

**A WORKERS' VILLAGE:  
JOHN E. MORGAN, THE LABOUR MOVEMENT AND THE  
POLITICS OF THE PAST IN YNYSYBWL, 1880-1920**

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Bearing in mind the clouds which have so long obscured the industrial horizon, it would at first seem surprising to find speculators persistent in their development of the South Wales coal trade. [...Yet] how suddenly Ynysybwl has shot up into public prominence is a matter of real note.

*Aberdare Times*, 26 September 1885

Nestled in a once isolated valley between the Rhondda and Aberdare, lies the mining village of Ynysybwl. Before the discovery of coal and the sinking of the Lady Windsor Colliery by the Ocean Coal Company in the mid-1880s, Ynysybwl had been a rural hamlet comprised of 'respectable' people and 'well to do farmers'. The first school in the area opened in 1867 to much acclaim, since, in the words of one journalist, 'a school is generally much more appreciated by an agricultural than a mineral population'.<sup>2</sup> This question of respectability and the decline in moral standards associated with the rise of industry would rage through South Wales for much of the last quarter of the nineteenth century. For those in Ynysybwl who feared industry, who believed it uncouth, the attempted murder of a colliery official by a sacked labourer a matter of months after the colliery had opened seemed proof enough.<sup>3</sup> It certainly entertained the macabre gossipers of late-Victorian Wales for several weeks.<sup>4</sup> Of course, the isolation of a hamlet set on the top of a hill offered ideal territory for illicit activities including prize fighting, petty crime, drunkenness,

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<sup>2</sup> *Cardiff Times*, 22 June 1867.

<sup>3</sup> *Aberdare Times*, 3 October 1885.

<sup>4</sup> *Tenby Observer*, 1 October 1885; *North Wales Express*, 2 October 1885; *Cardiff Times*, 3 October 1885, 10 October 1885; *Weekly Mail*, 17 October 1885; *Aberdare Times*, 24 October 1885. The assailant – Evan Lewis – was sentenced to 20 years' penal servitude in November. *Aberdare Times*, 14 November 1885.

and rioting, and so the extent to which Ynysybwl's respectability was actually altered by the arrival of coal mining is doubtful.<sup>5</sup>

What did change, and rapidly, was the size of the village and its modern provisions, albeit in the haphazard fashion associated with the development of the industrial frontier. By 1890 around 4,000 people were resident in Ynysybwl; a new primary school had been constructed and opened in 1886; and in 1890 passenger service began on the village's branch line of the Taff Vale Railway.<sup>6</sup> An additional infants' school opened in April 1897 to further ease pressure on the community's educational facilities.<sup>7</sup> For religious worship there was a new Anglican church built in a gothic style, with enough space for 300 people.<sup>8</sup> And by the turn of the century nine chapels had been built covering a range of denominations and both languages: the Tabernacle Independent Chapel on Other Street; Noddfa Welsh Baptist Chapel on High Street; Jerusalem Welsh Presbyterian Chapel on Thompson Street; Zion English Baptist Chapel on Robert Street; and Glyn Street (English) Presbyterian Chapel on Glyn Street, to name the most prominent.<sup>9</sup> Of the nine, Tabernacle and Noddfa were key to civic life in Ynysybwl since these played hosts variously to meetings of the Liberal Association and the nascent Miners' Federation branch in the years before the establishment of the miners' institute, and were the place of worship for leading members of both organisations.<sup>10</sup>

This was a community similar to the rest of the South Wales Coalfield in the late-nineteenth century. It had its colliery, its chapels and Anglican churches, its mixed community of Welsh- and English-speaking immigrants, and its emergent civic society. It provides, therefore, a useful case study with which to examine the emergence of South Walian social democracy in the first half of the twentieth century. In recent years, debate amongst historians on the development of the labour movement and its ideas and practices in industrial South Wales has focused heavily on the existence of an 'alternative culture'. First introduced into the literature by Hywel Francis and Dai Smith in their iconic, *The Fed*, published in 1980, the term

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<sup>5</sup> *Merthyr Telegraph*, 8 January 1870; *Cardiff Times*, 26 March 1876, 22 July 1876; *Pontypridd Chronicle*, 19 November 1881. This kind of hill-top crime is more broadly analysed in David J. V. Jones, *Crime in Nineteenth-Century Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1992).

<sup>6</sup> *Weekly Mail*, 16 October 1886; *Cardiff Times*, 11 January 1890. Glamorgan Archives, Cardiff: EPP/23/1/2. Trerobart Primary School, Log Book, 1886-1929. The School, opened on 26 August 1886, initially met in the long room of the Roberttown Hotel; the school buildings were opened on 6 October. Trerobart Boys' School, Ynysybwl, *Jubilee Souvenir, 1886-1936* (Pontypridd: Edwards and Rogers, 1936), p. 8. Copy consulted at the Salisbury Library, Cardiff University.

<sup>7</sup> Glamorgan Archives: EPP/25/1. Cribindu Infants' School, Log Book, 1897-1950.

<sup>8</sup> *Cardiff Times*, 1 August 1885.

<sup>9</sup> For a wider sense of the chapels and nonconformity in Ynysybwl see: Alan Vernon Jones, *Chapels of the Cynon Valley* (Aberdare: Cynon Valley History Society, 2004); E. T. Davies, *Religion in the Industrial Revolution in South Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1962); D. Ben Rees, *Chapels in the Valley: A Study in the Sociology of Welsh Nonconformity* (Upton: Ffynnon Press, 1975).

<sup>10</sup> Richard Burton Archives, Swansea University: Abel Morgan Papers, MNA/PP/81/42, 'Noddfa, Eglwys y Bedyddwyr, Ynysybwl, 1885-1935' (Noddfa Baptist Church, Ynysybwl, 1885-1935).

suggests a fundamental hostility to capitalism, a throwing off of 'social, political and cultural norms' and their replacement with 'a new behavioural pattern' which was grounded on 'class discipline, resourceful quasi-political illegality, direct action resulting often in guerrilla and open warfare, collectivist action of various forms, perverse humour and escapism'. All this combined to create 'a society within a society'.<sup>11</sup>

The revisionist case, put forward by Michael Lieven<sup>12</sup>, and to a lesser extent David Gilbert<sup>13</sup> and Stefan Berger<sup>14</sup>, suggests a somewhat different perspective. For these authors, Lieven in particular, the need is to focus on the 'multi-faceted variety of Valley communities and the extent to which politics reflected local community interests', using comparatives and particular case studies to achieve this understanding.<sup>15</sup> A more moderate revisionism has been proposed by Chris Williams who argues that 'South Wales miners shared in a common trade union and political culture that, if not "alternative", was certainly distinctive in a British context'.<sup>16</sup> As he notes, 'many aspects of miners' culture was not alternative, either in coalfield, Welsh or even British contexts'. From religious affiliation to a love of team sport, the music hall and Hollywood cinema, South Walian miners and their families enjoyed the same pursuits as working-class people in West Yorkshire, the West of Scotland, and London.<sup>17</sup> This reading has proved particularly influential in more recent social and cultural studies of the region, which stress the relative absence of politics in popular life across the twentieth century.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Hywel Francis and David Smith, *The Fed: The South Wales Miners in the Twentieth Century* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1980).

