

The breaking of *The Dawn*: the rise and decline of Aberystwyth students' first Welsh language magazine, *Y Wawr*

The essentials of what follows can be summarized in one paragraph. In 1913, a group of students at Aberystwyth launched the first Welsh-language magazine in the history of the University of Wales, *Y Wawr* (The Dawn). When material for the spring 1918 issue was with the printers, the College authorities intervened to prevent its publication. The magazine came to an end after 13 issues, and was not revived until after the Second World War.

If there were no more to the story than that, it could be listed with a myriad of other examples of conflicts between stubborn but principled youth and principled but fastidious authority that have always characterized the relationship between students and their institutions. However, the specific history of *Y Wawr* sheds light on the more general change from cultural patriotism to constitutional nationalism in the Edwardian period.

To understand this shift in mental attitude, it is worth asking why was there nothing offensive in the College's English magazine, *The Dragon*. Although only 70 of the 429 students from the University College of Wales Aberystwyth in 1913 came from outside Wales, it is a fact and not a cheap shot to say that one would hardly guess that from its contents. The magazine was by then 36 years old and the English-medium persona of Aberystwyth students was well established. It reflected in essence what was seen in student publications at universities across Britain. The magazine strived to convince his readers that they were experiencing the most enjoyable period that they would ever see and that they should make the most of it. College life was a sociable thing, fed by societies in the sciences and the arts, by games of hockey, rugby and football, innocent jokes about members of staff, and tongue-in-cheek complaints about the quality of their accommodation and early morning lectures. Seriousness was confined to the floor of the *Lit and Deb*, where the more eloquent

could debate for or against the proposition ‘that the Stage has a beneficial effect on the morals of the people’, or to articles on ‘Tolstoy as a Novelist’.

Two things were considered anathema on the pages of *The Dragon*. The first was any mention of party politics, and the second was the lack of any acknowledgment that Aberystwyth College was a part of any society or community outside its own walls. In common with a host of similar publications in the period, *The Dragon* had built a defensive wall around itself. It represented a well-intentioned institution but one that was largely indifferent towards the wider world.

The motivations and values of the students who launched *Y Wawr* were completely different.

The first difference between the two magazines is so important that it deserves a new paragraph to itself, and so obvious that it can be easily be overlooked. Welshness – and the Welsh language as the essence of Welshness – is the direct and indirect topic of everything. When College is mentioned, it is mentioned in its relationship to the Welsh language; when former students who died on the field of battle are remembered, they are remembered as people who has not realised their potential as Welsh-speaking Welshmen; and when opinions are expressed about the broader cause and effect of war, it is done in terms of a linguistic minority drawn into the conflict between worldwide imperial powers.

To understand the other motivations, it may be easier to quote before interpreting and analysing further. Describing its mission, *Y Wawr* says of itself:

It is the product of nationalism awakening in the hearts of students of the University College. Many Welsh students at the College feel the need for a Welsh College magazine to foster a stronger union between the students and the people of Wales. Was it not through the hard work of the people that the University of Wales was created and isn't it our duty to repay them for their labours? We feel that there is a

gulf between members and the University and the people, and one of the aims of the magazine is to endeavour to bridge that gulf and making *One Wales*...¹

The magazine sought to make itself part of two popular patriotic movements in vogue during the first decades of the twentieth century. First, mention of the University's duty to repay the people for their efforts is part of a movement that can be traced through O. M. Edwards, to the cult of the literate peasantry, and manifests itself in W. J. Gruffydd's tribute to the 'Old Quarryman' who 'gave his meagre pennies to build the college', to Edwards' own 'People's Series' of books from 1899 onwards, to the extra-mural departments of the University, to 'The University and the People Series' of books, which began with R.T. Jenkins' *History of Wales in the Eighteenth Century*, published in 1928 and would go on to produce books on economics, philosophy, linguistics, agriculture, the history of literature and theology. *Y Wawr* is one example among many of *noblesse* (academically, at least) *oblige*.

