and in speech and largely nonconformist in religion and Liberal in politics. Llanddulas was a small village of under one thousand inhabitants but it could boast of not only its Anglican Church, dedicated to St. Cymbryd, but also Baptist, Calvinistic Methodist, Independent and Wesleyan Methodist chapels.28

Neither Alexander Duncan, of Kneeshaw Lupton, nor John Fair of Raynes, the local managers of the two strike-bound quarries, were Welsh and this led to the quarry workers complaining not only of their competence but also of their inability to communicate with them in Welsh. In their manifesto they stated:

The manager Mr Duncan does not understand his work and consequently is not a competent person to deal with either men or stones. The same remarks apply to his sub-managers, who are men of inferior judgement and tyrannous nature. Mr. Duncan cannot speak Welsh and it is a well-known fact that a great many of the men cannot speak English.29

The employers respondend by pointing out that Duncan had spent twenty-five years in the management of quarries in Penmaenmawr and suggested that his residence there “entirely refutes the insinuation that he cannot make the men understand him”.10 But the clash of cultures was clearly stamped onto the character of the conflict from the start. This element was exacerbated by the arrival of the ‘relief workmen, or blacklegs, who were variously described by the villagers as “English”, “foreign”, “Irish” or “Rats”.

The limestone quarries themselves were flanked by their limeworks where the limestone was placed in kilns for the production of lime. As the strike proceeded the employers became increasingly concerned with the state of the lime kilns and they determined to bring in men to keep them going. A week after the strike started, therefore, a dozen men from Birkenhead arrived in Llanddulas to stoke the fires. They arrived at 11:30am and immediately started packing the kilns with stone. By the time they stopped for their lunch a procession of two hundred of the strikers
entered the works and, using a police constable as a go-between, informed the Birkenhead men that they had better leave. The constable explained that he could not guarantee the men's safety if they were to stay and he escorted them back to the station. As a result of this incident a dozen of the strikers were charged with intimidation and appeared before a special petty sessions in Conwy shortly afterwards. The accused marched to the court with three hundred of their colleagues and a foreman and three of the Birkenhead men gave evidence against them. They were found guilty but were leniently dealt with by the court and were only bound over to keep the peace.

By this stage the conflict had clearly developed an ethnic dimension as English blacklegs were perceived to be threatening the solidarity of a Welsh workforce. In sentencing the accused men the chairman of the Conwy bench, Rev. J. D. Jones, came as close to exculpating them as he possibly could: "as a Welshman he was sure that they would behave themselves in the future. He was proud to think that they had behaved themselves so well. It was no doubt a great provocation to see men brought from England to the works." But, he reminded them with almost a note of regret, the law had to protect everyone.

The magistrate's hope that the people of Llanddulas would "behave themselves in the future" was not to be fulfilled. Within a week the Chief Constable of Caernarvonshire was urgently informing the Under-Secretary of State at the Home Office that,

the men at the quarries are on strike, they and their associates for miles around have banded themselves together to resist the employment of others in the quarries. Endeavours have been made to protect the peace, but without the least success. Rioting of a serious nature has been commenced and stones have been fairly used.

The Chief Constable was referring to the employers' attempt to import more blacklegs which had been thwarted by the vigilant strikers at the village railway station. The correspondent of The Times commented that "again the resolute attitude of the men and the determined opposition of the women prevented the approach of the relief men". The strikers who "have picketed the neighbourhood and done their utmost to strengthen their organisation" seemed to him to control the situation: "seaward the men commanded the beaches, while the mountains at the back prevented approach from that quarter". The surrounding "varied and picturesque scenery", which was already attracting tourists to the area, was also proving to be beneficial to the strikers' manoeuvres.

As the year drew to a close the police, certain magistrates and the employers collaborated with the military authorities in Chester Castle to try and import further English workers. As a result of muddle and policy disagreements, however, the plan initially failed to come off but, on January 4th, they finally succeeded in bringing in 'relief men' from
Birkenhead and Liverpool. Some one hundred soldiers of the 80th South Staffordshire Regiment were requisitioned from barracks in Manchester and joined the fifty relief men on the train in Chester. Referred to by the Liverpool Daily Post as "the Englishmen", they arrived on the ten o'clock train on the Monday morning when they were met by thirty-three policemen and a large crowd of strikers and their families. The soldiers leapt out of the train and "formed up on both sides of the relief men and marched out with fixed bayonets. The strikers were completely cowed." The march under armed escort to the quarry was a short one but it was to reverberate through innumerable newspaper columns and radical pamphlets.