<sup>12</sup> See Michael Lieven, *Senghennydd: The Universal Pit Village, 1890-1930* (Llandysul: Gomer, 1994); idem, 'Senghenydd and the Historiography of the South Wales Coalfield', *Morgannwg: The Journal of Glamorgan History* 43 (1999), 8-35; idem, 'A "New History" of the South Wales Coalfield?', *Llafur: Journal of the Welsh People's History Society* 8, no. 3 (2002), 89-106; idem, 'The South Wales Coalfield Communities: A Case Study of Senghennydd', Unpublished PhD Dissertation, University of Birmingham, 2002; idem, 'A Fractured Working-Class Consciousness? The Case of the Lady Windsor Colliery Lodge, 1921', *Welsh History Review* 21, no. 4 (2003), 729-756.

<sup>13</sup> David Gilbert, *Class, Community and Collective Action: Social Change in Two British Coalfields, 1850-1926* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

<sup>14</sup> Stefan Berger, 'Working-Class Culture and the Labour Movement in the South Wales and the Ruhr Coalfields, 1850-2000: A Comparison', *Llafur: The Journal of the Welsh People's History Society* 8, no. 1 (2001), 5-40.

<sup>15</sup> Lieven, 'Senghenydd and the Historiography of the South Wales Coalfield', p. 10.

<sup>16</sup> Chris Williams, 'The Hope of the British Proletariat: The South Wales Miners, 1910-1947', in Alan Campbell, Nina Fishman and David Howell (eds.), *Miners, Unions and Politics, 1910-47* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1996), p. 141.

<sup>17</sup> Idem, *Capitalism, Community and Conflict: The South Wales Coalfield, 1898-1947* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1998), p. 5.

<sup>18</sup> Martin Johnes, *Soccer and Society: South Wales, 1900-1939* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2002); idem, *Wales since 1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012). For a contrary view see Daryl Leeworthy, 'Partisan Players: Sport, Working-Class Culture and the Labour Movement in South Wales, 1920-1939', *Labor History* (Forthcoming).

Much of the debate on local specificity versus general trends has come to settle on the experiences of just two pit villages: Senghennydd and Ynysybwl. Both lie in the central district of the coalfield, both lie in valleys stretching off from a major urban centre – Caerphilly and Pontypridd respectively –, and both enjoyed a radical reputation in the inter-war years. And yet in the hands of the revisionists Ynysybwl’s character has been considerably (and unduly) moderated: emphasis has been placed on singular events, notably the rush of a union meeting by a group of conservative members in 1921, rather than on wider trends. What is our sense of Ynysybwl if we focus on other singular events? For instance, when in 1913 the Lady Windsor Lodge passed a resolution calling for a general strike in support of the locked out workers of Dublin<sup>19</sup>; when in 1916 they led a ‘milk strike’ against rising prices supported widely in the village<sup>20</sup>; and when they wholeheartedly endorsed T. E. Nicholas’ candidature for the Aberdare parliamentary seat in 1918.<sup>21</sup> Lieven is right to caution historians against making assumptions about the political enthusiasms of those who did not take part in political activity, but there is a danger in reducing all activity to the level of a ‘parish council’. Indeed, despite the overwhelming victory of Charles Stanton at the 1918 General Election, the *Aberdare Leader* made little distinction between the popularity of Stanton’s election meeting held at Trerobart School and Nicholas’ two meetings, both held at the Workmen’s Hall. Stanton and Nicholas, the newspaper reported, ‘addressed well-attended meetings’.<sup>22</sup> Nicholas even went so far as to launch his 1918 campaign in Ynysybwl.

The present article offers a reconsideration of the character of Ynysybwl and argues that, contrary to its recent historiographical image, the village presents a microcosm of the radical trends evident elsewhere in the South Wales Coalfield. Some of this appears, as Lieven urges, as part of the variety of voices that ought to be listened to; but much of it appears rather more in keeping with the characterisation of South Wales and its people present in the work of Dai Smith and Hywel Francis. What follows begins with an examination of the foundations of the Labour movement in Ynysybwl in the years before the Great War. The emphasis lies on the range of organisations that developed but also on the centrality of the South Wales Miners’ Federation and the Co-operative Society, which were in any case intimately linked.<sup>23</sup> Thereafter, the article considers the village’s response to the years of unrest

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<sup>19</sup> *Aberdare Leader*, 13 September 1916; Richard Burton Archives, Swansea University: MNA/NUM/L/47, Lady Windsor Lodge Records, ‘Receipt and Payments Book, January 1905-December 1920’, 8 October 1913.

<sup>20</sup> *Aberdare Leader*, 14 October 1916, 28 October 1916, 25 November 1916;

<sup>21</sup> *Aberdare Leader*, 7 December 1918.

<sup>22</sup> *Aberdare Leader*, 14 December 1918.

<sup>23</sup> For reasons of space, the Ynysybwl Co-operative Society is not dealt with in great detail here. For a thorough analysis see: Alun Burge, ‘The Co-operative Movement in South Wales and its History: “A Task Worthy of the most Sincere Devotion and Application”’, *Welsh History Review* 23, no. 4 (2007), 59-71; idem, *Co-operation: A Post-War Opportunity Missed? A Welsh Perspective* (Merthyr Tydfil: Bevan Foundation, 2012); idem, *William Hazell’s Gleaming Vision: A Co-operative Life in South Wales, 1890-1964* (Talybont: Y Lolfa, 2014). The original history of the society is by William Hazell, *The Gleaming Vision: Being the History of the Ynysybwl Co-operative Society Ltd, 1889-1954* (Pontypridd: Ynysybwl Co-operative Society,

and war between 1910 and 1914 before moving to make more general points about the 'politics of the past', that is the manner in which an autodidact generation set about writing down their own 'alternative' histories of their achievements.<sup>24</sup> At the heart of the story is one family, the Morgans, whose activities link the Co-operative, the Miners' Federation, the anti-war movement, the Communist Party, the Independent Labour Party, the Workers' Education Association, and a host of other working-class organisations.

### **Building the Labour Movement**

Socialism came to Ynysybwl in the 1890s. It was in this decade that the Social Democratic Federation (SDF), the first openly Marxist political movement in Britain, arrived tentatively in South Wales, with pioneering outposts in Barry, Llanelli, and Swansea. The first of these, in Llanelli, had been founded in 1893 but it was the branch at Barry, with its strong connections to the navvies union and the trades council, that proved more successful and gained greater impact in public life – not least the election of several members to Barry School Board.<sup>25</sup> In the second half of the decade, with sufficient roots along the coastal belt, the SDF began to spread into the coalfield first to Pontypridd and then to Ynysybwl in the crisis year of 1898.<sup>26</sup> It drew on fertile ground: three years earlier, the miners had played host to Beatrice and Sidney Webb. They had been invited to talk on the necessity of trade unionism.<sup>27</sup> Whilst the SDF presents a minor episode in the history of Ynysybwl's labour movement and was almost immediately overshadowed by the establishment of the South Wales Miners' Federation and the Lady Windsor Lodge later in the same year, it is notable that the village had the most active branch – aside from Pontypridd – on the South Wales Coalfield during 1898 and 1899 with a reported membership of

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1954). I am grateful to Alun for many hours discussing the singular contribution of Ynysybwl Co-operative Society and William Hazell in particular.

