

The Davies family and Belgian refugee artists & musicians in Wales

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THE Davies family of Llandinam owed their wealth to David Davies who had made a vast fortune with coal and railway interests in the 19th Century. The grandchildren, David Davies (later the first Lord Davies), Gwendoline and Margaret Davies all developed strong philanthropic interests and a desire to use their money for the benefit of Wales.

In September 1914 the Davies family decided to invite Belgian refugee artists and musicians to settle in Mid-Wales. I hope to demonstrate how this encouragement and financial support was seen not just as a form of patronage towards Belgian artists but as a means of furthering their family's hopes of a cultural renewal in Wales.

In early October 1914 Gwendoline Davies wrote:

'My sister and I together with Professor Tom Jones went to Alexandra Palace the week before last in search for refugees. Our original intention was to get people of the artisan or trades people class but we found that the Roman Catholics are most vigilant and are preventing these people as far as possible from being taken into Protestant homes.'¹

They had heard that many Belgians of the educated classes were also stranded and it was arranged that a party should go over to Belgium to make contact directly. The arrival of the Belgians in Aberystwyth was announced in the local papers on October 7th 1914.

'A contingent of Belgian refugees reached Aberystwyth on Saturday evening by the express train from Euston and received a hearty welcome by inhabitants. It is stated that the adults are distinguished professional teachers, musicians and painters of a high station in life. The maintenance of a large number of the refugees has been undertaken by a well known benefactor.'²

By October Belgian refugees were flooding into Britain and by January 1915 about 1 million (1/6 of the population of Belgium) had fled their country. Of these about 110,000 came to Britain. Early in September a 'Committee for the Relief of Belgian Refugees' was formed as a central organisation and in towns and villages across the country further small committees were set up to organise hospitality for groups of Belgians. Usually they came in families: some were able to finance themselves and those who could afford it invariably preferred to stay near London but many groups were sent to the provinces. Lord Bute offered to provide homes for 3000 refugees in Cardiff and Rothesay.³ In Wales there were offers from Cardigan, Aberaeron, Llandysul, Lampeter and Barmouth to name but a few. At Lampeter a house was found to suit 15 refugees, furniture was provided by gifts from the townspeople and they were able to obtain free food from a local shop.⁴ There was of course a much larger number of women and children as most able-bodied men were expected to enlist in the army. There were problems of finding employment to support so many people and the trade unions were immediately on their guard. For this reason many of the refugees had to live on charity. By January 1915 special workshops were set up to make clothes to be sent to Belgium and sold there so as not to compete with British industry. But on the whole

everything was done to make the refugees welcome in Britain. The *Western Mail* in 1915 even ran a column with the latest news of the war written in Flemish.

The great interest in Belgium generated by the events of the war and the need to raise money gave rise to a spate of lectures, concerts, gift books, art exhibitions and articles about Belgium. *The Studio* in its December 19 14 issue carried the first of three articles on 'Belgian Artists in England'.⁵ The articles were well illustrated if somewhat biased towards certain artists because of the difficulty of obtaining photographs of the work of others. A number of exhibitions were also organised, the most important of which was the Belgian section of the 'War Relief Exhibition' at Burlington House in February 1914. By a piece of luck a representative selection of modern Belgian work had been exhibited in Scotland in 1914 and due to the war had remained in Britain. This formed the core of the exhibition. Further exhibitions of Belgian work were held at the Ridley Arts Club, the Women's International Art Club, the Royal Institute of Water Colour Painters and Goupils. One suspects that some Belgian artists never had a better chance of exhibiting!

In November 1914 *The Welsh Outlook* published a short article on Belgian artists in Wales.

'Probably no part of the Kingdom outside London, has so many distinguished Belgians among its guests as are now to be found in Wales. At their head stand E. Verhaeren,⁶ who is staying at Llwynarthan. A few miles away at Barry is Emile Claus,⁷ Belgium's best known painter. At Aberystwyth we have another able Sculptor, M. Minne,...With him at Aberystwyth De Saedeleer, Van der Woostyne, and L. Petrucci ⁸ all well known names in art circles on the continent.'