Second, the magazine's title, the mention of an awakening and 'making *One Wales*', stand in the tradition of *Cymru Fydd* [Future Wales]. This is an awakening through cultural institutions: the charter of the University of Wales in 1893 and the creation of the Central Board to inspect schools in 1896, establishing the National Library and National Museum (1907), the Welsh Theatre Board (1911), the Board of Celtic Studies (1919) and University of Wales Press (1922). And, doubtless, the reason why the words *Cymru Fydd* are italicised is a reference to the words of a song by Lloyd George himself, 'One Wales', composed in 1897:

Children of the hills, light is at hand –
Wales's blessed morning is breaking above...

Freedom for education, freedom for work,
Freedom for our Muse, our language will be free,
Freedom for religion to spread through the land,

Freedom for the spirit, which is true freedom;
Children of the hills, we will join in song,
The freedom of blessed Wales will make Wales pure.²

The same notion of awakening suffuses John Morris-Jones's 'Cymru Fu, Cymru Fydd' (Past Wales, Future Wales):

In hill and valley, Wales is awakening...
O, poets, see Future Wales,
See the fair hour of your lustre.

There also, and in countless similar media, contributors to and readers of the magazine discovered their faith in the shared ideas of dawn and service:

Dawn will break, O blessed country,
Do not weep, my happy Wales...

You will raise noblemen – men of distinction,
An aristocracy with the heart
To love you, my fair one,
And love this, your ancient language.³

In addition, *Y Wawr* promoted the other central patriotic message of the first quarter of the twentieth century: that Wales had its own special calling. As its motto it chose 'Ein goreu i Gymru a Chymru i'r byd' ('Our best for Wales and Wales for the world'). The country could not boast of its material wealth or of its size, but it could proclaim the Christian virtues of neighbourliness, humility and purity that come from having no worldly power.

No wonder then that the tone and content of *Y Wawr* differed from that of the *Dragon*, even before war broke out. It was, from the outset, was less frivolous. It considered itself as a publication that served the whole of Wales as it had no intention, in the words of the first opening column, ‘to compete against our nation’s well-known publications’. It also defined itself (a caveat that would never have entered the *Dragon*’s mind) as independent of ‘any sect, party or denomination’. Another significant difference was a place for non-student contributors, not as guest writers but as members who shared in the venture. In the very first issue there was a contribution by every one of the staff of the Welsh Department. Edward Anwyl wrote on ‘The Message of Welsh Literature’; T. Gwynn Jones contributed a pen portrait of a rural character; and T.H. Parry-Williams, in ‘The Crow, the Nightingale and the Mist’, expounded his belief that ‘to express truth in literature is the fruit of extraordinary ability’. In accordance with the belief of the age that there was an almost mystical link between national awakening and the literary awakening brought about by T. Gwynn Jones’ epic poem ‘Ymadawiad Arthur’ (Arthur’s Departure) during the previous decade, the magazine also gave prominence to literature more generally, along with advice on writing clear Welsh. There was even room for these deeply ironic verses by Griffith John Williams:

Better the noise of ferment
Than the chirping of foolish love,
Must it be the fate of the brave to leave the sword
And live in bowers and meadows?

Far from the feeble dawn
We’ll march to a brighter day;
And follow the phalanx of heroes
From the depths of the worthless woods.⁴

The launch of *Y Wawr* was considered not just as a natural extension of college life but also as a victory that was won in the teeth of opposition from the College authorities themselves. It lived from issue to issue, without any security of continuation. As the editorial in the summer of 1915 put it:

We felt rebellious and the period in retrospect could be called one of rebellion. Seeing how the Welsh language was ignored a certain Welshman or Welshmen thought of a Welsh-language magazine. Yet it's fair to say that misfortune (or fortune) broke the link with those who had the vision before the dawn broke. The english-worshippers [*sic*] were stronger and more influential than the Welsh, and the Welsh themselves weren't really united. A million barriers arose. The College rules were strict, or it was maintained that they were so. It was declared that it was presumptuous to challenge them, but as with every romance, success came at last and for the first time the University of Wales had a Welsh magazine. It wasn't backed by any one society. The college senate didn't want it, but the true Welsh of the college supported it and 'Y Wawr' still shines upon us.⁵

But more importantly, perhaps, on the pages of *Y Wawr*, precisely 50 years before the protest on Trefechan Bridge in the same town, young Welsh people learned for the first time that revolution can happen in the name of conservatism.

