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The Rebecca Riots - An Essay

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In this essay I hope to explore and detail the history of the Rebecca Riots in preparation for the film project that is underway. I will be exploring the politics of the time, along with pre-existing media on this event. Upon conclusion, I hope to understand the subjects of my film better; my ancestors John and Hannah Edwards of Gelliwernen.

The Rebecca Riots were a series of rural protests between 1839 and 1843 in Wales by farmers against the charges of the toll booths. During these riots, men would disguise themselves as women, and join together under the name “Rebecca and her daughters”, in order to attack the toll booths. The Rebeccaites are thought to have taken their name from Genesis 34:52; “And they blessed Rebecca, and said to her, ‘...may your descendants possess the gate of those who hate them!’”.

Politics And Society

As previously mentioned, the riots were protests, though as written by Pat Molloy in his novel; “no part of Wales was so thickly planted...as the area between Llanelli, Llannon and the Gwendraeth Valley”(p200). This is interesting to note, as previously I believed that it was far more widespread, or at the very least had similar levels of violence. It had never occurred to me that it was Llanelli, my own hometown, that had the brunt of it.

As stated by Rhian E Jones in her novel, ‘Petticoat Heroes’, “Wales experienced sustained population growth from the late 1700s well into the 1850s”, with Llanelli, Pembroke and Aberystwyth gaining anywhere between 5,000 and 7,000. She goes on to explain the ‘social pyramid’, which include the landed gentry, the Church and the military, and those in between such as the land agents and merchants. This influx of new, ultimately not farming folk, could have been a part of the reason for the riots, but who’s to say. I believe that it must be connected in some way, however, due to these areas being singled out for having the worst of the attacks.

It was the tithe collectors that received a lot of the attacks; because of course the people were against being taxed to use the very roads necessary for their livelihood. A section from an *OpenLearn* course elaborated on this further by mentioning the “detested tithe agent” who the rioters had attempted to injure, none other than John Edwards of Gelliwernen himself. I think the fact that he’s gone down in history, specifically as the ‘detested’ man, speaks for itself the views on tax collectors, especially for the time. This part, I knew. When the rioters came, they shot out the windows, and when John Edwards feigned sickness, it was his young adult daughter; Hannah, that came to the door. She was shot at, but was luckily missed. The clock they hit instead is still in my family to this day.

“Tithes were paid to the Anglican Church in almost all Welsh parishes once a year...80% of the population of west Wales was Non-Conformist, they resented having to pay tithes to a

church that was not their own.”(*National Archives*) This is surely the trigger that started the riots, that *not only* were farmers losing profit, making it harder to live and for them to continue their livelihoods, that it wasn't even going to higher-ups in Wales. This couldn't have played well on their minds, and so attacking the toll booths must have seemed like the best they could have done at the time.

The Rioters were violent, and had access to guns thanks to the fact that they were farmers. “A notice was fixed on the door to apprise the toll-collector that his gates were destroyed...and if he or anyone else presumed to raise any new tolls at the place would be shot.”(*Henry Tobit Evans, Rebecca Riots!*) This only shows their violent nature, their warning clear. It only goes to show the level they were willing to escalate to, and their warnings were not just that. Tobit Evans goes on to describe one of the attacks where “Rebecca and a great number of her children, well armed with guns and other destructive weapons, made their appearance at Llanelly”(page 98) then proceeded to beat the gatekeeper and shoot him in the face. A horrible image, truly. It only goes to show the measures they were willing to take. I'll be honest, I was unaware that anyone had been *killed* during the riots, I can't say that I'm surprised but I didn't think it had a bodycount.

The Riots In Media

There is a surprising lack of media surrounding the Rebecca Riots outside of books and historical documents. However, there is a film ‘Rebecca's Daughters’(1992) that was written by Dylan Thomas and Guy Jenkin. The film is a Welsh and German comedy/adventure film, and stars Peter O'Toole and Welsh rugby star Ray Gravell among others. At the time of writing this, there isn't much to be found outside of purchasing the film, and it stands with a whopping two reviews on IMDb, both of which speak highly. It was based on a novel, also by Thomas, written in 1948 which has been described as a comedic romance, which is evidently difficult to track down, and appears to have faded into obscurity rather quickly in its lifespan.

From the knowledge that I have been able to track down, I can safely say that I do not want my work to delve into comedy(and frankly, since I am basing off of a father and daughter, romance will not be anywhere near the project).

Strangely, there really isn't much to be said about the Rebecca Riots in media. It isn't a topic that has been approached as often as I would have thought, though I am certain that there are plays on the subject; tracking them down has proven to be far harder than it should be. There are even very few documentaries on the subject, just a small handful in comparison to any other topic that I've researched.

For such a big piece of Welsh history, there's barely anything to note.

Conclusion: What Has This Got To Do With Me?

I'll be honest, I'm astounded at the lack of films or shows based around the riots. As it's been something that's been so entwined with my upbringing, with my mother and grandmother going through the history with me from such a young age, I feel that it's strange. Stranger still since it hit areas of Wales quite hard, and that it *was* so widespread.

I can feel my initial thoughts on John Edwards changing. I was raised seeing him as a coward, and maybe he was, but ultimately he was hated by so many simply due to his occupation. No source documents what he was like, or anything at all besides that he was so *hated* that it made history, no matter how small. He might have been a coward, he might have been horrible, but in the end he *was* almost shot at his home, when his employer was likely untouched due to his lack of appearing in any source.

Researching this has put into perspective what the time was truly like, with the sudden amount of people moving into the affected areas, the fact that the money that they were forced to pay wasn't even staying in Wales. I've also learned that this is a strangely difficult topic to research, as I've been avoiding referencing research papers on top of the lack of ranged information. The majority of sources give out the same information, but worded ever so slightly differently. I never thought this to be a hard topic to gather information on, but with the repetition or the lack of information otherwise, it's proven to be a rather niche topic in history.

As a conclusion, a real conclusion, I believe that this makes it important for the script that I am writing to be good and researched. With the lack of media surrounding it, staying clear of misinformation or misunderstanding is more important than ever. This, of course, means that I should perhaps look into collaborative work so that not all the information is coming from me, due to my wavering biases on John Edwards and in case of any mistypes.

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