'IN THAT GENTILE COUNTRY . . .'

The beginnings of Puritan Nonconformity in Wales

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The cover combines a view of the Llan-wern steelworks with a reproduction of the Chi-Rho mark found on a piece of pottery at Caer-went, which is the earliest evidence for Christianity in Wales; both Llan-wern and Caer-went are within a few miles of Llanfaches, the 'cradle' of Puritan Nonconformity in Wales

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The beginnings of Puritan Nonconformity in Wales

Who were Wales's earliest Nonconformists? They were, of course, Puritans; but I should perhaps stress at the outset that not all Puritans were Nonconformists. Indeed, the contrary was the case: in general, no self-respecting Puritan would turn Nonconformist unless he were compelled to do so. Who, then, were the Puritans? This is a surprisingly difficult question to answer: indeed, the answers are almost as numerous as the answerers. But if there were what might be termed a consensus answer to the question, it would be something like this.

THE PURITANS: A QUESTION OF DEFINITION

Protestantism emerged on the Continent in 1517 with the witness of Martin Luther in Germany, to be followed soon by Ulrich Zwingli in Basel and Jean Calvin in Geneva. All three upheld the authority of the Bible against the authority of Church and Pope, the preaching of the Word against the the Sacrifice of the Mass, justification by faith against justification by works. Calvin went further and developed new teaching regarding Church government (that which became known later as Presbyterianism) and also church worship and discipline. Protestantism came finally to England and Wales in 1558/9 with the ascent to the throne of Elizabeth I, after a full quarter century of experiment and vacillation which at times involved considerable bloodshed. The doctrine of the Church of England at first was thoroughly Protestant, if not Calvinist; but the policy and liturgy of the Church of England retained a highly conservative and Catholic look. The Puritans, it is argued, were those people who believed that the Church of England was insufficiently Protestant: that it needed to be further reformed by adopting

a Presbyterian church order and more particularly the kind of ecclesiastical discipline that was practised in Calvin's Geneva and John Knox's Scotland. These, according to the consensus view, were the Puritans, and they fought for their ideals on numerous battle-fields throughout the reigns of Elizabeth and James I and Charles I, until the victory of the Parliamentary cause in the Civil Wars, 1642-9, gave them the opportunity of translating their ideas into practice. By then, however, yet more radical ideas had gained ground, and people were arguing that the Church in its essence had nothing to do with the State, and that only in voluntary congregations of believers (as contrasted with compulsory congregations of all the inhabitants of a parish) could the true Church of God be discerned on earth.

To sum up the consensus view: the Puritans were the people who agreed with the Church of England as regards doctrine but disagreed with her as regards church order, worship and discipline. Some ten years ago, however, Professor John F. W. New of the University of Waterloo, Ontario, Canada published a short but important book (*Anglicans and Puritans. The Basis of their Opposition* 1558-1640) challenging the received standpoint and arguing that there were profound, if ill-formulated, doctrinal differences between Puritans and Anglicans from the beginning. He perceives these differences more particularly in the following areas: the doctrine of man, especially with regard to the extent of his corruption; the doctrine of the church; the doctrine of the Sacraments, whether or not they had any objective efficacy; and the doctrine of the Last Things—all this in addition to the far less passive attitude of the Puritans towards the Christian life in general. Perhaps a simpler way of saying the same thing would be to state that the Puritans on the whole were thorough and consistent disciples of John Calvin's, whereas the Anglicans, even at first, followed him from afar only. As the seventeenth century progressed, even the doctrine of the Church of England, at least among the higher clergy, became more and more Arminian; John Hales spoke for many when he remarked of the Synod of *Dort,* 1618, which he attended as one of the Anglican representatives, 'There I

bade John Calvin good night'—a most perilous act for any theologian.

But to return to Professor New. I am quite sure that it is he who is right rather than the scholars whom he criticizes, and that it would be possible to take his analysis a step further if we were to include in the discussion the experiential aspect as well as the theological. That is, if the writings of the Puritans and Anglicans were compared from the point of view of their attitude to Christian experience, I am sure we would find that the Puritans place far greater stress than the Anglicans on the experience of God's grace, that is, on conversion (or vocation, as they called it). And the ordinary means by which this experience came to man was, of course, the preaching of the Word. The place of preaching in the Puritan apprehension of the scheme of salvation was fundamental and central. 'How shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear, without a preacher?'

To sum up. The Puritans were those people within the Church of England during the reigns of Elizabeth, James I and Charles I who were on the whole faithful followers of John Calvin's and who wished to see their Church further reformed according to his teaching as regards doctrine, liturgy and ceremonial, polity and discipline—which is a pretty comprehensive list; they also believed fervently in preaching as the means of conversion of those who were to be called; and it may be added that they held these convictions with the utmost seriousness and endeavoured to live according to these convictions every minute of every day. No wonder their more frivolous neighbours sometimes looked askance at them, as well as the powers-that-be in the Church of England. And it is certain that there were plenty of hypocrites and time-servers among them who deserved all the stripes they got. But on the whole it is doubtful if England ever saw a nobler group of men and women than this.

But what of Wales? Who were the earliest Welsh Puritans? When this question is asked, the first name that generally comes to mind is that of John Penry. Then we think of that

brilliant and heroic generation of Welsh Puritan leaders which emerged during the Civil Wars and their aftermath: Walter Cradock, Vavasor Powell, Morgan Llwyd and perhaps William Erbury. It is, however, very doubtful if John Penry (almost certainly, by the way, a native of Glamorganshire rather than Brecknockshire) ever laboured in Wales, although he laboured unstintingly for Wales, and indeed gave his life for her in the end. And as far as the generation of Cradock and Powell and Llwyd is concerned, it could in fact be argued that this was the second generation of Welsh Puritans. There was a preceding generation, and it is with this generation that I want to remain for a short time this evening.

