

# WELSH BAPTISTS

## IN AN AGE OF REVOLUTION

1776 - 1832\*

The fifty or sixty years from 1776 to 1832, between the American Declaration of Independence and the Reform Act, constituted an extraordinarily lively and fascinating era. Positively seething with energy of every description, spiritual, intellectual, cultural, political and material, it was truly an age of revolutions: the American Revolution, French Revolution, Industrial Revolution and Agrarian Revolution. It was no less an age of revivals: the Methodist Revival, Evangelical Revival, Romantic Revival and Antiquarian Revival. In some minds, the prospect raised of far-reaching changes awakened rapturous welcome; in others, it provoked the direst alarm at the possible outcome.

In the intellectual sphere the eighteenth century had been unmistakably an Age of Reason and Enlightenment.<sup>1</sup> If, in the process, reason had replaced authority in science and philosophy, why should it not do so elsewhere, men argued. Why not in the realms of religion, morals, law, politics and the economy? Overall, the advocates of the Enlightenment aspired to set the individual free from all of what they saw as his shackles. They wanted to release him from the ignorant traditionalism of the papal Middle Ages and even the narrowness of Reformation doctrine; from the bondage imposed by autocratic monarchs and established priesthoods; from the blinkered conventionalities of outmoded law, morality and economic practice; and from the cramping fetters of out-dated political institutions and shibboleths. That accomplished, men would be set on the road to secular, rationalist and progressive individualism. Such notions percolated extensively into the sphere of religion. Here they assailed not only Catholicism but Calvinism as well; both were regarded as intolerably gloomy, pessimistic and outworn in their view of the nature of human sinfulness and the divine purpose. This livelier curiosity had further induced much speculation about aspects of past literature, history and culture, sparking off an influential antiquarian revival.<sup>2</sup> But nowhere, perhaps, were the effects more innovative or disruptive than in the fields of political and economic life. There they gave rise to the American Revolution first, and then to the still more volcanic French Revolution, which convulsed so much of the modern world.<sup>3</sup> These political revolutions had been accompanied by another equally productive of change in the shape of the Industrial Revolution. No one could be in any doubt that this was an age of profound and lasting transformation.

Examining the fate of Baptists in general and of Welsh Baptists in particular in the midst of this maelstrom of ferment and transfiguration raises two questions of some difficulty for the historian. First, how far were Wales and Welsh Baptists affected by all this? Second, assuming that they were influenced, how is the historian to measure its impact upon them?

Did Wales feel the force of change?<sup>4</sup> It was a remote, upland country, with appalling communications, on the periphery of Europe, of Britain even. Its people were mostly small farmers and labourers, living in thinly-populated, isolated communities, with few towns or centres of population. Most of them were illiterate or barely literate, and too poor to be able to buy books. Being mainly monoglot Welsh speakers, they tended to be sealed off by their language against outside

---

\* This paper was presented to the Baptist Historical Society as the Annual Lecture 1989.

influences advocating change. That, however, is not the whole story. There were other circumstances that assisted the penetration of ideas. Wales may have been on the periphery, but there were close contacts between English and Welsh Baptists; a two-way traffic warmly encouraged and maintained. The Baptist College at Bristol<sup>5</sup> was a key factor in this respect. Drawing something like half its students from Wales, it sent many of them into English churches. From these churches they kept in close touch with Wales and exercised a notable influence. The two Bristol principals, Hugh and Caleb Evans, father and son, were Welshmen and both were regular attenders and preachers at Assemblies in Wales. Some of their outstanding pupils, like William Richards of Lynn,<sup>6</sup> Benjamin Francis, or Thomas Llewelyn, were men of the same sort. Others, like Morgan John Rhys<sup>7</sup> or Joseph Harris (Gomer),<sup>8</sup> though ministering in Wales, acknowledged their profound debt to Bristol. On the question of literacy, the Circulating Schools of Griffith Jones had, between 1737 and 1761, taught an estimated 300-400,000 of the Welsh to read. Many more books, mainly religious in character, were now being published in Welsh and were being bought by people of widely differing social origins. Nor was the Welsh language such an insuperable barrier. Many of the Baptist ministers, the men who really counted as leaders and opinion shapers, had an excellent knowledge of English and read widely in it.<sup>9</sup> They were also eager to produce literature in Welsh for their compatriots to read. A particularly noteworthy point is that Welsh Baptists, as we shall see, took the lead in evolving a Welsh periodical press for regular and systematic instruction. It may, therefore, be confidently averred that Welsh Baptist ministers were intimately acquainted with current ideas and able to convey them to their flock. How readily their congregations responded is a much more difficult question to answer. But, measured by the rough and ready test of how quickly Baptist churches grew in numbers, the influence of the ministers was considerable. For if these were the years of what economists call 'take-off' in the Industrial Revolution, they were also the years of 'take-off' in the history of the Baptist denomination in Wales.<sup>10</sup>

