

“Wales’s Locust Years” is the historian K. O. Morgan's description of the 1920’s and 1930’s in Wales. Is this a fair assessment of the interwar years in Wales?

Introduction:

Across the planet, the decades that immediately followed the cessation of hostilities in Europe saw massive change. New regimes rose where old ones fell, and massive social, political and economic upheaval completely reshaped the world order. However, even in smaller nations, developments like this took place, moulding and changing the fabric of the lives of those who inhabited them.

Wales provides an interesting case study, and the observations made by Kenneth O. Morgan in his work *Rebirth of a Nation*, specifically the chapter “Wales’s Locust Years”, helps to illustrate this. That is what this essay will attempt to display and explain, as well as approaching the usefulness of this description for looking at the three decades following the end of the Great War.

Year of the Locust - 1922:

While there are many years that could rightly be referred to as the “Year of the Locust”, in terms of tipping points in British, and especially Welsh history, 1922 is an obvious choice. It was the year that saw a general election, an event which was the first time in the history of Wales that the Labour party won almost every single seat. According to Daryl Leeworthy, “Labour’s position continued to be consolidated and the party proved easily able to defeat rivals” (Leeworthy, 2022, Pg. 232). It was only possible for Labour to gain support of this magnitude in Wales due to the massive unemployment which had been one of the main motivations for their support. This is explained well by Morgan himself, when he writes that South Wales “experienced mass unemployment and poverty without parallel in the British Isles” (Morgan, 1981, Pg. 210).

Why Labour was able to garner so much support in Wales is a much longer story than this essay allows for, and would be a distraction from the main focus of the work. However, it is important to detail, even briefly, why Labour enjoyed so much support in the region. After the end of the Great War, demobilisation rapidly led to mass unemployment and poor working conditions. Jon Gower details the areas worst affected by the crisis, stating that “unemployment was at its most extreme in coal mining... also [affecting] steel, tinplate, slate and transport workers” (Gower, 2012, Pg. 259). Such a huge number of jobs were impacted by the economic crisis caused by the end of the Great War, that when the Great Depression, itself another incident outside of the control of the Welsh people, hit the entire planet, as many as “one in five workers in Wales wasn’t working” (Gower, 2012, Pg. 258).

The lack of support offered to those in Wales living in poverty, unemployment and poor working conditions under the Liberal government of Lloyd-George allowed for the Labour party to gain popular support amongst the working population. It was under these circumstances that in the 1922 snap elections, caused by the Conservative withdrawal from the Liberal coalition, that the Labour party dethroned the Liberals from their position in Wales. Under the new Labour administration, the choice was made to “invest... heavily in recreational amenities” (Leeworthy, 2022, Pg. 272), a decision which was made to “inculcate

democracy as widely as possible" (Leeworthy, 2022, Pg. 272). It is with this in mind that the rest of the 1920's and 1930's in Wales must be examined.

Years of Change:

While around the world, massive change took place in the two decades following the Great War, most noticeably in the former Imperial powers of Russia and Germany, the wave of reform was not limited to them. Wales saw a huge shift in the power paradigm in the nation, with the birth of what Daryl Leeworthy calls "Labour Country" (Leeworthy, 2022). It is undeniable that the impact of unemployment had its impact on the labour movement in Wales, and the trade unions and left wing parties made it an essential part of their policy. As events following the Great War continued to develop against Wales, by the end of the 1920's, matters had taken yet another turn for the worse.

In 1929, in New York in the United States, the Wall Street stock market crash ripped a massive hole in the finances of almost every nation on the planet. Some nations saw such a huge reversal in their economic development that new forces, most notably the NSDAP in the Weimar Republic, were able to harness the backlash and grief, and seize power. While the fall of democracy in Germany is an extreme example of the fallout of the Wall Street Crash, the Great Depression which followed saw mass unemployment in every developed nation on the planet, and Wales was no different. Within five years, a cataclysmic amount of Welsh workers were unemployed. As John Davies notes in his work, "in August 1932, 42.8 percent of insured Welsh males were unemployed" (Davies, 2007, Pg. 559), showing the scale of the crisis which plagued the Welsh economy in the wake of the Stock Market Crash.

Like in many parts of the world, unemployment and general dissatisfaction with the response to the Great Depression led to increased political activism, and extremism. Why some felt compelled to turn to more dramatic methods of political change is easy to see, with a good description given by Kenneth O. Morgan, "with the works shut down, an entire community found its social and economic existence destroyed" (Morgan, 1981, Pg. 216). In this quote, Morgan is speaking in reference to the Dowlais works, a steel mill. When speaking about the financial crisis that afflicted Wales in the wake of the Wall Street Crash, most authors speak in reference mostly to the coal industry, which was at the time the most famous of the Welsh industries. Welsh coal, afterall, provided the fuel for the Royal Navy throughout the Great War, and was a major source of energy throughout the entire United Kingdom (Leeworthy, 2022). However, it is important to note that every industry in Wales was deeply affected, as we have already seen, and that the economic crisis crept its way into every facet of working life, regardless of the specialist area.

Keeping this in mind, it is crucial to understand just how much weaker the Welsh economy was when the Second World War broke out, providing yet more pressure onto a nation which had seen its industries ravaged, and its population massively reduced. While the economic situation across the nation had begun to improve, with rearmament providing an impetus for economic growth, it is undeniable that the closure of such important industries as the steel and coal sectors had left a lasting impression on the economy (Morgan, 1981).

Unemployment among the miners remained high, and it was only in limited areas of the country that tangible recovery was made. Most of South Wales still relied on the production of coal as its main source of income, and with so many unemployed much more was needed on a national level. The scope of this question does not allow for a detailed analysis of the

Welsh economy, in respect to regional developments, but the description that Morgan gives to the government intervention and economic aid is quite apt: “the story of government intervention... in south Wales during the interwar period was a relatively blank one” (Morgan, 1981, Pg. 228).

