

World War One and the Birth of Modern Wales

An Essay Prepared For

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Introduction

In reference to the clash between the Central and Allied Powers, English writer H.G Wells, writing with a hope that a violent, shocking and gargantuan conflict would bring about an end to militarism, deter violence among nations and beget peace, coined a phrase that is now popularized as ‘*the war to end all wars*.’¹ But the First World War did not accomplish this. It did however, for nations the world over, bring about what could be described as a radical change of paradigm in how life was conducted. It did not end war, but it did give birth to Modernity.

For Wales, whose language (and culture) is, as Tolkien asserts ‘the senior language of the men of Britain’² ‘this is especially true. This work summarizes the Pre-War economic, political and social conditions in turn of the 20th century Wales then explores the changes wrought by the Great War.

The aftermath in Wales, however, cannot be studied apart from the first two years of the war as the transitional changes of national mood, economic explosion and even spiritual worldview are of such weight and import that ‘three Wales’ emerge from researching the subject. From 1900 to 1918 (and after) there is *Pre World War One Wales*, *Intra-World War One Wales*, and *Aftermath Wales* (ensuing from approximately year three of the war).

This work heavily references two historians with very different concepts of both Pre and Aftermath Wales. Kenneth Morgan is a historian and prolific author of Modern British History who writes from a Labour Party perspective but has, in sum, a favorable view of the Liberal Party’s politics and worldview of Wales at the dawn of the war. His Pre-War vision of the country is gilded, happy and glorious. To provide contrast, Simon Brooks and his *The Wales That Never Was* is consulted for a bleaker and more dismal Pre and Aftermath snapshot of Wales. Although both writers are Labour, the former’s essays are more Centrist and the latter radical Leftist in leaning, allowing the careful reader to find “the truth in the middle”. Leveraging these and other resources, a few key features of each change category of the Welsh experience (economics, politics and culture) will be explored.

¹ “The War To End War” Wikipedia, 17 July 2025, <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_war_to_end_war#:~:text=%22The%20war%20to%20end%20war,War%20\(1939%E2%80%931945\)>](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_war_to_end_war#:~:text=%22The%20war%20to%20end%20war,War%20(1939%E2%80%931945)>) > [accessed 13 July, 2025]

² Emma Gregg, Visit Wales *Places in Wales With Connections To JRR Tolkien* (2025) <<https://www.visitwales.com/things-do/culture/cultural-attractions/explore-tolkien-wales#:~:text=Lodges%20and%20Glamping-,Nant%20Gwrtheyrn%2C%20Ll%C5%B7n%20Peninsula,coast%20of%20the%20Ll%C5%B7n%20Peninsula>> > [accessed 3 July, 2025]

Insider the Numbers – One Horrific Statistic to Set the Stage

The population of Wales, according to 1911 census figures, was approximately 2.4 million, of which 1.3M were male³. Of these, approximately 275,000 (of a fighting age range between 18 and 51 years old) or about 21% of the country's population directly experienced the dread of combat, and around 10% of these or over 30,000 never returned to the land of Dragons and Song.

The purpose of opening an essay with a raw stratification of population data is to emphasize the devastation wrought in Wales by the Great War. The total number of enlisted men sent to terror as a percentage of total men, and the percentage of that subset who perished, changed everything for Wales, as it did for the world. Historian Kenneth Morgan describes the Pre War condition of the nation as Renaissance like, then emphasizes its fall:

There were two major reasons for the continuous collapse of the Welsh Renaissance from earlier in the century, one external and the other more internal. The major external factor was, obviously, the impact of the First World War, which transformed the entire world.⁴

Thousands of nuclear families were destroyed, factories and farms hollowed, churches emptied, and graves filled, poets, thinkers and builders lost. World War One is the most appropriate dispensational change in the history of Modern Wales for the direct fact that the extreme loss of life (and untold generational damage done to those who lived) is so proportionally high that it was impossible for Wales *not to have been changed*. Often World War Two is given more airtime in cinema and historical circles but, for Wales, it was on the fields of Passchendaele and not Normandy where things changed forever.