But how is the historian to assess the effect on Welsh Baptists of these swift-moving intellectual and spiritual currents? Should he concentrate on the typical or the exceptional members of the denomination? Is he to attempt a photographic recording of the events and activities that loomed largest at the time? Or is he to 'zoom in', as it were, and focus only on those aspects, quantitatively less significant then, but which were potentially decisive for the future? There is a real temptation to try to play the role of the prophet in retrospect and single out the men whom the future would acclaim for special, even undue, attention. Let me illustrate what I mean by reference to Christmas Evans and Morgan John Rhys. Christmas Evans is undoubtedly the best-known Baptist of this age; yet Morgan John Rhys was the most intelligent and forward-looking. Rhys was forgotten for most of the nineteenth century until Thomas Shankland revived his memory. Now he is in danger of becoming the Welsh Baptist who absorbs all the attention of historians attracted by the modernity of his radicalism.<sup>11</sup>

What I have in fact tried to do is to maintain a balance between what interested Baptists of the period at the time and what, with the benefit of hindsight, tends to preoccupy us. Like all those who go in for balancing acts, I can hardly hope not to fall flat on my back from time to time; when I do, I hope you will forgive me. I shall try to present, as far as that is possible in the space of an hour, the broad spectrum of Welsh Baptist views and interests, ranging from theology through moral, social and cultural issues, all the way to political and economic matters. I shall try to indicate where different Baptist groups and individuals stood in relation to them. Needless to say, there was no consensus; no such thing as 'the Welsh Baptist viewpoint'. Indeed, Baptists may have been more divided amongst themselves than any

denomination. I shall try to depict their views in the light of their own standards and not those of the twentieth century. To dismiss or patronise the moral values of the past is usually conceited, sometimes calamitous, and nearly always short-sighted. Nevertheless, I believe that history should do more than feed an antiquarian curiosity. Unless it adds to the sum of our understanding of present as well as past concerns, it is not serving as valuable a purpose as it might. History does not repeat itself; it is historians who repeat one another! But a study of the past can and should present us with wisdom and comprehension of a generalised kind, if not with instant and sure-fire solutions to contemporary difficulties.

Since it was to theology that the men of that age would have given priority, we might begin with debates involving theological issues. The earlier part of the eighteenth century had already been the scene of bitter and prolonged controversies between Calvinists and Arminians within the Baptist denomination.<sup>12</sup> After 1689, the spread of Arminian notions had been encouraged by the emphasis placed by Dissenters on reasoned intellectual and theological discussion, by greater religious freedom in Britain, and by more adventurous speculation by contemporaries. The seedbed of Arminianism in Wales was Carmarthen Academy, where radical opinions of many kinds flourished. Some of the Baptist students there not surprisingly tended to imbibe Arminian inclinations towards free will and election and to disseminate them among the churches. There were other deep divisions between Baptists and other denominations over the question of infant and adult baptism. A fresh and more intense outbreak of all these controversies occurred towards the end of the century.<sup>13</sup> Some involved the perennial disagreements over baptism. Here, Christmas Evans and Titus Lewis were well to the fore in replying hotly in print to the views of a lapsed Baptist, Peter Edwards. Other controversies, showing clear traces of the influence which the spread of ideas deriving from the Enlightenment had on some Baptists, could be regarded as potentially much more damaging. It is noticeable that men like William Richards of Lynn, or William Williams, J.P., of Cardigan, or even Morgan John Rhys, who came most strongly under the inspiration of the traditional sources of seventeenth-century Dissenting belief, were also those most open to the rationalist tendencies of their own age. They were deeply suspicious of Methodism, with its emphasis on 'high' Calvinism and its belief in the wholly sinful nature of man. Like Joseph Priestley, they believed that established Christianity had been corrupted down the ages as a result of priestcraft. They wanted to see it restored to its pristine gospel state. Though they did not end up as Deists, or Unitarians like Priestley, they had moved some distance in the direction of such ideas. They stubbornly resisted all attempts to impose a strictly-defined Confession of Faith within the denomination. It might perhaps have been expected that there should have been heated debates between William Richards of Lynn and Joseph Harris (Gomer) when we remember that the latter made his reputation as a theologian as a result of his furious onslaughts on Priestley's Unitarianism.

There were also deep divergences between 'high' Calvinists and those of a more moderate complexion. The General Baptists separated from the Particular Baptists on account of their belief that Jesus died for all men and not just for the elect. In North Wales, J. R. Jones of Ramoth, though he accepted the five basic Calvinist tenets and even the three Persons of the Trinity, could not believe in the eternal filiation of Christ.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, he led an exodus of some importance which considerably weakened the struggling Baptist cause in North Wales. Another interesting figure was the gifted J. P. Davies of Tredegar.<sup>15</sup> A splendid preacher, devoted evangelist, and heavily committed to the missionary movement, he was profoundly influenced not only by Andrew Fuller but also by the wider liberalising movement of the period. He wished to return to a more moderate Calvinism, which

implied preaching to all sinners and not only to the elect. About the same time Micah Thomas, who was to be principal of the Baptist College at Pontypool,<sup>16</sup> shared many of his views. Conversely, some of their contemporaries, including the great Christmas Evans,<sup>17</sup> had taken up a very 'high' Calvinist position indeed, believing in a kind of quantitative calculus of the Atonement, which held that it was exactly, mathematically equivalent to the amount needed to save the elect.