Wales's Other Locust Years:

While the massive unemployment of the 1920's and 1930's led to economic hardship and near financial and social collapse in Wales, a similar story played out decades later, under the premiership of Margaret Thatcher. Yet more economic influence from London had led to massive unemployment and social unrest in Wales. However, not all blame for the impending economic and social crisis can be pinned on the government. For some young people, according to Leeworthy, underground mine work was an extremely unappealing option. He writes, “young South Walians were unwilling to enter the industry” (Leeworthy, 2022, Pg. 459), a decision which would have severe long term impacts on the economic stability of any economic sector. This lack of new workers led to a massive disparity in the mines themselves, and “by 1970, nearly forty percent of those working in the industry were over fifty years old” (Leeworthy, 2022, Pg. 459). With the long term effects of an ageing working population in a single industry in mind, examining the decades of the 1970's and 1980's becomes very different.

Economic hardship, as we have seen, was nothing new for Wales in the 20th Century. However, the almost total devastation that the decades of the 1970's and 1980's were to wreak on the nation were only parallel to the 1920's and 1930's. Massive unemployment, spurred by the closure of mines and metal refinement plants, led to protest and a rise in support for the Labour Party across Wales. Yet despite this, the Labour Party on a national level failed to harness the anger and discontent and win election to government. It was during this time, that names like Kinnock, became more and more well known. The miners strikes saw a huge shift in government approach to collective strike action, and led to clashes between police and miners. The 1984-85 miners strike is a matter of great interest to Welsh labour, as well as being a “major turning point in the history of the British labour movement” (Leeworthy, 2022, Pg. 472).

It was a major departure from the strikes of the 1920's and 1930's, in that it saw a response by a highly militarised police force, acting on the orders of the government and the extra judicial ACPO, the Association of Chief Police Officers. Its main aim was to “increase the autonomy of senior police officers from Home Office interference” (Coulter, 1984, Pg. 236). Acknowledging that cooperation between different police forces, from across the nation, allowed for much harsher crackdowns on striking workers gives us a much better method of understanding industrial opposition to the decisions and actions taken by the government.

However, we cannot analyse the effects of the miners strike on the 1970's and 1980's without acknowledging the strain that it placed onto the families of those affected, and the individuals themselves. As Leeworthy notes, “thousands endured bitter hardship and poverty to keep, so they believed, their jobs, to maintain the industry that had been the principal employer in mining communities for generations” (Leeworthy, 2022, Pg. 472). Despite the hardship that most strike action brought with it, such as reduced income, clashes with police forces and social unrest, many people were still committed to striking. Such a strong connection with the local mine and the industries connected to it was a massive motivation

for continued, and extreme, strike action on the part of the miners. Since they were faced with a seemingly existential, massively more organised and prepared force, and a government which to all extents and purposes was hell-bent on closing the mines, forges and industries which supported them, the militancy visible among the striking miners is tangible.

Conclusion:

To conclude this piece, a comparison between the two sets of decades must be drawn. While this is a misleading way to look at some very complex and multifaceted areas of history, both with nuance and real differences, it is necessary to make an assessment as to how correct the term “Locust Years” is to either period of time. While the mass unemployment, economic instability and social unrest of the decades immediately following the end of the Great War were massive factors in establishing the circumstances of the later economic and social unrest in Wales, it would be unfair and a serious misunderstanding of the origins of the term, and applying it exclusively to one period of history could be implied as trying to commercialise the period.

That is why comparisons must be drawn between these two periods, as they share a considerable amount of similarities. Both the social unrest and economic hardship that sprung from them, and the far reaching consequences can be attestable to the lack of appropriate aid given by the government to communities that needed it the most. As we saw in the description of government aid in response to the unemployment crisis, taking a holistic approach allowed for the “inculcation of democracy” (Leeworthy, 2022, Pg. 272), but did little to encourage and expand the industrial areas of Wales, which were the primary employers in the nation and one of the most profitable industries in the entire United Kingdom. Welsh coal was essential for economic growth in Wales, and losing the mines was a serious blow to the continued existence of the communities which relied on them.

The same consequences can be seen several decades later, in the handling and fallout of the miners strike. Daryl Leeworthy notes that, “thousands endured bitter hardship” (Leeworthy, 2022, Pg. 472) for just the hope of retaining the jobs which provided their communities with income and real interpersonal connection, something which is often left out of academic commentary on the subject. Forging community connections through work had been arguably one of the greatest strengths of the Welsh coal mining industries, and allowed for the forging of strong personal connections outside of the boundaries of church, or of other communal gathering spaces. The loss of both the older wings of the Welsh mining communities to old age or illness, and the lack of youth movement into the mines would have doomed these communities eventually, but generations later than what the government under Margaret Thatcher accomplished. The brutal crackdowns that the police forces, coordinated by the extra governmental ACPO, only fanned the flames of their resilience, but the clashes and losses sustained by the Welsh strikers was not enough to stem the tide of mine closures, mass unemployment and the reconstruction of the Welsh economy into what it is today.

To finish this conclusion, it should hopefully have become clear that naming such a brief period of the history of the Welsh economy, and Welsh history itself, the “Locust Years” was a good natured, if still incorrect, choice by K. O. Morgan. Since much of the hardship and circumstances that defined in the mind of Morgan could also be applied to the 1970's and

1980's, it would be more appropriate to call the entire period, ranging from the end of the Great War, to the outbreak of the Miners Strike as the Locust Years, perhaps even as far up as devolution and the creation of the Welsh Senedd.

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