From Success to Booming to Struggling – Economic Comparisons

Pre-World War One

The economics of Wales in the decades leading up to World War One are best summarized through a regional lens. North Wales relied upon quarrying and some agriculture,

³ "Wales In The World Wars" Wikipedia, 13 October, 2024, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wales_in_the_world_wars> [accessed 13, July 2025]

⁴ Kenneth Morgan, Open Edition Journals *Revue Francaise De Civilization Brittanique*, Issue XXVIII-3 *The Welsh Renaissance: Boer War To World War, 1899-1914* (2017) <<https://journals.openedition.org/rfcb/11183>> [accessed 4 July, 2025]

West Wales was almost exclusively agriculture based, and South Wales was fueled by industry, namely Coal and Steel.

North Wales's economy was *dynamic*. The region was a large leader, on world-wide platform, in slate production and exports. Penrhyn and Dinorwig could fairly boast of being the largest in the world. The North was also successful in several other industries including textiles, weaving and tourism.

In Mid Wales, agriculture ruled, and the specialized farming (the separation of sheep and cattle) was the primary driver of the economy. Additionally, Coal Mining and Railway work were other contributors in the Midlands.

The South of Wales was a major powerhouse in the coal mining and iron production industries. The Cardiff Coal Exchange set the worldwide price of steam coal and by the end of the first decade of the 1900's, South Wales was Earth's largest producer of iron. Such was the success of coal and steel at this time that Wales looked more like America, having an ongoing influx of emigrants seeking work and opportunity, than an insulated indigenous Celtic kingdom.

Morgan fondly describes the era preceding and leading up to World War One as the *Edwardian Renaissance*, and paints a gilded, happy picture of Wales Pre-War Wales, conjuring imagery from the glory of Ancient Rome:

In the history of modern Wales, the Edwardian years just before the First World War appear in retrospect to be a time of hope and glory.

The Welsh nation, previously regarded as a poorer and marginal fringe of England and its empire, saw unprecedented growth; from literary and musical creativity to dramatic events in the world of sport, the nation acquired a fame and distinction unknown since the Act of Union in 1536.

Edward Gibbon, writing his epic history of the Roman Empire, wrote of the period of the Antonine empire in the second century AD as one when the citizens of Rome were "most happy, and prosperous".¹ In the more parochial but increasingly influential history of the Welsh people, the dynamic years up to 1914 may be regarded as their Antonine Age.⁵

This view of prosperity and happiness is not shared altogether. Brooks, in his brooding and negative outlook *Why Wales Never Was*, gives a bleak appraisal. He calls Welsh nationalism

⁵Kenneth Morgan, Open Edition Journals *Revue Francaise De Civilization Brittanique*, Issue XXVIII-3 *The Welsh Renaissance: Boer War To World War, 1899-1914* (2017) <<https://journals.openedition.org/rfcb/11183>> [accessed 4 July, 2025]

a failure⁶ then goes onto write that ‘the pace and nature of industrial development did indeed play a role in the Welsh failure.’⁷ Brooks alludes to the scenario unfolding that, as emigrants poured into the South, from the other regions of Wales and abroad, ironic and short lived levers and pulleys were activated economically whereby the vast success of one region had a net impact of ‘emptying out’ and causing financial strain in Mid and North Wales.

Intra-War Period

If Morgan’s view is taken and the Pre War condition was ‘happy and prosperous’, then Intra-War Period was *booming*. According to a piece on coalmining on St. Fagan’s Museum’s website, Amgueddfa Cymru, the zenith of production was during the onset of the war, when over 10.7 million tons was exported annually.⁸ The demand was high for Coal to fuel factories, transportation, warships, and for steel to erect the naval fleet and other wartime weapons. In the early stages of the conflict, Coal Miners were so vital to the economy that they were exempt from military service.

The South Wales Coalfield workforce grew to 271,500 men during the intra-war period, nearly matching the same number of Welsh men who fought over the span of the entire World War. There is limited Gross Domestic Product (GDP) available for Wales from this time-period, but the UK’s GDP grew by 10-14% at this time, truly creating twenty-four months of vast prosperity as Wales had pivoted from ‘good to great’ economically.

However, in accord with Brooks’s assessment, the North and Midlands, were beginning to suffer from too few souls and the beginnings of sorrows, and loss of identity. An economy wanting of a strong Middle Class and depletion of Welsh speaking young people was setting the stage for a woeful aftermath.

