



In the Name of Unions and Nation. The Development of Welsh Labour Historiography in the 1950s – 1990s

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This paper aims to explore the emergence of Welsh labour historiography in the period after the Second World War and to examine the postmodern challenges faced by Welsh labour historiography since the 1980s. In this text, I regard ‘labour history’ as a discipline of social history that focuses mainly on the working class or classes and their relation to other social groups and politics.¹ ‘Welsh labour history’, however, is treated as an independent branch of labour history that is interested in the Welsh country and particularly in the history of mining regions and unions.²

This paper sets the development of Welsh labour historiography into the broader context of social history. A significant part of this analysis consists in a comparison between the works of Welsh labour historians and their British colleagues. Apart from this descriptive aim, this paper raises more analytical questions, such as: how did Welsh labour historians respond to the ‘new social history’ represented by the British Marxists? To what extent was Welsh labour historiography influenced by the emergence of postmodernism and how did it meet those challenges? To answer these questions, the first part of this paper concentrates on a comparison between the work “The Rebecca Riots” by Welsh labour historian David Williams, which focuses on rural rebellions in nineteenth-century Wales, and the books “Primitive Rebels” and “The Crowd in History” by British Marxists Eric Hobsbawm and George Rudé. Furthermore, the paper deals with the foundation of the Welsh labour history journal ‘Llafur’ in 1970. At the end of the first part, the paper discusses the book “The Fed” (1980) by Hywel Francis and David Smith, which studies the biggest Welsh mining trade-union organization. The second part of this paper examines the way in the Welsh labour paradigm, represented for instance by the book “The Fed”, dealt with the linguistic and cultural changes propagated by postmodernism. Finally, I argue that some aspects of Welsh labour history merit further development, but also that the emerging

1 Kirk Neville, Challenges, Crisis and Renewal? Themes in the Labour History of Britain 1960–2010, *Labour History Review*, 75/2, 2010, p. 163.

2 The question of Welsh identity was discussed by Gwyn Williams. For more details see: Gwyn Williams, ‘When Was Wales?’ *A History of the Welsh*, London 1979.

postmodern views and ideas would have been a valid contribution to the conservative paradigm of Welsh labour historiography.



A WELSH RESPONSE TO BRITISH MARXISTS? WELSH LABOUR HISTORIOGRAPHY IN THE 1950S – 1980S

After the Second World War, the British government's overriding concern was the establishment of a welfare state. This led to several social and political developments, such as the nationalization of mines, the foundation of the NHS, and the increasing influence of trade unions. Furthermore, Keynes' economic policy garnered increasing support from politicians and Marxism became more and more popular amongst scholars. This shift in policy was not only typical of the United Kingdom but also of most European countries. Moreover, these changes in the British social and political environment created a demand, which labour history was able to meet. At the beginning of the 1960s new universities were founded in the United Kingdom that offered plenty of opportunities to young historians. Welsh historian Andy Croll described this period as follows: 'It was an exciting time, in which to be a labour historian.'³ This inspiring environment produced many important works of Welsh and British labour historiography.

David Williams, a Welsh historian at Aberystwyth University, published his book "The Rebecca Riots" (1955) four years before Hobsbawm's "Primitive Rebels". He was interested in the rural riots known as "Rebecca riots" that erupted between the years 1839 and 1843 in West Wales (in the counties of Pembrokeshire, Cardiganshire and Carmarthenshire). The protesters were poor farmers who did not agree with the tax policy of the state and in particular, with the toll-gates system. The roads in Wales were administered by special trusts which collected money for their maintenance. Therefore, the toll-gates became a target of protesters to whom they embodied the unfair taxation of the state. To the farmers the toll-gates represented a major financial burden, because they always had to pay when, for instance, they went to sell their goods in the market. The protesting groups, who attacked the toll-gates, called themselves "Rebecca's Daughters". The origin of their name is said to be a verse in the Bible.⁴ At the beginning of the riots, the attacks on the toll-gates took place during the night, with men dressed up like women and before destroying a gate the leader of the group, representing Rebecca, approached the gate and asked in Welsh "My children, this gate has no business to be here, has it?"⁵ The crowd responded and went to destroy the toll-gate. Soon, the Rebecca riots became part of Welsh folklore. In

3 Andy Croll, 'People's Remembrancers' in a Post-Modern Age: Contemplating the Non-Crisis of Welsh Labour History, *Llafur: the Journal of the Society for the Study of Welsh Labour History*, 8/1, 2000, p. 6.

