

An Uneasy Alliance? Welsh Nationalism and Roman Catholicism

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In 1936 arguably the most significant, symbolic act in the history of modern Welsh nationalism took place. Objecting politically, socially, and most of all culturally to a new Royal Air Force bombing school which was being built at Penyberth on the Llŷn Peninsula in north-west Wales, a group within the Welsh Nationalist Party arranged and carried out an act of arson on the site. Its significance was emphasized by the arsonists voluntarily admitting the offence and entering police custody. The event came to epitomize the nationalist struggle against an oppressive English imperialism, and even today is held as a definitive act in the history of Plaid Cymru. The support and involvement of a number of Roman Catholics would outwardly seem to reveal the considerable extent of Catholic involvement in twentieth-century Welsh nationalist issues. Only six Plaid members were directly involved in the planning of the Penyberth fire. Of these, one, Victor Hampson-Jones, was on the verge of conversion to the Catholic fold, while two were already Roman Catholics: R. C. Richards, the editor of the Welsh Nationalist newspaper, and the playwright Saunders Lewis. It was Lewis, along with Nonconformists D.J. Williams and Lewis Valentine, who carried out the deed.¹ Another Catholic, R.O.F. Wynne, the squire of Garthwin, put up bail for Saunders Lewis.² After an inconclusive trial at Caernarfon, the re-trial at the Old Bailey saw the three perpetrators sentenced to a year's imprisonment in Wormwood Scrubs. While incarcerated, Saunders Lewis was visited by the fully-robed Catholic archbishop of Cardiff, Michael McGrath, who informed the activist that he "approved definitely of the Porth Neigwl action and had let his clergy know so."³ Indeed, there were even those who saw a deeply spiritual, and specifically Catholic, significance in the arson attack. It took place, after all, on the pre-Reformation Pilgrim's Road to Bardsey Island, the island of the saints, while the date of the fire, 8 September, was no less significant. "It was on Our Lady's birthday night that the fire was kindled," wrote the mother of R.O.F. Wynne, Frances Wynne, a decade after the event, "... some there are who see design in that fact which sets a seal upon its essential rightness."⁴

¹ The part of R.C. Richards and Victor Hampson-Jones in the Llŷn plan of action was kept secret for many years. See, D. Hywel Davies, The Welsh Nationalist Party 1925-1945: A Call to Nationhood (Cardiff, 1983), p. 175.

² J.E. Jones, Tros Gymru: J.E. Jones a'r Blaid (Swansea, 1970), p. 177.

³ Mair Saunders Jones, Ned Thomas and Harri Pritchard Jones, Saunders Lewis : Letters to Margaret Gilcriest (Cardiff, 1993), p. 594.

⁴ Frances Wynne, The True Level (Dublin, 1947), p. 86;

The extent of Catholic involvement and interest in the action at Penyberth, however, seems strikingly disproportionate in comparison with the modest number of Catholics in Wales at the time. Although the Catholic Church was experiencing numerical growth, Wales was still very much a chapel-based, Nonconformist society. Moreover, the growth of Catholicism was due almost exclusively to Irish or English immigrants and their descendants. “The Roman Church in the Welsh lands is a small minority,” wrote the Catholic calligrapher and poet David Jones, “and Welsh-speaking Welsh Catholics are a very small minority within that minority.”⁵ An examination of Plaid’s membership lists up to the 1960s, throws some light on the apparent disparity between Catholic numbers and Catholic nationalist involvement.⁶ What is striking, it seems, was not the number of Catholics involved in the nationalist movement, but the prominence of those Catholics who were involved.

Only a minority of Welsh Nationalist Party members were Catholics. Yet, up to the 1950s, the Party suffered some fervent, and occasionally hysterical, criticism because of a common misinformed perception of a strong Catholic presence in its ranks. The reality reveals the bitter irony of the situation. With their unmistakably English or Irish backgrounds, the vast majority of Catholics in Wales had little or no interest in Welsh issues. Their attitude was one of indifference, if not contempt, towards Welsh affairs. With characteristic hyperbole, Saunders Lewis wrote in a private letter to the Clergy Review as late as the mid-1960s that “90% of Catholic priests in Wales and 98% of the Catholic laity have no interest in Wales or any knowledge of its history, and its language is anathema to them.”⁷ The Welsh language was regarded as posing a critical threat to both parish life and Catholic education. English was the language of Catholic parishes and schools, and the “xenophobes” within Welsh nationalism were believed to threaten unity and mission within these spheres.⁸ Furthermore, the elitist nature of the Welsh Nationalist Party, with its right-wing policies and its largely intellectual and pseudo-aristocratic leadership, further alienated the faithful. The vast majority of Catholics in Wales were, after all, working-class supporters of the Labour party. The strong political streak of anti-socialism within the Plaid was therefore anathema to them. While they, and British Catholics generally,⁹ welcomed the establishment of the welfare state in 1946, Catholic Welsh nationalists, in keeping with the ethos of the party, were highly critical. Catherine Daniel, for example, condemned the move as de-humanizing because it would discourage personal responsibility in favor of a dependency culture,¹⁰ while Archbishop McGrath claimed that any efforts which catered purely for man’s material welfare while ignoring his moral inadequacies “are not worth the paper on which they are written.”¹¹