<sup>24</sup> Alun Burge has noted the considerable scale of this kind of history (totalling around fifty books and pamphlets), much of it written in the immediate post-war period. Alun Burge, 'New Era Histories: Local Labour Movement Histories in the 1940s and 1950s' (Unpublished Paper, 2007).

<sup>25</sup> *South Wales Daily Post*, 4 September 1893; *Barry Dock News*, 13 December 1895, 19 November 1898, 28 July 1899. See also Jon Parry, 'Trade Unionists and early Socialism in South Wales, 1890-1908', *Llafur* 4, no. 3 (1986), 43-54.

<sup>26</sup> *Glamorgan Free Press*, 28 May 1898, 5 August 1898, 4 February 1899, 11 February 1899. *Justice*, 11 June 1898. The chairmen of the meetings were Rev. J. C. Lloyd of Tabernacle Chapel and Councillor D. W. Howell, the landlord of the Windsor Hotel.

<sup>27</sup> *Cardiff Times*, 14 September 1895; *Tarian y Gweithiwr*, 12 September 1895. The meeting is mentioned by John E. Morgan, albeit he records as taking place in 1896. John E. Morgan, *A Village Workers' Council: A Short History of the Lady Windsor Lodge South Wales Miners' Federation* (Pontypridd: Celtic Press, 1950), p. 45. Other lecturers present in Ynysybwl in 1898 included Enid Stacey, suffragette and Fabian, who spoke on free trade and socialism. She returned in August 1899 at the invitation of the Lady Windsor Lodge to discuss 'Freedom, Equality and Brotherhood' and 'The Social Teaching of the Lord's Prayer'. *Pontypridd Chronicle*, 29 April 1898; *Glamorgan Free Press*, 14 May 1898, 9 September 1899.

some 150.<sup>28</sup> The branch was guided by its secretary, William Gibby, an ostler at the Lady Windsor who also served as librarian of the workmen's library on Augustus Street, and its chairman, Samuel Lewis.<sup>29</sup>

For most in Ynysybwl, though, the discussion of points raised in SDF lectures, even lectures delivered by charismatic and effective speakers such as John Spargo and John Chatterton, were neither here nor there. Instead, it was the wider effects of the exhausting 'Coal War' of 1898, which began as a point of contestation about the sliding scale (a mechanism which linked miners' wages to the selling price of coal) and quickly became something more radical, that focused their attention on the impact of capitalism.<sup>30</sup> On 1 April 1898, workers of the Lady Windsor Colliery gathered at the Noddfa Chapel on High Street to hear John Williams (known to the men as 'John Check'), checkweigher and secretary of the works committee, to discuss the growing crisis in the coal industry. The Lady Windsor, along with twelve other pits in the Aberdare district, had already fallen idle following the decision of the night hauliers to begin strike action earlier that day.<sup>31</sup> For several weeks the workers refused to sanction the formation of a plenary committee – one of the key demands from the coalowners being that they convene with a representative committee to discuss settlement terms – because of a fear that it would be formed of those moderate leaders who were not committed to the implementation of a minimum wage within the sliding scale.

By the end of April, the effects of the lockout were clear to see: on 25 April the vestry of Noddfa Chapel was turned into a soup kitchen and a committee of local chapel ministers, led by Rev John James, began fundraising work to assist the beleaguered miners and their families.<sup>32</sup> Equally, the committee of Ynysybwl Co-operative Society appealed to the Co-operative Wholesale Society in London for a grant to ensure the continued supply of food to the community.<sup>33</sup> Ten days later, it was reported that around four hundred families were being 'daily relieved' at the

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<sup>28</sup> *Justice*, 24 September 1898. Unfortunately the local press provides no indication of membership, so this is difficult to corroborate. Branches were also reported in Porth, Ystrad Rhondda, Tonyrefail, Mountain Ash, and Abercynon. *Justice*, 30 July 1898, 6 August 1898, 24 September 1898, 1 June 1901, 20 July 1901. For the Abercynon branch see also *Glamorgan Free Press*, 3 September 1898. The wider context of SDF activity in 1898 is given in Kenneth Hilton, 'John Spargo, the Social Democratic Federation and the 1898 South Wales Coal Strike', *Welsh History Review* 16, no. 4 (1993), 542-550.

<sup>29</sup> *Aberdare Leader*, 20 May 1916; *Merthyr Pioneer*, 27 May 1916. On his death in 1916, aged 68, Gibby's obituary recorded that he was both the oldest member the miners' federation lodge and the oldest resident in Ynysybwl. The Workmen's Library had opened in January 1888. *Aberdare Times*, 17 December 1887.

<sup>30</sup> H.A. Clegg, Alan Fox and A.F. Thompson, *A History of British Trade Unions since 1889* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 124; L.J. Williams, 'The Strike of 1898', *Morgannwg* 9 (1965), 61-79.

<sup>31</sup> *Evening Express*, 2 April 1898.

<sup>32</sup> *Glamorgan Free Press*, 30 April 1898.

<sup>33</sup> *Evening Express*, 29 April 1898.

Noddfa soup kitchen, a situation which prevailed for much of the summer.<sup>34</sup> Ynysybwl was not alone in feeling the effects of the lockout, nor alone in having a soup kitchen.<sup>35</sup> Not only did the closure of pits affect miners and their families, but the docks and railways which relied heavily on the coal trade also experienced idle periods of their own. The lives of dockers, navvies, and their families, in Barry, for instance, who had experienced the turbulence of unemployment in the wet winter and a three month lockout of their own in the summer of the previous year, had barely got back to normal before the effects of the miners' lockout were felt.<sup>36</sup>

The lockout ended on 1 September 1898. The news was received in Ynysybwl at 3.45 in the afternoon with considerable dismay that the settlement reached would entail the loss of Mabon's Day, the monthly holiday which had been won a decade earlier, and anger that the 'total loss' that the miners had endured could have been achieved months before.<sup>37</sup> Frustration turned into militancy – the workers had already voted to reject the settlement – and a meeting was called for Monday, 5 September.<sup>38</sup> This took place in the open-air on the hillside opposite Christ Church – it overlooked the Windsor Hotel and the Lady Windsor Colliery. 'The meeting was held in the afternoon', records John E. Morgan, 'and, the weather being fine, and the men not working, there was a large and interested audience'.<sup>39</sup> The South Wales Miners' Federation was formed on 24 October, a move welcomed by a large proportion of the workers, but not all of them.

Indeed, the aftermath of the strike left those non-unionists (i.e. those who did not join the South Wales Miners' Federation) feeling considerably isolated by their erstwhile comrades and for over a year the village teetered on the edge of a further strike to ensure the colliery became a universally unionised workplace. At one meeting held in Trerobart School in September 1899, union members passed a resolution that stated simply 'non-unionists are not to be tolerated'.<sup>40</sup> Then in August 1900, the lodge presented the Ocean Coal Company with their intention to strike.<sup>41</sup> This was delayed in order to 'give more time' to the non-unionists to join up, but eventually on 1 October 1900, the strike began.<sup>42</sup> It concluded that afternoon when the remaining non-unionists joined the Federation.<sup>43</sup> One hundred percent union membership at the Lady Windsor did not last for very long and there were

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<sup>34</sup> *Evening Express*, 9 May 1898, 20 May 1898; *Glamorgan Free Press*, 18 June 1898, 23 July 1898, 3 September 1898. John E. Morgan recalled there being a soup kitchen at the Roberttown Hotel. Morgan, *A Village Workers' Council*, p. 26.