THE EARLIEST WELSH PURITANS

But before I do so, perhaps I should stress that even this generation has its prehistory, as it were. Although the English Puritans, not without justice, used to regard Wales as 'one of the dark corners of the land', there were individuals who could be described as Puritans scattered up and down the country from at least as early as the beginning of the fifteen eighties—several years before John Penry stepped onto the stage. According to the biographer of St. Richard White, the Roman Catholic martyr, the parish of Wrexham in 1582 was dominated by 'certain pedlars and tinkers, . . . hot Puritans and full of the Gospel', and 'at Easter none was to be admitted to the Communion table but such as had a token from one of the two tinkers': the presence of these Puritan tinkers was surely a reflex of the activity of Christopher Goodman in the neighbouring diocese of Chester. The following year Rowland Puleston of Bersham who is described in a later source as Vicar of Wrexham but was probably never more than a curate, compiled in his execrable Welsh a treatise entitled 'Llyfr o'r Eglwys Gristnogedd' (*A book of the Christian Church*): this is primarily an anti-Papist tract, but in it Puleston specifically adopts the Puritan standpoint on ecclesiastical discipline. After this, Wrexham Puritanism goes underground for a while, but it would be rash to assume that it no longer existed. At the other end of the country towards

the end of our period, later Nonconformist hagiography identifies two prominent clergymen as Puritans. The first of these was Rhys Prichard, Vicar of Llanymddyfri 1602-1644, and a prolific and influential popular religious poet; according to our source, he even 'wore his beard long, after the manner of the Puritans', which Thomas Charles translates as 'yn gadael ei farf i dyfu yn ôl dull yr hen Frutaniaid' (*allowing his beard to grow according to the custom of the ancient Britons*), thus conjuring up a vision of Rhys Prichard striding around Llanymddyfri adorned with flowing Celtic moustaches! The second clergyman to be designated a Puritan is Robert Powell, Vicar of Cadoxton-juxta-Neath 1620-1644; he is said to have been 'a great opposer of the Book of Sports in the year 1639 [*sic*] and very strict in examining the Communicants before they came to the Lord's Supper and those he approved of he gave them tickets.' About both these gentlemen, however, one must have certain reservations. Rhys Prichard was Chancellor of St. David's Cathedral, and high ecclesiastical dignitaries were not normally Puritans. Moreover, Robert Powell's will has just come to light and it betrays little evidence of Puritan sentiment, although closer analysis may well reveal some interesting connections (for example, with John After, Vicar of Swansea 1588- ?).

We might hope to find further evidence of early Welsh Puritans in the records of efforts to provide more Welsh preaching. As we have seen, Puritans placed the greatest emphasis on the importance of preaching, and Wales was peculiarly badly off in this regard. There is a cloud of witnesses from the fifteen seventies onwards testifying to the scarcity of preaching in Wales, and their testimony is fully supported by official Church records. The most eloquent of these witnesses was, of course, John Penry himself. Another was Walter Stephens, the Puritan Rector of Bishop's Castle in Salop from 1580 onwards, who used to say that in his early days in the living there was not one preacher between him and the sea—that is, in the whole of mid-Wales. Towards the beginning of the Civil Wars it was said that there were not in Wales as many preachers as there were counties—which may have been an exaggeration, but not a serious one.

And of course it cannot be assumed that those clergymen who were able to preach were of necessity acceptable to the Puritans: most of the Welsh manuscript sermons that have survived from the period seem far too abstruse to have made much of an impact on ignorant country congregations. In England, the Puritans attempted to remedy the dearth of preaching by setting up what were known as lectureships. Lecturers were paid preachers attached either to parish churches or, more usually, to boroughs, and their function was to expound the Bible; not unnaturally they felt themselves more beholden to the trust or corporation which employed them than to the bishop of the diocese in which they laboured. A few lectureships were set up in Wales, both at parish and corporation level: for example, there were town preachers in the borough of Cardiff in the fifteen eighties and in the borough of Caernarfon in the sixteen thirties. But in very few cases can we be sure that the lectures given were Puritan in content and thrust, at least before the sixteen thirties, so that this source also turns out to be somewhat disappointing in the nature of the evidence which it affords. The whole history of preaching in this period in Wales deserves further systematic attention. Incidentally, it was the success of the English Puritans in setting up lectureships that so disturbed Charles I and Archbishop William Laud that they decided in the sixteen thirties upon a final solution (as they thought) of the Puritan problem. The Court of High Commission in London was a convenient weapon to hand; and the members of the House of Commons, many of them Puritan in sympathy, were rusticated throughout the decade (1629-1640) and so were unable to come to the aid of those persecuted. By forcing every clergyman and lecturer to state upon oath that they believed the Church of England to be virtually without blemish as regards doctrine, liturgy, organization and discipline, Charles and Laud hoped to compel the stubborn Puritan to declare himself so that they could then force him to submit or else suspend or deprive him. The reissue of the notorious Book of Sports in 1633, encouraging Sunday games, further exacerbated the situation. Laud used to receive annual reports from his bishops as to the state of affairs in their

dioceses, and these reports he would then summarize and send on to the king. Laud's summaries are still extant, and it is in these, together with a few other sources, that we first see the names of those Welsh Puritans who were forced into a position of nonconformity—Wales's first nonconformists. More than one generation is represented among these names but, as I have already mentioned, I propose to concentrate this evening on the first generation only.

WILLIAM WROTH (*c.* 1576-1641)