As a result, the Great War affected the two magazines in different ways. Conscription and slaughter tested *The Dragon's* fun-loving nature. The editors and contributors created something akin to regimental *esprit de corps*. Readers were welcomed back to Aberystwyth in September 1914 with this bittersweet message:

The Session has begun in circumstances of unprecedented gloom; death has been amongst us and War overshadows us increasingly ... Nevertheless, we feel that it is the duty of every one of us to maintain a cheerful courage and to fail in nothing of the zest and enthusiasm which is the very soul of our College life.⁶

The Dragon did not free itself from this tension for the rest of the War. The same dualism can be seen a year later:

This is the Easter Term when our minds are full of we know not what, but not athletics and not even soirées; and when the lighter things of our existence are little more than shadows of what once they were. We who are left have tried to make things go in the

usual way, and not without a measure of success. But when the streets and fields and Coll itself are full of khaki and gowns are rarely seen, and the lights of the Prom are darkened, then we know that while the War lasts, things cannot be quite as they used to be. Nevertheless, let us remain fixed in our resolve to do what in us lies for the common good, and at least to keep the wheels running smoothly, even though the speed be somewhat slackened.⁷

And again, two years on:

For the fourth time this session has opened with the gloom of the war still overhanging us; our heads are bowed in morning for our comrades ... Let us strive to uphold the glorious traditions of our College, and perpetuate the memory of our beloved comrades, by cherishing the institutions they cherished, and by unselfishly supporting the societies they founded and would have us support.⁸

The War added to *The Dragon's* stock of rhetoric – ‘Roll of Honour’, ‘patriotism’, ‘sympathy’ – but the conflict did not disturb its characteristic self-sufficiency. The games and the societies and the leg-pulling continued as before, as a tribute to the fallen.

The dynamics of *Y Wawr* were different. It responded to the War on a conceptual rather than a collegiate level. The overriding feeling was one of disappointment in the German people for allowing its government to attack Belgium. The War, then, became a means of questioning the value of patriotism and, slowly and gradually, unpicking the paradigm. Welshness was not supposed to be a warm feeling but a challenge. The italics have been added:

Y Wawr appeared with the motto, ‘Our Best for Wales and Wales for the World’. Everyone should judge for themselves what is their ‘best’. But we know that there are few who have given their best for Wales. There much talk of ‘Awakening’ and ‘Reviving the Old Country’, and ‘Wales for Ever’. But that isn’t giving ‘our best for Wales’. Patriotism may be despised in the sight of many – *there is hope for it then*; and men, yes, and more than men have been in the minority before now. But patriotism can be fashionable and respectable – and that should be feared.

It is worth remembering before going any further that setting an agenda is not the role of the editor of a college magazine. The annual pattern of change does not allow that. The inevitable role of an editor is inevitably subservient to the agenda that has been set by others. The above

call to show disrespect and take pride in being a minority accompanied an article, 'Y Tri Hyn', ('These Three') by D.J. Williams. Here, in a piece that was ignored by the typesetters in Montgomeryshire, are the real origins of the dispute that killed *Y Wawr*.

By early 1916, D.J. Williams* was 30 years old and already an Aberystwyth graduate studying at Oxford. He, therefore, possessed the romantic authority of a man who had risen



from rural Carmarthenshire, via a period working underground in the coal mines of Glamorgan, to achieve academic acclaim. The 'three' to which his article refers were the three bogeymen of the British yellow press ever since 1914: conscientious objectors (whom he praised for acting out Christ's message to love our enemies), Sinn Féin and the German himself: 'creature of circumstances... surrounded on all sides by enemies'.