<sup>35</sup> For a critical reading of feeding during the 1898 lockout see: Andy Croll, 'A Famished Coalfield or a "Healthy Strike"? Assessing Evidence of Hunger in the South Wales "Coal War" of 1898', *Welsh History Review* 26, no. 3(2012), 58-80.

<sup>36</sup> *Barry Dock News*, 12 February 1897; *Weekly Mail*, 4 September 1897.

<sup>37</sup> *Evening Express*, 2 September 1898. For more on growth of Mabon's Day see: Andy Croll, 'Mabon's Day: The Rise and Fall of a Lib-Lab Holiday in the South Wales Coalfield, 1888-1898', *Labour History Review* 72, no. 1 (2007), 49-68.

<sup>38</sup> *Glamorgan Free Press*, 3 September 1898.

<sup>39</sup> Morgan, *Village Workers' Council*, p. 1.

<sup>40</sup> *Weekly Mail*, 2 September 1899.

<sup>41</sup> *Weekly Mail*, 4 August 1900.

<sup>42</sup> *Weekly Mail*, 6 October 1900.

<sup>43</sup> *Cardiff Times*, 6 October 1900.

regular notices of intent to strike given by the unionised workers to apply pressure to those that consistently waived. Indeed, an examination of the local press reveals a nearly annual effort to maintain full unionisation. In 1905 and again in 1908, for instance, the pattern established in 1900 prevailed. Full unionisation was achieved, either with a brief stoppage or none at all, only for it to drift away again slowly. In 1906, however, a strike on the issue lasted for several days.<sup>44</sup> The Lady Windsor Lodge was not alone in applying pressure in this fashion, nor was it unique in never being quite able to maintain full membership: nearly seventy stoppages took place between 1898 and 1904 on this issue.<sup>45</sup> The most frequent cause of non-membership was financial difficulty and the struggle to keep up payments. John E. Morgan, the lodge secretary, reflected half a century later that:

Generally, non-payment of dues was not caused by hostility to the organisation, but rather from a faulty disbursement of the family income. That this is true is surely proved by the fact that since the dues have been kept at the colliery office there has been no protest whatever against the union contributions.<sup>46</sup>

There was also a small amount of opposition, particularly from right-wing circles. Conservatism remains an understudied topic in the Welsh context, given the overwhelming dominance of the Liberal Party and subsequently the Labour Party and the wider sympathies of many Welsh historians.<sup>47</sup> Yet, the Conservatives maintained a relatively strong presence in the coalfield, both in urban centres such as Pontypridd and in mining villages including Ynysybwl.<sup>48</sup> Conservative presence in the village relied heavily on local farmers such as Evan Llewellyn of Darwonno Farm or Morgan Davies of Fan Heulog, at least until the establishment of the Constitutional Club in Windsor Place in 1900, and remained relatively slight thereafter – never seriously challenging either the Liberal or the Labour-Lodge committee electoral consensus.<sup>49</sup> This assessment of Conservative strength runs counter to existing historiographical analysis, which draws primarily from the work of Michael Lieven and is itself concerned with a single lodge meeting in 1921 and the background of protest against the political levy. Drawing on the Lodge minutes,

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<sup>44</sup> *Weekly Mail*, 31 May 1902, 7 November 1903, 16 September 1905; *Cardiff Times*, 7 April 1906, 14 April 1906; *Aberdare Leader*, 6 June 1908.

<sup>45</sup> Williams, *Capitalism, Community and Conflict*, p. 41.

<sup>46</sup> Morgan, *Village Workers' Council*, p. 16.

<sup>47</sup> Felix Aabel, 'The Conservatives in Wales, 1880-1935', in Martin Francis and Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska (eds), *Conservatives and British Society, 1880-1990* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1996), 96-110; Kenneth O. Morgan, *Wales in British Politics, 1868-1922* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, [1963] 1991 edn). For the post-Second World War years, Conservatism is increasingly better served. See: Andrew Edwards, *Labour's Crisis: Plaid Cymru, the Conservatives and the Challenge to Labour Dominance in North Wales, 1960-79* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011); Johnes, *Wales since 1939*; and the forthcoming PhD by Sam Blaxland. [www.samblaxlandhistory.wordpress.com](http://www.samblaxlandhistory.wordpress.com)

<sup>48</sup> F. J. Harries, *A History of Conservatism in the Rhondda* (Pontypridd: Glamorgan County Times, 1912).

<sup>49</sup> *Evening Express*, 29 June 1891; *Weekly Mail*, 6 October 1900.



Lieven notes that 'by August 1919, ninety miners were in 'in arrears', five were refusing to transfer from other unions and a further seventeen SWMF members were refusing to pay the political levy'. That made for a total of 112 in a colliery workforce of over 1,200.<sup>50</sup> Not quite the basis of the 'unusually high degree of conflict' that revisionist historians have suggested.<sup>51</sup>

The focus on union matters appears to have resulted in the relative absence of the labour movement in Ynysybwl from electoral matters, at least until after 1910. This was unusual, both in the immediate context of the Pontypridd Board of Guardians, Llanwonno School Board, and Mountain Ash Urban District Council (UDC), and more broadly on the coalfield.<sup>52</sup> As a consequence, the pattern of local government representation in Ynysybwl remained consistent from the initial elections to Mountain Ash UDC in the mid-1890s through to Labour's true electoral breakthrough in 1919: the UDC seats being occupied by Dr Rhys David Morgan, the local GP; David Rogers, a bookseller and newsagent; and David William Howell, a licensed victualler.<sup>53</sup> The election of 1902, which followed Howell's retirement, did bring forward a Labour candidate selected by the members of the Lady Windsor Lodge. The two potential candidates were Silas Williams, checkweigher and lodge committeeman, and Hugh Price, an engineman.<sup>54</sup> The latter emerged victorious winning 460 votes to Williams' 335.<sup>55</sup> With no Liberal or Conservative candidate standing in the election, lodge members considered Price's victory assured until the sudden intervention of another collier, James H. James.<sup>56</sup> Those voting for James did so, in large part, because 'he was prepared to contest the seat and serve the ratepayers at his own expense, whereas the other candidate's expenses would be borne by his fellow-workmen through the local lodge of the South Wales Miners' Federation'.<sup>57</sup> In the event, the intervention of James, encouraged as he was by local businessmen, very nearly scuppered the lodge's electoral ambitions: Price won 292 votes to 256.<sup>58</sup>

Taken at face value, the non-contested council elections and the weak presence of Labour on ward positions in local government does seem to suggest that, as David Gilbert observes, 'Ynysybwl could justifiably be characterized as the Welsh Liberal consensus in microcosm'.<sup>59</sup> Indeed, Cliff Prothero, born in 1898 and later the Labour organiser for Wales, reflected on his childhood in Ynysybwl that 'I am writing about

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<sup>50</sup> Lieven, 'Fractured', p. 738.

<sup>51</sup> Sue Bruley, *The Women and Men of 1926: The General Strike and Miners' Lockout in South Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011), p. 57.

<sup>52</sup> The first Labour member of the School Board from Ynysybwl was David Smith, elected in 1901. *Pontypridd Chronicle*, 9 March 1901.