But it is the concluding paragraph which is perhaps the most revealing:

'The study of painting and sculpture is in a deplorably backward condition in Wales. Shall we take full and immediate advantage of the unexpected presence in our midst of this brilliant group; take counsel with them; give them facilities to exercise their genius; give our young art students a chance to see their work? What will the three colleges do? and the Art Academies? and the Art Schools? The opportunity is unique but we may be too *parochial* to seize it'.

The article is signed F.P. and was written by Dr. Fabrice Polderman, a Belgian who was apparently teaching at UC Cardiff However, it also reflects a more general policy of *The Welsh Outlook* which was financed by David Davies, and at that time edited by Thomas Jones,⁹ for whom aesthetic considerations were always important. The aim was to provide a monthly magazine for Wales which would stimulate interest in the Welsh cultural heritage but also provide links with politics and culture beyond Wales.

Thomas Jones was an old Aberystwyth student who became a lecturer in Glasgow and Professor of Economics in Belfast but in 1910 had returned to Wales, always his first allegiance, to organise the campaign against tuberculosis funded by David Davies. He was a close adviser of all the Davies family and in September of 1914 he had gone to Belgium with Polderman and W. J. Burdon-Evans, at that time Secretary to David Davies. It was no doubt Polderman who provided the contact with the Belgians.

Madame Gevaert-Minne recalls the event thus:

'One afternoon, my father, George Minne, Valerius de Saedeleer and Gustave Van de Woestijne, met Mr. and Mrs. Petrucci, refugees from Brussels as they were talking in the little village of St. Anna ter Muiden. The Petrucci's just had the visit of Dr. Polderman, a Belgian Professor in Cardiff who came with the fantastic

message from Mrs. David Davies of Llandinam and her daughters Miss Gwen and Miss Daisy Davies: to invite Belgian artists to come to Wales, where they would not only be able to continue their work but also to bring a specific talent to the Welsh people. This idea of the ladies Davies was splendidly philanthropic, one might say they foresaw the union of the peoples and the flourishing of their cultures throughout the world.'¹⁰

In a letter to T.J. (as Thomas Jones was popularly known) in 1933 Burdon-Evans writes:

'You will remember that we went to Belgium towards the end of September 1914 and were there a couple of weeks I think. We visited Ostend, Zeebrugge, Knocke, Bruges, Ghent, Newport, Heyst and Le Zoute. We brought back 91 refugees of the better class, and these were planted mostly at Aberystwyth and Barry. Later, most of those at Aberystwyth were distributed to different places and several families were transferred to the Garden Village of Llanidloes.

Among those refugees were the two ladies De Cazenave, Minne (Sculptor) and Van de Woestyne (artist)...

Mrs. and the Misses Davies bore the whole cost until the party was distributed, and maintained those at Llanidloes. I think there were seven families and that they numbered about 30.

I cannot tell you what the total cost was for the whole period, but it ran into hundreds of pounds. Not only did the ladies bear the cost but, as you know, they took an active interest in the whole thing.'¹¹

During 1915 the *Welsh Outlook* carried numerous references to the Belgian artists including photographs of the artists and reproductions of their work. In May 1915 there was an article on George Minne written by Van de Woestijne and in September 1915 Raffael Petrucci wrote 'The Soul of Belgium'.

The exhibition of work by Belgian artists in the Royal Academy was brought to Cardiff and was one of the earliest exhibitions to be organised by the National Museum of Wales of which the Davies family were important patrons. The Council of the National Museum of Wales purchased three works and another was presented by one of the artists. The Davies sisters also purchased from the exhibition and these are probably the two works by Emile Fabry and Piere Paulus left to the National Museum in the Margaret Davies Bequest in 1963.
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The war had an adverse affect on another of the family's plans for a cultural renewal in Wales. The official inauguration of the School of Instrumental Music at U.C.W. Aberystwyth which Gwen Davies had founded¹³ had had to be postponed because the appointed head of the school Mr. Gaston Le Feuve was serving in the French army. He never really took up the appointment. However in spite of some misgivings Gwen Davies decided to go ahead with the remainder of the appointed teachers who were all French.

