

A Cowbridge Society of 1831 :

*The Society for the Improvement of the Working
Population in the County of Glamorgan*

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A MEETING was held at the *Bear Inn*, Cowbridge, on 21 January 1831 to form a society to improve the condition of the working population of Glamorgan.

The founding members had been moved, and probably to no small degree frightened, by the uprising of farm labourers which had become known as the "Swing" riots. The riots had started with the breaking of threshing machines and the firing of ricks in Kent in the summer of 1830, had spread into the neighbouring counties of Surrey and Sussex, and during November and December had erupted in violence, intimidation and arson of a more or less serious kind in most of the counties of southern and eastern England. There were a few ugly incidents in Gloucestershire, Herefordshire and Monmouthshire at the end of November and early in December but in these counties, as in Glamorgan itself, the farm labourers as a body showed no inclination to rise. The most serious incident in Glamorgan occurred at Dyffryn, St. Nicholas, on 10 December, when a threatening letter addressed to the Hon. William Booth Grey was found near a burning hay rick. Shortly afterwards the Rev. Edward Picton, Rector of Llandow, received the following letter:

Newport Decr. 10th 1830 Reverend Father no machinery
no tythe to the Clergy no Bradley Agency &c I have just been
paying a Visit at Duffrin The Honbl. W. B. Grey I shall vissit
you Shortly as bold as the General entered Badajoss it is my
full intencion to see your house burnt down to the ground take
this hint Swing

PS more wages to workmen¹

¹ Quoted by D. J. V. Jones, *Before Rebecca: popular protests in Wales 1793-1835* (London, 1973), p. 59. "Bradley Agency" is a reference to the prominent local land agent, Edward Bradley of Cowbridge; "as bold as the General entered Badajoss" refers, of course, to the Duke of Wellington's victory at Badajoz in the Peninsular War.

These isolated occurrences were doubtless the actions of aggrieved individuals emboldened by the prevailing atmosphere of unrest. The alarm which they created in Glamorgan was out of all proportion; rumours circulated wildly. The gentry took every opportunity of declaring their confidence in the good conduct of the labourers, yet as magistrates they swore in a considerable number of special constables, which only increased the excitement.

By the middle of December the riots in southern England were virtually over and special commissions of judges had begun to try the rioters. The whole weight of the country's savage penal system fell upon those unfortunate enough to have been caught. Once the countryside had been restored to its former calm, however, sympathy for the plight of the labourers and their families began to show itself, and the need for conciliation and reform as well as repression of violence was apparent to many. Rather curiously, in few places did this sympathy express itself in as practical a form as in the Vale of Glamorgan.

The first intimation of the concern of the gentlemen of the Cowbridge district to allay the discontents of the poor was their enthusiastic distribution of certain publications of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge. These pamphlets, addressed to the rural labourer, attempted to expound the advantages of machinery. It was not, of course, unusual for the upper and middle classes to attempt to combat undesirable tendencies among the lower orders by giving them tracts to read—Hannah More had been the first in the field with her *Cheap repository tracts* more than thirty years before. But as we shall see, the gentlemen of Cowbridge were not content with this. At first they considered setting up a local committee of the S.D.U.K. but later determined upon a society of their own, with an elaborate and ambitious programme, to educate the working population of Glamorgan by means of specially written tracts, and by the establishment of infants schools, circulating libraries, friendly societies and savings banks. The poor were to be taught the principles of political economy and the practice of self-help.

The prime mover of the Society was Dr. Benjamin Heath Malkin (1769-1842) who, retiring from the professorship of history at London University, had recently come to live at Old Hall, Cowbridge. The Doctor was not an historian or scholar of note though he was

certainly a man of wide reading and culture.² His long and successful career as master of the grammar school at Bury St. Edmund's was brought to an unexpected close in 1829 by his being appointed to a chair at the new university. The greatest influence over such appointments belonged to Henry Brougham, the great Whig lawyer, future Lord Chancellor, and founder of the S.D.U.K., and it is obviously not without significance that two of Malkin's sons sat upon the general committee of the S.D.U.K. and were the authors of several of that Society's publications. Whether the senior Malkin knew Brougham at all well is not certain; what is quite clear however is that he was an enthusiastic Whig of the Brougham kind, that he was familiar with the aims and activities of the S.D.U.K., and that at a critical point in time he removed from London to Cowbridge.