<sup>53</sup> For most of the Edwardian period, both Rogers and Morgan were elected uncontested. According to John E. Morgan, Rogers was 'considered a member of advanced views and as "not far from the kingdom" (of Labour)'. Morgan, *Village Workers' Council*, p. 47. Upon Rogers' death, his seat was taken by a lodge committeeman, Ernest Frowen.

<sup>54</sup> *Pontypridd Chronicle*, 15 February 1902.

<sup>55</sup> *Pontypridd Chronicle*, 8 March 1902.

<sup>56</sup> *Pontypridd Chronicle*, 15 March 1902.

<sup>57</sup> *Pontypridd Chronicle*, 22 March 1902.

<sup>58</sup> *Pontypridd Chronicle*, 29 March 1902, 12 April 1902.

<sup>59</sup> Gilbert, *Class, Community and Collective Action*, p. 117.

a time when there were very few Socialists in the village and those who were in sympathy with this new doctrine were considered to be very queer people'.<sup>60</sup> And yet, it is clear that the Lodge was increasingly influential within the village and presented an alternative means of securing change to that possible through local government. This is particularly true of the campaign for a recreation ground, which began in 1901 as a resolution tabled in the lodge committee and was conducted by the lodge committee, with popular support.<sup>61</sup> The first motion was put forward by Morgan Walters, a founding member of the Lodge and founder of the Ynysybwl branch of the Independent Labour Party in 1906, encouraging the committee to approach local landowners for land to lay out a park. Although the request was rebuffed, the Lodge were undeterred and tried again a few years later albeit with the same response.<sup>62</sup>

It took a further four years and the intervention of Mountain Ash Urban District Council (UDC) before the matter was settled and it remained an election issue for the local Labour Party branch in their campaigns against the established Liberal councillor, David Rodgers, as late as 1912 – Will May, the Labour candidate, lost by just 36 votes.<sup>63</sup> Ostensibly Ynysybwl's first recreation ground was a municipal facility since it was Mountain Ash UDC that secured the ground, paid the £30 per annum lease, and fenced it in. The impetus, however, came from the Labour movement and without their agitation it is unlikely that the park would have been provided so early. The Lodge organised mass meetings and the organisational prowess of the Lodge steered the community in favour of a park of its own and on its own terms. Had the landlord been willing to deal with 'the men' as well as Liberal councillors, it is certain that a welfare ground run by the Lodge would have been laid out. Writing fifty years later, John E. Morgan reflected:

Hundreds of children of both sexes [...] have grateful memories of countless delightful hours spent in its bushes and by-paths, playing "Indians" etc., and many harassed and tired mothers also treasure memories of many enjoyable evenings in the sun upon its seats, where they had gone without dressing up, with their toddlers playing round on the grass nearby.<sup>64</sup>

Similarly, in the provision of medical services, the lodge took it upon themselves to secure the services of Dr Morgan, whom they retained through a levy until his retirement in 1923; for hospital services the lodge paid an annual levy of one shilling

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<sup>60</sup> Cliff Prothero, *Recount* (Ormskirk: G.W. & A. Hesketh, 1982), p. 1.

<sup>61</sup> Newspaper reports indicate that a letter was sent to Lord Windsor, the landowner, by community representatives in 1898, although it is not clear who they were. Given later initiatives it seems reasonable to suggest the work committee at the colliery, of which Morgan Walters was a member. *Glamorgan Free Press*, 21 May 1898.

<sup>62</sup> Richard Burton Archives, Swansea University: Lady Windsor Lodge, *Minutes of Meetings*, 27 November 1903-28 April 1907, 7 November 1906, 5 December 1906, 2 January 1907; Morgan, *Village Workers' Council*, p. 66.

<sup>63</sup> Mountain Ash Urban District Council, *Minutes of Council*, April 1910-September 1910, 12 July 1910; *Rhondda Socialist*, 11 April 1912.

<sup>64</sup> Morgan, *Village Workers' Council*, p. 66.

per member to Cardiff Infirmary and, in addition, to Pontypridd Cottage Hospital at a rate of 1d per week from 1911.<sup>65</sup> By the time of the Great War, the lodge were also paying funds to Bristol Eye Hospital.<sup>66</sup> And, as a last example of the lodge's significant strength, in 1916 the committee managed to wrest control of the workmen's hall from the control of the Ocean Coal Company.<sup>67</sup> By the time checkweighers Richard Woosnam and Ellis Lewis were (respectively) elected as Labour Party members of Mountain Ash UDC and Pontypridd Board of Guardians in 1919, nearly every major institution in the community was run through the lodge, the workmen's hall, the Co-operative Society or extensions of the three.<sup>68</sup> The following year Will R. John, the lodge's Labour candidate, was elected unopposed.

### **Ynysybwl and the Great War**

The response of Ynysybwl to the outbreak of the Great War has typically been regarded as much like that in other villages of the South Wales Coalfield, at least until the introduction of conscription in 1916. As Chris Williams has pointed out, 'there was widespread initial enthusiasm for soldiering amongst miners'.<sup>69</sup> On the day that war was declared, 4 August 1914, many villagers were enjoying the sunshine at Barry Island – this was, after all, the miners' annual holiday. In the weeks that followed a number of Ynysybwl societies, including the rugby club, the Co-operative Society, and the St John Ambulance brigade, reported members having joined up.<sup>70</sup> Nevertheless, there appears not to have been a great surge of enthusiasm. When interviewed as part of the South Wales Coalfield Project, Goronwy Jones, later lodge chairman and member of the Communist Party, recalled that:

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 57-62; for a wider sense of the (not uncontroversial) role of charitable payments in the support of hospitals see: Neil Evans, 'The First Charity in Wales: Cardiff Infirmary and South Wales Society, 1837-1914', *Welsh History Review* 9, no. 3 (1979), 319-346; Steven Thompson, 'Hospital Provision, Charity and Public Responsibility in Edwardian Pontypridd', *Llafur: Journal of the Welsh People's History Society* 8, no. 3 (2002), 53-65; idem, 'To Relieve the Sufferings of Humanity, Irrespective of Party, Politics or Creed: Conflict, Consensus and Voluntary Hospital Provision in Edwardian South Wales', *Social History of Medicine* 16, no. 2 (2003), 247-262. Similar patterns have been revealed in the north of England by Barry Doyle. See: *The Politics of Hospital Provision in Early Twentieth Century Britain* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2014).

<sup>66</sup> *Western Daily Press*, 1 September 1917, 24 May 1919.

<sup>67</sup> *Merthyr Pioneer*, 29 July 1916, 2 September 1916. The officers consisted of John E. Morgan (Chair), William Hazell (Vice-Chairman), Will R. John (Secretary), and Fred J. Priday (Treasurer); members of the committee included Richard Woosnam and Abel Morgan (brother of John E. Morgan). Richard Burton Archives, Swansea University: Abel Morgan Papers, MNA/PP/81/11, 'Assignment of Lease of Lady Windsor Workmen's Library and Institute'; Richard Burton Archives, Swansea University: Goronwy R. Jones Papers, MNA/PP/61/1, 'Assignment of Lands at Ynysybwl, 17 August 1917'.

<sup>68</sup> *Aberdare Leader*, 22 March 1919.

<sup>69</sup> Williams, *Capitalism, Community and Conflict*, p. 20.

