

The making of a ruling class

The Glamorgan gentry
1640 – 1790

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Dating

Dates before 1752 are old-style, except that the year is taken as beginning on 1 January.

Placenames

The tendency among recent Welsh historians has been to achieve ‘pure’ Welsh forms – even to the extent of using ‘Abertawe’ for Swansea, or ‘Caerdydd’ for Cardiff. I have generally compromised by following the spelling of the Ordnance Survey’s one-inch series of maps, which are usually an excellent reflection of local practice.

General introduction

To explain the purpose of this book, a short autobiographical excursus is required. The origins of the book lie at least five years before I began undertaking the research on which it is based: they lie in a summer of the late 1960s when, in the space of a few days, I discovered that Glamorgan possessed two of the finest monuments in Britain from the period we call 'early modern'. The first I encountered was the Mansell series of tombs in Margam Abbey, which dates from between 1560 and 1640. It is the last tomb in the series (that of Sir Lewis Mansell) which is of such quality that it may fairly be set beside any piece of art in Britain from that outstanding century. The second 'find' was the deserted roofless manor house of Beaupre (pronounced *Bewper*), which stands almost forgotten in the rolling meadows south of Cowbridge, the countryside often called 'The Garden of Wales' (less restrained local patriots drew comparison with Arcadia or Eden, but 'Garden' will suffice). The house's best feature was a two-storied columned porch in the 'English Renaissance' style of about 1600, and it was quite magnificent. I have never seen a photograph which succeeded in catching or defining its splendour, and its image remained with me when in later years I was pursuing more serious historical studies.

But these artifacts also raised difficult historical questions. There can be few parts of Britain where the transition from 'the world we have lost' is quite as apparent as in Glamorgan, a county now famous above all for industry, pollution, perhaps for radicalism, and increasingly for industrial decay. Margam itself stands only a mile from the gargantuan Abbey steelworks of Port Talbot. In contrast, these monuments – of the Bassetts of Beaupre and the Mansells of Margam – conjured up the society which lay beneath the Industrial Revolution, a totally different world of thought, belief, superstition and commonplaces, an ancient Celtic world where bards still wandered from mansion to aristocratic house as late as 1720, in the world of Pope and Walpole. It was a strange combination of ideas. At that stage, my interest in the county's history was in writing a social history

modelled on some of the ideas of the *Annales* school, reconstructing a lost world of thought and life by asking questions about people's attitudes to their immediate family, to birth and death, to the passage of time, to animals. What were their geographical perspectives, where did they place the boundaries between the normal and the supernatural, or the decent and the deviant, how far were their ideas conditioned by their natural environment and the level of available technology?

Antiquarian as it was, there were interesting points in such a study. For example, even from a romantic perspective, I would be amazed to learn just how remote from modern ways of thought this area was in late Stuart times. In the last years of Charles II, a visitor to South Wales might enter the country by way of Abergavenny, where he would see the holy mountain of Skirrid, cleft at the moment of Christ's crucifixion and still a centre for large-scale catholic pilgrimage.¹ If the traveller entered Glamorgan from the north, he passed at Abercrave a stone circle still believed to represent the guardian spirits of these barren mountains. At Margam, he found a superb natural environment now wholly lost, with great flocks of geese migrating over the highest sand dunes and some of the best coastal scenery in Europe – lands which since the 1940s have been overwhelmed by the steelworks. At Margam House, the squire Sir Edward Mansell (1636 – 1706) patronised bards, and refused to demolish a decrepit gatehouse for fear of an ancient curse.² He also recounted (and no doubt believed) stories of the appearance of miraculous salmon in the local river – and the salmon had possessed a sanctity among the Celts long before the coming of Christianity.³ There were legends surrounding local Dark Age monuments, and still-current tales of a seventh-century Welsh king who had retired to a hermitage only a mile from the great house.

