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'LLAIN Y DELYN: FELLOWSHIP HOUSE, Y TYMBL AND ITS RELATION TO THE QUAKERS IN BRITAIN'

(University of Birmingham unpublished M.Phil. thesis, 2001)

Accompanied by numerous appendices – including a concise history of Quakers in Wales, and another considering the use of the Welsh language by Friends – this thesis uses the case study of Llain y Delyn, Fellowship House in Y Tymbl, South Wales, to examine the ultimate failure of Quakerism to gain and sustain Friends in the region. At the centre of the thesis is an account of a rupture between Presbytery and grassroots Calvinist Methodism in Y Tymbl, caused by the socialism and unorthodox theology (God as trinity of concepts; Jesus as mortal) of chapel minister Tom Nefyn Williams. Devotion to their inspirational minister led the congregation to break from the host church, before Williams returned to a more orthodox position and the worshippers chose to part company with him. Similarities and sympathies between the 'Nefyn Group', led to an association with the Quakers that lasted the lifetime of the Y Tymbl Fellowship House (1928-1994). Despite this, and several approaches by Llain y Belyn, The Society of Friends chose not to convey member status. The lacklustre approach was symptomatic of the wider inability to establish a firm footing in Wales, which, the author has argued, was due to a fundamental lack of cultural understanding. Quakerism manifested as an English faith with middle-class and Anglo-centric concerns. Friends were uncomfortable with notions of nationalism and did not appreciate the dominance of the Welsh language, nor Welsh traditions of religious practice.

Keywords: Tom Nefyn Williams; George M. Ll. Davies; E. P. Jones; Calvinist Methodism; Ebeneser Chapel; Wales; Tumble; Anglo-centric; social gospel; socialism

Useful for: people interested in the history of Quakers in Wales; historians of Dissenting religion and Left politics in Wales; genealogists and others looking at Y Tumble, its religious life and culture; exploring nationalism in the British Isles and Welsh identity; discussions of unorthodox theological thinking in twentieth-century Wales and Methodism; people interested in the links between Quakers and other faith groups; for those seeking information about the tensions that can arise between grassroots, regional and national faith bodies

Section 1

Introduction

A short passage stating the subject of the thesis – the 1928 rift between Reverend Tom Nefyn Williams and the Calvinist Methodist Church of Wales, resulting in the establishment of Llain y Delyn, Fellowship House, Y Tymbl – and explaining its structure.

Section 2

Nationhood, national identity and Quakerism

In part using wider historical and cultural scholarship, these pages introduce Welsh identity and the tensions between its character and the Anglo-centricism of London Yearly Meeting. The author has alluded to the unease with which Quakers have approached nationalism, recognising it as a progenitor of progress, as well as potentially repressive, and inferred its connection to the World Wars (pp. 5-7). The Anglo-centricism of London Yearly Meeting ‘was not from any wish to denigrate, but simply because there was no real need to pursue or even debate’ its representation as of English identity (p. 7). It is argued that localities therefore inherently framed Quakerism and Britain as English. As such, this hampered conceptions of the faith in Wales.

Religion and national identity

Evangelical Dissent shaped Welsh national identity in the nineteenth century. Religious attendance reached 74% in places in 1851, helping to promote strong communities, compared to the English/ Welsh average of 35% (p. 10). Wales also displayed uniqueness in its political leanings, returning all but one of the Liberal Party’s MPs in 1906. Despite this backdrop of nonconformity, Quakerism made little impact.

Quakers and Welsh Identity

Westminster recognition of Wales as a distinctive region developed only gradually and was evident in discussions surrounding disestablishment: the removal of the Church of England from Wales. The Anglo-centricism of Quakerism (perhaps aided by English in-migration), the lack of ‘an effective Welsh body’ and a miniscule membership (295 in 1897) had meant that, whilst consulted for the 1908 Royal Commission on the Church of England in Wales, the faith had little to say and did not consider the nation and its language of any import. The case study of Fellowship House, ‘Llain y Delyn’, Y Tymbl –

extant between 1928 and 1994 – therefore provides ‘an insight to some of the difficulties that challenged Friends’ in Wales (p. 14).

Section 3

Y Tymbl

The Carmarthen village of Y Tymbl (English name, Tumble) is in the midst of South Wales mining communities, though in an area that retains its own specific characteristics, in particular in its small settlements knitted tight by kinship and Welsh-speaking. Y Tymbl hosted several chapels, including a Calvinist Methodist chapel, Ebeneser, which, between its 1902 opening and 1908, garnered 164 worshippers, 212 Sunday-school attendees, and 350 part-members.

T. N. Williams – Tom Nefyn [1895-1958]

These few pages present a biography of Williams, one of the ministers at Ebeneser, a leading protagonist in the subject of the thesis. Against a backdrop of evangelical Revival, Williams trained to become a minister. He was ordained in 1925 and appointed to his first ministry at Y Tymbl.

Tom Nefyn, Ebeneser and Experimentation and Conflict and Challenge

The Presbytery knew Williams wanted to be an agent for change. Establishing a social gospel, he became a supporter of miners in a labour dispute and protested about conditions in local coal company houses and won stalwart local support, including from E. P. Jones, a bastion of the Y Tymbl congregation until 1974. William’s socialist politics and personality issues generated an official challenge to his ministry, though it was theological differences concerning modernisation and the privileging of humanism (see discussion, pp. 26-9. See also pp. 32-5, **Theological controversy – heresy or reform?**, for a more detailed discussion of his notion of God, not as a trinity of persons, but concepts, and Jesus as a man who decided on his path) which ‘were to create ... schism’ in 1928 (p. 24). Whilst three deacons resigned, Williams’ congregation voted for him to stay and issued a pamphlet, *A Plea and a Protest* (see Appendix 4), which reflected antagonism between the grassroots and the Presbytery.