<sup>70</sup> *Aberdare Leader*, 19 September 1914, 3 October 1914, 10 October 1914, 11 March 1916.

There was nothing against the war no, only with certain individuals, Johnny Morgan and a few of those, Johnny Morgan's brother. But you know what it was, the old flag, the old Union Jack, and the youngsters were proud to march behind the flag. [Except] well, I don't think there was a great rush. Of course, conscription came in, you see, in 1916.<sup>71</sup>

Indeed, it was conscription that transformed attitudes to the war and radicalised still further the group of committeemen running the Lady Windsor Lodge.<sup>72</sup>

The focus of this radicalisation was the fate of Bethuel William Morgan, the twenty-two year-old brother of John E. Morgan, the lodge secretary. The younger Morgan had secured a place to begin teacher training at Bangor Normal College in the autumn of 1914 following three years working as an uncertified teacher at Carnetown Mixed School in Abercynon. He remained at Bangor until December 1915, despite being ostracised by many of his fellow students for refusing to attest – that is, to join the Officers Training Corps –, and did not return until October 1919.<sup>73</sup> He graduated the following year.<sup>74</sup> Living at home in Ynysybwl and a single man in his mid-twenties, Morgan was certain to be called up following the implementation of the Military Service Act in March 1916. When his papers arrived, he refused to join up and instead appealed his case to the district tribunal in Mountain Ash declaring that 'war was contrary to Christianity and he would obey the dictates of his conscience and refuse all military orders'.<sup>75</sup> At the tribunal hearing, Morgan claimed absolute exemption on the grounds 'that he believed in the sanctity of human life'; he was subjected to torrents of horror stories from the tribunal bench about German atrocities in order to test the strength of his conviction. 'You are trying to save your skin', barked one member, to which Morgan replied 'I have a soul, if that man hasn't'. His appeal for exemption was denied.<sup>76</sup> After appeal to the County Tribunal hearing in Pontypridd, at which he was offered (and refused) non-combatant status, Morgan was sent to Cardiff Barracks.

There he refused to get changed into his military uniform and submit to medical examination, in one last attempt at avoiding military service.<sup>77</sup> Alongside fellow conscientious objectors Gwilym Smith (Ynysybwl) and Emrys Hughes (Abercynon), with whom he had been closely linked since the Mountain Ash tribunal, Morgan was subjected to abuse from the soldiers at Cardiff Barracks with threats such as

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<sup>71</sup> South Wales Miners' Library, Swansea University: AUD/314, 'Interview of Goronwy R. Jones, 1972'.

<sup>72</sup> For a wider sense of anti-war sentiment in Wales see: Aled Eirug, 'Agweddu ar y Gwrthwynebiad i'r Rhyfel Byd Cyntaf yng Nghymru' (Aspects of the Opposition to the First World War in Wales), *Llafur: Journal of Welsh Labour History* 4, no. 4 (1987), 58-68.

<sup>73</sup> *Merthyr Pioneer*, 1 April 1916.

<sup>74</sup> This information draws on Bethuel William Morgan's college record, which is contained amongst the papers of Bangor Normal College held at Bangor University Archives and Special Collections. I am grateful to Einion Thomas, the archivist at Bangor University, for providing me with a copy.

<sup>75</sup> *Merthyr Pioneer*, 29 April 1916.

<sup>76</sup> *Merthyr Pioneer*, 11 March 1916.

<sup>77</sup> *Merthyr Pioneer*, 29 April 1916; *Aberdare Leader*, 20 May 1916.

'before God, if there were no-one else present I would tear you limb from limb' or 'you will have hell at the depot, and be fed on bread and water', or 'I hope you will be shot', or, finally, 'you're bloody well in the Army now and will have to say "Sir", meted out.<sup>78</sup> Refusal to obey orders resulted in the three men being court martialled at the end of May, the first court martial to be held in Wales during the Great War. This provided them with a further public platform to resist war service and to give a full account of the abuse that they had received. 'The whole atmosphere of the recruiting office', Morgan insisted, 'was one of bullying and cowardice'.<sup>79</sup> The military court, of course, was having none of their defence and the imposition of harsh sentences was inevitable. Bethuel Morgan and Gwilym Smith were sentenced to two years' hard labour, with a remission of eighteen months; Emrys Hughes faced two years with a remission of fifteen months - to add to the harshness of the sentence, it was promulgated at Cardiff Barracks in front of 300 soldiers, 90% of whom had already seen active service.<sup>80</sup>

The group were transferred from Cardiff Barracks to Devizes Military Prison on 31 May 1916, a Wednesday, having been seconded to the Wiltshire Regiment. They were escorted by seven armed soldiers and handcuffed together in pairs; the serving soldiers had to carry the prisoners' kit since they themselves refused to touch it. Emrys Hughes' sister, Agnes, later wrote 'how ludicrous it seems that so many soldiers were required to accompany five Conscientious Objects, well handcuffed, on a railway journey'.<sup>81</sup> She travelled to Devizes a week later to visit her brother and reflected that:

After much pleading, I was allowed special permission to see my brother. I could easily see by change in his physical condition that all stories we hear of Conscientious Objectors are not exaggerated. He was looking haggard and thin - the inevitable results of living not on the luxuries enjoyed by the military officers, but for the most part on a bread and water diet, and not much of that. He said that they had all been treated in a similar manner, and had received a very bad time. Khaki had been forced on him six times - after this forcing his hands had been handcuffed to prevent him from removing it.

Shortly after Emrys Hughes, Bethuel William Morgan, and Gwilym Smith, all went on hunger strike.<sup>82</sup>

Hunger strike and continued refusal to accept military orders resulted in the Abercynon five being court martialled for a second time on 11 July, this time with a

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<sup>78</sup> *Llais Llafur*, 20 May 1916. Emrys Hughes discusses his case in his unpublished autobiography which is held at the National Library of Scotland. A copy (consulted by the present author) is held on microfilm at the Glamorgan Archives. The case is also the subject of an article by Anthony Mor O'Brien, "'Concise": Emrys Hughes and the First World War', *Welsh History Review* 13, no. 3 (1987), 328-352.

<sup>79</sup> *Merthyr Pioneer*, 20 May 1916.

<sup>80</sup> *Abergavenny Chronicle*, 26 May 1916; *Aberdare Leader*, 27 May 1916.

<sup>81</sup> *Merthyr Pioneer*, 17 June 1916.

<sup>82</sup> *Merthyr Pioneer*, 1 July 1916.

Major Hawkes of the Wiltshire Regiment presiding.<sup>83</sup> One by one, they reiterated their stance stated at the first tribunal hearing. Percy Kendell: 'I am a Christian and a Socialist, and believe in the brotherhood of man and the sanctity of human life'; Idwall Williams stated that he, too, was a socialist and Emrys Hughes that he was a socialist and a pacifist. And Bethuel Morgan gave this impassioned speech which merits quoting in full:

I am guilty of the facts, but do not admit that I am a soldier. I am a follower of Jesus Christ, and as such I am a Conscientious Objector to all war and to all kinds of military service. Christ was and is a Prince of Peace and I, like my Master, am an advocate for Peace. I contend that all war influences thoughts [that] are in direct conflict with those of a true Christian. I was nurtured on a religious hearth, and from my youth I have been susceptible to religious impressions. From the age of 12 years, I have been a member of the Baptist Denomination of the Christian faith. At all times I have been unswerving in my sincerity to the principles of Christ. The omnipotent alone knows my sincerity in my convictions and the struggles that I have made to remain loyal to Christ's teachings.