Unnecessarily heated, subtle and intense these debates may now seem to us to have been. Some of the conduct on both sides may also appear to have been unjustified, even perhaps unchristian. Much of that with which they concerned themselves may look like the casuistic splitting of the finest of the theological hairs. Indeed, it sometimes looked like that at the time. Many Welsh Baptists deplored the bitterness of the arguments. Morgan John Rhys was one who disliked bickering over the fine points. He wanted to see the 'full gospel preached as against men's traditions' (pregethu'r efengyl berffaith yn erbyn traddodiadau dynion)<sup>18</sup>; in his insistence that it was a man's moral code not his creed which counted, he was very much a man of the eighteenth century. The eloquent blind preacher, Daniel Davies, could not help being struck by how little substance there might be in these impassioned controversies. When he preached the same sermon in Tredegar and Hengoed, two centres violently opposed to one another in their views over Fullerism, he found that what he had to say was welcomed in each for very different reasons.<sup>19</sup> In fairness, nevertheless, we should bear two points in mind when reviewing these debates: it was an age when theology mattered intensely, when it seemed to be literally a matter of life and death to establish the truth as against Unitarians, Deists, and sceptics; and second, these dissensions, however impassioned, did not seem to impair the success of the churches. Welsh Baptist numbers grew from about 1,600 in 1760 to over four times that number (7,058) in 1794, and they grew faster again in the first thirty years of the nineteenth century.<sup>20</sup> Controversy was obviously one of the symptoms of vitality not inertia. And yet, looking back at the fury of some of these rows, it is hard not to put in a plea for charity and tolerance towards one another. Can any one individual or group indeed claim to encompass the whole of God's infinite truth within the span of limited human mentality? Additionally, one cannot avoid concluding, as one looks back at these disputes, how dated many of them have come to appear with the passage of time.

The eighteenth century was not only the Age of Reason, however; nor was it an age when scepticism completely triumphed. Even the rationally-minded Edward Gibbon confessed his amazement that the majority of his countrymen were so 'fondly attached', as he put it, 'even to the name and shadow of Christianity'.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, from the middle of the century onwards there was an unmistakable reaction, a revolt even, against the dictates of reason. An appeal was heard with increasing force to the 'inner voice' of emotion and sensibility, of the heart as well as the head. Not only among philosophers like Rousseau and Herder, but also in the ranks of believers. It took particularly powerful hold among the Methodists in England and Wales. They were convinced that, in spite of the depravity of man's nature as the result of original sin, Jesus's death had made it possible for the unregenerate sinner to become capable of sudden conversion through divine grace. To bring this about, the Christian preacher must lend himself completely to God's will so that divinely-inspired eloquence could evoke in his listeners a certainty of salvation and an immediate sense of holiness. By graphic appeals to the emotions of their hearers, the Methodists wanted to bring them to the heat and tears of the furnace of the spirit through which they themselves had passed. There, by raising the emotional temperature to boiling-point, they sought to melt the mould of the old Adam and release the new man born again in Christ. Moreover, they believed it necessary to go on preaching in the same

## THE BAPTIST QUARTERLY

way so as regularly to rekindle the experience of those already converted.

Methodists were not the only people susceptible to such fervent appeals to the heart and the emotions. Such concepts of the role of preaching and conversion, of prayer, hymn-singing, and individual testimony, began to percolate gradually among the older Dissenters too. They started to move away from rationalism and increasingly to conceive of themselves as an evangelising and proselytising church. From the 1770s onwards this becomes more and more true of Welsh Baptists. There were to be a number of developments symptomatic of the new approach. There was the mission to North Wales in 1776; the proliferation of new churches founded from what had previously been the localised branches of mother churches; the increasing activity in the industrialising areas; and the emergence of powerful, new-style preachers like Christmas Evans, Daniel Davies (Felinfoel), Titus Lewis, or Gabriel Rees.<sup>22</sup> All this was not a simple matter of copying Methodist modes but rather of Baptists themselves feeling the attractions of the same forces that moved the Methodists.

Not that the new trends found favour among all Welsh Baptists. Some of those most firmly embedded in the older Dissenting traditions expressed intense distaste for the *tân dieithr* ('alien fire') appearing in their midst. Richards of Lynn hotly denounced Methodists, and William Williams of Cardigan was dismissive of preaching which awakened only the emotions and neglected to provide regular sustenance for the intellect.<sup>23</sup> Men of this kind were also suspicious of the Methodists on account of their political conservatism and their association with the Established Church, from which Welsh Methodists did not part until 1811.

