

To what extent did the First World War act as a catalyst for economic, social and political change in Wales?

Wales just prior to the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 had already seen a significant amount of economic, social, cultural and political change. A lot of that change was then further fueled by events of the war and the subsequent post-war feeling in Wales, which, together with the economic depression of the 1930s, helped to make Wales the country that it is today. In the sixty years prior to the start of hostilities, the population had more than doubled, from 1,163,139 inhabitants in 1851 to 2,523,500 in 1914.¹ There had been a big shift too during that time away from rural, agricultural-based employment to more urban, industrial employment in the coal, iron and steel industries in South Wales.² Here they were joined by immigrants from across Europe including an strong Irish community who had first traveled to Wales to escape the 1840's potato famine and settled in the South Wales towns of Merthyr, Cardiff, Swansea and Newport, by 1881 they accounted for a third of the population of Cardiff and were primarily employed in construction work, such as the building of Cardiff docks, and also working in the coal mines and the steel industry.³ Until about 1890, most of the those coming to the South Wales valleys came from rural west or mid Wales but after this date they were joined by people from the west of England and Italians from the north of Italy who were also leaving behind them rural poverty some of whom also found work in mining or the steel industry.⁴ By the end of the 19th century and up to the start of World War I, south Wales was dominated by heavy industry, exporting their huge output from docks in Cardiff, Swansea and Barry. The rate of growth and success of these heavy industries was phenomenal, in 1913 south Wales exported 36,832,000 tons of coal, compared with just 450,000 tons of coal in 1850.⁵ These were the boom years for industrial south Wales. There was a similar situation in north Wales where the slate industry dominated the local economy and was

¹ John, Davies, *A History of Wales*, Revised edition. (Penguin, 2007), p. 522

² Ibid. P. 522

³ www.gwegogledd.cymru/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/patterns-of-migration-welsh-context.pdf

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Davies, *A History of Wales*, p. 522

a major source of employment.⁶ The historian K. O. Williams described them as 'Wales's Antonine Age'.⁷

However, despite there being successful industries in both north and south Wales employing a very large proportion of the population, a feeling of disquiet amongst the people had already begun. Much of this was linked to poor working conditions and rates of pay, leading to a rise in Trade Union membership, strikes and even riots. According to the Office for National Statistics, the 1898 south Wales coal strike was a dispute over the Sliding Scale of 1875 which was used to calculate pay for miners during which 15,257,000 working days were lost.⁸ The sliding scale linked miner's wages directly (and the miners felt unfairly) to the selling price of coal, although the strike was unsuccessful in removing the calculation the strike did result in the formation of the South Wales Miners' Federation being formed. In Tonypany in a dispute at the Ely colliery in 1920 concerning miner's wages became violent resulting in battles with the local police leading to Winston Churchill sending in troops to put down the unrest.⁹ Just some 10 years earlier, unrest was also seen in the north Wales slate industry when a move by the owner of the Penrhyn slate quarry to prevent his workers from belonging to a Union resulted in a three-year strike with the men finally returning on the owner's terms.¹⁰ The demand for better treatment by the workers, the growth of Trade Unions and the rise in Socialism went hand in hand with the increasing success of the Labour Party in Wales. Welsh politics during the 19th century had been dominated by the Liberal Party. As Kenneth O. Morgan states in his book, *Rebirth of a Nation: Wales 1880-1980*:

The Labour movement in Wales, as it had done with increasing intensity since 1898, menaced the traditional ascendancy of Middle-class Liberalism, and the social and cultural assumptions of class collaboration and of national pride that went with it.

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The Liberal middle-classes had started to establish themselves in the larger towns of south Wales, such as Swansea, even before the 1880s, comprising merchants, bankers and the

⁶ <https://museum.wales/slate/story-of-slate/>

⁷ Kenneth O. Morgan, *Revolution to Devolution* (Chippenham: University of Wales Press, 2014), p. 147

⁸ https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/nesscontent/dvc277/line_chart/index.html

⁹ Morgan, *Revolution to Devolution*, p. 151

¹⁰ <https://tuc150.tuc.org.uk/stories/the-great-penrhyn-quarry-strike/>

¹¹ Kenneth O. Morgan, *Rebirth of a Nation : Wales 1880-1980*. (Oxford Univ. Press, 1981), p.142

like, dominated local government whilst the middle-class of the smaller provincial towns like Brecon and Caernarfon, were seeking greater control over their own municipal life.¹²