4 "And they blessed Rebekah and said unto her, Thou art our sister, be thou the mother of thousands of millions, and let thy seed possess the gate of those which hate them!" Online: <http://biblehub.com/genesis/24-60.htm> (30.9.2017)

5 David Williams, *The Rebecca Riots*, Cardiff 1986, p. 191.



Wales, there was a very strong nonconformist tradition and Rebecca and her daughters were, for many Welshmen, a characteristic expression of their culture.

David Williams structures his book as follows: First, he concentrates on an analysis of the local state administration and the gentry, then he focuses on the social structure of rural society and on the local economy. In his book, David Williams stresses that most of the historical accounts interpreted the Rebecca riots only because of an unfair taxation system and the high tolls. However, Williams argues that the roots of the riots are rather more deeply manifested in the change of rural society. His argument is based on two major phenomena that occurred in the nineteenth century in Wales: the rapid growth of population and the creation of public opinion. According to Williams, the society in the western parts of Wales, where the riots took place, was isolated, underdeveloped and dependent on agricultural means of production. Therefore, the riots should not be interpreted as an uprising of rural proletarians but rather as a rebellion of 'small farmers'. Additionally, he points out that the regions where the riots started, experienced enormous population growth at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Hence, the reason for the eruption of the riots lies exactly in the combination of an underdeveloped economy that did not produce sufficient revenues and the rapid increase in population. Williams summarises his thoughts: 'The early nineteenth century saw a breakdown in the social structure of rural Wales, with its outmoded systems of government and administration, when the pressure of a greatly increased population upon a backward economy produced disturbances.'⁶ Apart from the analysis of the social and economic structure, Williams was interested in the analysis of the growing public opinion. He assumed that the rioting farmers were not illiterate. According to him, the creation of negative public opinions in newspapers had an influence on the unsatisfied farmers who later became rioting groups.⁷ Finally, he stressed the isolated geographical position of the western parts of Wales. That is why the growth of population could not be compensated by the urbanisation. He assumed that if the railway reached these remote regions of Wales ten years earlier, the riots would maybe not have happened at all.⁸ With this book, Williams introduced the rebellions in the remote Welsh regions and the transformation of rural societies into industrial societies as a new topic in Welsh labour historiography, and thus broke with the tradition of focusing on the history of the mining regions and unions. Moreover, Williams was less 'materialistic' in his explanations and rather examined the influence of public opinion.

In the 1960s, an influential group of British Marxist historians represented by Eric Hobsbawm and George Rudé emerged in Britain.⁹ These so-called 'new social historians' sought to revise the writing of the 'total' social history of the working

6 David Williams, *The Rebecca Riots*, Cardiff 1986, p. viii.

7 *Ibidem*, p. 118.

8 *Ibidem*, p. 158.

9 British Marxist historians were represented by more scholars such as Edward P. Thompson, however, I am interested in the works of Rudé and Hobsbawm who focus in their books on the same topics as David Williams. The comparison is then more accurate.

class.¹⁰ In 1959, Eric Hobsbawm's pioneering work "Primitive rebels" was published, in which he focuses on a variety of rebellions, conflicts and struggles in the rural parts of nineteenth and twentieth-century Europe.¹¹ Eric Hobsbawm was interested in the 'primitive' or 'archaic' forms of social agitation, such as the "banditry of the Robin Hood type, rural secret societies, various peasant revolutionary movements of the millenarian sort, pre-industrial urban mobs and their riots, some labour religious sects and the use of ritual in early labour and revolutionary organizations."¹² By using the terms 'primitive;' or 'archaic' he refers to people whose identities were still based on tribal bonds. According to Hobsbawm, the history of social movements can be divided into two main branches: the first one is interested in the ancient slave revolts and pre-industrial era riots which were mainly interpreted as isolated and unimportant episodes in history. The second branch is focused on the modern social movements which are interpreted within the framework of the socialist narrative, and is therefore interested in the history of Luddism, Jacobinism or Utopian Socialism.¹³ However, the aim of Hobsbawm's book was different: his goal was to focus on groups of people who did not fit into either of these categories. Hobsbawm concentrates on anonymous people who were mostly illiterate and unknown. He defines them as 'pre-political' persons because they were not able to use political language to express their demands. This is the reason why their movements were not well organized, marginal, and ignored by scholars.