No matter what hostility they may have aroused in some quarters, the new approaches contributed enormously to the amazing success of the denomination in the second half of the eighteenth century. True, the population of Wales increased from 480,000 to 586,000 between 1750 and 1800 but this rate of increase was far outstripped by the growth in the number of Baptists. Two hundred or so ministers were produced between 1775 and 1800, as compared with only 60 or so between 1750 and 1775.<sup>24</sup> Practices similar to those of the Methodists did not alone account for such growth but they were the most important single reason. Expansion instilled a new confidence, enthusiasm, and outreach in the denomination. Individual churches breathed a fresh zeal, and the regional assemblies met more regularly and were attended by larger numbers. These were the aspects of activity which awakened the liveliest interest and commitment among all Welsh Baptists at the time. Present-day historians may find their attitudes towards political or social issues most interesting, but these would have been regarded by Baptists of an earlier age as no more than secondary offshoots of their labours as men called to spread the Kingdom of God. We cannot fail to be impressed by the extraordinary élan shared by all Welsh Nonconformists at the time; not only in Britain but in the wider world as well. The 1780s saw the great drive against the Slave Trade get under way, then regarded much as apartheid is nowadays, as a shame on the Christian conscience. The 1790s were the years when the Baptist Missionary Society was founded. They were also the years when Morgan John Rhys and others were impelled to extend their efforts to bring the Indians and negroes of North America within the Christian fold.

Mention of activity to ease the burden of the slaves and other oppressed peoples brings us to consider another powerful urge observable not only among the Baptists but also among many other Christian groups - the widely-based crusade for moral and social reform. This derived from a number of different sources which might, at first sight, have seemed incompatible with one another. Yet all of them, in different ways and to differing degrees, shared a common concern to raise the standard of morality. To achieve that end, men of very varied standpoints might work together.

## WELSH BAPTISTS IN AN AGE OF REVOLUTION

Their concern sprang not only from a Christian sense of compassion and fraternity but also partly from eighteenth-century Enlightenment. The latter looked upon earlier ages as a time of poverty, oppression, ignorance and obscurantism, the remains of which ought to be cleared away. There might be many different kinds of people still suffering from oppression and being deprived of the natural rights of man. Among them were slaves and the victims of the antiquated legal and prison system. There were widespread demands for the emancipation of the slaves and for reforms along the lines advocated in Beccaria's best-selling book of 1764, *On Crimes and Punishment*, which urged that punishment should be corrective and not vindictive. Some of these considerations deeply moved old Dissenters, strongly susceptible to rationalist argument. But one of the most influential sources of inspiration was the Evangelical Revival within the Church of England.<sup>25</sup> It united men of many denominations in its social attitudes and was prepared to work even with free thinkers to achieve reform. Avoiding the pitfalls of theology and dogma, concentrating on the social implications of Christianity, Evangelicals aimed at raising morals and bringing about social improvement.

There had been grave problems among the poorer and more neglected sections of the population throughout the eighteenth century. Sincere Christians were all the more perturbed because of the debauchery and cynicism that were widespread among the upper classes and their failure to set an example to the lower orders.<sup>26</sup> The growth of population and the rise of industry served only to give the issue a more pressing urgency by the 1780s. In 1787, two years before the French Revolution broke out, George III was induced to issue a proclamation condemning sabbath-breaking, blasphemy, drunkenness, obscene literature and immoral amusements. The outbreak of the French Revolution and the drift to war made the need to press moral reform all the more critical. The best answer to the threat of French revolutionary atheism was to steep the whole population in true Christianity and an intimate knowledge of the Scriptures. Evangelicals and their allies were generally agreed that at least an outward respect for the Christian moral and social order ought to be imposed on all.

The moral problems as seen by Welsh Baptists and others were surprisingly similar to those of our own time and remind us, if we need reminding, how intractable human nature can be. The unholy trinity were violence, drunkenness and debased entertainments. Resort to violence could be viewed as including warfare, slavery, fist-fighting, and child and wife beating; while cruelty to animals embraced cockfights, dogfights, bull and bear baiting, and the like. Richards of Lynn was one of a number of Baptists who condemned the contemporary 'delight in war, profit from the slave trade, and keeping Indians in close captivity'.<sup>27</sup> Alcohol at this time 'spread a pestilence of hard liquor across Europe', accompanied by prostitution and other evils - the words are those of a Marxist historian, Professor Hobsbawm.<sup>28</sup> In the industrial districts of South Wales drink was unquestionably the worst social problem, and Joseph Harris (Gomer) was particularly severe on it and its consequences in the pages of *Seren Gomer* after 1814.<sup>29</sup> The emergence of the temperance movement from the 1830s was rightly believed to be one of the strongest pillars of the Baptists and other Nonconformists. As to immoral entertainments, perhaps a word or two should be said about the attitude of Welsh Nonconformists towards music and dancing. They are frequently censured for having had an unnecessarily narrow attitude towards these essentially harmless pastimes. But they did not appear to contemporaries to be so innocuous when they were usually associated with over-indulgence in drink and sexual licence.