Most Catholics, then, regarded the Plaid with contempt, both for its elitist ideology and its Welsh cultural emphasis. A year before the Penyberth action, an editorial in the popular Catholic weekly The Tablet was scathing of the “hot-bloods and die-hards of extreme and almost monolingual Welsh Nationalism,”¹² while two years later in the Welsh

⁵National Library of Wales Archives : David Jones Papers Box 1/1.

⁶ National Library of Wales Archives : Plaid Cymru Papers (e.g. File H56, H57, H65).

⁷ Menevia Diocesan Archives (Saunders Lewis Box).

⁸ Cf. The Tablet, 21 Dec. 1963, 1381; Western Mail, 17 Feb. 1960, 4.

⁹ Adrian Hastings A History of English Christianity 1920-1990 (London, 1991), p. 476.

¹⁰ Conversation with J.P. Brown.

¹¹ Michael McGrath, Cardiff Advent Pastoral 1941.

¹² The Tablet, 17 Aug. 1935, 197.

Catholic Times, Pasco Langmaid of Cardiff claimed that Welsh nationalists “represent the legalism of the modern Pharisee. They have no idea of setting people free.”¹³

Despite the overwhelming number of Catholics who opposed or ignored any attempts at forging a specific Welsh political identity, it was, in fact, the vocal and active minority that held sway in Welsh thinking in this period. It was because of their prominence that, right up to the 1950s, the Plaid was hounded by the accusation that it was a Papist party.¹⁴ Saunders Lewis had been chosen as Plaid’s President in 1926, the year of its official establishment. Although he did not become a Catholic for another five years, his early ideas and policies idealized pre-Reformation Wales as a golden era. By the mid-1930s, Catholic prominence within the Party had reached its zenith. Saunders Lewis, as party president, had written five out of the first seven Plaid pamphlets, and up to 1939 was the editor of Plaid’s Welsh-language newspaper Y Ddraig Goch. For a year, he was also editor of the English-language party newspaper, The Welsh Nationalist. His editorial successor at the latter publication was another Catholic, R.C. Richards of Boverton.¹⁵ The extent of Catholic prominence within the Plaid is reflected in the fact that some issues of this publication contained articles written by Catholics alone. Alongside articles by Lewis and Richards themselves, Catholic contributors included Catherine Daniel (the wife of Plaid’s vice-president and staunch Congregationalist J.E. Daniel), T. Charles Edwards (the history master at Ampleforth Abbey and great-grandson of the prominent Nonconformist theologian, Lewis Edwards), R.O.F. Wynne (a descendent of aristocratic Protestant forbears), and T.P. Ellis (the distinguished judge and former Anglican from Dolgellau).

It is not easy to explain why this Catholic minority achieved such distinction in Plaid. What is clear is that the great majority of those Catholics who took a leading role in the Party were native converts to the faith. They were, by and large, already prominent in nationalist circles before they embraced the faith. It was, then, nationalists becoming Catholics, rather than vice versa. There was admittedly a small number of Catholics of Irish and English descent who were attracted to Welsh nationalism, often as a result of interest in Irish nationalist issues. These rarely achieved prominence within the Plaid itself, although they were well known among its members. The group included Archbishop Michael McGrath of Cardiff and the Franciscan Fr Rudolph, who in the 1960s was moved out of Wales by his order for his alleged support of the extremist movement, the Free Wales Army.¹⁶

Paradoxically, Welsh Catholic prominence in the Plaid was also the result of a willingness to use the English language in efforts to promote the Party. In an anglicized Church, the application of the English-medium in this way was aimed both at cultural evangelism among Catholics outside the Party, and at assisting those minority of Catholics of English and Irish descent who had embraced Welsh nationalism. It is, therefore, with little surprise that we compare the dearth of material written by Catholics in Y Ddraig Goch (barring, of course, Saunders Lewis’ writings) with the copious articles written by the faithful

¹³ Welsh Catholic Times, 21 Jan. 1938, IV.

¹⁴ Cf. Trystan Owain Hughes, Winds of Change: The Roman Catholic Church and Society in Wales 1916-62 (Cardiff, 1999), pp. 71-80.