It seems reasonably certain that the most senior of all the Welsh Puritan Nonconformists was William Wroth. He was a native of Monmouthshire (now Gwent) and may have been a member of the Llanelen branch of the Wroth family of Abergafenni. He was born *c.* 1576, one year later than Dom David (Augustine) Baker, the famous Benedictine writer on ascetic theology, another native of Abergafenni whose life-span corresponded almost exactly with Wroth's. Like Baker, Wroth was probably educated at the indifferent local grammar school before matriculating at Oxford, from New Inn Hall, 27 November 1590 at the age of fourteen. He stayed nearly fifteen years in Oxford, graduating B.A. from Christ Church 18 February 1596 and M.A. from Jesus College 26 June 1605. In the matriculation register he is described as *generosi filius* 'the son of a gentleman', and so he was technically; but tradition has it that he came to Oxford as servitor to Sir Edward Lewis of the Fan near Caerffili, the scion of the most powerful family in Glamorganshire at that time, and it is a striking fact that Edward Lewis's graduation dates (B.A. 20 June 1597, M.A. 23 June 1605) correspond pretty exactly with Wroth's. Whatever the exact connection between the two, it was maintained after both left Oxford, and several documents, mostly relating to land conveyance, suggest that Wroth lived for a time at the Fan with Edward Lewis: these documents are so far fourteen in number and are mostly dated between 1604 and 1615, although there are two strays belonging to 1622 and 1623. In 1610 Wroth was promised the Rectory of Llanfaches in Monmouthshire by Edward Lewis when it

should become vacant. This happened the following year and Wroth was presented to the living, but for some reason—possibly because the Crown challenged Edward Lewis's right to present—the appointment did not become effective. In 1613 Edward Lewis presented Wroth to the Rectory of Llanfihangel Rhosied (Roggiet), also in Monmouthshire, and he held this living until 1626 when he resigned. Meanwhile, in 1617, Llanfaches once again became vacant, and this time the process of presenting Wroth to the Rectory—by the Crown—went without a hitch. For nine years, therefore, he held both Rectories together (1617-26); neither was lucrative, but Wroth appears to have had some private means and to have been unmarried, so that his needs were few. The connection with Edward Lewis was not broken, and Wroth is said to have served as chaplain both to Sir Edward and to his daughter-in-law Anne Lady Beauchamp (wife of the second Sir Edward Lewis): indeed, Nathaniel Rogers says that Wroth acted on behalf of Lady Beauchamp when her rights in the Chase of Wentwood were challenged by the all-powerful Earl of Worcester, and that he suffered as a result. His link with the Lewis family is illustrated by the following traditional story.

> Being once at Parc y Fan near Caerffili to visit Sir Edward Lewis, and walking in the garden, the gardener offered him some flowers and [he] took them and returned him sixpence. He said, 'I hear you lead a loose life', to which the gardener replied, 'Yes, God forgive me, but I have a good heart'. Mr. Wroth said, 'Come to hear me tomorrow.' He did, and Mr. Wroth asked him what he thought of his heart now. He answered that it was bad indeed, he did not think it was so bad, and afterwards lived a better life.

WROTH'S CONVERSION

This incident, however, must have happened after the great transformation in Wroth's life. We have two traditional accounts of that transformation. The one was preserved for us by Joshua Thomas of Leominster, the great eighteenth

century historian of the Welsh Baptists, who gives as his source 'a manuscript in Monmouthshire'. The other account is found among the manuscripts of Thomas Charles and was copied by him and an amanuensis from a mid eighteenth century manuscript written by someone interested in early Welsh nonconformist history—almost certainly, in my view, Edmund Jones of Pont-y-Pŵl—and drawing upon his own memories, oral tradition and such lost documents as the 'Church Book of Neath'; this is an immensely valuable source of information which has not yet been fully published or properly analysed, although Thomas Charles published a summary of it in *Trysorfa Ysprydol*. This is how the Thomas Charles manuscript tells the story of Wroth's conversion :

> He learned to play upon the harp, and before his conversion would play upon it in the churchyard to divert the people in the evening of the Lord's Day after the morning service. Thus Mr. Wroth spent the Lord's Day in his unconverted state until the mercy of God intended for him began to operate toward him in the following manner. The master of the family where he lodged and to whom he himself was related, having bought a new harp for him in London, came down to Colebrook on his way home, fell sick there and died. Notice was sent to the family, but before they went he had been buried. This great and sudden turn of providence greatly affected him, and put him on thinking of the world to come. This was greatly helped on by an extraordinary dream he had at that time. He dreamed he was in a great flood in danger of drowning, in great fear, apprehending he was quite unfit to die. While in this perplexity he saw in his dream standing on the bank of the river a beautiful young man with a sky coloured cap or crown on his head. He said to him, 'What wilt thou do to have thy life saved?' He answered, 'I will do anything to have my life.' Then replied the other, 'Make restitution, and go and preach the Gospel.' When he awakened he was greatly affected and resolved to obey. Accordingly he sent for one to whom he had lent money on interest

and returned so much back that he impoverished himself; and studied a sermon to preach without telling the people of it, not knowing how he should come off. For before he only read the Common Prayer to a few old people and those hard by, for the young people met in the afternoon to play in the churchyard, who expected him to come among them with his harp, and wondered he did not come, but were told by those that had heard him that he had preached a sermon, which brought more to the church the next Lord's Day, and the next Lord's Day more, and the whole parish and about, still increasing more and more, so that Llanfaches church was another sort of place from what it had been before. The congregation increased continually, so that the church became much too little, and Mr. Wroth was obliged to come out to the churchyard, which is a large one. And now the churchyard which had been before profaned, though called consecrated ground, was indeed [consecrated], by the presence of God and the preaching of the Gospel, whereby many sinners were turned from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to the living God.

The Joshua Thomas account is less full and differs in detail, but also has some additional material:

I was told that he was a clergyman much given to music, mirth and levity in some part of his younger days. In an old manuscript I had this account, that a gentleman in the neighbourhood had a suit of law depending which was of great importance to the family. The gentleman was gone to London to attend the [weighty] affairs. To his no small satisfaction, the trial turned out in his favour, he won the cause. He sent word of it home. His family and friends were transported with joy. The gentleman appointed a certain day to be home. There were great preparations for feasting and joy that evening. Mr. Wroth brought a new violin, in order to bear his part in the triumph.

> But alas, while thus in full expectation awaiting the appearance of the gentleman, behold, to their inexpressible mortification, the news arrived that death, relentless death, had seized the gentleman. He was no more. It is not easy to conceive what impression was made on the minds of an affectionate mother and tender daughters by this deep-wounding report. The transition was so great from abounding joy to the extremity of grief that not only tender relatives but friends and others were struck with astonishment. The parson despised his new violin, and the report is that in the midst of the company he fell on his knees and most fervently prayed for a blessing upon the alarming providence, and that God would be pleased to comfort the disconsolate widow and fatherless children, &c. Thus for the substance of the manuscript.
>
> The report further was that Mr. Wroth soon after gave full proof that he was fully convinced of the vanity of earthly pleasures and the importance of eternal concerns. His preaching was very different from what it had been formerly, and from what was common in the country.