Prior to the war there had been a growing sense of Welsh identity and interest in Nationalism. Before 1850 the number of specifically Welsh organizations was almost non-existent as was the idea of Wales being a nation on par with England, Ireland and Scotland, but by 1914 there had been a dramatic change with the creation of a national university, library and museum.¹³ This sense of national identity also reached the sporting world with Wales playing their inaugural international match against England in February 1881 (the score using today's scoring system would have been 82-0).¹⁴ Around this same period the Irish were seeking Home Rule for themselves, looking to establish a domestic parliament for themselves but at the same time remain part of the British Empire. This caused the people of Wales to start seeing parallels with their own situation and ask if they were being treated fairly. In 1886, Thomas Edward Ellis, a Liberal Member of Parliament was an early proposer of self-government for Wales.¹⁵ He was one of the founders of a group called Cymru Fydd (Wales to Be) whose program included the creation of a Welsh legislative assembly.¹⁶ The group was formed in London based largely on the Welsh intelligentsia with the roots of its mission being in native culture and linguistic tradition. Under the influence of Ellis and a young David Lloyd George the idea of Home Rule became pivotal to the group with some members planning on Cymru Fydd becoming an independent Welsh national party that would replace the Liberal Party.¹⁷ The group remained active until 1896 but did not deliver any significant change to Welsh politics. However, they clearly highlighted an appetite in some quarters for the possibility of a devolved Wales.¹⁸

A significant cultural change that started before 1914 was the decline of the Welsh Language. The migration of people from the predominantly Welsh speaking rural areas to the new urban centres of population, the immigration of non-Welsh speakers together

¹² Ibid. P.10

¹³ Davies, *A History of Wales*, p. 523

¹⁴ <https://web.archive.org/web/20120927174122/http://www.wru.co.uk/eng/thewru/history/index.php>

¹⁵ [https://biography.wales/article/s-ELLI-EDW-](https://biography.wales/article/s-ELLI-EDW-1859#?c=0&m=0&s=0&cv=0&manifest=https%3A%2F%2Fdamssl.llgc.org.uk%2Fiiif%2F2.0%2F5292167%2Fmanifest.json&xywh=811%2C918%2C4237%2C3486)

[1859#?c=0&m=0&s=0&cv=0&manifest=https%3A%2F%2Fdamssl.llgc.org.uk%2Fiiif%2F2.0%2F5292167%2Fmanifest.json&xywh=811%2C918%2C4237%2C3486](https://biography.wales/article/s-ELLI-EDW-1859#?c=0&m=0&s=0&cv=0&manifest=https%3A%2F%2Fdamssl.llgc.org.uk%2Fiiif%2F2.0%2F5292167%2Fmanifest.json&xywh=811%2C918%2C4237%2C3486)

¹⁶ Davies, *A History of Wales*, p. 596

¹⁷ Dewi Rowland Hughes, *Cymru Fydd* (University of Wales Press, 2006)

¹⁸ Ibid.

with the need general tend to Anglicization had a profound impact on the language as John Davies explains in his book, *A History of Wales*:

In 1850, two out of three of the inhabitants of Wales spoke Welsh – a total of about 750,000 people – and most of them had no knowledge of any other language. By 1914, there were almost a million Welsh speakers; yet they represented only two fifths of the population, and four out of five of them had some command of English.

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A good example of Anglicization is provided by the Welsh Historian K. O. Morgan:

In 1909 at a meeting of the Rhondda district of the Fed (The South Wales Miners Federation), the chairman asked, 'Everyone here understands English.' The reply - 'Everyone here speaks English.' ... the trend in the District minutes is clear. In 1901 it printed its rules in English and Welsh; between 1901 and 1907 summerized every report in Welsh; from 1908-11 they gave a synopsis of the minutes in Welsh.²⁰ In contrast to this, Welsh Language literature with its different target audience was thriving just before the war with a diverse audience from scholarly tomes to childrens' magazines.²¹

All this was to change with the start of the First World War in August 1914. Wales was swept up with a jingoist fervour, as was the rest of Britain, with queues of men waiting to sign up at recruiting stations that sprang up across the country. This was part driven by a feeling of not wanting to miss out on going to France to fight the Hun in war they believe would be short-lived and over by Christmas. It fitted with the teaching they had received from the Nonconformist chapels about service, duty and self-sacrifice. Also, as K. O. Morgan explains, this was a war on behalf of small nations, 'Welsh men and women felt, in a sense, it was their war, a crusade to defend their basic values.'²² This sense of urgency to join was further reinforced by a massive government propaganda campaign with some posters being specifically aimed at the Welsh people. The Nonconformist chapels too played a major part in encouraging men to enlist. John William Brynsiencyn was Calvinistic Methodist minister who played a major role in Welsh recruitment and promoted the

¹⁹ Davies, *A History of Wales*, p. 523

²⁰ Gwyn A. Williams, *When Was Wales?: A History of the Welsh*. (Penguin, 1985), p. 245-246