But more remarkable was the juxtaposition of this amazingly primitive thought-world with the material achievements of the family and the area. Sir Edward was as thoroughly in touch with Continental painting and architecture as was any connoisseur of his age, as he showed when the ancient gatehouse was joined among Margam's buildings by a superb and very contemporary Italianate summerhouse. Equally strange was the modernity of the economic life of Sir Edward and his neighbours. They corresponded nervously about the Monmouth rebellion, as much for what it would do for their coal sales in Devon as for any political consequences. They were among the first customers for Newcomen steam engines; and when they engaged in feuds over manorial boundaries or ancient borough charters, it was usually with the 'modern' intent of driving out an industrial competitor. It was squires like these who took the initiative in pro-

posing to Bristol merchants that their particular borough should be the centre of a new coal and copper complex, with a massive expansion of port facilities and shipping.⁴ We are facing the problem left unanswered in Macaulay, of *how* the barbarous backwoods squires of 1685 became the cultivated country gentlemen of 1840; for Glamorgan seemed to suggest that aspects of the two types had coexisted in almost shocking proximity.

This raises an interesting problem of historiography, in that it is now easy to find material on the ‘Classical Age’ of the gentry between about 1560 and 1640, or on the critical years of the mid seventeenth century; but the century after the Restoration is by no means as well covered. For South Wales, there are excellent gentry studies by Professor Williams, and by Drs Jones, Robbins and Lloyd, but all concern the period before 1640.⁵ Volume 4 of the *Glamorgan County History* covers gentry life in detail up to 1640 and gives a historical narrative up to 1790, but we are nothing like as well informed on the post-Restoration period as we are on the gentry who became sheriffs under Elizabeth, or who served in Jacobean parliaments. On other areas of Britain, there is some material – Professor Mingay’s fine syntheses, Professor Chambers’ studies on Nottinghamshire, Dr Moir on Gloucestershire local government. We also have Dr Roebuck’s account of Yorkshire baronets and Dr Beckett’s description of the economic activities of the Cumbrian squires.⁶ Of course, there is also the strictly economic debate on the development of the great estates, with work by Drs Clay, Beckett and Habakkuk.⁷ But there is little to set beside a book on the earlier period like Dr Cliffe’s on the Yorkshire gentry, or some of the Civil War studies like Dr Morrill’s on Cheshire.⁸ This is curious: the families who opposed James I or Laud, who have been analysed in minute detail for their reactions to the coming of war in 1642, were still leaders in county society at least until the end of that century. Participants in the Civil Wars often lived on to serve or oppose William III, no doubt strongly influenced by their wartime loyalties and experiences. To study county communities only during the Civil Wars and Interregnum is to miss at least half the story. More local research might even produce evidence that there were other later years like 1642, in which a ‘high road to civil war’ was blocked at the last moment (1681 and 1715 come to mind here).

Outside the strictly political arena, the neglect of the century after 1660 means that we lack essential components for an account of the background to the Industrial Revolution, and an answer to the question, ‘Why was Britain first?’ There had been a real modernisation of thought in a relatively short period of the early eighteenth century, so that Sir Edward Mansell’s

ideas about ghosts, legends and hermits already seemed absurd within thirty years of his death; thirty years later they were ready for revival as an artistic style, sufficiently distant to be a fit subject for exotic fiction. On many major issues, it will be argued that a great gulf separates the life and thought of the generation that was old in 1720 from that of the mid eighteenth century. Moreover, this was a time of rapid political and economic change, and of an enormous increase in Britain's power and prestige in the world. In the 1660s, the country was a pensioner of France; by 1760, it was well on the way to possessing a world empire, with the strongest economic base of any leading power.

Two questions emerge here: given the enormous economic role of the landed classes, how had changes in their outlook, their tastes or assumptions, contributed to this shift; and in turn, how did this reversal alter the character of their domestic life and social relationships? The former question is one of peculiar interest given the archaic manorial framework in which landowners and their stewards operated, and the latter gains relevance from the degree to which patriarchal theory would have to be set aside during rapid industrialisation. There can be no doubt of the zeal with which squires and peers pursued these goals, not least from the evidence of their membership in the many societies for 'improvement' which flourished after 1760. Indeed, 'improvement' became as much a vogue word then as 'development' has been in many countries of the Third World in the last two decades. Another interesting parallel is the role in such 'improvements' – of roads, harbours, towns, agriculture – of a closely defined and homogeneous group of political radicals and progressives, who were usually freemasons and anticlericals. One theme of this work will be a quest for the origins of this 'improving' ideology.