I now feel we can date this incident quite precisely to 1625-6. The Thomas Charles manuscript says Wroth was fifty years of age when it happened, and it would explain why he resigned the Rectory of Llanfihangel Rhosied in 1626, since Puritans naturally disapproved of pluralism.

Wroth had perhaps eight years of peace in which to preach his late-acquired faith at Llanfaches. When the great campaign against the Puritans began in the sixteen thirties, a campaign to which I have already briefly alluded, he very soon attracted the attention of the authorities. He was examined by the Bishop of Llandaf, William Murray, during his triennial visitation of the diocese in 1634 and so startled that prelate that his case was referred at once to the High Commission Court in London, together with that of Wroth's disciple, William Erbury, Vicar of St. Mary's, Cardiff; on the other hand Erbury's curate Walter Cradock, another of

Wroth's disciples, was summarily dismissed, 'being a bold ignorant young fellow'. Wroth and Erbury appeared before the High Commission in 1635 but no verdict was reached in their case for three years and in the meantime they were able to carry on with their work. It was presumably during this period that the following incident occurred, as the Thomas Charles manuscript records (not without a certain understandable overstatement of Wroth's nonconformity at the end of the anecdote):

> I heard the following story of him. The Bishop of Landaff being at Bath, Mr. Wroth went to him, whither of his own accord or being sent for I was not told. The Bishop blamed Mr. Wroth for not obeying the King and the bishops to read the Book of Sports, and for his preaching so much out of time as he counted it, &c. Mr. Wroth in answer in some of his speeches spoke to the following purpose with tears and crying, 'Souls are going to hell, my lord, in their sins: should not we endeavour all the ways we can to save souls, &c.', so as to affect the Bishop himself that he also wept but said to Mr. Wroth, 'I shall lose my place for your sake'. To which Mr. Wroth replied, 'No, my lord, you shall not lose your place for my sake. I give up the Church. Do you place an incumbent in it to have the profit. I only desire the favour to preach a sermon in it now and then gratis.'

THE ANTIOCH OF WALES

In 1638 the High Commission Court arrived at its conclusions. Wroth submitted and conformed; Erbury (characteristically) resigned. Wroth's conformity was less than profound, however, for in the following year there occurred what must be regarded as the high point of his career, the event described as follows by the biographer of Henry Jessey, minister of an important Congregational church in London:

> In November 1639 he was sent into Wales by the congregation for the assisting of old Mr. Wroth, Mr.

> Cradock and others in their gathering and constituting the Church of Llanfaches in Monmouthshire in South Wales, which afterwards was, like Antioch, the mother Church in that gentile country, being very famous for her officers, members, orders and gifts; for the furtherance of which this worthy servant of God was instrumental, and ever afterwards acknowledged so by them.

The date of that account is 1671. Similar, but less precise, is that of Edward Terrill, the historian of Broadmead Baptist Church, Bristol, which may be dated 1672-8 :

> In those parts was one Mr. Wroth in Monmouthshire, not far from this city of Bristol, who for the powerfulness and efficaciousness of his preaching, with the exemplary holiness of his life, was called the Apostle of Wales, for the papists, and all sorts almost, honoured him for a holy man. By his ministry it pleased the Lord to convert many, [so] that they left their sinful courses in the world, after which he caused them to separate from the worship of the world, and gathered them into [the] gospel order of Church Government, which light of theirs began to shine very much in this part of the land.

What kind of church was gathered by William Wroth, Walter Cradock and Henry Jessey during those fateful days in November 1639? Both William Erbery and Henry Maurice (in his notes on Welsh Nonconformist history in 1675) agree that it was a church 'according to the New England pattern' or 'according to the New England way'. This means that Wroth was following the example of John Cotton and other Church leaders in the Puritan settlements of New England. These used to gather their converts and bind them together through a church covenant; the covenanters would then elect their own church officers; only those who had taken the covenant could receive the Sacraments and they were naturally kept under strict discipline—and yet they worshipped together with the unconverted in the parish churches and heard the preaching of the Word with them. Although

they formed a little church within a church—*ecclesiola in ecclesia*—they did not formally separate themselves from the larger body. It was this tolerant pattern that was followed at Llanfaches, and Dr. Thomas Richards was firmly of the view that the tolerance of the congregation originally extended so far as to include both the advocates of child baptism and the advocates of adult baptism among its members.

WROTH—THE PASTOR

Whether that was so or not, there is no doubt that Wroth's ministry at Llanfaches was peculiarly fruitful. We have testimony to this effect not only from Jessey's biographer and Edmund Terrill but also from two of Wroth's converts, William Erbury and Walter Cradock, and from the Thomas Charles manuscript. Erbury grew very suspicious of all ecclesiastical organization, indeed he developed into a heretic of the first rank, but he could not forbear from looking back with longing on the flourishing estate of Llanfaches in those early days:

> For I will speak the truth without partiality. There were not more spiritual and suffering saints on any part of English ground as were in Wales, so self-denying and dying to the world, yea so wise-hearted and knowing Christians. Let all the English counties about them testify, and will tell, how many saints from Somerset, Gloucestershire, Herefordshire, Radnor, Glamorganshire came in multitudes with delight to Llanfaches.
>
> What light and labour in the spirit was then? How heavenly-minded? What holy language among them? What watching? What prayers night and day, in the way they went, in the work they did at their plough? Everywhere in private that spirit of prayer and pureness of heart appeared. Nothing of ordinances was then mentioned, but with fear in themselves, and forcing others by the Spirit from living in them. All was spirit and life the saints in Wales then looked for.

Cradock's evidence has to do more particularly with Wroth himself and his excellence as a pastor of souls and as a preacher.