Aftermath

The boom was short lived, and the golden economic age but a season and memory. As the war persisted several factors coalesced to bring misery and another, more final-state change of economic landscape. Tycoons were created as a result of the boom, and widening range between the wealthy and the working class produced a ‘have and have nots’ dynamic. Oil was growing in importance as the fuel of the oceans, and the Treaty of Versailles flooded

⁶ Simon Brooks, *Why Wales Never Was The Failure Of Welsh Nationalism* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2017), p. 142

⁷ Simon Brooks, *Why Wales Never Was The Failure Of Welsh Nationalism* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2017), p. 142

⁸ Amgueddfa Cymru, *Cardiff – Coal And Shipping Metropolis Of The World* (2007) <<https://museum.wales/articles/1034/Cardiff--Coal-and-Shipping-Metropolis-of-the-World/>> [accessed 19, July 2025]

Europe with cheap German coal. Southeast Wales fell into a steady state of economic depression, one that not even the machinations and spending of a Second World War could cure. Amgueddfa Cymru's article perfectly captures the decline following the war:

By 1932, in the depths of the depression, coal exports had fallen to below 5 million tonnes and dozens of locally owned ships were laid up. It was an era of depression from which Cardiff never really recovered, and despite intense activity at the port during the Second World War, coal exports continued to decline, finally ceasing altogether in 1964.⁹

Concluding with the regional lens; quarrying became, and now is, a shell of its former production, with many of its renowned locations turning into tourist attractions, nature preserves and museums. Penrhyn Quarry production continues, on a much smaller scale and the industry is no longer a driving factor in North Welsh economics.

In the Midlands, agriculture lived, and lives on but, like its neighbor to the North, is but a shadow of its former self and South Wales, once an industrial titan is now fueled by sports and tourism in the stead of coal and steel.

From Pacifism to Jingoism to a New Nationalism – Social and Political Comparisons

Pre World One

Economics and Politics are connected as the ouroboros, cyclical and inseparable, one often indistinguishable from the other. But they do differ. Capital is the means of production, labor, corn, steel, cattle etc. Currency is the means of exchange for capital, and Economics is the medium by which capital flows in the currents of the marketplace. In this regard economies are described as 'tourism based', 'tech based' etc. If Economics are the 'what', then Politics concerns the 'who'. Political spectrums are defined by who owns and controls the means of production and has at its core the 'form of rule' in a community, nation or confederacy. In a broadened definition some social movements (or enduring norms) can be described as equally social, cultural or political as well. For example, the long-lasting hallmark of Methodism in Wales, which perfectly complements the Nonconformist Movements in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, was pacifism. The policy of the People, by vast majority, was ardently opposed to war.

The essay *Primitive Methodism – A Community At War*, written by Jill Barber, documents the doctrinal stance that permeated policy up to the eve of the Great War:

⁹ Amgueddfa Cymru, *Cardiff – Coal And Shipping Metropolis Of The World* (2007) <<https://museum.wales/articles/1034/Cardiff--Coal-and-Shipping-Metropolis-of-the-World/>> [accessed 19, July 2025]

Before the outbreak of the First World War, the Primitive Methodist Church was largely a pacifist church. It had no chaplains in the armed forces, it fiercely opposed the Boer War, and was the most politically radical of the Free Churches.¹⁰

And Religion was greatly interwoven with politics to such an extent that the first act of Parliament since the 1542 Act of Union with a direct application to Wales (and only Wales) was The Sunday Closing Act.¹¹ It was sponsored by the Liberal Party, who were socially conservative and whose theology was primarily Nonconformist. Religion was tied to policy making, and the religion of the day called for passive, non-aggression and no war.

Intra-War Period

Then the Nonconformist Churches made a radical reversal of doctrine. The dramatic rapidity of the change is memorialized in *Primitive Methodism* where Conference President Arthur Guttery, who held the highest-ranking office in the Methodist Church, is quoted as passionately preaching the following to fifteen hundred listeners:

‘A wave of madness has swept over Europe, and Britain is invited to plunge into a fury that is insane ... It is the policy of Bedlam and it is the statecraft of hell... The duty of the Church is plain. It must declare the will of God, which is brotherhood, the gospel of Bethlehem, which is peace, and the evangel of Calvary, which is the dominion of love.’¹²

The date given for this sermon is Sunday, August 2nd, 1914. Two days later Britain declared war on Germany and a week later the same Preacher was suddenly known for indomitable passion for victory at arms, crying ‘Our chapels are not the refuge of dissent; they

¹⁰ Jill Barber, My Primitive Methodist, *Primitive Methodism – A Community At War* (2018) <https://www.myprimitivemethodists.org.uk/content/subjects-2/first_world_war/conscientious-objectors/introduction-primitive-methodists-attitudes-first-world-war#:~:text=An%20Introduction%20to%20Primitive%20Methodist%20attitudes%20to%20WW1%20and%20Conscientious%20Objection.-zoom&text=Before%20the%20outbreak%20of%20the,by%20downloading%20the%20article%20below.> [accessed 11, July 2025]