To combat such problems and to raise the general level of moral awareness, nothing was regarded as more valuable than the formation of Sunday Schools and the

regular reading of Scripture. The Baptist, Morgan John Rhys, was outstandingly zealous and active in this context. Owing much to the example of English Sunday Schools, he was convinced that they, together with the preaching of the gospel, constituted the 'best method of putting an end to the shameful sins of the country'.<sup>30</sup> His efforts awoke widespread interest among his fellow-Baptists. Equally important was regular Bible-reading. For that to be successful there had to be widespread dissemination of Bibles among the poor. Hence the enthusiastic support among Welsh Baptists for the activities of the Bible Society, founded by Evangelicals in 1804. Gomer was notably warm in his praise for the Society as the sovereign antidote to the Deism and unbelief of radical revolutionaries like Tom Paine.<sup>31</sup> Closely associated with these exertions to achieve moral reform was support for social improvement in the field of prison and legal reform. Demand for such changes commanded considerably wider support than that for political reform, which was confined to a small minority. This would have been true even of such advanced reformers as Richards of Lynn or Morgan John Rhys. A moment's reflection will help us to understand why. The application of Christian beliefs to moral and social conduct was more immediate, and its relevance clearer and more certain, than in the political sphere. Nor, of course, did it carry any suggestion of disloyalty or lack of patriotism, as demands for political change were almost bound to do once the country was at war with France.

Another eighteenth-century movement which might not appear to have close connections with religious belief but which had significant implications for Welsh Baptists was the Antiquarian Revival.<sup>32</sup> Finding its inspiration among London-Welsh patriotic societies, it administered a vigorous stimulus to a revived interest in Welsh language, literature, antiquities and history. Affection combined with utility caused its effect to radiate among Welsh Baptists. Welsh was their own language in which they had been brought up to worship and believe. Furthermore, they knew that if they were to influence their countrymen they would have to do so through the only language that most of them knew - Welsh.

Prominent Baptist exiles in England, like Hugh and Caleb Evans, 'ever loved and honoured Wales',<sup>33</sup> while Joshua Thomas of Leominster became the Welsh Baptist historian *par excellence*. Another, Thomas Llywelyn, described Welsh as an 'ancient, expressive and sonorous language',<sup>34</sup> and Richards of Lynn and Titus Lewis both made eminent contributions to Welsh lexicography. Virtually all the ministers were aware of the importance of literacy and schools, if their flocks were to understand Baptist principles. Similarly, when Gomer encouraged the formation of patriotic societies in Wales during the second decade of the nineteenth century, he did so for religious and moral reasons as well as patriotic ones. But the decisive contribution made by Welsh Baptists was the founding of periodicals. The *Cylchgrawn Cynmraeg*, founded by Morgan John Rhys in 1794,<sup>35</sup> and *Seren Gomer*, founded by Gomer in 1814, were crucially important.<sup>36</sup> *Seren Gomer*, the first lastingly successful Welsh periodical, marked a stage common to many European peoples in encouraging an awareness of nationality. It was also vital in the creation of an informed public opinion on religious, moral, social and political issues. The practice of regular reading which it encouraged involved a quantum leap forward for the transition of a society, in which knowledge was transmitted by tradition, folk-lore, and even superstition, to one in which up-to-date information was more thoroughly and systematically acquired by a process of regular reading. One of the sadder aspects of the last twenty or thirty years in Wales has been the decline of the Welsh denominational press, Baptist newspapers included.

Finally, we come to consider the attitudes of Welsh Baptists towards politics. Long before the outbreak of the French Revolution they were, like many other

## WELSH BAPTISTS IN AN AGE OF REVOLUTION

Christians, markedly divided in their political views. That was not to be wondered at: it is a mistake ever to expect that there will be a consensus in these matters. The most we can aim for is that there should be enough understanding and compassion among us to accommodate our differences. Given the seventeenth-century background from which the denomination had emerged, it might have been expected that Welsh Baptists, like their fellows elsewhere, would have been keen on civil liberty, especially the equality of Christians before the law, and on political freedom. Some of them certainly were. Although there was a good deal of deferential, possibly over-deferential, loyalty to the Hanoverian kings, there were also those Baptists who realised that the Established Church occupied a place of political as well as religious dominance. They perceived it to be one of the strongest buttresses of the existing political order and realised that since 1660 Church and State had been, and still were, natural allies in keeping Dissenters in a place of inferiority and inequality. So when George III, unlike his Hanoverian predecessors, began to move in a Tory direction, it was not surprising that men like Hugh and Caleb Evans should voice their criticisms - in Wales as well as England. They called not only for the defence of existing liberties but also for their extension.<sup>37</sup> The outbreak of the American Revolution in 1776 was welcomed by Welsh Baptists in America and by their kinsmen on this side of the Atlantic. Professor R. T. Jenkins always insisted that it was the American Revolution and not the French Revolution which created the greatest impact on Welsh radicals; their attitude towards the French Revolution was the effect of their radicalism and not its cause.<sup>38</sup> When revolution broke out in France in 1789, the first reactions of Welsh radicals were those of extravagant welcome. But the long-term effect of the wars against Revolutionary and Napoleonic France was virtually to snuff out all sympathy for radical political causes.