Malkin was no stranger there; indeed he belonged by marriage to the ruling clique of the town; one of his wife's sisters was married to Francis Taynton, the town clerk, and another to the Rev. Dr. William Williams, master of the grammar school, who was also an alderman; a niece was the wife of the son and heir of Thomas Edmondes, the largest property owner in the town and mayor since 1828. Not surprisingly Malkin soon found himself co-opted on to the town council. The prominent position which he occupied in the town in the exciting years 1830-32 is thus explained by family alliances, though it was obviously strengthened by his own abilities and by the prestige of his connections in London. His first formal contribution to the political life of the town was to preside at a meeting which petitioned Parliament for the abolition of slavery in the British colonies, in November 1830. And when the Corporation and inhabitants of Cowbridge petitioned the Commons in favour of the first Reform Bill in March 1831 Malkin and his circle of friends and relations were the leaders of opinion.

It was this same circle that formed the core of the Society for the Improvement of the Working Population in the County of Glamorgan. A list of subscribers, published in February 1831, contained 48 names, headed by that of the Marquess of Bute; by the end of that month there were 60 members, but no further lists have come to light. It is clear from the surviving list and from *The Cambrian's*

² Malkin was the author of several books, of which *The scenery, antiquities, and biography, of South Wales* (London, 1804), and *A father's memoirs of his child* (London, 1806) are the most important. There are articles about him in the *Dictionary of national biography* and the *Dictionary of Welsh biography*.

reports of the Society's meetings that membership was predominantly from Cowbridge and district; at least seven subscribers were members of the Corporation, and the remarkably large number of tradesmen and shopkeepers were almost all from the town. There were of course a few aristocratic and landed supporters—no such organisation in a small country town could exist without their patronage. One rather interesting group was of a quite different character: the Neath quakers, Elijah Waring, Isaac Redwood, Charles Heyward and Mrs. Heyward; and possibly Joseph Tregelles Price may also have become a member, at least he was sufficiently interested to send Dr. Malkin a plan for providing allotments of land for the poor. Their link with Cowbridge was Isaac Redwood's brother Charles, a solicitor in the town and the Society's secretary.³ The only other noteworthy members were Walter Coffin, colliery owner and pioneer of works schools, and Edward Romilly, the owner of an estate in the Vale, son of the law reformer Sir Samuel Romilly, and son-in-law of Mrs. Jane Marcet, of whom more anon.

What, then, did these worthy men under the direction and inspiration of Benjamin Heath Malkin propose to do, and what did they achieve?

Dr. Malkin stated his own social philosophy at the inaugural meeting of the Society in January 1831. He wished to see a better sympathy between the three orders of society (landowners, farmers, labourers) than then existed; such sympathy would be created by showing on the one hand that the upper classes would not permit the laws to be violated, but on the other that they cared for the people, that they were "sincerely desirous of redressing real grievances, temperately stated", and, above all, that they were intent upon communicating to the people "sound, not spurious knowledge" and upon "disabusing them of their errors and prejudices". It followed from this statement that the great need was for instruction in sound economic and social principles. The primary object of the Society was therefore "to diffuse a knowledge, generally, of the circumstances on which the well-being of the labourers and their families depends; and particularly to point out the effects of the institution of property on society; to teach the principles which

³ Further information on the Redwood family will be found in Dr. Peter H. Thomas' article on "Professor Theophilus Redwood (1806-92)", in *Glamorgan Historian*, vol. 3 (1966), pp. 89-106.

regulate the price of labour; and to show the manner in which that price is affected by machinery". This was standard doctrine of the political economists, indeed a very similar argument in favour of popular education was put forward by Malkin's colleague at London University, J. R. McCulloch, in the March 1831 number of the *Edinburgh Review* in discussing the "Causes and cure of disturbances and pauperism".

The Society began to carry out their primary object by publishing a series of pamphlets, probably at monthly intervals through 1831. The first six were almost certainly written by Malkin himself since a personal reference in the third tract to the author's "being an Englishman by birth, and till lately by residence, but connected and intimately acquainted with the Principality, for full 35 years . . ." fits Malkin exactly. He set out to explain the working man's economic and social situation, and then went on to describe the advantages of friendly societies and savings banks. The pamphlets were intended to be written in the plainest language, but the style succeeded in being patronising rather than plain, and there were far too many literary and historical allusions—the remark "You have most of you heard of a great Poet by the name of Pope" is absurd when addressed to labourers who must have been at the best semi-literate. Perhaps there were a few who read the tracts and were convinced that to preserve the *status quo* was as much to the advantage of the working class as it was to the propertied classes, but there cannot have been many. The seventh tract, addressed "To the labourers of Glamorgan", was written by someone other than Malkin; there is no clue to his identity. The eighth, ninth, tenth and eleventh tracts were different from the first seven, and were rather better adapted to their purpose. The authoress, Jane Marcet, was one of a number of ladies who were at that time engaged in writing informative works for children, and who could with equal facility turn to writing improving books for the lower classes. Her contribution was a collection of five stories of a labourer's family in which various situations were used to show the working of economic principles.⁴

