A Red × here means that if we don't hear from you (with enclosure) we shall cut off your supply. ☐

THE PLEBS MAGAZINE

"I can promise to be candid but not impartial."

Vol. X. August, 1918. No. 7

CONTENTS

The Class-Struggle in South Wales

III.

THE MAKING OF MERTHYR.

In the preceding article we endeavoured to convey some adequate idea of the conditions which determined the social and religious life of the Welsh proletariat at the period of its migration from the land to the settlements around the forges and the mines. This movement eastwards, like the Wandering of the Barbarians, was by no means a systematic invasion or an immigration compressed into a few years. It extended over several generations and in the Rhondda and Cymore Valleys it was continuing until quite recently. But the environment into which these late arrivals have come bears no comparison with that which received and grew up with the original proletariat of Merthyr and the Monmouthshire Valleys. The condition of those primitive industrial settlements of the late 18th and early 19th Centuries was that of some backwoods lumber-camp without its romance and with a squalor all its own. It savoured somewhat of the serfdom of the Middle Ages, so utter was the dependence and degradation of the workers and so brutal the cynicism of the masters.

The Commissioners inquiring into the condition of Education in Wales in 1847 ask us to "suppose some 5,000 or 6,000 people collected at the top of a valley, forming a *cul de sac* and nearly cut off from the rest of the world," and tell us that such was the location of the mining villages along the iron outcrop which crosses the head of the seven valleys of the Cynon, Taff, Rhymney, Sirhowy, Ebbw, Tillery, and Afon. Here "the works have increased faster than adequate accommodation could be provided. The houses are all over-crowded. . . . The average of inhabitants is said to be nearly twelve to each house." When the furnaces were built and the mineral workings opened up there were only a few cottages scattered here and there about the desolate valleys. The capitalists had to provide accommodation and did so grudging the outlay and limiting the expenditure to the barest possible needs. The King's Writ ran to these places, but it had to run on its own legs, unless the landlord or the capitalist had occasion to require its enforcement. There was no constabulary, and there were no mining or factory inspectors, and practically no laws or regulations, whilst such as there were had none but interested parties to administer them.

The spiritual provision made for the area dated from the pre-industrial period, and was utterly inadequate to meet the new conditions. *The Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian*, December 23rd, 1848, in commenting on the fewness of the Chartist outbreaks in Merthyr, remarked :—

> Merthyr contains a large proportion of places of voluntary worship, set up from no love of dissent, but because the established Church then cared nothing for the people.

The newspaper thus quoted was Conservative and Anglican, and most virulently reactionary in tone. The Commissioners reported that the village of Rhymney was five miles distant from the parish church, but there the compnay had set aside a site for a place of worship. It seems also to have promoted a brewery in the following year. Not alone the *Merthyr Guardian*, but a doctor at Pontypool loudly lamented the lack of church-seating accommodation and of religious instruction. "A long experience," he wrote, "has convinced me of the more peaceful and submissive character of the lower orders who are members of the Church of England over those of other sects."—(Report, p. 295.)

The South Wales weekly papers in 1848 were much concerned about the lack of education and the Reports of 1847 were hotly canvassed. The Commissioners had been sent down following upon Chartist agitation, labour unrest and turnpike outrages which filled much of the time between 1839 and 1844 and their remedy, Plebeians will be interested to learn, was education. The Anglicans wanted Anglican training, some of the non-conformists wanted non-secterian teaching, the employers were building and providing schools in the new mining towns and villages, and the *Merthyr*

Guardian reprinted with approval an article from the *Liverpool Courier* on "Chartism and Education," in which these excellent sentiments find expression :—

> Had the State and the superior classes done their duty towards the uninstructed millions, we should never have heard of Chartism except as the abstract proposition of some theorist. . . . Thank God there is and has been for a long time past a movement among the most benevolent and enlightened of the aristocracy, aided by clergy and a large portion of the middle classes who are imbued with the highest motives of statesmanship for the purpose of filling the awful void thus left. . . . Those who feared for their property on the 10th of April may rest assured that education is the best police" (*Merthyr Guardian*, July 29th, 1848).

It was customary to thank not only God but Lady Guest for the benevolences that befell the workers of Dowlais. But unfortunately for the lick-spittles of South Wales scholarship, it is a historic fact that Sir John Guest and his lady did not provide schools until *after* the Chartist outbreak in the hills in 1839.

> The means of education for the labouring classes in the large village of Dowlais, with a population of about 12,000, were, in the autumn 1839, very meagre and unsatisfactory. An important improvement made in the spring of 1844" (*Report on Education for Brecon and Monmouth*, p. 34).