Cartoon by R. Ll. Huws (Anglesey) that was published in *Heddiw*, May, 1937

His real target, however, is the link between loyalty and forelock-tugging subservience.

Everything now is loyalty – King, Empire and the honour of Great Britain and Greater Britain. Who but a traitor or a fool would dare say a word against them? ... And by being loyal, what loyalty to the English could the spirit of Wales show that isn't equal to bending a knee to his national god, and refusing completely for the time being, at least, our own lesser and less unimportant ideals in religion, education and sacred nationalism? Doesn't pious Wales today receive the praise of the world through the chief newspapers of the kingdom for her just hatred of the arch enemy of the English? The praise of the whole world for little Wales, remember! Isn't that a tasty dish to dine upon – yes, and the price of the soul of the Welsh nation from the hand of the foreigner at the same time, no doubt. Will this feast once again be the treason of the long knives for Wales, I wonder – spiritual murder?

The turning point in the history of *Y Wawr* was appointing Ambrose Bebb** editor for the winter 1917 issue. His editorial notes are a pattern of how the more militant nationalism that the War had created tried to link Welshness with wider causes. Bebb opens his column boldly. The quotation marks in the second sentence alone would have been enough to condemn him in the eyes of many. More important in terms of the rhetoric of the piece, however, is the feeling it creates of distrust, the truth stifled, and a growing crisis:

These are days of battle – days of anxiety and distress. And when the bells and bugles of battle call ‘heroes’ to kill each other, and when the laws Great Britain throw in prison anyone who dares to think for himself, it is difficult to know what to write and what not to write... There is no freedom to speak the truth in the highways, or permission to speak one’s mind in the more secret corners ... Although *Y Wawr* has now survived many years of the war and the most horrific atrocities that we have ever heard of, we could very well think that, after three years of mourning and sadness, today is the darkest hour.

The remainder of the column veers between hope and anxiety. He welcomes the Russian Revolution and the people there ‘breaking the chains of centuries of oppression’. But things are different in Aberystwyth: ‘We feel, alas, that we are not in a Welch College... The College was intended as a nursery for the ideals and the deepest aspirations of the Welsh people, but, if Welsh life does not receive greater support and inspiration, we fear that it will be their cemetery.’ Some of the students are also blamed for speaking English ‘even as they go to a Welsh class’ and the language is praised as ‘our greatest treasure ... our greatest glory ... our strongest defence. It is more valuable than the mightiest fleet or the strongest army.’ Nationalism is only the beginning ‘of the road to achieving the ideal of loving every nation and every man’:

We must immerse ourselves in the spirit of the prophets of national independence in every age. We should meditate on Mazzini and Thomas Davies [*sic*] so that we have the same vision.⁹

There is a temptation for us to be distracted by overblown rhetoric of anxiety and longing, of treasure and vision, and fail to remark its broader effect. It creates a relativism. It allows

Bebb to combine and compare such apparently different topics as the Communist Revolution, the Welshness of the College, the moral dominance of language over military might, the Risorgimento and Young Ireland.

It is here, in his underlying message that what happens within the walls of the Old College is a part of a more general phenomenon, that Bebb made *Y Wawr* something more than a student magazine. Its fate was sealed.