The twelfth and final tract, written by Dr. Malkin, was devoted to a review of the Society's first year. He had to admit that no progress had been made towards the establishment of infants schools

⁴ Mrs. Marcet subsequently expanded these stories and published them as *John Hopkins's notions on political economy* (London, 1833).

or a savings bank, but the Society had succeeded in promoting a friendly society, on sound actuarial principles.⁵ But much the greater part of the pamphlet was taken up with the description of an elaborate plan for circulating libraries which were to come into being at the beginning of 1832. The plan was in direct imitation of the "itinerating libraries" founded by Samuel Brown in East Lothian. These libraries had been given considerable publicity by Lord Brougham and his associates who held them up as examples of what might be done on a national scale; but the Glamorgan scheme was one of the very few that were actually inspired by them. Collections of 25 books were to be deposited at each of five centres in the county, and after six months would be changed round. There were numerous and stringent rules governing the borrowing of books, and a not insignificant subscription was to be charged (thus rather defeating the object of bringing suitable literature within reach of the labouring poor). The Society had, through the good offices of Benjamin Heath Malkin, junior, received a gift of all the S.D.U.K's publications, and had also received a "valuable and copious assortment of books" from Longmans, Rees & Co., the publishers. Although an impressive organisation had been planned, and a stock of books was already in existence, there is no evidence that the libraries ever opened to the public.

The publication of the twelfth tract, apparently in December 1831, seems to have been the final act of the Society. Its enthusiastic tone does nothing to suggest the Society's imminent dissolution—quite the reverse. The last quarterly meeting to be reported in *The Cambrian* had taken place in September amidst obvious optimism. There is no known reference to the winding up of the Society nor, directly, to the reasons for it. One can only speculate. The Society had undoubtedly been controversial because of its distinctly Whig aspect at a time when party strife was at its most intense over the Reform Bill. William Williams of Aberpergwm expressed his sorrow that many prominent and influential persons were doubtful of the propriety of affording instruction to the poorer classes. A fundamental doctrine of the followers of Henry Brougham was Adam Smith's dictum, "An instructed and intelligent people . . . are always more decent and orderly than an ignorant and stupid one". Tories

⁵ "The Cowbridge and Lanblethian Friendly Society" was registered in Quarter Sessions in January 1832. There is no evidence that it ever functioned.

were rather inclined to believe that a literate working class would be an insubordinate one. On the other hand Lord Bute, a Tory and an opponent of the Reform Bill, had consented to be patron of the Society and cordially approved its principles and objects. Addressing the Society in May 1831, Bute remarked that he had heard much argument for and against the Society, particularly that "it would not be lasting". He may have come near to explaining its failure when he observed "with much satisfaction" that "this county had been exempt from keen distress and from any great degree of discontent or excitement, and therefore might be said to stand little in need of improvement". It is rather ironic that the issue of *The Cambrian* that printed this speech also carried the first brief report of an outbreak of rioting at Merthyr Tydfil—the beginning of what modern scholars refer to as the "Merthyr Rising". It is clear however from the context that Lord Bute had the rural parts of the county in mind when he addressed those remarks to the assembled Society at Cowbridge, and it was, equally clearly, to the rural labouring class that the Society was directing its educational efforts.

The Society had come into being as a result of the agrarian disorders of 1830. No one knew then that the riots would cease as suddenly as they had begun. The labourers of the Vale of Glamorgan had scarcely been affected by the contagion; indeed, as Bute indicated, the intolerable social conditions of southern England, the rapidly growing population, the unemployment, the degradation of almost universal pauperism, these things were, relatively speaking, almost unknown in the Vale, though the years around 1830 were, it is true, a time of economic uncertainty. Perhaps the simple truth about the Society's failure is that Malkin's own zeal for Brougham's ideas had carried them in the anxious moments of December 1830, but when the overthrow of the social order no longer seemed about to occur the subscribers fell away. They had no interest in "improving" a docile and well-conducted labouring class. One cannot help feeling that this ambitious attempt at social reform was merely a temporary departure from the normal complacency of a small country town.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

The most important information about the Society is to be found in *The Cambrian* of 29 January, 12 February, 12 March, 4 June and 1 October 1831. There is useful information, including several letters from Malkin, in the papers of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge deposited in the library of

University College, London. The local background of alarm and rumour at the end of 1830 is well conveyed in the letters of E. P. Richards to Lord Bute; his letter-book is preserved in the Research Room of the Cardiff Central Library. There are complete sets of the Society's pamphlets, the *Cowbridge tracts*, in the Cardiff Central Library and the library of the University College of Swansea.

Secondary works of value are: G. Rudé and E. J. Hobsbawm, *Captain Swing* (London, 1969); R. K. Webb, *The British working class reader, 1790-1848* (London, 1955); T. Kelly, *Early public libraries* (London, 1966).