The strikers comforted themselves by observing the unskilled way in which the new men, fourteen of them in Raynes' and the rest in Kneeshaw Lupton's, carried out the work and laughed "when the lime dust was being blown into their eyes". They held a mass meeting which counselled peace and foresaw the blacklegs being removed "as they are evidently unaccustomed to the task of filling and drawing the kilns". But the soldiers had brought their tents and were billeted around the neighbourhood. Fifty of them marched into the village from Abergele every day and sentries were permanently posted throughout the village; the relief men stayed in the works and were fed by the local publican.

The blacklegs were sometimes referred to locally as "Irishmen", a reference to their Merseyside origins; they had been promised good wages and constant employment and "as the men out of work in the large towns are unlimited no difficulty is experienced in filling the places of the strikers". But in the context of the disturbed state of North Wales in the 1880s the important thing about them was that, like the employers, they were "foreigners". Feeling ran high, and not only amongst the strikers: the chairman of the Caernarvonshire Quarter Sessions warned the Home Secretary that "it would be wrong of the proprietors to introduce English workers".

Support for the strike was widespread in North Wales and the men and their families relied heavily on the financial donations of supporters throughout the region: "but for extraneous assistance," commented the sympathetic Daily Post, "the strikers must have been starved into submission long since." There was some support received from the North Wales Quarrymen's Union which organised slate quarrymen although its funds were being rapidly depleted by the much larger demands of the Dinorwic lock-out. The Mayor of Bangor sent sacks of flour and an anonymous "lady" personally donated £10. More significantly, local farmers who, it was reported, "deeply sympathised with them" sent flour, corn and other agricultural produce. Within weeks the farmers of Denbighshire were themselves to violently encounter police and military as they themselves set out to flout the rule of church and state in the Tithe Wars.
The dispute was settled early in February, 1886, on a compromise which meant the companies dropped the twelve-month contract and substituted an open-ended agreement which could be terminated by a fortnight's notice. The 'relief men' returned to Merseyside and unemployment. Despite the fact that the limestone workers had been in close contact with the North Wales Quarrymen's Union they did not join that union nor any of the other small unions which were attempting to cater for quarry workers. They did, however, elect their own committee which was recognised by the employers.

The strikers at Llandduelas, through their confrontation with the fixed bayonets of the soldiery and in their admixture of ethnic, political and industrial strands, demonstrated, through their actions, the way in which the ideologies of radicalism, however guarded and qualified, affected the living tissue of Welsh society. They raised no narrowly political demands but, like their co-workers in the coal mining and slate and granite quarrying communities of North Wales, they reflected and expressed a set of analyses which can only be described as political in the wider sense. They were concerned with power and its displacement. As the Chairman of the Caernarvonshire Quarter Sessions wrote to the Home Office in December 1885: "The real cause of the ill feeling among the men... is political. There is no doubt of it."41

**Conclusion**

The achievement of the radical ideologues of the late nineteenth century was to create a remarkable alliance, not only of social classes but also of diverse and very specific aspirations — in the case described above those of a village of limestone workers on the North Wales coast. This alliance could be distilled into manifestoes but, much more to the point, it fused into a coherent identity which could contain the contradictions and inner conflicts of a self-defined Welsh constituency. Its future was defeat, some of it self-inflicted, but its significance, and the measure of its ambition, was definitive.

This essay has been concerned with discussing the historical expression of this ideology in labour and protest actions in the second half of the nineteenth century but, in conclusion, it would seem appropriate to suggest some of the problems which the pervasive nature of this consciousness offer for the subsequent development of labourist organisation in North Wales. For out of this radical, if limited and raucously middle-class, moment emerged a class divide which led to the familiar features of labour organisation and, later, to the re-definitions which eventually led to nationalism. The conclusion about to be advanced here will suggest that this modernisation of the political terrain, whilst feeding off this tradition, and basing itself on it, need not necessarily be
accepted as a step toward increased radicalism and enhanced possibilities for change but, on the contrary this process can also be interpreted as a retreat from the earlier traditions, a signalling of an acceptance of power structures, and of a tenant status for workers within power's estate.