In addition to Hobsbawm's "Primitive Rebels", other influential work of British Marxists was "The Crowd in History" written by George Rudé (1964). As the title indicates, George Rudé's work focuses on the history of a crowd that he defines as a 'face-to-face' or 'direct contact' group.¹⁴ However, in his research he did not include all types of people's gatherings. Rudé deliberately excluded the following groups from his study: crowds meeting purely on ceremonial occasions, crowds attending an academic or religious event, crowds at sports stadiums, and any kind of crowds organized for a political purpose.¹⁵ The innovative potential of Rudé's study lies in his approach. According to him, labour historians so far have been ignoring the role of crowds in history or describing them as an 'angry mob' without purpose or meaning. This is why he drew inspiration from American sociologists who were already interested in racial minorities and riots. Rudé did not examine crowds as an abstract and irrelevant phenomenon but rather focused on the goals, behaviour and rituals of

10 Andy Croll, 'People's Remembrancers in a Post-Modern Age: Contemplating the Non-Crisis of Welsh Labour History, *Llafur: the Journal of the Society for the Study of Welsh Labour History*, 8/1, 2000, p. 6.

11 Eric Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels. Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, Manchester 1959.

12 *Ibidem*, p. 1.

13 Eric Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels. Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, Manchester 1959, p. 2.

14 George Rudé, *The Crowd in History. A Study of Popular Disturbances in France and England, 1730–1840*, London 1985, p. 1.

15 *Ibidem*, p. 4.



crowds.¹⁶ Therefore, he asks the following questions in his research: “How large was the crowd, how did it act, who (if any) were its promoters, who composed it, and who led it? Who were the targets or the victims of the crowd’s activities? What were the aims, motives, and ideas underlying these activities? What were the consequences of the event, and what has been its historical significance?”¹⁷

As already indicated in the last paragraphs, there are some differences between the books “The Rebecca Riots” by David Williams and “Primitive Rebels” by Eric Hobsbawm. For one, the Rebecca protesters were not similar to the outlaws in “Primitive Rebels”. Although Hobsbawm and Williams both focus on how people struggled with the transformation of their society under the wave of modernization, they differ in their research on objects which are from different social groups. The protagonists of “The Rebecca Riots” were small farmers and landowners, which was not the case of Hobsbawm’s “Primitive Rebels”. From the methodological point of view, there are some differences as well. Williams’ argument was mainly based on an analysis of the social and economic structures of West Wales. Hobsbawm, however, was more interested in the development of the concept of ‘social banditry’ and its different types (e.g. the Mafia). Moreover, Hobsbawm examined the role of rituals in the social movements that he studied.¹⁸ By contrast, Williams’ study on Rebecca’s Daughters lacks an analysis of the rituals and ‘carnival-time’ behaviour, although it seems reasonable to include it due to the uncommon nature of the riots. Additionally, Hobsbawm based his book on a comparison between different regions and periods, which was typical of the British ‘new social history’.

In one chapter of “The Crowd in History” Rudé even looks at the Rebecca riots. For the purposes of comparison with Williams, Rudé highlights different aspects of the riots: Firstly, he argues that the crucial role in the Rebecca riots was played by nonconformist ideas. He argues that the nonconformist tradition was very influential in the Rebecca movement because it expressed “the deep malaise of the farming and labouring population”.¹⁹ Secondly, Rudé devotes a significant part of his text to an analysis of the behaviour of the mob, its rituals, and reasons for its success or failure. This approach, based on an examination of the cultural aspects of rioting, was the main difference between Williams’ and Rudé’s works on the Rebecca riots. As I have pointed out, the starting point of William’s analysis was an examination of the social and economic structures, although, he did not go as far as to analyse the riots,

At the beginning of the 1970s, Welsh labour historians had enough self-confidence and decided to establish ‘Society for the Study of Welsh Labour History’.²⁰ Twenty years after the foundation of the British academic journal ‘Past and Present’, in the

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 9.