¹¹ UK Parliament, *Hansard, Commons Chamber, Returns and Reports, Sunday Closing (Wales) 1881 Amendment Bill*, (2025)< [https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/1900-05-09/debates/beeda0e5-fd05-4dfe-8766-26cc9e2c4670/SundayClosing\(Wales\)Act\(1881\)AmendmentBill](https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/1900-05-09/debates/beeda0e5-fd05-4dfe-8766-26cc9e2c4670/SundayClosing(Wales)Act(1881)AmendmentBill)> [accessed 12, July 2025]

¹² Jill Barber, My Primitive Methodist, *Primitive Methodism – A Community At War* (2018) <https://www.myprimitivemethodists.org.uk/content/subjects-2/first_world_war/conscientious-objectors/introduction-primitive-methodists-attitudes-first-world-war#:~:text=An%20Introduction%20to%20Primitive%20Methodist%20attitudes%20to%20WW1%20and%20Conscientious%20Objection.-zoom&text=Before%20the%20outbreak%20of%20the,by%20downloading%20the%20article%20below.> [accessed 11, July 2025]

are the citadels of liberty, and they train men who will break all tyranny in pieces'. By September he was boasting of the numbers of young men who had enlisted, he was creating honors, rewards and accolades to bestow up those fighting for God and King. He had instantly departed from the doctrines that defined his ministry.¹³

Pastor Guttey was not alone. Nearly the whole of the nation shifted from sequestered Celts who believed in 'defense only' or full pacifism to a fully integrated Britishness as a wave of jingoism splashed over Wales. Young men enlisted scores at a time, often in groups called 'Pals Battalions' and the recruitment percentage in Wales was the highest in the UK. The radical shift was uncanny and difficult to explain.

Enter David Lloyd George. Enter propaganda. During the Intra-War period George, of the Liberal Party, was the Minister of Munitions. Kenneth Morgan describes him as '*highly controversial figure who* (during the first two years of the war) *rose to the summit of power*.'¹⁴ The Liberal Party were not unified on the war, and intrigue surrounded the schism with the Jill Barber suggesting that George may have made false promises to the Nonconformist Sects relative to further alcohol prohibitions to garner support along with other dark-corridor political intrigue.¹⁵ George was the face of the ramp-up war period and his propaganda gears churned effectively as he appealed to legendary Welsh heroes such as Owain Glyndwr and the cause of small nations throughout Europe banding together to fight the German menace.

Aftermath

The pivot from peacefulness to battle-lust lasted but twenty-four months. As voluntary enlistment gave way to conscription and as fanciful ideas of ending the war 'before Christmas' became of season of what must have felt like a permanent, violent purgatory, the mood pivoted again. Letters began pouring home, the reality of amputations, grotesque injury, disease, sorrow and hopelessness mounted. This was punctuated by tremendous losses by the 38th Welsh Division in Mametz Wood where hundreds of lives were lost and then again, the following year at Passchendaele where, on July 31st, 1917, four thousand Welshmen perished in one day.

The Allies prevailed, but the cost was dire. Passchendaele became a sort of inverted Mynydd Baedan for the Welsh. As they had done fifteen hundred years afore, they had

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Kenneth Morgan, Open Edition Journals *Revue Francaise De Civilization Brittanique*, Issue XXVIII-3 *The Welsh Renaissance: Boer War To World War, 1899-1914* (2017) <<https://journals.openedition.org/rfcb/11183>> [accessed 4 July, 2025]

¹⁵ Jill Barber, *My Primitive Methodist, Primitive Methodism – A Community At War* (2018) <https://www.myprimitivemethodists.org.uk/content/subjects-2/first_world_war/conscientious-objectors/introduction-primitive-methodists-attitudes-first-world-war#:~:text=An%20introduction%20to%20Primitive%20Methodist%20attitudes%20to%20WW1%20and%20Conscientious%20Objection,-zoom&text=Before%20the%20outbreak%20of%20the,by%20downloading%20the%20article%20below.>> [accessed 11, July 2025]

defeated the Saxons, but this time it was the Celts who suffered loss that would reverberate for generations.