Alongside the question of modernisation, I will study what might be called the growing cosmopolitanism of the local landed elite, so that merchants, gentry and aristocrats came by the end of the eighteenth century to form one ruling class, divided neither by aspirations, educational background, cultural tastes, standards of life and thought, nor economic or political outlook. It will be argued that we can observe a process very much like that described by de Tocqueville for contemporary France, where increasingly cosmopolitan local elites were detached from the assumptions and 'moral economy' of their poorer neighbours. They tended to become a *rentier* class, whose enforcement of archaic rights caused great rural discontent in the years leading up to the Revolution in 1789.⁹ In Glamorgan there was no revolution – but new forms of social protest will be increasingly noted from the 1720s.

This book hopes to show the crucial importance of the century after 1660 in creating such a sophisticated ruling class, one so modern in political and economic outlook that the state it governed would dominate the politics of the world for over a century. The value of Glamorgan for such a study is readily explained. First, the county combines two very different geographical areas, each representative of a large part of Britain. The upland north closely resembles the central massif of Wales, and what we find here about social and economic patterns is likely to provide a model for much of pastoral upland or moorland Britain. The lowland south – the territory centred on Beaupre – is more like the fertile and gentrified areas of southern and western England, so the development of the Glamorgan gentry is likely to resemble that in those counties. Moreover, because it is a *Welsh* county, it will be easier to trace and observe the gradual detachment of the upper classes from the culture and sentiments of their social inferiors. Between 1715 and 1750, the class line in this county also became a linguistic frontier, a fact of immeasurable importance for any discussion of the survival of the ‘paternalistic’ ideology. Finally, Glamorgan was one of the first areas in the world in which we can speak of an ‘Industrial Revolution’, so the internal social developments leading towards this are of obvious interest.

Once the value of such a study is decided the sources available to the historian are surprisingly rich: there are excellent collections of manuscripts and, notably, of correspondence for several gentry families, particularly the Mansells and Kemys’s. There is also one source for which it is difficult to think of an exact parallel, a diary slightly reminiscent of the *History of Myddle*. This was kept from 1762 to 1794 by the schoolmaster William Thomas, and it preserves what was intended to be a complete list of newsworthy events that came to his attention.¹⁰ Most days therefore record a marriage, death or local scandal, in most cases including remarkably extensive biographical material on the participants. For a critical period of Glamorgan’s history – the first years of industrialisation – it is possible to form an excellent impression of lower-class life and social attitudes in the county. It therefore becomes possible not only to describe the gentry and their attitudes, but to place these in a wider social context, and to examine the differential rates of change in social and economic outlook.

1. Structure

The book will begin by creating and populating a landscape, providing a society of the past with scale and dimensions. It will then seek to apply a

steadily narrowing focus on the landed community. Next, we can examine the role and importance of the gentry in their 'habitat', in guiding the economic, political and administrative life of that society, and can study how patterns of power changed over this critical time. Having done this and provided ourselves with a framework, we can examine in detail how views and attitudes changed between the 1640s and 1780s, and especially in the years between 1715 and the 1740s. From this point, we will be able to trace the growth of the common national culture and standard of material life on which the new ruling class was based, and the effects of these changes on material conditions and economic life in the wider society.

2. Geographical context

Part I of this book tries to recreate the natural environment of this society and the geographical perspectives of the time. It will, for instance, be argued that events at the end of our period 'turned the world upside down' and not merely in the sense of social disorientation or political radicalism. Today the 'real' Glamorgan is found in the urban conglomerations of Cardiff, Swansea and the northern valleys, with the southern Vale a rural hinterland – which is also a growing country suburb for a burgeoning middle class. In 1750, the southern Vale was the thriving heartland of a gentry society little inferior to any in Britain for wealth, power and aspirations, while towns like Swansea and Cardiff based their prosperity on their role as markets for Vale produce. It will be stressed that the towns were vital political arenas in such a society, but as battlegrounds for rival gentry factions, rather than as centres of an autonomous political culture. The hill country was backward, despised, perversely radical in political and religious opinions, and simply outside the county's political mainstream.