> It was once a speech of a reverend minister [marg. The Rev. Mr. Wroth], who, because of the multitude of his hearers was often necessitated to preach in the churchyard, that there was not one person in that congregation whose spiritual estate he did not fully know. And the success of his work was answerable, exceeding great and glorious. 'Neither,' said he, 'is there any sermon I preach wherein I teach them not at least one lesson more than any one of them all knew before, and yet I learn from them throughout the week as much or more than they do of me on the Lord's Day.'

The Thomas Charles manuscript adds some interesting personal touches to the portrait.

> Mr. Wroth's way of preaching was powerful and plain, and it had need to be both in those time[s] of ignorance and profaneness. He would sometimes ask questions as he went on in his sermons, as 'in what condition God made man at first, and did he continue so?', 'who is Jesus Christ?', &c., giving leave to answer, and when they could not he would answer his own questions. And very zealous and particular he was in his endeavours for the good of souls, and his success was equally great. Mr. Wroth had need of a strong voice, and so he had, stout and masculine to reach the great congregation. He entertained many at his table who came from far, and his manner was, after the table was laid, to come to the room and ask a blessing, and to say after the blessing, 'there is good meat, and it is a good God that sends it: eat and welcome!', and he would go to his chamber to prepare for the evening sermon, his place of worship being much crowded with hearers; and much business he had with religious people, his own people and others. He was said to be a very holy man, strict in his life and conversation,

> strict also and close in examining persons whom he had received into Communion, with whom he also often conversed with afterwards, so that he is said to have thoroughly understood the soul state of every one of his communicants.

Wroth's joint ministry of the parish church and gathered church at Llanfaches—for so I interpret the evidence—lasted for less than two years. He had drawn up his will 17 September 1638 and it was proved in April 1641. Edmund Terrill says that he had forseen the coming of the Civil War and had prayed 'that he might never hear a drum beat in order thereto'. And so, says Terrill, 'he was by the Lord laid asleep before the war'. When Walter Cradock was once moved to compose a poem on the Last Judgement, in English but in an impeccably Welsh metre (the *englyn cyrch* or *Triban Morgannwg*), he included in it the following stanza depicting the sheep on the one hand and the goats on the other :

> There's Moses and Elias,
> There's Jezebel and Caiphas,
> There's Peter, Preston, Wroth and Paul,
> There's Saul and Cain and Judas.

Cradock obviously thought highly enough of his old mentor and father in God to place him in the company of the Apostles Peter and Paul and of John Preston, the great English Puritan leader who died, wholly worn out by his labours for the Faith, in 1628 at the age of forty one.

WROTH—THE POET

In composing this poem, Cradock may in fact have been following the example of Wroth himself. He too composed popular religious verse in English but in Welsh metres. Terrill records a charming scene, of which he must have heard from his wife, who was a daughter of the Mr. Listun to whom he refers.

> But sometimes Mr. Wroth would come over [to Bristol] and preach to them, strengthening them in the

Lord, who lodged at Mr. Listun's aforesaid, whose children the said Mr. Wroth would use to teach them at night-time this verse following :

Thy sin, thy end, the death of Christ,
The eternal pangs of Hell,
The day of doom, the joys of Heaven,
These six remember well.

Thus this holy and humble man, desiring the good of souls, would be doing good wherever he came, both to young and old.

There are in various manuscripts at least two, and perhaps four, English religious poems composed by Wroth. The two that are certainly his are written in the same Welsh metre as Cradock's poem, the *Triban*, and are in effect English *cwndidau*. There was in Glamorgan and Monmouthshire at this time a school of *cwndidwyr*, of poets who composed poems in the so-called 'free metres' in order to instruct the ignorant. Wroth must have noticed how successful they were and have decided to adapt their methods for the benefit of his own bilingual congregation. The *cwndidau* were probably sung, and the fact that Wroth, according to tradition, was a musician, must have helped him to appreciate the potential of the *cwndid* as a means of instruction. The first of Wroth's *cwndidau* is about the Twelve Apostles and their martyrdoms : this was by far the most popular of his poems and at least five manuscript copies are still extant. At its close, following the verse on St. Philip, the poet refers to the complex of ideas known to Welsh historians as 'the Protestant Ecclesiastical Theory', namely the hypothesis that Joseph of Arimathea had founded a primitive and pure evangelical church in Britain long before the corrupt faith of the Church of Rome was propagated here.

Some say that he for certain
From France or part of Almain
Sent him that buried Jesus dear,
Good Joseph, here to Britain.

Some say that Joseph's body
Doth rest in Glastonbury
Where he taught to honour God
And fear his rod divinely.

Thus did the Apostles publish
Christ's faith without all blemish,
All the twelve through death and smart
Their earthly part did finish.

I am a shepherd simple:
Oh help me, heaven's turtle!
I do not seek the children's loaf
But crumbs from off thy table.

Oh Jesus, help to lighten
My flock's most sinful burden;
After death and earthly doom,
Lord, give them room in heaven.

If any ask what truant
Did pen these verses currant:
One that honoured Christ his troth,
One William Wroth, his servant.

The second poem which is certainly by Wroth is a confession of sin and a plea for mercy, and it ends as follows:

O Jesu sweet, remember
Thy pangs of death most bitter;
Take my mite, my widow's store:
I have no more to offer!

And teach me, wretched sinner,
In thy vineyard to labour,
While I live thy grace to win
And die within thy favour.

The two other poems are in English metres and are perhaps more doubtfully to be ascribed to Wroth. The first of the

two takes the numbers from one to twelve and fashions a stanza about each number and the things that belong to it: 'One God . . .', 'Two Testaments . . .', 'Three Persons . . .' and so on. The second of the two is the most interesting of all since it is bilingual. It would be very pleasant to be able to believe that it is Wroth's work since its quality, in both Welsh and English, is much higher than that of the other poems ascribed to him. The poem is a meditation upon mortality—a theme dear to the heart of the earlier seventeenth century—and it begins and ends thus:

Oh earth of earth, observe this well
When earth in earth shall come to dwell,
When earth in earth shall close remain
Till earth from earth shall rise again.

O bridd o bridd, ystyria'r gwir
Cyn elych bridd i bridd yn hir
Lle erys pridd mewn pridd yn faith
N[e]s cwnno bridd o bridd ail-waith . . .