Tuition in music had been part of the College curriculum since the very earliest days but had tended to concentrate on singing and choral music. The new school was based on a small professional string orchestra who would give instruction in the instruments but also perform in Aberystwyth and the area. It was characteristic of the Davies that they did not look to Wales, or even England, to find their musicians but rather felt it necessary to import them from France.¹⁴ However there was also a link through Madame Barbier, the wife of the Professor of French. She was a gifted musician and seems to have been very influential in early plans for the group. When in 1916 Gwen Davies decided to withdraw her support for the School of Music mainly because of the war and her feeling that 'energies were more needed elsewhere' Madame Barbier felt very aggrieved. Courses were started at the College in October with tuition in string instruments, singing and piano. Already in the first term there

were 137 pupils of instrumental music. Miss Davies saw the influx of a group of Belgian musicians in Aberystwyth as a useful addition to the recently appointed instrumentalists:

'We thought we would like the more interesting people at Aberystwyth and that some of the musicians would be helpful in starting the projected orchestra along the coast.'¹⁵

At least five of the refugees in Aberystwyth were musicians of whom probably the best known were the brothers Lavoureux: Marcel was pianist to the Royal Court at Brussels, Nicolas was a violinist. Between December 1914 and 1st February 1915 they were among a group of eight Belgian musicians who gave a series of 22 concerts throughout central Wales to raise money for Belgian refugees. The artists were offered an honorarium which was not however paid till 1919 and by that time only one, Mile Fousney, still had an Aberystwyth address though a number lived in London.¹⁶

There were 130 Belgians in Aberystwyth and many apparently enrolled in classes at the College. However there are some indications that all did not run entirely smoothly in Aberystwyth. At the very outset the local people were disappointed at not being allowed to act as host to the refugees in their own homes. It was felt that professional people had to be housed respectably at the Queen's Hotel. Further problems arose a few months later when there was a second inundation of outsiders forced upon Aberystwyth in the form of the Territorial Army. In February 1915 Gwen Davies wrote:

'I am trying to move a few of the Belgians to Llanidloes. The arrival of the troops in Aberystwyth must have complicated things very much. I am sure our troubles with the Belgians dates from their advent.'¹⁷

Of the artists in Aberystwyth the main group had come from a Belgian artists' colony at Sint Marten Latem outside Ghent. These included Georges Minne the sculptor, his wife and 6 children, Valerius de Saedeleer, his wife and 5 daughters and Gustav van der Woestijne, his wife and 4 children (a fifth child was born just after they arrived in Wales and was called 'David' after David Davies).

George Minne was a sculptor of some international reputation by that time. He was the only one of the group whose work was represented in the R.A. and Cardiff exhibitions but as a sculptor it was clearly very hard for him to continue working because of the difficulty of obtaining materials. The Minnes had six children with them, the two eldest boys were in the army, a fact which caused great consternation to the parents and contributed to Minne's difficulty in settling in his new country. They remained at Llanidloes for the duration of the war almost entirely supported by the Davies family. Minne turned to drawings on the theme of mother and child which represented to him the symbol of 'Peace' and during the 4 years produced over 400 drawings which he took back to Belgium. He did however leave one larger piece of work painted on the wall of the house in Llanidloes. After he left the Davies sisters had it preserved behind glass.¹⁸ There are two drawings by George Minne at Gregynog.

Gustav van der Woestijne also went to live at Llanidloes for a time but eventually moved to London where he worked mainly as a portrait painter.