The question 'Where is Glamorgan?', at any point before the eighteenth century, evoked a complex response: by sea (the most logical means of travel) it was a virtual suburb of Bristol, and very central for routes to Cork, Cornwall or Bordeaux. While not badly placed for land access to London or the Welsh interior, most of England north and east of a line from Shrewsbury, via Aylesbury, to London did not exist in contemporary Glamorgan perceptions. 'Pre-industrial' Glamorgan looked to south-west England, where there existed the same types of English dialect or customary acres, the same surnames and the same dependence on metropolitan Bristol. 'Modernisation' here came in the later eighteenth century, when the emergence of Swansea as an industrial and commercial town in its own

right was instrumental in creating a new social and economic region of South Wales. Industrial growth in the hill country likewise turned the area towards the north and east, towards the new British nation-state. We must not forget that hitherto, the owner of a house like Beaupre had looked outwards, to south and west, into Bristol's zone – to Ireland, the Scillies, and beyond to the distant colonies.

3. The gentry

Having described the society, the structure of economy and population, we can then proceed to define the different grades of gentry which dominated it, and the framework of kinship and clientage which bound together this ancient and deep-rooted community. Until about 1700, we will observe the development of the landed classes as a gradual process of organic growth; but then, in the space of a generation, we encounter a violent caesura (one in fact that overcame landed elites throughout Britain), a demographic catastrophe that thoroughly changed the composition and character of the Welsh gentry.¹¹ Between the 1720s and 1750s, a resident squire was a *rara avis* in Glamorgan, and the old patterns of authority and respect must have been severely shaken. When a new community re-established itself after 1760, it was a very different gentry – more English, more the product of government service, closer to families made rich through careers in commerce or the professions. Throughout the following study, we will find the same themes and the same chronological structure: the survival of the ancient dynasties into the eighteenth century, followed by a pattern of extinction or ruin, and then the creation of a new elite oriented not to the county, but to England, to London, to the central government.

I have tried to demonstrate elsewhere the number of communities to which such a dramatic change occurred, and if this hypothesis is correct, then we might choose this event as the natural conclusion to the numerous gentry studies which have been written about Elizabethan or early Stuart times. Certainly it marked a fracture of historical continuity far more useful as a dividing line than 1660. The ramifications of this change extend throughout whatever aspects of cultural life we consider – tastes in literature or music, education, activity in building or cultural patronage. Much of the new gentry culture which emerges in the 1760s will be seen in the context of a deliberate 'invention of tradition', an attempt to disguise the breach in continuity by the assumption of pseudo-antiquity. To take just one example, the new public school was a facet of this, and it also provided

the new ruling class with the common form of speech that was the trademark of the break with provincialism. These developments form the subject of Part III of this book, where consideration will also be given to the effects on the wider society by these changes of thought and attitude among this narrow but immensely influential segment.

4. Economic history

One of my purposes in this study is to show the close relationship between political and economic aspects of life. Part I concludes with a history of the steps toward industrial revolution in Glamorgan, stressing the economic role of the gentry throughout in developing their society, but definite political conclusions will also emerge. Firstly, I have attempted to give proper emphasis to the pressing financial needs of landed society in explaining the bitterness of political conflict in the later seventeenth century. It will be suggested that the peculiar commercial and industrial orientation of this area went far towards determining the desperate party hostility under Anne, and in turn the relaxation of partisan hostility by the 1740s. Tory 'blue-water' policies were not the result of ignorance of military developments or of foreign affairs. Quite the contrary, they arose from the squires' sophisticated industrial needs, their links with Bristol's colonial trade, and the need to preserve markets – first in western Europe, later in the western hemisphere. Given also the frequency of industrial activity and innovation by high tories, catholics and jacobites, it sometimes seems as if the classical Weberian or Tawneyan theory of industrial origins could be opposed by a model using a slogan like 'backwoods squires and the rise of capitalism', or even 'the jacobite work-ethic'. It was, for example, a catholic marquis of Worcester who invented a steam engine in the Interregnum, his son who evicted commoners to gain timber for his ironworks, and later jacobite and nonjuring members of the family who built the metallurgical industries of west Glamorgan, in partnership with catholic and nonjuror entrepreneurs and managers. No wonder that a jacobite list of likely supporters in the 1720s found most optimism in the industrial areas of north and west Britain; and it is hoped this may suggest lines of inquiry for explaining the high toryism of other advanced industrial areas of the English Midlands or North-East. It is no longer adequate to explain this in terms of the survival of primitive patriarchal structures of loyalty and obedience.