Background to Controversy

Tom Nefyn was subsequently called before a meeting in London for heterodoxy. He ‘prepared a statement of beliefs’ (p. 29. See Appendix 6 for the published expanded version), in which he essentially

stated that the Presbytery knew what they were getting when he was employed and that change – even of the manifestation of theology – was needed to keep Calvinist Methodism alive.

Judgement and Consequence

The South Wales Association asked for his resignation. Williams reflected on his ongoing determination to revive the Church through Welshness or even converting to and promoting Welsh Quakerism. Adored by his congregation and receiving massive public support, Tom Nefyn would not renounce his beliefs and was suspended without submitting his resignation or receiving excommunication.

Section 4

Expulsion and fellowship

The congregation continued to wish to hear Tom Nefyn preach. The Presbytery decided to close the Ebeneser chapel and excommunicate worshippers, who would go on to become the 'Nefyn Group'.

The interest of the Quakers

It was not local Friends, but members of the Home Service and Extension Committee who became involved with the Nefyn Group, seeing it as an opportunity to invigorate Welsh Quakerism. Assisted by links to Woodbrooke, a Quaker conference took place in Harlech with lectures delivered by Henry T. Gillett and Joan Mary Fry. (Nefyn would actually study at Woodbrooke in 1929.) George M. Ll. Davies – a prominent public figure in Wales, Presbyterian minister, member of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, one-time Christian pacifist M.P. and friend of Tom Nefyn – became pivotal to the association. An appeal was launched for Quaker contributions to the building fund for the Y Tymbl group's Fellowship House.

Development, disappointment and change

In 1929, the group renamed themselves Llain y Delyn, reflecting their new building. They and Quaker guests met every Sunday for worship. The weight of expectation fell on Tom Nefyn and, believing he had been on the wrong path, leading him and the group away from faith and towards politics, he buckled. He applied for ordinary membership of the Methodist Church. The Tymbl congregation asked for his return, despite their desire for communion to be open to all and not just senior figures. His was, however, becoming more orthodox, and his trusteeship at Llain y Delyn was suspended.

Quaker Support, membership and vacillation

The author has viewed ongoing Quaker interest in the Y Tymbl group as based on: '[g]eneral concern about the condition and threats to the religious life in Wales and their hopes for renewal'; Society sentiments concerning 'freedom of belief and democratic action within the church universal'; a chiming of approach between the practices of the two groups, including a peace testimony, 'stemming from experiences' of World War One; the influence of figures like Quakers Henry Gillett and Frederick Sainty, and especially non-Quaker George M. Ll. Davies; and concurrent active Friends' relief work in the South Wales coalfields (pp. 55-8). From 1929, members of the Y Tymbl group attended Swansea Meeting and Quarterly Meetings. With E. P. Jones having 'emerged as the 'leader'' (p. 60), the group tried to gain associate membership of the Friends in 1931 and 1933. Whilst there were flickers of closer relations – including the 1950s re-ignition of Quaker progress in Wales – Friendly associations remained cool. After the 1974 death of E. P. Jones, Llain y Delyn fell into terminal decline and was finally suspended in 1994.

Conclusions

The author has expressed surprise at the fact that the Friends became at all involved in the tiny community of Y Tymbl in South Wales, where they had no traditional links. He stated that it would not have happened, were it not for non-Quaker George M. Ll. Davies. The author also considers their involvement as part of the wider changes in the faith prompted by the 1895 Manchester Conference. Y Tymbl's shift away from the Calvinist Methodist Church echoed the new direction of Quakerism: 'the questioning search of scripture and belief, allied to scientific discovery and biblical criticism, a declaration that the seeker is to be encouraged, that faith is to be tied to service'. Greater social activism by Friends resulted in 'the establishment of meetings in the valleys' from 1929 into the 1930s (p. 69).

However, the author has reflected, '[l]iving faith communities have to be vibrant' to survive and thrive (p. 70); Quakers failed to nourish green shoots in Wales and as a result lost potential Friends. The author argued that this was due to fundamental cultural misunderstandings. The Society's Anglo-centric, middle-class membership and a deep-seated mistrust of nationalism (as a potential harbinger of discord) meant that the use of Welsh was neglected; a profound mistake, especially in South Wales. Moreover, Quaker practice simply did not resonate with Welsh traditions of faith: in 1931 Tom Nefyn noted that the 'spiritual reality in Wales' was 'linked with special forms – preaching, pastoral care, the sacrament, baptism [and] singing' (p. 71). The cultural chasm was expressed most clearly in the refusal by the South Wales Monthly Meeting to express any kind of empathy or activity in response to the 1856 desire by the

(English) Liverpool Corporation to flood an entire Welsh valley, despite local agitation and widespread Welsh anger.

Appendices

1. The Religious Society of Friends in Wales – an overview

A useful six-page history of Quakerism in the region between 1682 and 2000

2. Quakers and the Welsh Language

In this overview, the author contends that the use of Welsh by the Quakers – most especially in written form – historically has been poor.

3. Numbers of Quakers in Wales

4. A Plea and a Protest [copy of petition]

Here is a facsimile of the 1928 pamphlet and petition, published by the congregation of Ebeneser Methodist Chapel in Y Tymbl in support of their minister, Tom Nefyn Williams, against the Presbytery.

5. The Calvinistic Methodist Church of Wales

6. The Publication of ‘Y Ffordd yr Edrychaf as Bethau’ [The Way I Look at Things]

Details the history of Tom Nefyn Williams’ statement of religious belief in anticipation of his appearance before a disciplinary committee.

7. Welsh version of principal translations contained in the body of the thesis

Summary prepared by Rebecca Wynter (2012)