¹⁵ R.C. Richards was a teacher in the north of England, before returning to Wales to farm. He edited The Welsh Nationalist from 1936 to 1941 cf. Jones, Tros Gymru, 83, 177.

¹⁶ Conversations with J.P. Brown and John Daniel; Fr Rudolph continued his support of Plaid from Crawley monastery in Surrey (National Library of Wales Archives : Plaid Cymru Papers File H57).

in The Welsh Nationalist. Catholics such as T.P. Ellis of Dolgellau and Walter Dowding of Brynmawr¹⁷ in the 1930s, and J.P. Brown of Llangollen and H.W.J. Edwards of the Rhondda in the 1950s, became well known for their English-language efforts to promote nationalist issues. Edwards was even instrumental in the establishment of a Plaid branch with an “all English language rule.”¹⁸ A final point which can help explain the prominence of Catholics within Plaid is that, consistent with the contemporary trend outside Wales, Catholic converts were found primarily among the intelligentsia. Thus, in a party with an elitist ethos, such intellectuals were natural leadership material.

An explanation as to why this minority of Welsh nationalists embraced Catholicism is less complex, though admittedly nuanced. While these converts insisted that their entry into the Catholic fold was for religious reasons alone, the close alliance of their nationalistic and religious tendencies cannot be ignored. In The Tablet in 1985, Saunders Lewis described his nationalism as “rather like a religion” and summarized the movement as spiritual, religious, and cultural at heart.¹⁹ For him and his fellow Welsh converts, Christianity and nationalism were clearly intertwined.²⁰ It was frequently emphasized that the role of nationalism, and of the Plaid in particular, was both to preserve Welsh culture and to help return Wales to a Christian order.²¹ The root of Wales’ problems was, after all, to be found in the nation’s post-Reformation disunity and the rejection of Papal authority. In the words of the Welsh Catholic Times, it was “the great and inglorious Deformation” which had “destroyed the soul of the Welsh nation.”²² Likewise, for Victor Hampson-Jones it was the loss of Catholicism, not merely the loss of political independence, which “arrested the development of our historic community.”²³ In the Middle Ages, on the other hand, Europe was a civilization united by the Catholic faith, and, within this harmonious unity, individual cultures flourished. Wales was, therefore, both a part of the “United States of Europe” and also a definite national entity in its own right.²⁴ While eighteenth-century Methodism was deemed to have returned Wales to a pseudo-Catholic spirituality, the dire consequences of “the disruptive force of the so-called Reformation” were unmistakable.²⁵ These could be witnessed both in the moral degeneration of the secular age and in the cultural wilderness Wales had become. Only through a return to a united European and world order, within the Catholic fold that had in the Middle Ages nurtured Wales’ language and culture,²⁶ could a truly nationalistic and religious spirit ensue. Secularization and Anglicization were regarded as the mutual enemies of God and Wales alike, and so a religious counter-reformation and a cultural restoration were therefore seen as complementary. The unmistakable consequence of this, in their view, was that the Catholic Church needed the Plaid, and the Plaid needed the Catholic Church.

¹⁷ Jones, *Tros Gymru*, 83.

¹⁸ Alan Butt Philip, The Welsh Question: Nationalism in Welsh Politics 1945-1970 (Cardiff, 1975), p. 88; this was in the Rhondda in 1959 and saw Edwards as secretary.

¹⁹ The Tablet, 14 September 1985, 951; Cf. Menevia Diocesan Archives (Saunders Lewis Box).

²⁰ Menevia Record, 12/3 1965, 10-14.

²¹ Cf. The Tablet, 11 Jan. 1964, 50; 15 March 1969, 278; 28 Oct. 1972, 1023.

²² Welsh Catholic Times, 15 July 1932, II.

²³ National Library of Wales Archives: Victor Hampson-Jones Papers 6.

²⁴ Welsh Catholic Times, 2 Dec. 1932, II; cf. Welsh Catholic Times, 8 Jan. 1932, II.

²⁵ Welsh Catholic Times, 2 Dec. 1932, II.

²⁶ Cf. John Barrett Davies in Welsh Catholic Times, 26 Feb. 1932.