5. Politics

This was a highly political age because of the direct relevance of partisan success and failure to everyday life and economic prosperity. Furthermore, Chapter 4 will show the almost total control which the landed gentry had over most aspects of life and government in the wider community. There need therefore be no elaborate justification for the decision to include here a chronological political history; especially as the existing *Glamorgan County History* account leaves room for a much fuller analysis of events, particularly one based on a wider range of sources than are there employed. Three main themes will be examined here:

The development of a gentry ideology

The formation of a characteristic body of attitudes will be traced against the events between 1640 and 1688, critical years in which the local power of the gentry, even their existence as a class, were repeatedly challenged. Throughout these events, it will be suggested that three distinct parties can be observed in operation. Two of these were linked to great peers – extreme royalists to the Marquis of Worcester, moderates to the Earls of Pembroke – but politics were not simply a matter of aristocratic faction. Apart from the extremes of royalists and parliamentarians, there was a third group, here tentatively described as ‘moderates’, who appear to have been central to political history in these years. They were not exactly the great gentry presbyterians described by Professor Everitt, nor the neutralists of Dr Morrill, yet they resembled both. They were a faction of great gentry who reacted violently against challenges of religious extremism, catholic and absolutist, or puritan and republican.

I have laid such stress on this group for three reasons. First, they help to explain the very advanced state of party development in South Wales by the end of the seventeenth century – in fact, they appear to have been the core of the new whig party that emerged in the late 1670s. Second, it will be suggested that in terms of local politics, 1688 should be considered the real point of transition from the alignments of the Civil War years: 1660 merely changed the balance of forces between competing sides, while 1688 changed fundamentally the composition and purpose of these sides. Finally, the examination of this faction suggests the very constant stress on anti-popery in Welsh politics until about 1690, a local peculiarity of immense consequences. Far from accepting the traditional view of the Welsh

gentry as fanatical royalists, it will here be argued that the fear of catholicism made a large section of the great gentry less sympathetic to Stuart governments than was apparent anywhere else in Britain. ‘Moderates’ from this area went on to play a substantial role in national politics – Robert Harley is the best-known example – so we are not merely dealing with a squabble of local importance. The forces shaping the ideology of the gentry in South Wales and the Borders were different in vital respects from those affecting the squires of Norfolk or Kent.

From faction to party

It was in the 1950s and early 1960s that historians began to apply the insights of Namier into the age of George III to earlier periods of ‘party’ conflict, so that it was often questioned whether ‘whig’ or ‘tory’ under Anne had any more meaning than in the age of Newcastle. This extreme view was rebutted by Professors Plumb and Holmes,¹² and contemporary perceptions of the ‘rage of party’ are now treated with more respect. But the origins of these parties at local level has not been researched as thoroughly as might be expected, given the undoubted importance of parties in political conflict from the 1680s – perhaps before. Here, I wish to analyse the parties that crystallised in the 1690s into their distinct elements, and study the processes by which they were united and acquired their particular ideologies. Kinship is clearly one element and groups of related families can be seen to have pursued coherent policies over periods of a century and more. In one case (the Kemys – Aubrey – Jenkins group) a clique led the high anglican ‘ultra’ faction for at least half a century, before being converted *en masse* to Court whiggery in the 1690s. Equally enduring was clientage to aristocrats like Worcester or Pembroke. This might be through what we could call the ‘ghost interest’, a group of families acting together as a faction in support of a lord, and maintaining this cohesion and tradition of collective action sixty years after that lord’s family had ceased to have any connection with the area. Whiggery arose in Glamorgan from three main elements: old roundheads and republicans; the Kemys – Aubrey – Jenkins clique; and part of the ‘ghost’ interest of the Earls of Pembroke, after this party finally dissolved in the 1690s. This coalition was soon strengthened by the force of direct government patronage, especially with the presence in the county of leading government office holders and magnates. We therefore have a fairly clear example of how the seventeenth-century factions based on kinship and clientage became a remarkably modern party structure with all that implied for the role of managers and electoral experts.