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 11.

¹⁸ Eric Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels. Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, New York 1965, pp. 150–175.

¹⁹ Geroge Rudé, *The Crowd in History. A Study of Popular Disturbances in France and England, 1730–1840*, London 1985, p. 156.

²⁰ Neil Evans and Coleg Harlech, *Writing the Social History of Wales?*, *Social History*, 17/3, 1992, pp. 481–482.



year 1972, the Society published the first issue of the new Welsh labour journal ‘Llafur’ (Labour), which included ‘The Chairman’s Address’ written by Ieuan Gwynedd Jones that summarises the main aims of the journal.²¹ According to him, the general aims of the journal were “to nourish and sustain the study of Labour History in Wales” and “to encourage the preservation of those historical sources without which such a study would be at worst impossible and at best emasculated and thin.”²² It is remarkable how the Society proceeded to fulfil these tasks. The goal was to create a journal that would serve as a discussion forum where information and ideas could be exchanged. The founders of the journal stressed that ‘Llafur’ should be available not only to experts but also to a variety of people (from students and local history societies to trade-union groups). In the introduction, Ieuan G. Jones emphasizes this idea: “There are whole areas of community experience about which the academic historian, comfortably cocooned and protected within his profession, can know nothing. In-depth studies of the past of this country can only succeed as a cooperative effort involving the enlightened amateur as well as the trained academic.”²³ Furthermore, the text emphasizes the involvement of the community with historical research: “This kind of creative cooperation has always been an essential and typical ingredient in the culture of Wales.”²⁴ The goal was to re-establish a Welsh labour history based on the strong relationship between the academic and non-academic sphere. In this concept, the Welsh labour historians were viewed as ‘public servants’ whose main goal was to preserve and develop Welsh culture. Thus, Welsh labour historiography held an important position within the Welsh master narrative. However, one aspect of this concept is questionable. Should Welsh labour historians ‘nourish’, ‘preserve’ or ‘encourage’ Welsh culture, or was there also enough space for a more critical stand that would challenge the national narrative?

The concept of Welsh labour history, introduced in ‘Llafur’, did not emerge suddenly but continued in the strong Welsh tradition emphasizing the importance of the community. This tradition was mainly based on the influence of nonconformity in Welsh society from the eighteenth to the twentieth century. The close links between the academic community and the non-professionals were one of the principal aspects of the Welsh labour historiography. Moreover, this legacy of the founders has continued to this day. Although the journal has been renamed ‘Llafur, the Journal of Welsh People’s History’ the aims have remained similar: to promote the history of the common people with open membership for everyone.²⁵

The ideas put forward in ‘Llafur’ shaped the further development of the Welsh labour history. For instance, this influence can also be identified in the book “The Fed” (1980) by Hywel Francis and David Smith, which summarizes the history of the biggest Welsh mining union, ‘The South Wales Miners Federation’ (known as ‘The Fed’). Francis and Smith claimed that their book will mainly serve non-academic purposes:

21 Llafur the Journal of the Society for the Study of Welsh Labour History, p. 2.

22 Ibidem, p. 2.

23 Ibidem, p. 2.

24 Llafur the Journal of the Society for the Study of Welsh Labour History, p. 2.

25 Online: <https://www.llafur.org/about-us/> (03.10.2017).



“We would like to think that this history, [...], will stand as a record of struggle that may act as a link for those younger members and their families with their own past.”²⁶ Another intention of their book was to preserve the history of the union for future generations. According to the authors, the struggles of trade unions were the ‘great creative acts of working people’.²⁷ In the introduction, the authors also declare that they want to write ‘a trade union history’ about ‘the principal institutions used and devised by the South Wales miners within, and for, their society’.²⁸ Thus, the authors continued the long-standing tradition of the Welsh labour historiography covering the history of the trade unions. According to Francis and Smith, to write about the union was the same as to write about Welsh society: “[...] our chosen union was, as we show, intimately associated with its society so that to write a history of the one without the other would be to divorce Adam from Eve by academic decree.”²⁹ As we can see, the authors argue that labour history should mainly be regarded as the history of trade unionism which — slightly exaggerated — was also for them a history of the (whole) society. However, Francis and Smith only use the term ‘people’ to refer to members of the union. This is the disadvantage of their approach. Francis and Smith are only interested in the trade unions, and thereby exclude a variety of experiences of working class people, be it in family life or leisure time.

