



LLYFRGELL GENEDLAETHOL CYMRU THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF WALES

Mae'r fersiwn digidol hwn o'r erthygl/cylchgrawn wedi'i greu gan Lyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru.

NODER y gall cyfyngiadau hawlfraint ac amodau trwydded fod yn berthnasol. Am ragor o wybodaeth, ewch i **Mwy o Wybodaeth** wrth ddarllen y cylchgrawn ar wefan [Cylchgronau Cymru](http://cylchgronau.llyfrgell.cymru) (cylchgronau.llyfrgell.cymru).

Efallai y bydd hefyd gennych ddi-ddordeb yn [Papurau Newydd Cymru](http://papurau.newydd.llyfrgell.cymru) (papurau.newydd.llyfrgell.cymru), chwaer-wefan gan Lyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru sy'n rhoi mynediad i dros 1.1 milwn o dudalennau o dros 130 o bapurau newydd a gyhoeddwyd rhwng 1805 a 1919.

This digital version of the article/journal has been created by The National Library of Wales.

PLEASE NOTE that copyright restrictions and license terms may apply. For more information, view **More Information** when reading the journal on the [Welsh Journals](http://journals.library.wales) (journals.library.wales) website.

You may also be interested in [Welsh Newspapers](http://newspapers.library.wales) (newspapers.library.wales), a sister-site from the National Library of Wales that gives access to over 1.1 million pages from over 130 newspapers published between 1805 and 1919.



THE LIBERATION SOCIETY AND WELSH POLITICS, 1844 TO 1868

WHEN A. H. Dodd described 1868 as an *annus mirabilis* in Welsh politics he was subscribing to a view of the events of that year which has passed into the mythology of Welsh political and historical thinking. For Dodd 'the wholesale dethronement of . . . great parliamentary dynasties' justified the appellation 'wonderful',¹ and if we exclude the exaggeration of the word 'wholesale' we must agree that it is here that the importance of the general election of that year lies. Other historians and politicians from Henry Richard onwards have descanted on the same theme, but there has been curiously little serious effort to assess its significance in an objective and disinterested manner and, in particular, scarcely any attempt to analyse the nature of politics in the preceding generation or so. Yet such studies are obviously crucially necessary, for wonderful changes in the world of politics do not occur *in vacuo*, are not unprepared, do not emerge fully fledged out of the minds of men. We cannot understand such changes until we know something of the operation of the forces which produced them. Such a knowledge of antecedent changes, of the causation of significant events must obviously be comprehensive if it is to be meaningful: it should concern itself not only with the mechanisms of politics, but with changing economic and social conditions, and take account of intellectual developments, of man's attempt to adjust himself to, and to control, the forces of change active in society. To attempt such a task within the compass of this paper would be impracticable, but something of profit along these lines might be attempted if we confined ourselves to thinking about one of the political agencies by which a new public opinion was created in Wales in the two or three generations preceding the elections of 1868. There were many such agencies, of course: the complex, disorganized body of Welsh Nonconformity in its relations with English Nonconformity; the educational movements of the age; nascent party machines; the press; working class organizations, both industrial and political. But involved in all these, and coming gradually to play a more formative rôle in their development and interactions, was a great religio-political society, namely the Anti-State-Church Association, or, as it later became known, the Society for the Liberation of Religion from State Patronage and Control. To study the operations of this body is not a fringing issue, for in

¹ In *Studies in Stuart Wales* (1952), p. 215.

the nineteenth century the maintenance of what were called 'religious interests' was dependent on the existence of sectional societies, a state of affairs which had grown out of the realization by Dissenters round about 1837 that neither of the two great parties could be relied upon to support their just demands. It will be argued that it was the Liberation Society, more than any other agency, which was responsible for shaping those political attitudes in Wales which in 1868 produced such wonderful fruit.

Welsh Nonconformist publicists in the '60s were fond of declaring that English Nonconformist Radicals were merely teaching their countrymen principles which Welshmen had been familiar with since the days of Samuel Roberts and earlier.² The kind of assumptions implicit in such judgments reflects the self-confidence and assurance of the Nonconformists of the '60s: as descriptions of historical fact they are in error. For however powerful a pressure group the Liberation Society may by then have been, and however influential its leadership in Wales may by then have become, it had attained to this position only as the result of constant and careful exertion, and through a conscious effort to preserve and develop and adjust these elements in the Dissenting tradition which appeared to it to be fundamental. An essential preliminary therefore to a description of the history of the Society in Wales, and of its influence in reshaping the tradition of Welsh Dissent, must be a sketch of the history of its predecessors in this field.