The end came suddenly with what was intended the first issue for 1918. The copy was sent to the offices of the *Montgomery County Times* for printing, and among the material the staff noticed something that they considered unpatriotic in a time of war. They refused to set it. It isn't clear today what exactly caused offence. The most popular story is that it was an essay by D.J. Williams under the title 'Ich Dien';¹⁰ but it is difficult to reconcile this with the date on the original manuscript (January 1919) and, more importantly, with its contents. Hardly anyone would think of reading it today: the references have lost their significance and the style is laborious. Its message about national servitude and the failure of representation for Wales at Parliament is threadbare and tired. More pertinently, it's difficult to see a clear call to pacifism. The *Cambrian News* of 28 December 1917 mentions that the printers withheld an article (by Williams') and an offensive 'editorial note' (that hasn't survived) by Bebb on Sinn Féin. While the *Cambrian News* was prepared to forgive – 'readers have to bear in mind that the writers for "Y Wawr" are not men of matured [*sic*] judgment and some allowance must be made for the indiscretions of youth'¹¹ – the College authorities were not. Bebb was summoned by the Deputy Principal, Edward Edwards, in December 1917, and was told to resign. Bebb refused and was unanimously supported by the magazine's committee. The scandal went as far as the Houses of Parliament and a question to the Home Secretary.

ABERYSTWYTH COLLEGE MAGAZINE.

Sir J. D. REES asked the Secretary of State for the Home Department whether he is aware that, in the Aberystwyth College Magazine, called "Y Wawr," seditious articles are published in the Welsh language such as are calculated, if not intended, to debauch the loyalty of the students and to impede the prosecution of the War; whether this college receives any Grant from public funds; and whether he will inquire into this matter, in view of stopping the publication of such articles and suitably punishing those responsible for their publication?

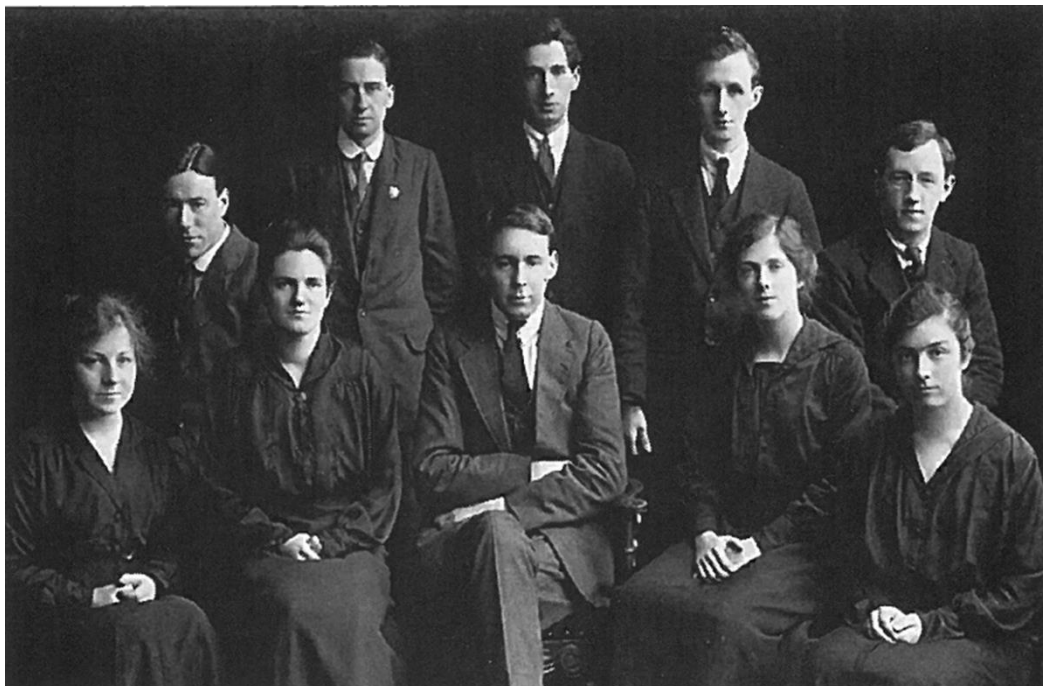
The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sir George Cave): I have made inquiry of the authorities of the college, and I find that no article answering to the description in the hon. Member's question or to that in the newspaper article on which the question was founded has appeared in the college magazine. There can, I am satisfied, be no question of the patriotism of the teaching staff of the college or of its students, the majority of whom are now training ^[1134] for military service, while a large number of the remainder are men who have been invalided from the Army.