The "benevolent efforts" of Lady Guest were described as too recent to "report their success or prophsey their result." When one recalls that the first Chartist outbreak was in the autumn of 1839 and the second in August, 1842, whilst there were disorders at Aberdare and in the Rhymney in 1843, the said "benevolent efforts" of the philanthropic Lady Charlotte and the most public-spirited Sir John Josiah shine with a lustre slightly less luminous than in the customary panegyrics of the glorious, gracious and generous alliance of the aristocrat Bertie and the bourgeois Guest. At Cyfarthfa, Plymouth and Penydarran, no schools were provided, but at Court-y-bella, Sirhowy and Tredegar—to name a number—schools were built, also *after* 1839. The Education Commissioner declared that two-thirds of the expenses of Monmouthshire schools were borne by the workers, that they had to submit to deductions from their wages to pay for instruction and for upkeep, that no account was rendered them, that they had no control, and that there was nothing to prevent the exactions becoming "a source of clandestine profit" to the firms. The Guests and their contemporaries completely neglected education till they became convinced of its urgency as a police measure, put off the cost as much as possible on to the workers, monopolised the control and the credit of fictitious good deeds, paraded their piety for electioneering purposes, boasted that by good business they had "no diminution in the make of iron," and distinguished themselves as scandalous rack-renters and ruthless union-smashers. Now, we will look a little closer at Merthyr and Dowlais in 1844, when they had a popula-

tion of 40,000 persons a number which had increased by more than 15,000 in ten years. The revolution in the methods of production which had followed upon the adoption of Cort's process for puddling iron, of Boulton and Watts' steam engine for draining pits and driving works machinery, and of canals and tramways for transporting materials had completely altered the social life of Glamorgan and Monmouthshire, and rendered obsolete the local government surviving from the 17th and 18th Centuries. The Education Report remarked :—

> The gigantic character of these works is a feature not to be passed over. It has rendered the ancient divisions of the country a dead letter. The basis of the old parochial *terrier* was the manor ; the basis of the new one is the works (*Report on Glamorgan*, pp. 12, 13.)

Everywhere the new settlements began as mining villages, consisting of rows and clusters of houses erected, in the first instance, by the companies around their works and built without " the slightest attention to comfort, health, or decency, or any other consideration than that of realizing the largest amount of rent from the smallest amount of outlay." At most places there was but one works, or at most two, and neither was very large, but at Merthyr and Dowlais there were four proprietors and four establishments and about these there spring up four industrial villages to house the employes at Dowlais, Cyfarthfa, Penydarran, and Plymouth.

" Merthyr," said the *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian*, December 16th, 1848, " unfortunately is an appendage to no former nucleus, or rather to one, the institutions of which were wholly inadequate to regulate a large population ; ffty years ago Merthyr was an unconsiderable place. By the older inhabitants it is still called " the village," and its petty affairs were managed, or mismanaged, it mattered little which, by the neighbouring Welsh justice and a parish vestry."

It was, in fact, five villages, one manorial, and four others sheerly and anarchically industrial, and these it was which, running together into a straggling town, became the Merthyr Tydfil of the 19th Century.

It is impossible to reproduce some of the details in Sir H. T. de la Beche's *Report on the Sanitary Condition of Merthyr Tydfil*, printed as an appendix to the *Second Report of Inqiry into State of Large Towns and Populous Districts*, issued in 1845. Thev are too strong meat even for our candid pages. We will give a few extracts, however :—" Some parts of the town are complete networks of filth, emitting noxious exhalations. . . . During the rapid increase of this town no attention seems to have been paid to the drainage, and the streets and houses have been built at random, as it suited the views of those who speculated in them " (p. 143). The chairman of the Guardians gave evidence that " (The liquid refuse is) thrown into the water-courses " ; of the

deposit of refuse in the beds of the rivers Taff and Morlais; and after a long drought the stench is almost intolerable in many places." A local lawyer said: "There are no public sewers." The landlord of the Bush Inn informed Sir H. Becke that "the streets are uneven, and retain stagnant waters, as also refuse thrown out of the houses. Many cellars or kitchens are used for slaughtering cattle." A local doctor stated that "no attention has been paid to drainage, except for a few yards, nearly opposite the Church" (p. 144). "Such a thing as a house-drain was never heard of here," and as for dustbins, the answer he gave was "not known here" (p. 144). Cottages, with one room up and one down, 8 ft. by 10 ft., were not uncommon, and for these monthly rents ranged from 6/- in Merthyr to 8/- in Dowlais under the benevolent rule of Lady Charlotte and Sir John Josiah. We learn that wages ranged in 1844 from 17/- a week for colliers to 12/- a week for labourers and 20/- for puddlers and firemen.