I have suffered and sacrificed in the past. During my first year at the Normal College of Bangor I refused to join the Territorial Corps. During the second year I refused to join the Officers' Training Corps. I have also suffered confinement for 3 months and, if needs be, I am prepared to sacrifice my life, in order to prove to the Government, and to my nation, my loyalty to Christ.<sup>84</sup>

Given a further sentence of 21 months hard labour, commuted to 8 months hard labour, the five men were removed to Somerset County Gaol at Shepton Mallet, and into the hands of the civilian authorities.<sup>85</sup> After serving a short period of time at Shepton Mallet, the men were transferred 'in chains' to Cardiff Gaol where they remained until 3 October 1916. Aside from Emrys Hughes, who was considered the more dangerous of the group and remained in prison, they were then released onto the Home Office Scheme and sent to Weston-Super-Mare, where they carried out the hard labour they had been sentenced to. This took place on Milton Hill, a little outside the town centre, where the men were engaged in work for the Home-Grown Timber Committee chopping down trees. Conditions in Weston were considerably better than those the men had previously been used to, and they were able to form a democratically-elected committee to organise provisions and form a drama society to entertain themselves.<sup>86</sup> At the end of the war, Bethuel went back to Bangor to complete his teacher training and, upon graduating, found work at Abercynon Boys' School. He died, at the young age of thirty-three, in 1925, the effects of his time spent incarcerated during the war having taken an incalculable toll.

The case of Bethuel Morgan was not, at any stage, divorced from the wider politics of an increasingly radical South Wales, particularly in Ynysybwll. His brothers, John E. Morgan and Abel Morgan, were lodge officials, officials for the

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<sup>83</sup> *Western Daily Press*, 12 July 1916.

<sup>84</sup> *Merthyr Pioneer*, 22 July 1916.

<sup>85</sup> *Merthyr Pioneer*, 29 July 1916.

<sup>86</sup> *Merthyr Pioneer*, 21 October 1916.

Ynysybwl Co-operative society, and active in the Workers' Educational Association. It is not surprising, therefore, that, during the months of protests that took place against the treatment of Bethuel and his comrades, it was the Lady Windsor Lodge, which led the way. The workmen at the colliery even passed a unanimous resolution against the Military Service Act.<sup>87</sup> At the meeting when the resolution was passed, those present heard from John Thomas, a school teacher from Aberdare, the WEA district secretary for South Wales, and local tutor for a WEA class in Ynysybwl on industrial history. He too was a conscientious objector and had been granted exemption from military service by the local tribunal, the condition being to take up a full-time teaching post at Hirwaun Boys' School and stop agitating against conscription. But addressing meetings such as the one in Ynysybwl resulted in his being ordered to take up work through the Home Office Scheme: he went to work as a labourer at Singleton Farm, the future site of Swansea University.<sup>88</sup>

### **The Politics of the Past**

By 1920, then, the activities of the Lodge and the wider labour movement in Ynysybwl had eclipsed all of its rivals. The committee had wrested control of the Workmen's Hall from the Ocean Coal Company and begun running a successful cinema which redirected profits for workers' activities. It had spoken out against conscription and in support of conscientious objectors. It had come to dominate the electoral representation of Ynysybwl, and by the late-1920s would occupy every elected position for the ward. This 'hegemony' has been noted by historians, but also challenged. In his article on Ynysybwl's 'fractured' working-class consciousness, for instance, Lieven chastises David Gilbert for failing 'to make a break with established conclusions about the hegemonic forces within south Wales valley communities'. And yet, that's exactly what had developed in Ynysybwl by the 1920s. Lieven relies on the relative isolation of Ynysybwl to emphasise its difference, but with a regular train service (which Lieven notes), a brake service, and later buses from Pontypridd, this was a community well-linked to the outside world.<sup>89</sup> Edith Davies, born in 1907, writes of one trip on the horse-drawn brake to Pontypridd that 'it seemed no time at all before we were set down on the cobbled street of Market Square, Pontypridd, a sport handy for shopping at Pontypridd Market'.<sup>90</sup> Similarly, Cliff Prothero wrote of 'many people [who] would take an afternoon out for shopping or for an evening's entertainment' by travelling on the train to Pontypridd. In neither of these autobiographical works, written by those who grew up in Ynysybwl, is 'isolation' a factor in their experience.<sup>91</sup>

Our knowledge and understanding of Ynysybwl's history to the mid-1950s is shaped by three works, one written in the nineteenth century, the others written in

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<sup>87</sup> *Merthyr Pioneer*, 13 May 1916, 17 June 1916, 8 July 1916; *Aberdare Leader*, 20 May 1916, 1 July 1916.

<sup>88</sup> This passage draws on Neath WEA Branch, *Dr John Thomas: Pioneer in Adult Education* (Neath, 1971). Copy consulted at South Wales Miners' Library.

<sup>89</sup> Lieven, 'A Fractured Working-Class Consciousness', p.731.

<sup>90</sup> Edith S. Davies, *The Innocent Years: The Story of My Childhood in Ynysybwl* (Creigiau: T. Lewis, 1995), p. 23.

<sup>91</sup> Prothero, *Recount*, p.2.

the 1940s and early 1950s by two close friends and veterans of the labour struggles of the previous fifty years. *Hanes Plwyf Llanwonno* was written by the Rev. William Thomas (known by his bardic name, Glanffrwd) and published in serial form in the pages of *Tarian y Gweithiwr* (The Worker's Shield) in 1887. A translation of the book appeared in 1950, with much of the linguistic knowledge of nineteenth century Glamorgan lost to everyday use.<sup>92</sup> Thomas was born in 1843 in the then rural hamlet of Ynysybwl, and his work on his growing up place and the parish that surrounded it was shaped by that rural experience and a brief period underground in the Rhondda and at the Darren Ddu level in Ynysybwl.<sup>93</sup> His politics were Liberal and in 1889 he stood for election as a Liberal in the St Asaph ward of Flintshire County Council. The local press noted of him that 'he is not afraid of coming out to advocate the claims of Liberalism, and in the midst of the enemy to raise aloft its standard, and with great courage and boldness, through thick and thin, he sticks to his colours. [...] He believes in man, and not in a privileged class'.<sup>94</sup>

Glanffrwd's history encompasses a love of landscape, people, and the Welsh language. It was all framed by a deep passion for his native county of Glamorgan. As he wrote, 'Glamorgan, in many respects, is the most important of the Welsh counties. In terms of wealth, population, antiquity, and historic associations, it is the foremost of the twelve'.<sup>95</sup> For the most part, however, the histories published by Glanffrwd in literary journals and newspapers in the second half of the nineteenth century dealt almost entirely with medieval history or the passing of a more recent rural way of life and the creeping Anglicisation associated with it.<sup>96</sup> As a result, a sense of loss pervades his work, even as he celebrated facets of the past. Consider this interview with a journalist for the *Denbigh Herald* in 1888. It expresses very clearly Glanffrwd's medievalism and his sense that something had been lost from the Welsh people. 'The old people have been described by one of their poets gentle as lambs in their friendship, but in their animosities fierce as bulls', he said, 'there were giants in those days, in strength and stature, and their attention had been turned for ages towards the development of physical power and strength'.<sup>97</sup>

John E. Morgan's *A Village Workers' Council* and William Hazell's *The Gleaming Vision* are rather different in tone and purpose to Glanffrwd's work. For them the need was not to rescue a fading past but to pen a testament to the struggle that had been lived through by men of their generation, to ensure that future generations

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<sup>92</sup> William Thomas (trans. Thomas Evans), *Glanffrwd's History of Llanwynno* (Merthyr Tydfil: H. W. Southey, 1950). A reissue of the Welsh-language original appeared in the same year. Glanffrwd, *Llanwynno* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1950).