In the book “The Fed” by Francis and Smith we can see all the main aspects of the Welsh labour historiography: the connection between the academic and lay milieu as well as the focus on the history of the (mining) union organization and its struggles. One innovative aspect of Francis and Smith’s approach to the Welsh trade union history is their focus on the role of the rank-and-file members and their experiences rather than on leadership or bureaucracy. Moreover, Francis and Smith, who were inspired by the ‘history from below’, had close links to the Federation. This explains why the book was published by this union. Political engagement of the Welsh labour historians was not unusual. However, it remains unclear whether the publication of this book was not also the ‘swan song’ of the Welsh labour historiography tradition. Over the next decades, the unions lost most of their power due to the reforms carried out by the Thatcher government. Both, Welsh and British labour history, were in the shadow of the cultural and linguist turn. A second edition of the book “The Fed” from 1998, in which the authors reiterate most of their original arguments, clearly demonstrates that the methodological basis of the Welsh labour historiography is rather conservative and resistant to changes.

To sum up the main ideas of this chapter: The development of the Welsh labour historiography in the second half of the twentieth century was rather linear and gradual. On the other hand, Welsh historians were not completely isolated from the methodological development of the labour history. The Welsh labour historiography

26 Hywel Francis and David Smith. *The Fed: The History of South Wales Miners in the Twentieth Century*, Cardiff 1980, xv.

27 *Ibidem*, xv.

28 *Ibidem*, xv.

29 Hywel Francis and David Smith. *The Fed: The History of South Wales Miners in the Twentieth Century*, Cardiff 1980, xvi.

reacted to the paradigmatic change from classic social history to a ‘new social history’ within the framework of its tradition. The work of David Williams, “The Rebecca Riots”, was innovative in many regards; however, the comparison between the works of Welsh and British labour historians showed that the Welsh labour historians often lacked broader perspectives, methodological clarity and interest in the cultural aspects of the working class. The labour history of Wales was gaining in popularity during the 1970s and 1980s which led to the foundation of the Welsh labour history journal ‘Llafur’. In my opinion, the methodological concept introduced in this journal was a specific reaction of the Welsh labour historiography to the paradigm shift to a ‘new social history’. The journal not only emphasized that the Welsh labour history should bring together the academic and non-academic spheres, but also that it should strive to preserve the Welsh culture through the publication of historical works and through the activities of historians in their communities. In 1980, Hywel Francis and David Smith published their book “The Fed” which combines all these aspects of the Welsh labour historiography. In the 1980s, however, the unions were marginalized under the Thatcher government and labour history was labelled an outdated discipline. Therefore, in the next chapter, I will focus on what the Welsh labour historiography did to meet those challenges.

WELSH LABOUR HISTORIOGRAPHY IN UNCERTAIN TIMES OF POSTMODERNISM

Historiography has undergone a number of methodological changes in the last third of the twentieth century. Historians started to be interested in new approaches inspired by anthropology and linguistics. As a result of this development, historians began to work with new historical categories: Instead of solely focusing on class or nation, they used concepts such as language, narration or representation which became the core of historical research. To afford an insight into this development, in this section I will briefly summarize three trends which had the main impact on the writing of history. The first trend, which became soon very influential, was introduced in the book “The Interpretation of Culture” by American anthropologist Clifford Geertz.³⁰ Geertz developed a new concept of culture in which he defines culture as a ‘web of significance’ surrounding every human being.³¹ Every gesture or utterance carries also a symbolic content that expresses the whole culture. To analyse those expressions, he invented a method of ‘thick description’ that should confront and uncover meanings of analysed objects. In the 1990s, historical anthropology influenced by the concept of culture developed by Geertz gained in popularity among historians.³² It introduced new topics such as the history of sexuality, rebellions, witchcraft, and popular culture, which at the same time opened up new research possibilities. The second

30 Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, New York 1973.