Sir J. D. REES: Is not the right hon. Gentleman mistaken? Was not this allegation made publicly in the Press, and not refuted by the college authorities?

Sir G. CAVE: It is for that reason that I have had inquiries made, and I am informed that the article did not appear in the college magazine.

Following another summons to appear before the College Senate, Bebb was forced to step aside, and he was followed by the rest of the committee.

The first thing that the Principal said was that the Editor must resign and that nothing less than that would do ... We told him that there would be nothing political, or of a tendency to disturb the feeble-minded in the next issue. But that would not do. The Editor had to resign. And I was forced to do that, and so did the committee and thus *Y Wawr* [The Dawn] set gloriously under a cloud of College hellhounds.¹²



Y Wawr Committee, 1917-1918. (Taken after they had all resigned)

Back row: T.H. Parry-Williams, T.C. Jones, G.J. Williams, T.G. Thomas, D. Lloyd Jenkins.

Front row: Cassie Davies, Mabel Parry, Ambrose Bebb (editor), Annie Owen, Catherine Thomas.

There was talk, inevitably, of re-launching *Y Wawr*, but by 1919 Bebb was lukewarm. He wrote to D.J. Williams on 1 December:

Like you I am for Wales – a pure Wales, undefiled bright and beautiful, at all costs. But surprisingly few are those who have the same desire as us on the matter. Most of our fellow Welshmen live in a world of dust and ashes, and I'm afraid that that is truer of those inside the College than of those that are not.¹³

And certainly Bebb was in no position to do so by then. He graduated in the summer of 1918, and was about to start on an academic career that would see him before the end of another year at the Sorbonne. It is also doubtful whether anyone else, in 1919, had the will to restart the venture. A student magazine is a frail thing. It relies on the goodwill and energy of volunteers. However the most obvious reason why *Y Wawr* was not re-launched was the passage of time. By 1920 the number of students had nearly trebled to 1,092, and it was difficult to maintain the close-knit community that had previously existed. The same year saw the death of the last supporter of the type of patriotism that had stimulated the original decision: O.M. Edwards' *Cymru* magazine. And with it ended the vision of its founders. 'Longing', 'dawn' and doing 'our best for Wales' were no longer the governing discourse. Silence reigned.

T. Robin Chapman

****Williams, David John (1885-1970)**

Writer, teacher and nationalist campaigner. He left rural north Carmarthenshire to work in the south Wales coalfield in 1902, after which he gained degrees from Aberystwyth and Oxford, becoming a teacher in Fishguard until his retirement. Studies of the Irish nationalist G. W. Russell in *A. E. a Chymru* (1929) and a translation of his *The National Being* in *Y Bod Cenhedlig* (1963). Portraits of characters from his childhood in *Hen Wynebaw* (1934); stories in *Storiau'r Tir Glas* (1936), *Storiau'r Tir Coch* (1941) and *Storiau'r Tir Du* (1949); a memoir of the early days of Plaid Cymru in *Codi'r Faner* (1968).

Hen Dy Fferm has been translated by Waldo Williams as *The Old Farmhouse* (1961, second bilingual edition, 2001). J. Gwyn Griffiths discusses *Storiâu'r Tir Coch* and *Storiâu'r Tir Glas* in 'Earth Green and Red', *Wales*, 4.5 (1944), 20-3.