<sup>93</sup> *Cardiff Times*, 4 October 1890.

<sup>94</sup> *Denbighshire Free Press*, 19 January 1889. He was elected with a majority of 56. *Denbigh Herald*, 25 January 1889.

<sup>95</sup> Glanffrwd, 'Land, People, Language, and Customs of Glamorgan', *Y Geninen* 2, no. 1 (1884), p. 22. The original, in Welsh, reads: 'Morganwg, ar lawer ystyr, yw y bwysicaf o holl siroedd Cymru. O ran cyfoeth, poblogaeth, hynafiaeth, a chysylltiadau hanesyddol, hi ydyw y benaf a'r flaenaf o'r deuddeg sir'. My translation.

<sup>96</sup> Glanffrwd, 'Land, People, Language, and Customs of Glamorgan: Part II', *Y Geninen* 3, no. 1 (1885), 14-20; idem, 'Land, People, Language, and Customs of Glamorgan: Part III', *Y Geninen* 7, no. 4 (1889), 206-209.

<sup>97</sup> *Denbigh Herald*, 4 May 1888.



understood it and could learn from it. In this respect, these 'new era' histories are heroic texts, rather than pessimistic ones. They place a similar emphasis on people and custom, but are firmly located in a labour tradition. As Dai Smith observes, their intent was 'to stay rooted in a specific world and still be able to look outwards from it'.<sup>98</sup> In recent years such 'heroic' texts and the 'mythology' that they present have come under considerable scrutiny from historians engaging with the 'new political history' and its emphasis on language. As Jon Lawrence writes, 'this work has provided a valuable corrective to an older historiographical tradition which saw Labour as an intrinsically national, centralised and 'statist' party – in short, as the epitome of 'modern' class-based politics'.<sup>99</sup> In this reading, 'mythology' refers not to 'untruths, but rather shared stories about the party's origins and development which, regardless of their veracity, take on a life of their own within the collective identity and historical consciousness of party activists'.<sup>100</sup> Such stories helped to ground the otherwise disparate and localised elements of the Labour movement and turn it into a political force.

A critical reading of *A Village Workers' Council* would place it into precisely this mould. It certainly has all the attributes, and the self-confessed purpose. It was, after all:

prepared at the wish and direction of the present Committee in the hope that the present generation of miners and the generation to come may have some idea of the conditions that prevailed before the Federation, as such, was formed, and also to show what manner of men they were who brought about the change.<sup>101</sup>

But such critical readings rely, as Lawrence admits, on a particular reading of Labour's relationship with the communities it sought to serve; namely, that 'Labour politics had often been constructed on only the shakiest bases within local communities'.<sup>102</sup> In Ynysybwl that was not the case.

Ynysybwl provides, as John E. Morgan demonstrates, a case study not of a fractured working-class consciousness, but of the coming together of a community to transform the world around them: a transformation that took place broadly on their own terms. That the task of guiding this transformation should have fallen to a small number of committeemen, members of the Lady Windsor Lodge, the Ynysybwl Co-operative Society, the Labour Party, and the Workmen's Hall, is not surprising in a community that developed because of coal and lived symbiotically with the fortunes of the colliery. This does not mean that there were not debates about what sort of gleaming vision there should be: as Alun Burge's work on William Hazell shows

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<sup>98</sup> David Smith, 'Introduction', in idem (ed), *A People and A Proletariat: Essays in the History of Wales, 1780-1980* (London: Pluto, 1980), p. 9.

<sup>99</sup> Jon Lawrence, *Speaking for the People: Party, Language and Popular Politics in England, 1867-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 227. For a useful summary of the 'New Political History' see Steven Fielding, 'Looking for the "New Political History"', *Journal of Contemporary History* 42, no. 3 (2007), 515-524.

<sup>100</sup> Lawrence, *Speaking*, p. 257.

<sup>101</sup> Morgan, *Village Workers' Council*, iv.

<sup>102</sup> Lawrence, *Speaking*, p. 258.

very clearly, the form that the post-war welfare state took was not universally welcomed by labour activists who believed in a co-operative society. John E. Morgan and the Lodge Chairman, Goronwy Jones, were ejected from the Labour Party in 1941 for joining the People's Vigilance Committee (PVC); and John's son, Morien, 'readily' joined the Communist Party in 1936 because of his feelings about the Spanish Civil War and eventually served in Spain.<sup>103</sup> But, for their disagreements on methods, they all shared common ground and a belief in a better, fairer and more equal society. John's brother, Abel, after all, did not join the PVC and remained a Labour councillor.

### Conclusion

John E. Morgan died in 1960, ten years after completing his history of the Lady Windsor Lodge. The local newspaper, the *Pontypridd Observer*, carried a lengthy obituary remarking that 'all his adult life was devoted to the welfare of mineworkers [...] he was a well-known figure who had helped and encouraged countless fellow workers during his long and useful life'.<sup>104</sup> The list of committees on which Morgan had sat, from the Lady Windsor Lodge, to the Board of Governors of Cardiff University, to the local district of the Good Templars temperance organisation, served, in the journalist's view, to illustrate the passing not merely of an old miner but a community leader; a village elder, if you will. It is, in the absence of the same kind of leadership today, easy to see this as Romanticised and even a stereotyped view of the past. That should not blind us to the very real achievements of a generation who sought an answer to the question of where power lay in their local community, took control of it, and restructured society from within. The same process took place in Maerdy, in Cilfynydd, in Blaengarw, in Glynneath, and elsewhere right across the coalfield. As Dai Smith records of Maerdy:

A red village, then, in which nonetheless there were religious groups from Baptists to spiritualists, film shows and dances, so-called 'Communist' soccer teams and 'red' boy scouts. The society that was being born within the old one was, so long as it lived, in the image of the parent body, connected to its reality despite striving to give a new shape.<sup>105</sup>

In so doing, frontier communities, those villages of workers housed in regimented lines of terraces, became workers' villages. The South Wales of today still lives in their shadow.

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<sup>103</sup> Richard Burton Archives, Swansea University: MNA/PP/61/5, Goronwy Jones Papers, 'Letters relating to the People's Vigilance Movement, 1941'; National Library of Wales: A1994/81/1, Pontypridd Miners' Agents' Papers, 'Goronwy R. Jones Correspondence, 1941-1969'; Morgan, *Village Workers' Council*, p. 47; Imperial War Museum, London: Accession 9856, 'Interview with Morien Waldo Parry Morgan'. This is available online: <http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80009639>

<sup>104</sup> *Pontypridd Observer*, 12 March 1960.

<sup>105</sup> David Smith, 'Wales through the Looking Glass', in idem (ed.), *A People and a Proletariat*, p.237.