Ironically, the first parliamentary constituency to be won by Labour in North Wales was Anglesey, in 1918, one of the least industrialised seats in Wales. No sufficient explanation for this remarkable victory has yet been advanced, although the candidate's eccentricities and military bearing were clearly factors. More understandable were Labour's 1922 victories in Arfon and in Wrexham and, following the division of Flintshire into two constituencies, in Flintshire East. Arfon was to be lost until 1945 but Wrexham was to remain North Wales' solitary Labour bastion until after the second world war when more and more constituencies fell to Labour.

In 1966 all four constituencies in Gwynedd returned Labour members and in Clwyd Labour captured three of the five seats; seven constituencies out of nine went Labour, a remarkable testimony to the prevalence of Labour's influence in North Wales until recent times.\(^{42}\)

And yet the achievement was not only short lived but also remarkably ineffective. Labour as an organised force emerged out of the conflicts of the nineteenth century with no alternative ideology to speak of and with an inheritance of organisational failure and weakness. The leading figures who emerged to lead the labour movement in the area were complicated but deeply reactionary figures. In the east the mining leaders were moderate and unremarkable; the astonishing figure to emerge is Arthur Deakin. In the west it was not the socialists Silyn Roberts and David Thomas who came to dominate the Labour scene but the ex-I.L.P. quarryman, and briefly, Labour M.P., Robert Thomas Jones.

R. T. Jones narrowly won the ballot for General Secretary of the North Wales Quarrymen's Union in 1908, partly because he had ILP support. He was the first quarryman to have real power in the organisation and he deliberately manoeuvred the union away from its highly political and sectarian role towards a Labour and trade union professionalism. Within months of his election he was insisting that all decision-making come through him; he deliberately prevented the union's affiliation to the Labour Party until he could ensure that he would be the Labour candidate; he established the union during the First World War, despite an almost total lack of membership, by using his contacts with local and national political figures. At times, as he showed during the bitter disagreements at the Bryneglwys mine in the 1920s, he could be a stubborn defender of the right of unions to organise and negotiate. He was a Labour functionary of some skill and success; from 1921 until 1932 he served on the General Council of the Trades Union Congress; he created a trade union out of a radical and combative movement and eschewed any challenges to the order of things. Along with many quarry employers he was a freemason; representing labour was a matter for negotiation not challenge. The radical Liberal bid
for power, regional and limited as it might have been, was replaced by accommodation and the tradition of popular protest was emasculated into the rehearsed symbolism of the public demonstration. This was not achieved merely by Jones, the collapse of the economic base of the industry and the fundamental changes in the national, political scene meant that he had few choices; but his consolidation of Labour’s legitimacy can hardly be interpreted as anything other than a retreat from the combative positions of the Liberal ascendancy.43

It was Arthur Deakin who best represented the way in which Labour in North Wales narrowed the social base of protest and cauterised all radical ambition. Born in Warwickshire in 1890 Deakin moved to Dowlais when he was ten and there started to work for Guest, Keen and Nettlefolds at the age of thirteen. Influenced, like Jones, by the ILP and his local M.P., Keir Hardie, he moved to North Wales in 1910 to work as a roll turner with a steel manufacturer in Shotton. It was here that he launched himself on a career as a trade union functionary which was eventually to lead him to being the General Secretary of the Transport and General Workers Union and, as such, the most powerful trade union leader in Britain. Briefly a member of the A.S.E. he joined the Dock, Wharf, Riverside and General Union and, despite a brief spell as General Secretary of the tiny Roll Turners Association, it was in the dockers’ union, which amalgamated into the TGWU in 1922, along with R. T. Jones’ NWQU, thus making the TGWU by far the most important trade union in North Wales, that he made his mark. In 1922 Deakin became Assistant District Secretary for the North Wales region of the TGWU. Ten years later he moved to London where, in 1935, he became Bevin’s Assistant General Secretary. He ran the union during Bevin’s period in Government and, in 1948, emerged as the most dominant, and domineering, figure in British trade unionism. Obsessively anti-communist he succeeded, in 1949, in banning Communists from office in the TGWU. A Primitive Methodist with a taste for flamboyant clothes and large cigars, he did not drink and died, of a heart attack, while addressing a May Day service in Leicester. For twenty two years his apprenticeship had been served in North Wales and he was deeply affected by the economic depression in the area during the inter war period; in 1919 he had become an alderman on Flintshire County Council, and, in 1932, was Chairman of that Local Authority.44