Liberals Unified then Splintered to Lasting Labour Rule and an Unusual Nationalism– Social and Political Comparisons

Pre World One

The Liberal Party dominated the political landscape in Wales from the 1860s through the mid-point of World War One. There were several reasons for this. The Liberals had more conservative, Christian worldview that was akin to the Nonconformist religious movements of the time. Moreover, their form of rule was more consistent with competition, industrialism, production and individualism. Kenneth Morgan summarizes the era:

The Liberal ascendancy, which can be dated from William Gladstone's leadership of the party from 1868 onwards, was intimately linked with many of the developments mentioned above, the new industries and free trade, the civic growth and the local press, the stimulus of nonconformist religious life especially after the religious revival of 1904-5, the Sunday school and the temperance movement, the Band of Hope, and the upsurge in both popular and academic literary and musical culture.¹⁶

Wales was monoglot, nearly throughout, at this time but Liberals were mostly unionist, favoring a strong business focus that was best suited by a strong United Kingdom.

Intra-War Period

Not all that glittered was gold, and there were shortcoming and failings with the Liberal lead age of glory. As the industry in the South boomed, the super wealthy emerged, tycoons were created and the human nature of greed crept in. This created or worsened an ongoing gap between the working and wealthy classes and a strong middle class, quintessential for the survival of any society, was nearly non-existent. Thus, did Unionist, Organized Labor and Marxist elements arise. Morgan suggests that the stage was set even prior to the intra-war period:

¹⁶ Kenneth Morgan, Open Edition Journals *Revue Francaise De Civilization Brittanique*, Issue XXVIII-3 *The Welsh Renaissance: Boer War To World War, 1899-1914* (2017) <<https://journals.openedition.org/rfcb/11183>> [accessed 4 July, 2025]

The internal factor that undermined the Welsh renaissance had been under way long before the outbreak of war in 1914. This was the breakaway of much of the Welsh working class from their bourgeois allies in the Liberal Party.¹⁷

With dramatic and uncanny timing, two other forces were at work at the same time, the resultant combination of all three factors ending Liberal Party rule in Wales, possibly forever. First, as popularity of the war waned and collective misery abounded, the Liberal Party began to splinter, right amid the war, on its position towards the Great Conflict. A schism developed between those who backed David Lloyd George, who had ascended to Prime Minister and governed to the epoch of the crisis of the 'midpoint of the war' and Herbert Henry Asquith, the former, displaced Prime Minister from the same Party. Morgan calls the disunity, that began in 1916 a 'rot that set in and in four years the Liberal was on the point of collapsing.'¹⁸ Secondly, the Liberal vision and agenda paid no regard to considerations for women, their rights and concerns. They governed, and catered to a male world:

There was one great gap in the Liberals' objectives. They dealt with social or religious and cultural themes with passion. However, it was a male world, which they addressed.¹⁹

What women did by necessity, taking their brothers and husband's places in the factories and mines, demonstrated that they could do much more, and *anything* were they given the choice. This included entering into employment contracts, being doctors or lawyers and perhaps most important, participating equally in the market of ideas at the ballot box. Out of the dread of the mid-war period was great progress ignited in the realm of suffrage for women and although many Liberal Welsh leaders, including George, gave surface level support to the matter, the lack of focus and support for women's rights was another death nail in the dominance of the Party.

Aftermath

What emerged from splinter, rot and fall of the Liberals was a brand of National Socialism. Brooks notes that the capitalism, with its focus on individual rights of community needs did not fit the culture or needs of a small country, but the notion of an international workers paradise and the end of Nation States put forth by Marx and Engel did not fit as well.

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Ibid

Brooks quotes Friedrich Engels as calling any notion of Welsh Independence *an absurdity, got up in popular dress in order to throw dust in shallow people's eyes*.²⁰ The Leftists, at that time, were only supporting nationalist movements in small countries so that they could break them away from colonial or imperial constructs, only them to absorb them into a worldwide super-state.

Neither Left nor Right fit the ancient kingdom of Wales.

What emerged was a communitarian, socialist model that uplifted the working class and had deep regard for the poor without compromising concepts of self-determination, culture and nationhood.

Lastly, the role of women in Welsh society changed forever. The intra-war notions of equality endured into the aftermath, finally resulting in women's full participation in voting by 1928, this change being perhaps the one demonstrable, controversy free, and positive change from the horrific war to end all wars.

²⁰ Simon Brooks, *Why Wales Never Was The Failure Of Welsh Nationalism* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2017), pg. 74-75

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