While such concepts can be viewed as explaining, to some degree at least, Welsh nationalism's relationship with the Catholic Church in the twentieth century, there was nothing original or unique in the new order that Welsh Catholic nationalists propounded. These ideas were very much in line with post-Reformation European Catholic political thought. A popular accusation against Saunders Lewis' political teachings was that they were rooted in the convictions of Charles Maurras and his quasi-Catholic Fascist group, *Action Française*. This was, in fact, unsubstantiated,²⁷ with Dafydd Glyn Jones noting that there is little evidence of any significant *Action Française* influence on Lewis' politics.²⁸ There is certainly no reason to doubt the sincerity of Lewis' persistent denial of such accusations. "To the *Action Française*," he wrote as early as 1927, "France exists against Europe. For *Y Ddraig Goch* Wales does not exist except as a part of Europe."²⁹ Ironically, however, such a belief was more indicative of traditional Catholic social and nationalist thought, than the thought of a group which had suffered Papal denunciation. Similarities in the political thought of Welsh nationalist Catholics and of nineteenth-century French, German, and Spanish Catholics are certainly striking. There is even evidence that a number of Welsh Catholic nationalists, such as Victor Hampson-Jones, were well acquainted with such Catholic thinkers.³⁰ Saunders Lewis and his Catholic compatriots can, therefore, be placed alongside Victor de Bonald, Novalis (Friedrich von Hardenberg), Friedrich von Schlegel, and Juan Donoso Cortes, in their quest for a specifically cultural and spiritual (rather than merely political) nationalism. These thinkers likewise considered the Middle Ages to be an ideal, when a unifying religion formed the basis of European society thus allowing individual cultures to flourish. Lewis' "Principles of Nationalism," while admittedly written before his conversion, should therefore be regarded as an important milestone in Catholic nationalist thought, comparable with Novalis' "Christendom or Europe" (1799),³¹ De Bonald's "Essay on the General Interest of Europe" (1814), and Schlegel's "The Regeneration of Christian States and Nations" (1827),³² a fact hitherto apparently ignored by both Catholic and Nationalist historians.

Although small in number, then, the prominence of Catholics within the Welsh Nationalist Party in its formative years ensured a lasting legacy. While many of Saunders Lewis' policies were modified in Gwynfor Evans' post-war reorganization of the Party, Lewis' emphasis on the importance and centrality of Europe, which was perpetuated by his fellow Welsh Catholics, has remained an integral part of Party policy. Plaid's recent success in the national assembly elections was fought on the premise of Wales existing, in the words of Lewis himself nearly eighty years earlier, "as a part of Europe." In light of the earlier, almost hysterical fear of the influence of Catholicism in the party, it is certainly ironic that a

²⁷ The accusations were rejected by Catholics and ridiculed by some of the more discerning non-Catholic critics e.g. the poet T. Gwynn Jones cf. National Library of Wales Archives: E. Morgan Humphreys A/2085; Ambrose Bebb, a prominent voice in early Plaid though not a Catholic, was admittedly an admirer of Maurras.

²⁸ Cf. Dafydd Glyn Jones, "Aspects of his work: His politics," in ed. Alun R Jones and Gwyn Thomas, *Presenting Saunders Lewis* (Cardiff, 1973), pp. 23-78.

²⁹ '*Llythyr Ynghylch Catholigiaeth*', *Y Llenor*, Summer 1927.

³⁰ National Library of Wales Archives: Victor Hampson-Jones Papers 6.

³¹ Although Novalis never actually converted to Catholicism, his "Christendom or Europe" portrayed "the spiritual unity of the Middle Ages" and was "a glorification of the age of faith and papal domination" (John B. Halstead, *Romanticism* (London, 1969), p. 122).

³² Epilogue to his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*.

policy so reminiscent of continental Catholic nationalist thought has become the touchstone of Plaid policy. Of course, the central factor in both Welsh and European Catholic nationalist thinking – that it was Christianity, and specifically Catholicism, which could reunite Europe and nurture individual cultures – has now been lost completely, replaced by a markedly secular, socio-economic emphasis.

Indeed, despite their prominence and lasting influence, Catholic Welsh nationalists themselves felt little more than rejection and alienation in the early years of the Plaid. To those outside the Party, they represented both a religious menace and a temporal, crypto-fascist threat to Welsh society; to many within the Party, their unpopularity was believed to be stifling progress and damaging morale; to the great majority of Catholics in Wales, they were simply regarded as extreme and xenophobic hotheads. By the end of his presidency, Saunders Lewis himself certainly believed he had been victimized for his Catholic beliefs,³³ while the words of Victor Hampson-Jones as late as the 1970s summarize the sense of despair felt by himself and his fellow band of Catholic Welsh nationalists. “I am,” he wrote, “a religious oddity to Welsh-speaking Welshmen, a linguistic fanatic cum heretic to Catholics, I am unacceptable to the Welsh and publicly condemned by the Catholics.”³⁴

³³ *Taliesin*, 2 (1961), 14-15; cf. Philip, *The Welsh Question*, p. 21.

³⁴ National Library of Wales Archives: Victor Hampson-Jones Papers 6.