

Dolobran and its like: losing and rediscovering Welsh estates and country houses

*A lecture given by **Professor Prys Morgan** at the National Eisteddfod (Bangor University Pavilion) on Wednesday 5 August 2015 at reproduced with his kind permission.*

This eisteddfod field is next door to Dolobran, the home of a notable branch of the Lloyds. They were descended from ancient Powys families, all claiming descent from the patriarch Aleth, King of Dyfed, but flourishing across this area from the twelfth century onwards. They were related to the Vaughans of Llwydiarth and intermarried with the Blayney line at Gregynog. I came across these families initially when writing the history of Gregynog back in the 1970s. The Lloyds were notable because they were gentlefolk who were also bards, for example, Dafydd Llwyd in the sixteenth century, and, like all these families, they amassed extensive estates in the time of the Tudors, as a result of the changes of the Acts of Union, which forbade the custom of dividing up the inherited lands of the family grouping.

But it was in the seventeenth century that really revolutionary changes hit the Lloyds – they went up to Oxford for their education, and there they not only became anglicised, but they also turned Quaker and suffered persecution in the time of Charles II. One branch went off to Philadelphia and founded the Welsh Tract in Pennsylvania, and another branch started iron foundries on the family lands in Powys, losing a fortune in the process. Yet another branch went to Birmingham and joined Quaker circles there, eventually founding Lloyds Bank. One branch stayed at home at Dolobran, but they were struck by the sort of crisis that was so common among Welsh eighteenth-century gentry, a lack of heirs, and in the end the estate had to be sold.

By 1877 a branch of Lloyds came back from England and bought the old place, restored the old house and the old Quaker meeting house near the old home. It is notable that one member of the family, George Lloyd (1879-1942), Lord Lloyd of Dolobran, an important Conservative politician in his day, was a supporter of the aims of the National Trust to rescue country houses from destruction.

So there we have the Lloyd family of Dolobran, Welsh people moving from their ancient haunts to Birmingham, London and Pennsylvania to become Quakers, industrialists and famous bankers, but who eventually came home to restore the old home and rediscover their roots at Dolobran. The point of my talk today is to show that their story typifies what has happened to the historiography of the country house and country estate in Wales. The ‘Age of the Gentry’ from the sixteenth to the late eighteenth century was a golden age for a handful of families in each county, an age of constructing great houses, fine gardens and splendid parks for hunting, of appointing bailiffs and agents to run these extensive landed estates, of building schools and almshouses, dominating lawcourts and churches in every county, commemorating their families through bardic patronage or commissioning portraits of themselves, or grandiose tombs inside or outside the churches. These are the sort of families Professor John Gwynfor Jones has studied extensively in a series of books on the gentry from 1536 to 1640.

But then there comes a different age, one of divisions and hatreds, a time of withdrawal from their own neighbourhoods. This was seen as early as 1703 by the satirist Ellis Wynne of Lasynys in his *Visions of the Sleeping Bard*, where he laments the ruin of the houses of the lesser gentry as they were swallowed up by the greater gentry, a tendency which increased rapidly during the eighteenth century. By then Welsh estates had become prosperous enough

to be attractive to English suitors to come in search of marriage to the heiresses of the old families. Melvin Humphreys has studied this process here in Montgomeryshire, showing that it contributed to what he calls a rural crisis by about 1800.

Worse was to come, for the middle classes and the common folk looked for ways of wriggling out of the shackles of the noble families, by pushing for religious freedom to worship in their own chapels, and then by pushing for their own political rights, and then after 1868 by turning hostile to their old masters, forcing them to yield power over representation in Parliament, and similarly in the new county councils from 1889-90 onwards. Montgomeryshire is a notable example, with Sir Watkin Williams-Wynn and his family losing control over this county which they had held since the Acts of Union. Professor Kenneth O. Morgan has shown in several works how the gentry were elbowed out of the way gradually between 1868 and 1922. Worse was also to come in another sense, for generations of Nonconformist historians, such as Robert Jones of Rhos-Ian, created an inimical image of the old gentry, to be followed by Radical propagandists such as Thomas Gee with their image of bullying landowners, and then by other writers such as Owen M. Edwards, who created a memorable counter-image of the *Gwerin*, or virtuous peasantry of Wales. Matthew Cragoe has drawn our attention to this long process of creating the grim and hostile image of the gentry, first in his book on Carmarthenshire, and then in his study of the clash of the old order and the new Radicalism in Wales as a whole. It was but a short step to link the hostile image painted by nonconformists and Radicals to the views of the new Left as it arose at the end of the nineteenth century, so that the squires and their estates and the priests and tithe-owners, were all muddled up in a huge bundle of *bêtes-noires* together with capitalist bosses.

In one sense it is easy to see why common people were confused: for example, Lord Penrhyn and the Marquess of Bute were members of the ancient Welsh gentry, but by the late nineteenth century were amongst the richest capitalists in Europe, and living in great castles resembling medieval barons. Melvin Humphreys talks of the 'detached magnificence' of the gentry houses as early as 1800, and this was reflected in the rebuilding of great houses during the nineteenth century, more and more of them in fortified castellated styles. Bronwydd in Cardiganshire, rebuilt by Sir Martine Lloyd, a Welsh speaker who spent a lifetime trying to prove he was Marcher Lord of Cemais, is one example of the sort of house that seemed to keep the modern age at bay. One of the most threatening symbols of gentry power, in my opinion, is the huge walls of the great park surrounding Faenol, just south of Bangor. The main road from Newtown to Caersws used to pass by the front door of Gregynog, but that became a private drive, and the public was kept out of the view of the house.