On the other side, it may well be that this county played an important part in uniting diverse factions into the new toryism of the 1690s, as Robert Harley's closest friends and allies included Glamorgan magnates like Francis Gwyn and Thomas Mansell. Perhaps we shall not understand fully British politics in the generation after 1688 until a first-class biography is produced of Gwyn, that ubiquitous civil servant and go-between. This book makes no attempt to write that biography; but it tries to depict the world in which he moved. We can observe the growth of Glamorgan toryism as well as that of whiggery, and this subject gains added interest from the decades in which the tories were excluded from office and patronage, and needed to maintain their existence by other means. Hence we can study the sudden growth of sophistication in party structure, propaganda and organisation after 1714. Moreover, evidence from this area tends to undermine the idea that jacobitism was entirely a government bogey, as was argued by Dr Fritz.¹³ While not agreeing, either, with Dr Cruickshanks that jacobitism was the tory mainstream until well into the 1740s, real conspiracies can be traced at least until the late 1720s, so return to large-scale civil violence could not be discounted.¹⁴

Towards political stability

Party bitterness declined from the 1720s, and men of property gradually reached an accommodation in which all could claim a general whig viewpoint sufficiently to petition for the charity of the government. This was ably described by Professor Plumb in *The growth of political stability*, and his hypothesis stands up very well when tested against the situation in Glamorgan and other counties of South Wales. But more can be said about how stability came about here, and perhaps how the means of achieving stability sowed the seeds of conflict later in the century. Firstly, demographic changes in the gentry community will be taken into account, as will the economic pressures on the entrepreneurial landed gentlemen. Put crudely, they needed the distinctively tory war policy in Anne's time for the sake of their industrial and commercial interests, just as they were prepared wholeheartedly to support a government which fought for their interests by engaging in the 'blue-water' and colonial struggle usually described as the Seven Years War. Equally, a revival of party conflict after 1775 was likely when the government endangered their vital markets and sources of raw material in America and Ireland. Of course, economic determinism is not an answer in itself: there was also the decline of religious controversy, and the emergence of the masonic movement from the new deist consensus.¹⁵ This in turn would, from the 1760s, do so much to unite

gentry, professionals and merchants in progressive campaigns to improve the economic infrastructure, and in political reform campaigns.

By the 1760s, the new alignment of local elites could begin to be described as a national ruling class, and novel patterns of social relationship met opposition from traditionally-minded social inferiors. Between 1730 and 1770, a whole series of new forms of social protest emerged: riots, sabotage and coastal wrecking. Conflicts were very bitter when traditional social values encountered the new property ethos over matters like plundering ships, smuggling, or resisting a militia that took local men outside the county (and de Tocqueville cited the last as a special grievance in contemporary French society). What was national defence or international politics to the humble neighbours of William Thomas – and still more, what did it matter to them that colonial goods could safely travel to Bristol? But such considerations had become an essential part of the squires' life, no matter what the damage to social relations with tenants. Perhaps the new ideas of property and discipline could somehow be instilled into wrongdoers; and from the 1770s, the gentry made vigorous efforts to build a new model prison for deviants. The old world had by no means been a 'one-class society', but there had been a community of attitude, culture and belief which was now irretrievably shattered. A concluding section will assess the importance of the new class alignments for the county's industrialisation, and discuss the contribution of the various social, political and economic factors for the vital 'take-off' of the late eighteenth century.

This introduction began with the very archaic thought-world of Sir Edward Mansell, who died in 1706. In the 1760s, a more representative character might be one Robert Jones of Fonmon, a Wilkite, radical and freemason, a champion of political reform movements throughout South Wales; and a model justice of the peace, who tried to stop coastal plunder, and to moralise the poor by encouraging methodist preachers. He was also, of course, a leading figure in the militia, a champion of national defence in the wars which benefited himself and his friends. Almost certainly he did not speak Welsh, and he spent as much of his life as he could in London. Between 1700 and 1770, we seem to have travelled from one world which looked back to Elizabeth into one which looked forward to Victoria. The world represented by Beaupre and the Mansell tombs died with surprising rapidity – and they were separated by one a very few decades from the new civilisation represented by names like Merthyr, Dowlais and Cyfarthfa.