***Bebb, William Ambrose (1894-1955)**

Historian and politician. After studying history in Aberystwyth, where he was editor of the controversial pacifist student magazine, *Y Wawr*, Bebb spent 1920 to 1925 at the Sorbonne, becoming a supporter of Breton nationalism and editing *Panceltica*, a Welsh supplement to the movement's newspaper *Breizh Atao* from 1923. At the same time, he espoused the French far right, attending meetings of anti-republican *Action Française* movement. He became a founder member of the Welsh Nationalist Party in 1924. As a lecturer in history at the Normal College in Bangor from 1925 until his death, he published popular sequential accounts of Welsh history, especially for younger readers, in *Ein Hen, Hen Hanes* (1932) *Llywodraeth y Cestyll* (1934) *Machlud y Mynachlogydd* (1937) and *Cyfnod y Tuduriaid* (1939), and a more overtly political account of the Act of Union in *Y Ddeddf Uno, 1536* (1937). His most ambitious work on history, loosely modelled on Johan Huizinga's *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, was *Machlud yr Oesoedd Canol* (1950). He was also a productive travel writer, giving accounts of his time in Brittany in *Llydaw* (1929), *Crwydro'r Cyfandir* (1936) and *Pererindodau* (1941). His other work includes a defence of the Sunday School movement, *Yr Ysgol Sul* (1944), a centenary history of his chapel in *Canrifo Hanes y 'Tŵr Gwyn'* (1954) and essays on the 'crisis' of faith and language facing mid-century Wales in *Yr Argyfwng* (1956). Bebb popularized the diary form, as fiction in *Y Baradwys Bell* (1941) and in excerpts from his own diaries: *1940: Lloffion o Ddyddiadur* (1941), *Y Calendr Coch* (1946) and *Dyddlyfr Pythefnos* (1939). The latter account proved explosive. Written in two weeks after his return to Wales on the morning that Britain declared war, it is a stunningly naïve account of meetings with Breton nationalists, recording their plans for (or dreams of) collaboration with the Germans against the French state, and was used as evidence in post-liberation tribunals to convict old friends.

For an assessment, Gareth Meils, 'Ambrose Bebb', *Planet*, 37/38 (1977), 70-9. Georges Cadiou discusses the role of *Dyddlyfr Pythefnos* in the trials of Breton nationalists in *L'Hermine et la Croix Gammée* (2006). *Y Baradwys Bell* and *1940: Lloffion o Ddyddiadur* have been translated in one volume by Marc K. Stengel as *A Welsh Hundred* (2009).

Sources

¹ 'Wrth y Bwrdd', *Y Wawr*, 1 (1913), pp. 1-2.

² Quoted in yn Herbert du Parcq, *Life of David Lloyd George*, Vol. 1 (London, 1912), p. 148.

³ John Morris Jones [sic], *Caniadau* (Rhydychen, 1907), p. 66.

⁴ G.J.W., 'Yr Alwad', *Y Wawr*, 1 (1913), p. 42.

⁵ 'Wrth y Bwrdd', *Y Wawr*, 2 (1915), p. 123.

⁶ 'Editorial', *The Dragon*, 37 (1914), p. 1.

⁷ 'Editorial', *The Dragon*, 37 (1915), p. 117.

⁸ 'Editorial', *The Dragon*, 40 (1917), p. 1.

⁹ 'Wrth y Bwrdd', *Y Wawr*, 5 (1917), pp. 42-4.

¹⁰ The article was discovered amongst Williams' papers that were transferred to the National Library of Wales after his death in 1970, and was published in *Llais y Lli*, Aberystwyth student magazine, in January 1971. The central part in that the article played in the debacle is confirmed by Waldo Williams in J. Gwyn Griffiths (ed.) *D. J. Williams Abergwaun: Cyfrol Deyrnged* (1965) and Cassie Davies in her autobiography, *Hwb i'r Galon* (1973). The same account is accepted by J. Gwyn Griffiths, in 'Ysgrif a Gladdodd Gylchgrawn' ['An Article that Buried a Magazine'], *Y Traethodydd*, CXXVIII, 547, (1973), pp. 114-17, and in Peter Barberis, John McHugh, Mike Tyldesley (editors), *Encyclopedia of British and Irish Political Organizations: Parties, Groups and Movements of the 20th Century* (2000).

¹¹ <http://papuraunewyddcymru.llgc.org.uk/en/page/view/3414046?>

¹² LIGC, William Ambrose Bebb collection. WAB to D. J. Williams, 21.2.18.

¹³ LIGC, William Ambrose Bebb collection. WAB to D. J. Williams, 1.12.19.