The argument being somewhat hesitantly advanced here is that Labour failed to construct, in the particular situation obtaining in North Wales, any programme for radical change; the move away from the world view of radical Liberalism and the traditions of popular protest represented many positive advances but, along with the hypocrisy and the elitism of the nineteenth century, Labour, as represented by its leaders and its organisations, jettisoned also any hegemonic ambitions. The “rise of Labour” in North Wales did not lead to any socialist challenge but rather to a narrowing of horizons and a deflection of protest.
Notes

1 In 1891 over 80,000 Welsh born people were living in Lancashire and Cheshire; this was more than there were in some Welsh counties, *Census Report* (1891).

2 Ibid.


5 For an account of industrialisation in North Wales see A. H. Dodd’s definitive volume, *The Industrial Revolution in North Wales*, (1933, 1951).


7 *Census Report*, 1891.

8 Much of the following detail is taken from *Slater’s Directory, North Wales, Cheshire and Shropshire with Liverpool* (1883); and *Bennett’s Business Directory* (1899).

9 For industrial disputes in the slate industry, including the disputes in Llanberis in 1874 and 1885 see R. Merfyn Jones, *The North Wales Quarrymen, 1874-1922* (Cardiff, 1981).

10 W. P. Haskett Smith, *Climbing in the British Isles; Wales and Ireland* (1895), vi.


13 This argument is developed at much greater length in R. Merfyn Jones *op. cit.*


15 R. Merfyn Jones, *op.cit.


17 N.L.W., M.S. SA/MISC/364.


19 *Caernarvon and Denbigh Herald*, 6 July 1867; Gwyrnedd Record Office, XQ5/1856/H/6, Quarter Sessions Records.

20 *Times*, 26 December 1885.


27 See *Gore’s Directory* (1886); *North Wales Chronicle*, 28 November 1885; *Baner ac

28 Baner ac Amserau Cymru, 13 January 1886; Slater's Directory (1892).

29 Daily Post 26 January 1885. Much the same reports of the dispute were published, in different languages, in Baner ac Amserau Cymru and the Liverpool Daily Post, both Liberal newspapers; the North Wales Chronicle reflected the Tory view of matters.

30 Daily Post, 30 January 1885; North Wales Chronicle, 12 December 1885.

31 Baner ac Amserau Cymru was moderate enough in its treatment of the Llanddulas employers but described the English relief men as an “execrable rabble” whose behaviour was a disgrace and a “source of great danger to . . . morality through their drunkeness and frightful swearing.”

32 Public Record Office HO144/162/A41864, Major J.M. Clayton, Chief Constable of Caernarvonshire to the Under Secretary of State at the Home Office, December 17, 1885; I am indebted to John Parry, Workingmen’s College, for this and other references to the Home Office papers.

33 Times, 5 January 1886; Baner ac Amserau Cymru claimed that troops had appeared briefly on that occasion. Slater’s Directory (1892), there were several “appartments” for tourists in the village.

34 Times, 5 January 1886; Daily Post 5 January 1886.

35 See, for example, Caernarfon and Denbigh Herald, 2, 9 and 16 January 1886.

36 Daily Post, 6 January 1886. To make amends the publican also provided free soup for the strikers.

37 Ibid. January 5, 1886. See also Baner ac Amserau Cymru, 13 January 1886; Times, 12 January 1886.

38 P.R.O., H.O.144, Chairman Caernarvonshire Quarter Sessions to Home Office, December 20, 1885.

39 Daily Post, 6 January 1886.

40 Ffestiniog slate quarrymen contributed £17, Baner ac Amserau Cymru, 23 December 1885; Daily Post, 30 December 1885; 6 January 1886.

41 P.R.O., H.O. 144, Chairman of Quarter Sessions to Home Office, December 20, 1885.

42 A discussion of Labour’s early development in Gwynedd will be found in Cyril Parry, The Radical Tradition in Welsh Politics: A study of Liberal and Labour Politics in Gwynedd, 1900–20 (Hull, 1970).

43 On the career of R. T. Jones see R. Merfyn Jones, op.cit, Chapter X and passim; Owen Parry, Undeb y Chwarelwyrc, 1908–29 (1930).

44 For Arthur Deakin see V. L. Allen, Trade Union Leadership, Based on a Study of Arthur Deakin (1957).