31 *Ibidem*, p. 89.

32 For more details see: Richard von Dülmen, *Historische Anthropologie. Entwicklung, Probleme, Aufgaben*, Köln 2000.



trend that had a major influence was the publication of the work “Metahistory” written by American literary historian Hayden White. In his book he argues that historical texts share similarities with the literary genre rather than with scientific works.³³ In “Metahistory” White analyses historical works by influential scholars (e.g. Tocqueville, Michelet) to show that the writing of history is based on the strategies and ways of explanations used in literary writing, literary tropes (e.g. metaphor, metonymy) and literary genre (e.g. romance, tragedy). Thus, White stresses the narrative character of history and argues that all historical accounts follow a certain literary mode of writing. The third, and last, important trend that had an influence on historiography was the impact of linguistics. The so-called ‘linguistic turn’ was based on the work “Course in General Linguistic” by French scholar Ferdinand de Saussure.³⁴ In these realms, language was treated as a determinant of human thoughts and as a creator of social reality. In historiography, those developments lead to a shift in research interest. For instance, historians started to focus on the analysis of discourse and the role of language in people’s behaviour.

As a consequence of the growing popularity of the cultural and linguistic approaches, social and labour history were facing hard times being perceived as something old-fashioned and outdated. British social historians were discussing this new position of labour history. In an article from 1995, Patrick Joyce clearly described the situation: ‘British labour history is now almost moribund.’³⁵ The journal ‘Labour History Review’ from spring 1995 came to a similar conclusion, in which the authors emphasized that labour history suffers from its institutional orientation, eurocentrism, and theoretical naivety. This ‘Neanderthal’, meaning labour history of that time, was then undermined by the supporters of postmodernism.³⁶ In the article ‘Challenge, Crisis and Renewal?’, Labour historian Neville Kirk emphasizes that the main problem of labour history is its ‘conservative insularity’ and ‘academism’.³⁷ However, he did not agree that the British labour history would not be able to renew itself. According to him, the British labour history should combine its ‘committed’ British empirical tradition with a more active engagement with the new and modern approaches.³⁸ Moreover, he stresses that the British labour history should be able to include in its research more comparative and transnational perspectives. Geoff Eley, another influential British social historian, argues that the social history methodology does not exclude cultural and linguistic approaches.³⁹ On the contrary, there is no need to choose between the ‘social’ or ‘cultural’ history because both disciplines can complement

33 Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Baltimore 1973.

34 Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 1916.

35 Patrick Joyce, *The End of Social History?*, *Social History*, 20/1, 1995, p. 76.

36 *Labour History Review*, 60/1, p. 2.

37 Neville Kirk, *Challenge, Crisis and Renewal? Themes in the Labour History of Britain, 1960–2010*, *Labour History Review*, 75/2, 2010, p. 163.

38 *Ibidem*, p. 163.

39 Geoff Eley, ‘Dilemmas and Challenges of Social History since the 1960s: What Comes after the Cultural Turn?’, *South African Historical Journal*, 60/3, 2008, p. 313.

each other. Moreover, he pointed out that some aspects of social history, for instance, an ambition to study a whole society should be regained. Most of these texts about the role of social history in postmodern times agree on some arguments: The emphasis on the 'dissident' role of social history within historiography, the refusal of rhetoric of 'the end of history', the belief in possibility of writing social history that would include cultural or linguistic approaches and would not lose the notion of a broader social context.⁴⁰

