A conversation between Emeritus Professor Ieuan Gwynedd Jones and Richard Glyn Roberts

**Significant features:**

- Nineteenth century historiography;
- The contribution of local history societies;
- The relationship between language and community in the nineteenth century;
- How the working class of nineteenth century Wales created its own leaders.

**When you first started to work on late nineteenth century Wales, it was an area that had hitherto largely been ignored. Can you expand upon the condition of this field of history when you first approached it and what has been done since then?**

The transformation that took place in the field was unique, because it happened relatively quickly. When I started working on the nineteenth century, Gwyn Alf Williams was working on the early years of the century – on riots in particular – and my work followed on from that. Another co-worker in Swansea at that time was Kenneth O. Morgan, now Lord Morgan of Aberdyfi. Now he wrote a masterly book, his first book, on Wales in British politics. An excellent book. And it suddenly happened that these people became leaders in the field. An important book on the history of historiography in Wales from that period is *Merthyr Politics*, by Gwyn Alf, K. O. and myself. It’s a collection of lectures, you see, edited by Glanmor Williams. It’s a good book, although I say so myself. But Kenneth O. Morgan and I weren’t the only ones in Swansea working on the history of nineteenth century Wales. David Jones, D. J. V. Jones, was there too; one of the best historians of our generation, and the author of substantial volumes on Chartism, the Corn Laws and so on. So the transformation was complete and one of the reasons why the change happened so quickly was that money was coming in for research. When I came to Aberystwyth, after two or three years there were always six PhD students in the department studying various fields, but mainly the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

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How would you sum up the contribution of local history societies and their transactions to the history of Wales?

Totally key, a totally key feature. Wales has a long tradition of recording local history. I once started to collect and create a bibliography of histories and historical studies written, mostly, during the first half of the nineteenth century, although some had appeared in the 1870s. They had been written as essays for the Eisteddfod. They are the works of individuals, some showing a remarkable degree of maturity, others, you know, quite feeble. But I learnt that you shouldn’t ignore those either, the pathetic ones. Because they saw things too, they lived and by writing they emphasised the things that they considered important and not what the schools of history or historical fashion claimed was important. There’s an abundance of them – the history of villages, towns and areas.6

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Returning to the nineteenth century, another aspect of the century’s history on which you focussed during the 80s and 90as is the relationship between language and community.7 In your T. H. Parry-Williams lecture, *Ar Drywydd Hanes Cymdeithasol yr Iaith Gymraeg* (On the Trail of the Social History of the Welsh Language) you set the course for the Centre for Advanced Studies’ project on the social history of the language; you were a member of the project’s consultative committee and you later contributed a chapter to one of the volumes in the series.8 You make the point very articulately in the lecture that Welsh was the language of the workers rather than anyone else. This was different from the general perception of Welsh as the language of the pulpit or of literature.

What I was attempting to convey was that the preachers and such individuals would be the first to turn to English. The ordinary people spoke Welsh for much longer than we realize. But people like Lewis Edwards and Thomas Rees were willing, not so much longer than we realise. But people like Lewis Edwards and Thomas Rees were willing, not so much to ignore the language, but were willing to believe that the language was strong enough. But if they had had their way in the 1860s, in my opinion the language would have disappeared by now.

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This brings us back to the formation of social classes. Towards the end of that opening lecture in Aberystwyth9, you discuss the way in which the working class in nineteenth century Wales created its own leaders. Do you think it possible to analyse further the circumstances of the emergence of this élite? Doubtless there was more to it than the cerebral inheritance of some individuals within the proletariat. How do you analyse the emergence of this élite?

It depends on the area that you study and on the socioeconomic structure that exists there. For example, excepting the shopkeepers and craftsmen, there was no middle class in Bala, only estates, which managed the economy, and the rural working class, the agrarian working class – I dislike the word peasantry. As a result, it was the élite within the working class, rather than the middle class, who mediated between the owners on the one hand and the farmers or tenants on the other. If you study those involved in local administration in that area, or indeed in the industrial areas, they are ordinary people, who didn’t consider themselves different, but they were the ones running these communities. And gradually, after 1874 in particular, they deceive themselves into believing that they have formed a middle class. Some sociologists will debate that the function of the middle class was to mediate between the upper and lower echelons of society, but in many instances in Meirionnydd it was the élite within the working class who fulfilled this function.

So how does this élite develop?

It developed because they were already running their own establishments, which were independent of any establishments run by the upper class. The chapels were huge establishments – and not insignificant – and it was the denominations that linked this amorphous working class with the wider world, political organizations in England and new ideas.

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6 The significance of some of this material is discussed in Ieuan Gwynedd Jones, *Communities: the Observers and the Observed* (Cardiff, 1985), a lecture republished in idem, *Mid-Victorian Wales* (Cardiff, 1992).


10 Ieuan Gwynedd Jones, *The Dynamics of Politics in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Wales* (Cardiff, 1971).