In October 1914 Professor Fleure, then Professor of Zoology, later Professor of Geography and Anthropology, at Aberystwyth had accompanied the Belgians from London to Aberystwyth on behalf of the Davies. At that time he was in the process of re-organising the art collections and museum in U.C.W. Aberystwyth and he enlisted the help of a number of the Belgians in this project for restoration work, cleaning and display. M. Hannard, M. Bernaerts, G. Minne and De Saedeleer are all recorded in the Museum reports.

Of these Valerius de Saedeleer had the most prolonged connection with the town. The family took a house, Ty'n-lôn in Rhydyfelin outside Aberystwyth, and followed a simple and even perhaps 'self-sufficient' lifestyle. Valerius cut a striking figure in the town being a large man who always wore a long black cape and wide brimmed black hat. The daughters attended the county school and the family was well known among local people. De Saedeleer often paid his bills in kind and the doctor, the dentist and his tailor were all given paintings by him in return for services rendered. In February 1916 he held an exhibition in Alexandra Hall (a student hall of residence) in Aberystwyth and his landscapes of the local scenery seem to have become quite popular. He worked in both oil and watercolour using thin washes of paint over carefully designed compositions. In some cases the style is suggestive of the flattening of forms as seen in Japanese prints. The critic in the *Cambrian News* felt the need to warn his readers that M. de Saedeleer 'has the eyes of a primitive'¹⁹ reiterating a point made by M. Buschmann in *The Studio*. During their time in Aberystwyth the family became interested in weaving. The girls even wore clothes of handwoven material. They also made tapestries after their father's designs. These skills brought them employment after 1918 in the newly established Arts and Crafts department in U.C.W. Aberystwyth, another of the Davies sisters projects for the College. The idea of founding an Arts and Crafts Museum and Arts and Crafts Department was the joint brainchild of Professor Fleure, Thomas Jones and the Davies sisters, who gave a capital sum of £5,000 in 1918 to endow the Museum. They hoped that this would give impetus to the development of a craft movement in Wales. The influence of William Morris and the Arts and Crafts Movement of the late 19th century in Britain was still very much alive and the idea of an artists' colony in a peaceful rural setting where artists and crafts people could work together still held many attractions. It was in these very years that the seeds of the idea of Gregynog as an art and craft centre in Wales were germinating.²⁰ Marie and Elizabeth De Saedeleer, the two older daughters, taught weaving, tapestry and binding and at one point the family contemplated setting up a cottage industry to train local people in weaving.²¹ However in 1920 they decided to return to Belgium. According to Professor Fleure the fact that Tom Jones failed to gain the Principalship of Aberystwyth was one of the main reasons why the family decided not to stay on. It may even have been hoped to make De Saedeleer head of the Arts and Crafts department.²² The family set up the business in Etchichove where they named their house Ty'n-lôn after the house in Wales. The firm still survives today producing tapestry and weaving and exhibiting internationally.

During the war the De Saedeleers had given hospitality to a young Belgian soldier, Edgar Gevaert, who had been released from Wrexham Military Hospital still suffering from wounds and shell shock. In 1916 he married one of the daughters of George Minne and went to live at Llanidloes. Gevaert became a painter and the deep impressions left on him during his years in Wales remained as recurrent images in the visionary paintings. One of his finest paintings is called 'Peace' which depicts four children handing to one another the products of the land. On the right side are the mountains of Wales with a Welsh village and on the left the wealth of the Flemish lowlands and a Flemish village. The bible in the middle foreground is open at the 'Sermon on the Mount'. He wanted it to express his debts to both lands and his hopes for the future harmony of the nations. Edgar Gevaert like David Davies was a great idealist and dedicated to the cause of the peaceful co-existence of nations. During the Second World War he was again forced to flee his country partly because of his published writings against war and Nazism.

It is difficult to gauge the effects of the influx of Belgian artists in Wales²³ but one suspects that the early hopes and ideals expressed in *The Welsh Outlook* were hardly fulfilled. However the De Saedeleer family certainly did make an impression on Aberystwyth and may even have been influential in the first plans for the Arts and Crafts Department in U.C.W. Aberystwyth.