And to thy God for mercy pray
That at thy last departing day
The glorious angels may thee bring
Where blessed saints forever sing.

A gweddia ar Dduw yn brudd
Erbyn dy farwolaeth-ddydd
I angylion nef dy ddwyn yn syth
I blith y saint sy'n canu byth.

That, in brief, is William Wroth: a Christian without guile, a careful pastor of his flock, an effective preacher, something of a poet, a gentle and moderate man in all his ways. And yet this was the man who was responsible (to speak humanly) for one of the most revolutionary institutions that was ever planted in the soil of Wales, the first independent (or semi-independent) church, the church of Llanfaches. Wroth does not deserve to be forgotten, and I only wish these few ill-digested remarks were worthier of his memory as we approach the quarter-centenary of his birth.

OLIVER THOMAS, 'CARWR Y CYMRY' (1598-1652)

Before I end, I would like to mention another early Welsh Puritan and Nonconformist, this time from North Wales. This was Oliver Thomas, *Carwr y Cymry,* 'the friend of Welshmen', as he liked to call himself. Mr. Merfyn Morgan from Bangor has recently completed a valuable piece of research on Thomas, and in what follows I am much indebted to Mr. Morgan's work. Oliver Thomas was a native of Montgomeryshire, although we do not yet know precisely where in Montgomeryshire. He probably came from a family of some substance, and appears to have been born in the year 1598. It is possible that he was educated at Shrewsbury School and certain that he joined Hart Hall in Oxford in 1616; the Principal of Hart Hall at that time was a Welshman from Meirionethshire named Theodore Price. Thomas graduated B.A. in 1620 and M.A. in 1628. Shortly after graduating he married a certain Mary [Jukes?] in Shrewsbury and eventually settled down at West Felton near Oswestry. The Parish Register of West Felton begins in 1628 when Samuel Hildersham, son of the influential Puritan Arthur Hildersham, was appointed to the Rectory. Between that year and 1642 eight children were born to Thomas and his wife, of whom two died young; moreover, Thomas's will suggests that he and his wife had already had two daughters before 1628. How Thomas maintained this large family is something of a mystery (unless, as is not impossible, he acted as unofficial curate to Hildersham). He certainly took orders and at one time held a living, presumably either in the diocese of Lichfield or in the diocese of St. Asaph, but at some point—it is most unfortunate that we do not know when—he was deprived because of his Puritan nonconformity. Apart from the West Felton Parish Register, Thomas is mentioned in the records twice only between 1628 and the beginning of the Civil Wars in 1642. In 1628 he was heard by that remarkable man Arise Evans preaching in Wrexham upon the Song of Solomon 2 : 10, 'Arise my love, my fair one, and come away'. He must have been preaching in English for Arise Evans (as was his wont) interpreted the text as a personal message for him and forthwith packed his bags and

set off towards London. In 1639 we hear again of a sermon by Oliver Thomas, this time in the parish of Holt. We do not know his text, but someone testified to the church authorities that he had maintained in his sermon 'that all subordinate magistrates had their authority only from the devil. And that he and you [that is, the Churchwardens of Holt parish], with others of that congregation, had endured the yoke of them a good while, but now you were in a fair way to be freed, or words to the same or like effect.' By 1647 Thomas was Presbyterian minister to the Welsh people of Oswestry, and was considered fit to be accounted a member of the second *classis* of Presbyterian ministers in Shropshire. In 1650 he was appointed an Approver under the 'Act for the better propagation of the Gospel in Wales' and was given the Vicarage of Llanrhaeadr-ym-Mochnant in Denbighshire under the terms of the Act. He still lived at West Felton, however, and it is there that he died and was buried 6 April 1652. Shortly before he died he added a codicil to his will, first made at West Felton ten years earlier, and one of the witnesses to the codicil was Charles Edwards, the great Puritan author, who may have been Thomas's son-in-law.

Oliver Thomas was not only a considerable preacher and a Presbyterian minister of standing, he was also a not unimportant Welsh author. In all he published four Welsh books or pamphlets: a children's catechism in 1630, a book exhorting people to buy and read the newly-published family edition of the Welsh Bible in 1631, a catechism for adults entitled *Sail Crefydd Gristnogol* ('The foundation of Christian religion') in 1640—this was a joint enterprise with Evan Roberts, of whom more later—and finally an hortatory tract entitled *Drych i dri math o bobl* ('A mirror for three kinds of people') in 1647. Apart from *Sail Crefydd Gristnogol,* all these are signed 'Carwr y Cymry' only, but there is ample evidence to show that Oliver Thomas was in fact the 'Carwr'. He also contributed eight competent *englynion* to a book by a friend of his, Richard Jones, the ejected Vicar of Llanfair Caereinion, entitled *Testun y Testament Newydd* ('The text of the New Testament'). Thomas was in fact a man well-steeped in Welsh culture and a prose author of great skill,

as both Principal Thomas Parry and Professor R. T. Jenkins have testified.

EVAN ROBERTS (*c.* 1587-1649/50)

I should perhaps say a further word about Evan Roberts, co-author with Thomas of *Sail Crefydd Gristnogol* in 1640. Mr. Merfyn Morgan's researches suggest that Robert's career was roughly as follows. He was born in Denbighshire around 1587 of parents in fairly humble circumstances. Somehow he was able to get to Oxford and graduated B.A. from St. Edmund Hall in 1609. By the sixteen thirties he had been appointed to a lectureship somewhere in the diocese of St. David's; but in 1633 he clashed with Bishop Theophilus Field on account of his Puritanism and was deprived—this, incidentally, happened earlier than the deprivations of Cradock and Erbury in the diocese of Llandaff, so that technically Roberts was Wales's first nonconformist. After his deprivation he appears to have returned to his native North-east and to have collaborated with Thomas on the catechism of 1640. In 1646 he was appointed minister of Llanbadarn Fawr having already, it seems, had much success preaching with Vavasor Powell at Llangurig. The following year he was given the Rectory of Llanrhaeadr-ym-Mochnant (thus following, curiously enough, in the footsteps of the Biblical translator William Morgan, who was Vicar of Llanbadarn 1572-5 and then Vicar—not Rector—of Llanrhaeadr 1578-95, having spent three years as Vicar of Welshpool *en route*). Roberts died at Llanrhaeadr in 1649 or 1650, but not before he had published a revised edition of Robert Holland's translation of 1617 of William Perkins's famous catechism, *The foundation of Christian religion* : this is *Sail Crefydd Cristnogawl* (1649). I should add that Evan Roberts of Llanbadarn and Evan Roberts of Llanrhaeadr may have been two different persons, since two sources record payments to their widows; but Mr. Merfyn Morgan is probably right to argue that this is due to some clerical error and that the unity of Evan Roberts may tentatively be assumed.