It should be remembered, however, that even earlier there had been stiff opposition in some quarters to all ideas of political reform. Much of the seventeenth-century radicalism in religion and politics had already withered in the first half of the eighteenth century, when Welsh Baptists became a sect largely content with keeping their own beliefs alive amid their own enclosed circle. As time went on, the increased emphasis on the depravity of unredeemed man, emanating from the 'high' Calvinism in their own ranks and from Methodising influences, had led many to abhor optimistic ideas such as the 'natural' rights of man or the beneficent working of divine providence. They concluded that body and soul were antithetical and that it was the duty of a Christian to reject the world rather than to try to sanctify it.<sup>39</sup> That was a view that was to have a long history and is still not entirely extinct. But the most damaging blow to sympathy with the ideals of liberty, fraternity and equality was the slide towards terror in France and the wars which lasted from 1793 to 1815 with only a short break. Even after the wars had ended, the majority of Welsh Baptists were conservative in outlook, and those who still called for reform were radicals of only a very mild order.

Perhaps the clearest and most helpful way of disentangling reactions to politics may be to divide the period up into five phases and comment briefly on each: (a) the impact of the American Revolution; (b) the decade 1780-89; (c) the French Revolution, 1789-93; (d) the wars, 1793-1815; and (e) the years from 1815 to 1832.

(a) Since there was no historical precedent to which the Americans could appeal, they had to base their revolution on 'natural rights'. Men like Caleb Evans or William Richards, who conceived of themselves as being in the Puritan and 'Old Whig' tradition, might therefore have been expected to warm readily to the American Revolution. They were particularly impressed by the freedom the Americans enjoyed in the realm of Church-State relations. They saw their transatlantic cousins as emancipated from the tyranny of an Established Church and fully releasing the



energies of a people largely inspired by Puritan convictions.

(b) In the years that followed from 1780 to 1789, radical Baptists pressed for a comparable achievement in their own country. They wanted to see first, the establishment of equal religious status among all citizens; second, the extension of civil liberty; and third, the removal of any restrictions imposed by formal creeds and confessions. A man like Morgan John Rhys envisaged the United States as a model polity which ought to be widely emulated, in spite of some deficiencies, like its treatment of Indians and negroes.

(c) When revolution came to France in 1789 the predictable reaction among advanced Welsh radicals, like those everywhere else, was one of rapturous delight. While Richards of Lynn did not believe that French methods were necessarily either desirable or appropriate in Britain, he was nevertheless convinced that the case for parliamentary reform had now become 'an imperious and indispensable necessity'.<sup>40</sup> The reactions of his younger colleague, Morgan John Rhys, were uniquely interesting. He saw opening up before him the undreamed-of possibility of destroying the influence in France of the most reactionary established church of all, the papal church, and replacing it with true Christianity. For centuries, he believed, Catholic kings and Catholic priests had between them made of Christianity a tyrannical conspiracy designed to share the spoils between them. Rhys therefore tried to set up a society that should be a mixture of missionary and Bible Society. In 1791 he actually went to France to promote the teaching of the gospel and the dissemination of Bibles. As late as 1794 he founded his journal *Y Cylchgrawn Cynmraeg* and in its pages was eloquently advocating all the most advanced political and economic views.<sup>41</sup>

(d) However, the advent of the Terror in France and the outbreak of war in 1793 was to prove disastrous for the hopes of the radicals. France was the age-old enemy against whom so many earlier wars had been fought, and the alarm and horror caused by the Terror and the slide towards atheism added to feelings of hostility and panic. In vain did Richards of Lynn try to defend the French in his pamphlet of 1794, *Reflections on French Atheism and English Christianity*. Morgan John Rhys, despairing of the situation in Europe, emigrated to the United States in 1794. The situation became all the more desperate at the time of the attempted French invasion of Pembrokehire in 1797 when Welsh Baptists were accused - quite falsely - of being in league with the invaders.<sup>42</sup> The possible horrors consequent upon a successful invasion were depicted at their most lurid; only complete victory over godless France could guarantee safety. By 1800 most Welsh Baptists would have agreed with the English Baptist preacher, Robert Hall, when in his famous sermon of that year he denounced modern infidelity, by which he meant the principles of the French Revolution.<sup>43</sup> Long wars against Napoleon only intensified anti-French sentiment since he was regarded as an ally working hand-in-hand with the Papacy to destroy all aspects of British freedom. It seemed as if this long period of warfare had finally extinguished radical political opinions among Welsh Baptists.