It is perhaps not without significance that the core of the group of artists who were brought to Aberystwyth by the Davies sisters came themselves from an artists' community at Sint Marten Latem which had been influenced by the ideals of William Morris. The presence of the Belgians could well have encouraged Thomas Jones and the sisters to plan some kind of similar artists', community at Gregynog.

MOIRA VINCENELLI

Aberystwyth

- 1 Gwen Davies to J. H. Davies October 4th 1914. N.L.W. J. H. Davies MSS. (Corr.).
- 2 Aberystwyth Dispatch, October 7th 1914.
- 3 The Times, September 8th 1914.
- 4 Aberystwyth Observer, November 21st 1914.
- 5 P. Buschmann, 'Belgian Artists in England', The Studio, Dec. 1914, Feb., 1915. April 1915, Colour magazine issued 'Belgian Art in Exile' a portfolio of illustrations of works by Belgian artists in 1916.
- 6 Emile Verhaeren (1855-1916), Belgian poet.
- 7 Emile Claus (1849-1924), painter, member of Royal Academy of Belgium.
- 8 Raffael L. Petrucci, Professor of History of Fine Art, Brussels.
- 9 See T. Jones Papers, Class H. Vol. 4, National Library of Wales Letter 25 gives the actual amounts received from Llandinam. David Davies also vetoed certain articles.
- 10 Madame Gevaert to the author June 1978.
- 11 Letter W. J. Burdon Evans to T.J. 1/11/1933 (Diary with letters unpublished), T. Jones Papers, National Library of Wales.
- 12 Piere Paulis 'La Fuite' 1914. Emile Fabry 'War' 1914.
- 13 Gwen Davies made a gift of £ 300 for 5 years. G. Davies to J. H. Davies, 4th October 1914, N.L.W. J. H. Davies MSS (Corr.).
- 14 G. Le Feuve, M. Henry Delange, M. Camille Dolobelle, M. Charles Turbour, Madame L. Andre Barbier.
- 15 Gwen Davies to J. H. Davies October 4th 1914. N.L.W. J. H. Davies MSS. (Corr.).
- 16 Belgian Refugee Concerts, MS National Library of Wales.
- 17 Gwen Davies to J. H. Davies, February 1915. N.L.W. J. H. Davies MSS. (Corr.).
- 18 Gwen Davies to T.J.
'Blaker went over to see the Minne's frescoes at Llanidloes and thinks them very fine. We should have glass put over them to preserve them.'
T. Jones Papers, Class R. Vol. 2 letter 19. National Library of Wales.
The work is now covered over with wallpaper.
- 19 *Cambrian News*, Feb. 18th, 1916.
- 20 Prys Morgan 'Life at Gregynog between the wars' in *Gregynog*, ed. G.T. Hughes suggests that Thomas Jones had perhaps 'planted the seed of a Morrison craft guild in their minds.' Dora Herbert Jones also recalled that Gwendoline Davies had discussed with her as early as 1916 or 1917 the idea that Gregynog might become the home of a craft guild or community.
- 21 Professor Fleure to T.J. October 10th 1918
'The De Saedeleer family could really organise weaving a winter work for a village and would like to do so.'
T. Jones Papers, Class W. Vol. 7 letter 26. National Library of Wales.
- 22 Professor Fleure to Miss Davies 16th March 1920

'If the De Saedleer family wants to stay I am only too glad to agree. They are valuable to the country. On the other hand I cannot urge them to stay under the circumstances created by Thomas Jones non-election,'

T. Jones Papers, Class W. Vol. 7 letter 68. National Library of Wales.

- 23 This article has concentrated on artists in Aberystwyth area and the Davies family connections but other works of Belgian artists are still extant in Wales most notably perhaps the carvings in Llanwennog Church, Dyfed.

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