²¹ Morgan, *Revolution to Devolution*, p. 147

²² Morgan, *Rebirth of a Nation*, p.160

creation of the Welsh division of which he was its honorary chaplain.²³ In October 1914 a number of leading Nonconformist ministers called for the mass recruitment of Welsh men citing the fact that the war was on behalf of small nations.²⁴ At this early point in the war there was an almost competitive aspect to recruitment and the October 1914 Nonconformist call to the men of its congregations to enlist was driven by the Bishop of St Asaph suggesting that Nonconformist recruiting rates were less than those of the Anglicans.²⁵ As the war progressed the government needed to recruit more men and by lowering the minimum height requirement allowing a further tranche of Welsh men to enlist.²⁶ The creation of the Pals Battalions was designed to appeal to men almost to join up as a social activity as being with people from their local community and workplace would bolster a sense of comradeship.²⁷ By 1916 there was a huge change in Welsh public opinion regarding the war. The heavy losses at the Battle of the Somme and the particularly Welsh tragedy at Mametz Wood hit the people of Wales hard.²⁸ This, together with the return of injured men from the front who recounted the most terrible of experiences had the effect of turning people against the war. Until 1916, Recruitment has been on a voluntary basis but as the need for even more men and the supply of volunteers decreased, conscription under The Military Service Act 1916 that meant that all single men aged between 18 - 41 were forced to join the army unless they were eligible for exemption.²⁹ Even as early as 1915, there had been a growing anti-war feeling developing in the workers of the south Wales valleys which was strengthened by the introduction of conscription and openly voiced by the Trade Unions.³⁰ The 'No Conscription Fellowship' was founded in 1914 and in 1916 the Welsh Philosopher Bertrand Russell undertook an anti-war tour of Wales on behalf of the Fellowship which was well supported in all parts of south Wales especially in Briton Ferry which was a Labour stronghold.³¹ With the growing anti-war feeling was also a feeling

²³ National Biography Wales </https://biography.wales/pdf/s-WILL-JHN-1854.pdf> [Accessed 9 May 2025]

²⁴ Morgan, *Revolution to Devolution*, p. 152

²⁵ Ibid. P.152

²⁶ Ibid. P.153

²⁷ https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/britain_wnone/pals_01.shtml

²⁸ The battle of Mametz wood was part of the Battle of the Somme which involved 3 regiments in which 3993 officers and other ranks were killed, wounded or missing during the assault
<https://royalwelshmuseum.wales/mametz-wood/>

²⁹ <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-10226/>

³⁰ Morgan, *Revolution to Devolution*, p. 162

³¹ <https://britishonlinearchives.com/collections/55/volumes/321/no-conscription-fellowship>
<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Bertrand-Russell>

that the people had been betrayed in some way by the Nonconformist chapels. Prior to the war, the Nonconformist chapels had dominated life in Wales with a high rate of attendance from the general population where they preached pacifism and temperance, and a life based on honesty, a sense of duty, self-sacrifice and justice. As the shift from rural to urban employment happened some of the rural chapels declined but chapels were built in urban centres of population where, in the heart of the new communities, they helped to foster a sense of community, security and provide some solace to those that had moved from rural areas. It was these very chapels that had actively encouraged the young men to enlist and, as some saw it, had blood on their hands. The high standing of the chapels had in some way been besmirched by their pulpit preaching in favour of the war. This was particularly true of the once popular high profile preacher Rev Colonel John William Brynsiencyn whose post-war reputation was much reduced.³² The young recruits of 1916 onwards were removed from their communities which has been ruled, in part, by a strict chapel life and were exposed to a secular life.³³ Things were changing for the Nonconformist chapels, the people were moving away from them, people could not reconcile a fair and just God with the horrors of battle. World War I marked the start of the decline of Nonconformist chapels in Wales, a trend that was never to be reversed.

The economy of industrial south Wales was buoyed up by the wartime need of coal, iron and steel. But the close inter-relationship between these three industries together with the docks in Cardiff, Swansea and Barry was to prove catastrophic when the war-time demand for commodities came to an end. The signing of the Treaty of Versailles meaning that Germany would provide coal as part of the reparations hit the Welsh coal industry very hard as did the cheaper imports of coal from the United States. The large workforce in the south Wales valleys was no longer required with unemployment becoming rife. This loss of major industries was a key contributor to the depression of the 1930s.

Not only did the economy change radically but so too did the political face of Wales. It was no longer the Liberal stronghold as it has been in the 19th century, instead the people favoured the Labour party and socialism. The rise of the Trade Unions continued with support for the miners leading to the General Strike in 1925.³⁴ In the early part of the 20th century no political party existed that was proposing the establishment of a Welsh

³² Morgan, *Revolution to Devolution*, p. 160

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ <https://libguides.swansea.ac.uk/richardburtonarchives/strikes>

Government, Labour and the Liberal party had only tried to encompass demands for Welsh home rule, and it was into this political arena that *Plaid Genedlaethol Cymru* (Welsh for 'the National Party of Wales') was formed on 5 August 1925.

In conclusion, after the end of the war Wales did not return to the life of the pre-war years, instead the war acted as a catalyst for change playing a huge part in making Wales what it is today. The economic, social and political change that had started in the late 19th and very early 20th century drew momentum from the war.

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