Sometimes, according to the *Merthyr Guardian*, persons were lying sixteen in a room, "sleeping there indiscriminately." Water was brought from springs on the mountain side, or lifted from the river, and we are mercilessly told by the Health Commissioner that whilst the Dowlais Company had surveyed for a water supply to obviate their tenants having to go a mile for water in summer they had done no more towards providing it.

Such was the condition of the working class and such the town where the Crawshays, the Guests, and the Thompsons were piling up immense fortunes and laying firm and broad the foundations of family pride and position. As we showed last month, there was practically no middle-class in the new mining villages. At Merthyr, however, things were somewhat different, and this was ascribed to the absence of the truck system, "thanks to the absence of which there had grown up to a considerable extent, a permanent middle-class of tradesmen and shopkeepers between the masters and the men." As a matter of fact, this explanation is not at all accurate. It was the presence of what the Commissioner took to be the effect that was, in reality, the cause of the absence of the truck system. There were four large iron-working establishments, each with iron-mines, collieries, furnaces and foundries. In addition there was a canal, and there were extensive tramways. Overseers, managers, mechanics, pit-sinkers, haulage, and mine-contractors were required at their several departments. Copyholders, like John Thomas, of Magor, ancestor of the late Lord Rhondda, gave up their farms and invested their small capitals in an employment intermediate between the works operator and the wage-worker, and their ranks were swollen by skilled engine-men, miners from Cornwall, and, at a later date, colliery experts from Durham or Northumberland.

The iron-masters had their iron and, sometimes, their coal worked for them by contractors who employed from ten to a

hundred men apiece and, in a town like Merthyr, where Crawshay was at economic war with Hill, and Guest with Homfray and Thompson, and where industrial anarchy and cut-throat competition were rampant, these intermediaries could easily attain a position of some independence and so transform themselves into a middle class. It was customary for them to speculate in house-property, and they either bought company rows or built the alley and court dwellings, which were so often to be the scandals of the future. They also paid their wage-workers at the beer-houses which they kept, and where the employee was expected to spend a part of his earnings or they added to their income by keeping a small shop. It was their presence and their eagerness to go into shop-keeping that enabled the employers of Merthyr to give up the company shop and the task of supplying their workers with the necessaries of life, ordinarily so hard to get in those out-of-the-way hill country settlements. This system of truck, whilst it was transformed into an extra source of income, or an illicit means of reducing wages at the same time that it enabled the masters to keep a hold upon their " free " labourers, was in origin an unavoidable expedient and a social burden that the manufacturing producer of commodities had been unwillingly compelled to shoulder, and which he was ready enough, as soon as he became a great magnate, to forego.

In Merthyr, therefore, by the middle of the 19th Century, the truck system had disappeared except where the " butty " still paid his men over the beer-house counter and a considerable middle-class had grown up, consisting in some measure of the smaller yeoman farmers whose capital had saved them from wage-work, but had not lifted them to industrial mastery, and also of the class of craftsmen and mineral experts. Some of these gave themselves up to trade and others went into the new colliery enterprise which developed about this time. They were the second generation of South Wales capitalists, and became the colliery proprietors of the Rhondda Valleys, the coal shippers of Cardiff, and the commercial and professional class in Merthyr, Aberdare and Pontypridd.

Only a relatively small proportion eventually made themselves economically powerful and politically influential. The great majority never rose out of the shopkeeper status or raised themselves out of their struggling and sordid environment. They became the natural breeding ground of Welsh Liberalism and non-conformity, of middle-class political and religious thought. At the same time, Merthyr drew to itself restless spirits and ardent personalities from many industrial areas, and so became in turn a storm centre of Jacobinism, Chartism, Trade Unionism, and Radicalism, and then of Independent Labour Politics. It has come to have a revolutionary tradition, but because from the first it, more than any other town in the industrial belt, developed a shopkeeper element with all

the characteristics of that element, and because it has economic conditions of production which rarely change and have become, as one might say, set, it tends rather to political activity than to industrial vigour. Its labour ranks must henceforth be swollen politically by recruits from this intermediate class, this lower middle-class, which economic changes are dissolving, and whose interests lie henceforth with the workers, though for some time to come its ideas will continue to be influenced unconsciously by its past.

J. T. WALTON-NEWBOLD.