OLIVER THOMAS AND WROTH'S DISCIPLES

We have now glanced at the careers of three Welsh Puritan nonconformists who were active some years before the second generation (as I have called them) of Welsh Puritans, the great leaders of the period of the Civil Wars and the Commonwealth. Was there any connection between these three? We know of course that Oliver Thomas and Evan Roberts were connected, but were there any channels of communication between them and Wroth and his followers in South Wales? The answer is that there were such channels of communication, although they are difficult now to map in detail. Briefly, three of Wroth's disciples spent some time in North Wales and probably knew Thomas.

The first was Walter Cradock who, having lost his curacy at St. Mary's, Cardiff in 1634, somehow obtained the curacy of Wrexham. A possible clue to this appointment may be found in the fact that Walter Cradock's sister had married John Gwyn of Tintern, and the Gwyns of Tintern were a branch of the family of Gwyn of the Tower near Mold (John Gwyn's commonplace book is still extant in the Gwent Record Office and contains some interesting scraps of inform-tion—for example, that the last words of Walter Cradock's mother were, 'Duw, cymer!'). But however Cradock came to Wrexham he quickly made his mark there. The classic description is by Edmund Jones of Pont-y-Pŵl in his *Life of Evan Williams*:

> Instead of reading the Morning Prayers, as the manner before was, he expounded the Scripture to the people with such heavenly fire and plainness as greatly affected the people, so that when the bell would toll at six o'clock in the morning, the people would presently flock from town and country to hear him, and fill that large church. And by both his preaching and expounding a great reformation followed, which had not followed upon the reading of the Common Prayer, and many sinners were turned to the Lord.

It is possible that it was Cradock whom Arise Evans heard

preach in Wrexham in late 1634 or early 1635, although Evans was more concerned with making his own prophetic gesture than listening to the semon:

> Upon a Thursday, it being their market-day, a renowned man preached, and all the country about came to hear him . . . Then I went to the market and bought me an earthen platter, and came with it to church. And when the sermon was ended and the people ready to depart, I flung up the platter, which fell in pieces upon the stones, and said 'Thus shall England, Scotland and Ireland come to ruin'.

Among Cradock's converts was Morgan Llwyd of Cynfal Fawr in Merionethshire, then a sixteen year old schoolboy at Wrexham (the Thomas Charles manuscript, incidentally, specifically states that 'the Lord by his providence removed his mother, who was become a widow, from Merionethshire into these parts, together with her family, for the sake of giving them education, &c.'). Not many months had elapsed before a certain maltster found his trade diminishing and persuaded some of the local gentry to drive Cradock from the curacy (the Thomas Charles manuscript names the maltster as Timothy Middleton and states that he was related to the Chirk Castle family). In Bitterley Hall near Ludlow, Salop, at the end of the last century there was extant a petition pleading for Cradock's retention as curate of Wrexham signed by fifty one inhabitants of the parish but headed, for some reason that I have not been able to fathom, by Sir Charles Vavasour, Bt., of Killingthorpe in Lincolnshire. That petition, most frustratingly, is now lost—if we had it we would probably know the names of the nucleus of Morgan Llwyd's Independent congregation of fifteen years later—but it seems anyway to have been quite unavailing. From Wrexham Cradock appears to have gone to Shrewsbury, where he met Richard Symons (another of Wroth's disciples), and then to the London area. Before long he was back in the marches of Wales, in Llanfair Waterdine, enjoying the patronage of Sir Robert and Lady Brilliana Harley of Brampton Bryan; there he was joined by Morgan Llwyd and, in due course, by

Vavasor Powell, whose conversion he completed. It was from Llanfair Waterdine that the company, or some of them, moved to Llanfaches: Cradock was certainly, and Llwyd almost certainly, present when the church there was founded in November 1639.

There is admittedly no proof here that Cradock knew Oliver Thomas during his sojourn at Wrexham, but it is almost inconceivable that he did not: you will remember that Thomas had himself preached in Wrexham, and West Felton was within an easy morning's ride of the town. That is to argue from probabilities, but there is also one scrap of positive evidence which seems to me extremely suggestive although not conclusive. Early in 1636 Stephen Marshall, the powerful Puritan Vicar of Finchingfield in Essex, received £200 from Lady Jane Banardiston, wife of Sir Nathaniel Barnadiston of Ketton, Suffolk, for the purpose of furthering the Puritan cause. Of the £200, £150 went to John Dury, a Scot who was trying to effect a reconciliation between the various Protestant churches on the Continent, and the remaining £50 to 'Mr. Anthony Thomas, who lectureth in Wales and preacheth in the Welsh tongue'; moreover, a certain Mr. Cradock is known to have acted as intermediary between Dury and another of his benefactors, Sir Thomas Roe. No Anthony Thomas is known to have preached in Wales at this time, and it is my belief that Anthony in the document is a mere error for Oliver; and I also think it likely that the Mr. Cradock who conveyed money to John Dury was none other than Walter Cradock. If he had known Oliver Thomas in Wrexham, he would presumably have been glad of the opportunity to bring the claims of the Welsh work to the notice of Stephen Marshall.