As I have pointed out, the Welsh labour historiography was closely linked to the history of trade unions and mining. Surprisingly, at the beginning, the Welsh labour historiography did not actually reflect the crisis of social history at all. According to the Welsh historian Andy Croll, 'the post-modernist sirens' who were elsewhere able to challenge the methodological basis of labour history were not successful in the Welsh labour history circles.⁴¹ This isolation of the Welsh labour historians was even more striking because of the nature of the Welsh labour history that was based on class analysis and class conflicts. Should not the Welsh labour historians be the first who set the alarm bells to ring? However, this incapability of the Welsh labour historiography to reflect and react to postmodernist challenges was grounded directly in the DNA of the Welsh labour history based on the close links with the non-academic sphere. This obligation, represented for example by the journal 'Llafur', became also a barrier for reflection and reformation of the Welsh labour historiography. According to Andy Croll, "It was possible to be well versed in the intricacies of Gramscian theories of culture and still pen books and articles that had popular appeal. Times have changed. To be a Derridean or Foucauldian and a 'people's remembrancer', it would seem, is far more problematic."⁴² Furthermore, he stressed that the Welsh labour historians should not abandon this tradition. On the contrary, he argued that the aim of Welsh labour history is to achieve a balance between the academic and lay environments. He emphasized that the Welsh labour historians should include some of the questions and suggestions of cultural history, reflecting them still within the modernist parameters.⁴³ In my view, this argumentation is based on an inner contradiction. If the postmodernist challenge were to be treated seriously, this could not be done without rethinking the basic terms and categories of labour history.

Taking the example of gender, it can be demonstrated how the Welsh labour historiography attempted to handle the new postmodern challenges. In general, until

40 The discussion took place also on the continent. Especially, Jürgen Kocka emphasizes in his article that social historians should not abandon economic and social analysis in the current situation of expanding capitalism. For more details see: Jürgen Kocka, 'Losses, Gains and Opportunities: Social History Today', *Journal of Social History*, 37/1, 2003, pp. 21–28.

41 Andy Croll, 'People's Remembrancers in a Post-Modern Age: Contemplating the Non-Crisis of Welsh Labour History', *Llafur: the Journal of the Society for the Study of Welsh Labour History*, 8/1, 2000, p. 5.

42 *Ibidem* p. 12.

43 Andy Croll, 'People's Remembrancers' in a Post-Modern Age: Contemplating the Non-Crisis of Welsh Labour History', *Llafur: the Journal of the Society for the Study of Welsh Labour History*, 8/1, 2000, p. 13.



the last decades of the twentieth century there were few works focusing on the topic of gender in the Welsh labour history.⁴⁴ The Welsh labour history was written for a long time from the vantage point of a male miner, a member of the majority. His working in the mines and unions created the core of most of the labour historiography. However, this approach began to be questioned at the beginning of the twenty first century. Deirdre Beddoe published in 2000 a book titled “Out of the Shadows” in which she focused on the history of women in Wales in the twentieth century.⁴⁵ The main topics of her research regarding women in Welsh society were spheres of ordinary life such as free time, education or household chores. Moreover, she was interested in a comparison with other British regions. On the one hand, she convincingly argued that Welsh women had lower living standards in comparison with the English regions. For instance, Welsh women had less say about the family budget. The employment rate of Welsh women at the beginning of the twentieth century was around 23% which was 10% less than that in England. The same situation was in the sphere of women’s health or participation in public life. According to Beddoe, the patriarchy model was not seriously challenged in Wales until the 1970s. On the other hand, the work by Beddoe lacks a deeper theoretical background. She focuses in her book on the history of women rather than the history of gender.⁴⁶ Beddoe was also not much concerned about the sphere of power relationships, which was, according to theorists of gender, one of the cornerstones of gender.⁴⁷

Not only gender, but also other topics such as migration and language started to be examined by the Welsh historians in the last two decades. This development can be illustrated with the book “Immigration and Integration” by Welsh historian Paul O’Leary, who is interested in Irish migration to Wales in the nineteenth and twentieth century.⁴⁸ Apart from focusing on topics such as family, religious life, criminality or culture of the Irish in Wales, he emphasizes the importance of studying the integration processes. According to him, the Irish community did not just extend their cultural traditions to the Welsh milieu, but rather that interaction with the new environment forced the Irish community to rethink its own identity and to internalize new strategies of behaviour.⁴⁹ A similar topic, but focusing on Welsh emigrants and their experience, is examined in the collection “The Welsh in London” by Emrys Jones.⁵⁰

44 Neil Evans and Coleg Harlech, ‘Writing the Social History of Modern Wales’, *Social History*, 17/3, 1992, p. 483.

45 Deirdre Beddoe, ‘Out of the Shadows: A History of Women in Twentieth-Century Wales’, Cardiff 2000.

46 It should be noted that there were published works that focus more on a theoretical examination of gender in Welsh social history. For instance, see: Paul O’Leary, ‘Masculine Histories: Gender and Social History of Modern Wales’, *The Welsh History Review*, 22/2, 2004, pp. 252–277.