(e) The end of the wars in 1815 was followed by a long period of acute economic and social dislocation. The majority of Welsh Baptists appeared to be deeply apprehensive of the prospect of violent revolution. They were rendered all the more cautious by their dependence in some instances on industrialist leaders and their officials. Most of them would probably have agreed with a highly conservative declaration signed by Christmas Evans and seven other ministers in 1817: 'we do cordially hate the political leaven of Cobbett, Tom Paine and other radicals. Our duty is plain before us, namely, to fear God and honour the King.'<sup>44</sup> Not all Welsh Baptists took so timorously conservative a line. Tattered remnants of an older and bolder attitude were still to be found; there were still mild and cautious radicals among them. Leading figure among these reformers was Gomer, who placed the pages of his *Seren*

## WELSH BAPTISTS IN AN AGE OF REVOLUTION

*Gomer* at their disposal. Typical of their standpoint was Micah Thomas, in a position to influence many young men as principal of Pontypool College. In a well-known letter to Lord Normanby he declared himself to be opposed to violence yet concerned with social justice and 'the unflinched and devoted advocate of Reform'.<sup>45</sup> In the run-up to Catholic Emancipation (1828) and the Reform Act (1832), the Baptist periodicals *Seren Gomer* and *Greal y Bedyddwyr* were guardedly but unmistakably in favour of reform.<sup>46</sup> Baptists, though not as radical as they had been before 1793, still had a social conscience and a bent towards reform. Moreover, they had been prominent among Welsh Nonconformists in pioneering the methods that were typically to achieve great nineteenth-century reforms: the build-up of an enlightened public opinion, the establishment of a Welsh-language periodical press, the publication of pamphlets, the organisation of public meetings, and the founding of voluntary societies. All these techniques were to reap an abundant harvest as the century progressed.

Briefly to sum up, then, what are we to say in general about the attitudes and standards of Welsh Baptists during these years? A minority of them believed that Christian principles must be applied to all aspects of life, including political institutions. In the hopeful and palmy days before the outbreak of the French wars, some of them had taken up radical positions as advanced as any in Britain. As late as 1794 Morgan John Rhys had boldly continued to advocate the most liberal and forward-looking opinions on the whole spectrum of political issues. Admittedly, the reaction between 1793 and 1815 undermined such optimism, but did not utterly extinguish it. Even in the dark days after 1815 a tiny flame of reforming instinct still survived, warm and bright, to help kindle the great fires of Victorian Nonconformist Liberalism.

Though other Welsh Baptists could not proceed along the road to political reform, a majority were agreed that the acceptance of the Christian Gospel had its implications for moral conduct and social behaviour. They had no doubt that the level of morality needed to be raised and that believers must give a lead and set an example in that respect.

But, finally, the one thing that united them all, in spite of their many differences, was that they gave their top priority to the spread of the Gospel and the preaching of the Word. *Gomer* and Priestley might be implacably locked in theological and social debate; nevertheless, of Priestley it has been rightly said, 'Religion was the core of his life and the propagation of what he believed to be true Christianity the main object of his labours',<sup>47</sup> while *Gomer* just before his death declared that it was his Christian ministry which had been the 'sweetest delight of his mind and the greatest joy of his heart'.<sup>48</sup> If all the Welsh Baptists of this era cherished a common concept of freedom, it was the freedom from sin and bondage that came as a result of God's grace through the saving merits of His Son.

### NOTES

1. The literature on the subject is overwhelming, but three particularly useful general guides are P. Hazard, *European Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, Pelican, 1965; Basil Willey, *The Eighteenth-Century Background*, Pelican, 1962; and Norman Hampson, *The Enlightenment*, Penguin, 1982.
2. P. T. J. Morgan, *The Eighteenth-Century Renaissance*, 1981.12
3. R. R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution*, 2 vols., 1959, 1964.
4. R. T. Jenkins, *Cymru yn y Ddeunawfed Ganrif*, 1931; G. H. Jenkins, *The Foundations of Modern Wales: Wales, 1642-1780*, 1987.
5. G. F. Nuttall, 'Welsh Students at Bristol Baptist College', *Trans. Hon. Soc. Cymmrodorion*, 1978.
6. R. T. Jenkins, 'William Richards o Lynn', *Trafodion Cymdeithas Hanes y Bedyddwyr*, 1930. Note: there are entries on all the leading figures among the Baptists in the *Dictionary of Welsh Biography* down to 1951, 1959.
7. J. J. Evans, *Morgan John Rhys a'i Amserau*, 1935; J. T. Griffith, *Morgan John Rhys*, 1910.
8. Glanmor Williams, 'Gomer: Sylfaenydd Ein