The second disciple of Wroth's whom Thomas may have known was Richard Symons, to whom I have already referred briefly. Towards the middle of the sixteen thirties Symons kept school at Shrewsbury, and among his pupils for a time was the young Richard Baxter, who greatly admired him. One of the National Library of Wales copies of Thomas' *Carwr* of 1631 has the signature 'R. Symons' on its title-page, which

shows that Thomas was known to Symons through his work if not in person. But it is in fact extremely unlikely that the two did not know each other personally: West Felton is no more than twelve miles or so from Shrewsbury, Thomas's wife was probably a Salopian and Thomas himself would surely have heard of any young man of like persuasion to himself come to town, especially if he were a Welshman. In 1638-9, incidentally, Symons too appears in Llanfair Waterdine.

Finally, there is Richard Blinman, one of the witnesses to Wroth's will in September 1638. He spent most of the sixteen forties and sixteen fifties in Massachusetts, as did Marmaduke Matthews, who lost the Vicarage of Pen-maen in Gower *c.* 1636 for his nonconformity and promptly set sail westwards: the contacts of these early Welsh Puritans were wide, ranging from East Anglia to New England. Blinman was in Llanfair Waterdine 29 March 1639 and was commended by Lady Harley for his preaching. By 1 September 1639 he was in Holt with Oliver Thomas, when Thomas preached his allegedly seditious sermon. This fact, which has only just come to light, in my view clinches the case for a close connection between Thomas and the men of Monmouthshire.

A WELSH PURITAN MOVEMENT?

It seems to me that what we have here, in the thirties of the seventeenth century, is the lineaments of a Welsh Puritan movement. There were, as I have said, individual Puritans in Wales before but now we discern the outlines of a movement, a movement with a programme, and that a programme for Wales in particular. It could be argued that it was a very important movement. Under the leadership of William Wroth in South Wales and perhaps Oliver Thomas in North Wales it stood the test of persecution during the sixteen thirties and bred a generation of leaders that was able to some extent to take advantage of the opportunity to evangelize Wales that came in the wake of the Civil Wars—it is not easy to explain the Propagation Act except as the work

of a movement or pressure group such as this. Through this work a Puritan or evangelical witness was established in Wales, which was safeguarded—to a greater or lesser degree—by the Nonconformist churches that stood their ground after the Great Ejection of 1662, and which formed the backcloth to the efforts of the Methodist Revivalists and their successors in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. I find not only illuminating but also profoundly moving the statement of Joshua Thomas, one of the older Nonconformists, written in 1795 but referring to the thirties of the eighteenth century, the decade in which Methodism took wing in Wales :

> The author of these papers recollects that when he was young, between the years 1730 and 1740, the aged people among the Dissenters talked much of Walter Cradock.

They 'talked much' of a man whose bones had been mouldering in Usk churchyard for three quarters of a century !

Nor is this movement of historical significance only. The virtues or graces which its members displayed would stand us in good stead in our own day. There is their fundamental and consuming conviction that in the Biblical Reformed faith might be found the answer not only to their own most profound problems but also to the deepest needs of all men everywhere. There is their courage and persistence in the face of persecution. There is their obvious patriotism, which decreed that Wales should be the primary field for their labours, and nowhere else. There is their striking tolerance : a Presbyterian like Oliver Thomas working together happily with Independents (or semi-Independents) like Cradock and Symons and Blinman; the members of the gathered Church at Llanfaches joining in worship with the other parishioners at the parish church; and within the gathered church, if Dr. Thomas Richards is right, those who embraced believer's baptism and those who held to infant baptism living together in harmony. A vital Biblical faith, courage in the face of opposition, love of country, tolerance : these were the graces that began the process of transforming our country in the

seventeenth century, and these are the graces—the only graces—that can yet transform her, in another century which is no less testing.

A NOTE ON SOURCES

Any study of William Wroth must begin with Dr. Thomas Richard's articles in the *Dictionary of Welsh Biography* (1959) and *The Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion* for 1941, together with his *History of the Puritan Movement in Wales* (1920); other valuable surveys of the background are Geoffrey F. Nuttall's *Welsh Saints* 1640-1660 (1957) and, for those who read Welsh, the opening chapters of R. Tudur Jones's *Hanes Annibynwyr Cymru* (1966). The important document recording Edward Lewis's promise of Llanfaches to Wroth is printed by its discoverer, the Rev. T. Watts, in *Transactions of the Congregational Historical Society,* XX (1965-70), 281-2; and Wroth's will is printed in *Transactions of the Cardiff Naturalists' Society,* XXV.2 (1892-3), 6-7. Documents illumining the relationship between Wroth and the Lewis family are N. L. W. Plymouth 404, 406-7, 465, 472, 501, 511, 520, 592, 598, 635; N.L.W. Cilbebyll, I, 53; N.L.W. Tredegar Park 98/37, 104/18 (for possible light on Wroth's origins consult Glamorgan Record Office Fonmon 1734, 1740, 1748 and 2033 and N.L.W. Abergavenny B926). The 'Thomas Charles manuscript', of which extensive use is made above, is N.L.W. MS. 128C. The first quotation from Joshua Thomas is taken from N.L.W. MS. 21,161C, a photostat facsimile of Thomas's own manuscript English translation of his *Hanes y Bedyddwyr* at the Baptist College, Bristol. Wroth's poems are to be found in Gwent Record Office MS. Newport 4216 = D43 (the two authentic poems), N.L.W. Penrice & Margam A76 ('The Twelve Apostles' and the two dubious poems), Bodleian Library MS. Don. c.54 ('The Twelve Apostles'), Cardiff Central Library MS. 3.42 ('The Twelve Apostles'), N.L.W. John Jenkins MS. 268 ('The Twelve Apostles'); I hope to publish these poems in full elsewhere. Mr. Merfyn Morgan's thesis, which it is hoped will soon be published, is 'Oliver Thomas ac Evan Roberts, dau Biwritan cynnar: eu gweithiau' (unpublished University of Wales (Aberystwyth) M.A. dissertation, 1974): I am very grateful to Mr. Morgan for allowing me to make use of his work. The tenuous evidence for Walter Cradock's activities in South-east England during 1636-7 is in *Cal SPDom,* 1636-7, 400, 545.

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