47 Joan W. Scott, ‘Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis’, *The American Historical Review*, 91/5, 1986, p. 1067.

48 Paul O’Leary, ‘Immigration and Integration. The Irish in Wales 1798–1922’, Cardiff 2000.

49 *Ibidem*, p. xi.

50 Emrys Jones (ed.), *The Welsh in London, 1500–2000*, Cardiff 2001.

The topic of Welsh language is scrutinized in the series “The Social History of Welsh Language” published by Cardiff University.

In the last two decades the Welsh labour historiography could pride itself on a more varied book production. The dominant narrative has ceased to be concerned only with the trade union or mining history. However, this does not necessarily mean that the Welsh labour historiography has risen to the postmodern challenges for good because the cultural or linguistic turn did not aim to call into question only the choice of topics but rather, it aimed to challenge the methodology of labour history. From this point of view, the answer to the question of how the Welsh labour historiography tackle the new postmodern approaches is somewhat unclear. According to some historians, the lack of theoretical works in the Welsh labour historiography was due to a relative scarcity of historical works in general. And therefore, the Welsh historians had the impression that it was important in the first place to collect enough empirical works that would focus only on facts and only then to be concerned with methodology or theory.⁵¹ However, it seems to me that the Welsh labour historiography has stopped at the halfway mark. On the one hand, it was able to integrate to its narrative new topics such as gender or minority, but it was not able to reflect on how these phenomena changed the methodology of labour history. Moreover, the Welsh national identity was built on the sudden experience of industrialization in the second half of the nineteenth century, when the South Wales counties became some of the biggest mining areas not only in the Isles but also on the continent. Therefore, to write the Welsh labour history meant also to participate in the creation of a national master narrative, which was very fragile. The Welsh labour historians were aware of this responsibility and that is why they were afraid of excessive fragmentation of the discipline.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have examined the development of the Welsh labour historiography in the second half of the twentieth century. Though the Welsh labour historiography was not the most influential one, it has contributed to the general development of the historical discipline. Firstly, I was interested in the reaction of the Welsh labour historiography to the emergence of innovative approaches to social history represented by the British Marxists. In my opinion, the concept of the Welsh labour history introduced in the Welsh labour magazine ‘Llafur’ was an answer to this shift from classical social history to ‘history from below’. In this concept, the Welsh labour historians should focus on the links with the non-academic spheres and be interested more in collaboration with the public. This emphasis on preserving and developing the Welsh heritage through labour-related historical works was mainly based on the important role of the labour tradition in the Welsh national narrative. This is why the Welsh labour historians were mainly concerned with the

⁵¹ Paul O’Leary, ‘Masculine Histories: Gender and Social History of Modern Wales’, *The Welsh History Review*, 22/2, 2004, p. 258.



trade unions and mining history. The book “The Fed” published in 1980 is a good example of this approach. The authors’ prime focus is on the life of ordinary members of a trade union within the framework of this organization. To write social history meant for them to write the history of the trade unions.

Nevertheless, one decade later this concept was challenged by postmodernism. The Welsh labour historiography began to be challenged by new cultural and linguistic approaches. Though the Welsh labour historians began to examine the role of women or minorities in Welsh society, the concept of writing for a broader audience has not been abandoned. Therefore, the Welsh labour historians were rarely interested in theoretical discussions and revisions of the main categories of their discipline. In general, the Welsh labour historiography has its weak and strong points. On the one hand, there are some problematic points such as the conservatism in the methodology, the focus on the national paradigm or the lack of theoretical discussions. On the other hand, in the complex contemporary world, the idea that historians should actively participate in the public sphere is noteworthy. Moreover, the Welsh labour historiography has been always in the shadow of the British elder sister. This peripheral experience and the ways of coming to terms with it can serve as useful know-how worth mentioning. The challenge for the further development of the Welsh labour historiography is to consider how to focus on more transnational topics, how to take part in more theoretical discussions within the discipline, and how to be more open in communication with other labour historiographies.