## THE BAPTIST QUARTERLY

- Llenyddiaeth Gyfnodol', *Grym Tafodau Tân*, 1984.
9. T. M. Bassett, *The Welsh Baptists, 1777*, is an outstandingly good study of all Welsh Baptist history.
  10. T. M. Bassett, 'Trobywnt y Ddeunawfed Ganrif', *Traf. Cym. Hanes y Bed.*, 1967.22.
  11. See, for instance, G. A. Williams's stimulating book, *In Search of Beulah Land*, 1980.
  12. Bassett, *op.cit.*, chap.iii.
  13. G. M. Ashton, 'Llenyddiaeth Ddadleuol y Bedyddwyr, 1800- 1810', *Traf. Cym. Hanes y Bed.*, 1960.
  14. *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*, Jones, John Richard.
  15. D. R. Phillips, 'J. P. Davies, Tredegar', *Traf. Cym. Hanes y Bed.*, 1927.
  16. D. M. Himbury, *The South Wales Baptist College, 1957*.
  17. See his *Neilltuolrwydd y Brynedigaeth, 1811*, especially.
  18. Evans, M. J. Rhys, p.152, cf. pp.155-6.
  19. Phillips, *Traf. Cym. Hanes y Bed.*, 1927.
  20. Bassett, *op.cit.*, 1967, p.29.
  21. Hampson, *Enlightenment*, p.131.
  22. Bassett, *Traf. Cym. Hanes y Bed.*, 1967.
  23. R. D. Hughes, 'William Williams, Y.H.', *Traf. Cym. Hanes y Bed.*, 1945-7.
  24. Bassett, *Welsh Baptists; Traf. Cym. Hanes y Bed.*, 1967.
  25. E. Halévy, *History of the English People in 1815*, Pelican, 1938.
  26. Glamor Williams, 'Griffith Jones, Llanddowror', *Pioneers of Welsh Education*, 1964.
  27. J. J. Evans, *Dylanwad y Chwyldro Ffrengig ar Llenyddiaeth Cymru, 1928*.
  28. E. J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution, 1962*, p.202.
  29. E. T. Davies, *Religion in the Industrial Revolution in South Wales, 1965*; Williams, 'Gomer'.
  30. Evans, M. J. Rhys, p.58. *Tafodau Tân*.
  31. Seren Gomer, 1819, pp.91, 267, 282.
  32. Morgan, *Eighteenth-Century Renaissance*.
  33. Nuttall, *Trans. Cymmwr.*, 1978, p.182.
  34. *Ibid.*, p.183.
  35. Evans, *Dylanwad y Chwyldro Ffrengig*.
  36. Williams, *Tafodau Tân*.
  37. Bassett, *Welsh Baptists*, pp.108-111.
  38. *Traf. Cym. Hanes y Bed.*, 1930.
  39. K. S. Inglis, *Churches and the Working Classes in Victorian England, 1963*, p.304.
  40. Jenkins, *Trafodion Cym Hanes y Bed.*, 1930.
  41. *Y Cylchgrawn Cymraeg, 1794*, *passim*.
  42. E. H. Stuart Jones, *The Last Invasion of Britain, 1950*, chap.vii.
  43. Halévy, *History of English People*, p.49.
  44. *North Wales Gazette*, 27 March 1817.
  45. David Williams, 'Micah Thomas and the Chartists', *Traf. Cym. Hanes y Bed.*, 1950.
  46. Thomas Evans, *The Background of Modern Welsh Politics, 1936*, chap.iii.
  47. Willey, *Eighteenth-Century Background*, p.163.
  48. Williams, *Tafodau Tân*, p.242.

**GLANMOR WILLIAMS** *Professor of History at University College, Swansea, 1957-1982*

### SOME OF JOHN RYLAND'S BOOKS

In the course of a systematic but far from complete examination of the hundreds of boxes of tracts preserved in the Congregational Library (now at, and administered by, Dr Williams's Library), which I undertook some years ago, the following items were noted by me as having been formerly in the possession of John Ryland. There are probably others.

*Account of the late success of the gospel in the province of New-York, Coventry (N.Y.), 1765.* D c 14

*Account of the proceedings and debate, in the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, 27th May 1796,* Edinburgh 1796. The gift of the Rev. Dr Erskine. D c 9

Evans, Caleb, *British freedom realized*, Bristol 1788. From the author. A f 17

Horsley, John, *Eternal life viewed by Christian believers*, Northampton [1788]. The gift of the author. A h 1

Spring, Samuel, *Sermon preached at the Ordination of the Rev. Pearson Thurston, Pastor of the Church in Somersworth, Dover (N.H.) 1792.* Given by the author to Dr Jonathan Edwards. From Dr Jonathan Edwards to John Ryland, Bristol, Jan.1794. In the passage (p.17) 'the theological well is deep, and we have nothing by which we can draw up fresh and pure water except hard study', before the last two words Ryland has inserted 'prayer &'. B h 13

Thomson, John, *The Nature of true Religion*, Edinburgh 1792. The gift of Dr Erskine. B i 2.

GEOFFREY F. NUTTALL