The twentieth century brought its own horrors and tragedies to the Welsh gentry and their estates: in 1914 when the First World War began, the sons of the gentry saw themselves as Crusaders or chivalric knights leading their tenants off in a feudal array, and as officers of their county regiments led their men (often their own tenants) over the top from the trenches, often dying like flies. After the war many estates were left with no heirs and the houses were sold, for there was no staff left to sustain them. This is the black picture of abandoned houses drawn in the book *The Lost Houses of Wales* by Thomas Lloyd, a descendant of Sir Martine Lloyd of Bronwydd. In 1922 the act of F.E. Smith (later Lord Birkenhead) brought feudal and manorial tenures to an end, and manorial courts which were often run by the agents of the old estates, disappeared, and huge quantities of manorial deeds were thrown away. Perhaps this helps to explain the fashion, which I can recall clearly from my childhood, for everyone to have oak standard lamps or reading lamps with shades stitched together from vellum or

parchment deeds. Luckily some archivists and librarians were wide-awake enough to offer a home to cartloads of redundant manorial documents.

Twentieth-century Wales was a country with a growing web of public bodies, with a great army of *pobol gyhoeddus* or 'public-spirited people', but it is striking that comparatively few of the old gentry played a prominent role any longer in them, although there are several exceptions, Sir Grismond Philipps of Cwmgwili or Sir Cennydd Traheme of Coedarhydyglyn, to take two examples from south Wales. Gentry influence flourished only in one or two fields, such as the Church in Wales, the Lord Lieutenancy, or in societies such as The Cambrian Archaeological Association. Burke said of the French Revolution that 'the Age of Chivalry is dead', and I suppose one could say that for the Wales of the 1920s, the age of the Gentry too had by then finished.

Yet it is now that the third period comes into sight, because the old gentry had ceased, it is possible to have a renaissance of interest in the old subject of the country house and its estate, in an age that knows little of old grudges and prejudices. That is what is so valuable about the project at Bangor and Maynooth, for the two nations have woken up to the fact that a huge chunk of history has disappeared with hardly any study or record. The country houses were not only important in agricultural history but, as was the case with Dolobran, in the history of industry and banking as well. It's possible now to look at the Age of the Gentry with fresh eyes, as though old cataracts have been peeled from eyes formerly blinkered by squabbles of Liberalism and Toryism or by the old divisions of church and chapel, and one hopes, to be able to see the period with little or no prejudice.

It is an old theme which runs through historiography – think of the Italian Renaissance, with its sense of rebirth of the Ancient World after a thousand years or so of neglect. Remember that a hundred years or so have passed since the period described by Herbert M. Vaughan in his classic book *The South Wales Squires* in 1926. W.J. Gruffydd reviewed that book in the journal *Y Llenor* under the title of *Eira Llynedd [Last Year's Snow]*. The world of H.M. Vaughan had, in his view, disappeared, and in sense had sunk into a kind of historical compost, but a compost which is by today rich enough to be dug and from which treasures may be recovered. As happened with the Lloyds of Dolobran, the long years in Birmingham, or Philadelphia, had made it possible for them eventually to come back to refurbish their ancient home. To be sure, nobody is suggesting that our project is intending to bring back gentry rule in Wales, but that they should be allowed to come back to historiographical life, as Welsh history. After all, they ruled Wales for three hundred years, and no country can afford to ignore such an important aspect of its history.

I mentioned above the cartloads of manorial documents taken to the archives in the 1920s after the First War and F.E. Smith's act. There is a vast amount of work to be done not only on individual estates but also in comparing estates with others, and to decide why certain estates are exceptions. For example, I was much struck by Merlin Waterson's *The Servants' Hall*, on the intimate relationship of the squires of Erddig near Wrexham with their servants over several centuries. How typical was Erddig? Another question which needs to be addressed is the failure of heirs during the eighteenth century: was it the result of breeding since the time of the Acts of Union? Did families with few children manage to preserve fairly large properties, and did they in turn marry into similar families with few children, thus resulting in a genetic dearth by the eighteenth century? Or are there other factors? We need the help here of geneticists. Then again, we need to know more of the very small country estates. I've recently read the study by Professor Peter Jackson of the diaries of Margaret

Penderel Jones of Garth, Pontardawe, from 1871 to 1897, and they were a family of Welsh-speaking Anglican gentry owning a couple of farms and the site of a colliery, and yet unconnected to the general stock of old Glamorgan gentry families. Did such families form yet another social class? We also need to study the country house in Wales, although of course there are many excellent studies of individual houses or families. The Royal Commission at Aberystwyth has published several studies such as Richard Suggett's on the houses of Radnorshire. The whole of Wales is now covered by the 'Pevsner' series on 'The Buildings of Wales', which contain a wealth of information on hundreds of Welsh country houses and estate buildings, churches and gentry tombs. We have more than enough raw material to enable our project to give us a full picture of life in the country house and its place in Welsh society.

To conclude, I mentioned a little while back Sir Martine Lloyd of Bronwydd, a remarkable man who claimed to be the only surviving marcher lord, but who spoke Welsh at eisteddfodau and whose family had built a Methodist chapel to counteract the influence of Unitarianism, and I've also mentioned the wonderful work on Welsh houses by his descendant Thomas Lloyd. Mr Lloyd came to London recently to talk to the *Cymmrodorion* on the decline and fall of the Welsh gentry, and it was one of the most successful lectures we had held for many years. When I remarked to him that he had attracted a huge audience he said 'well, of course, now that we as a class have died the death, the historians want to know all about us'. The remark is as true as it is remorseful, but it surely indicates that we have a truly propitious project under way, wouldn't you agree?

Professor Prys Morgan
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