* * *

It is important to realize that when the Liberation Society began its work in the provinces in 1844 it was nowhere entering into a virgin territory. Both as regards the geographical location of its supporters, and in the work which it set out to accomplish, the soil had in some measure been already turned. In Wales we shall see that during the first critical years of its existence it could expect to find a fairly vigorous spirit of co-operation primarily in those parts of the country which had had closest relations with previously existing pressure groups or quasi-political organizations centred on London. Leaving aside for the moment purely religious organizations such as missionary societies (though these had their political affiliations) or denominational bodies, and movements such as the anti-slavery societies, there had existed a number of purely political Dissenting societies which had had Welsh affiliations. By 'political' is not meant

² See, for example, Rev. John Roberts in *Y Cronicl*, April 1862, and Rev. David Rees in *Y Diwygiwr*, February 1861.

organizations organically connected with the established parties, whether Tory (which in this context was unthinkable), Whig, Liberal, or Radical. It happened, for certain fairly clear reasons, that these Dissenting bodies consisted for the most part of men who found more to support and to hope for in the Whig-Liberal party: but such individual persuasions, as every political crisis from 1793 onwards showed, were unofficial. The societies as such were political only in so far as political action seemed at times to be necessary to protect or to advance Dissenting interests; indeed, it was they who gave some reality to the technical term 'Dissenting interest'. But it is necessary for the understanding of early nineteenth-century politics to appreciate that they were political only in the broadest sense.

Of these societies two are important for our purpose. The first of these—the Protestant Dissenting Deputies—was hardly a society in the accepted usage of the word.³ It was a representative organization of the congregations of the three denominations situated within ten miles of London. It originated in November 1732 when certain of the leading London Dissenters, among whom Welshmen were prominent, met to consider an application to parliament for the repeal of the Corporation and Test Acts. No such appeal was made on that occasion, but an organization was created consisting of a committee annually elected from the general body of delegates representative of London Dissenters—Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and Baptists. Since 14 January 1736, such choice of deputies had been made by the London congregations at regular intervals 'to take care of the Civil Affairs of the Dissenters', and it is with the activities of this body that we are now concerned. It is unnecessary to trace the history of the Deputies in subsequent years. What we have to remark is that this task of taking care of the civil affairs of Dissenters involved them in two different but related kinds of activity. In the first place, it involved them in political action, since the basic concern of the Deputies was the repeal of all penal legislation affecting Dissenters. The committee retained a solicitor to watch over their interests, and appointed a treasurer to receive the subscriptions which were solicited to finance their often expensive agitations and negotiations. The nature of their agitation was such that it could not remain a merely metropolitan society: it claimed to speak for Dissenters everywhere, in the colonies as well as in the United Kingdom, so that it soon extended its activities into the

³ For a history of the Deputies see B. L. Manning, *The Protestant Dissenting Deputies*, edited by O. Greenwood (1952).

provinces. After 1745 especially, and in the last three decades of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth, it systematically circulated addresses and manifestos on political issues, co-operating with reform organizations, striving to arouse the consciences of Dissenters everywhere. By 1789, after the failure of an attempt at repeal in the previous year, it felt sufficiently influential and representative to address all protestant Dissenters in these terms: 'we express your sentiments when we express our own . . . We feel alike as fellow-citizens unjustly deprived of civil liberties and are equally sensible that what we claim is not a favour, but a right'.⁴ Books and pamphlets were circulated, country meetings organized in favour of repeal, but, the French Wars intervening, the committee met for the last time in 1794 until reconstituted in 1810.

The second function of the Deputies was the defence of the existing rights of Dissenters as defined in the statutes, and called forth, therefore, a different kind of activity. There were many ways in which individual Dissenters and congregations could be deprived of their rights; assaults by hostile communities and mobs, interference with meeting houses, the refusal of magistrates to execute their offices in granting licences as required by law, the refusal of parochial clergy to perform their duties as by law required, and so on. In such cases—and they tended to become more frequent, especially during the American and French wars—the Deputies, with their superior resources of legal knowledge, finance, and metropolitan influence, could take upon themselves the defence of the injured and aggrieved. They could prosecute the brutal, overcome recalcitrant magistrates by appeals to higher courts, and take action against defaulting clergy in the ecclesiastical courts.⁵

In these ways the Dissenting Deputies became the main instrument in the creation of a cohesive body of Dissenting opinion in the country. London was bound closely to the provinces, isolated congregations made aware of their united strength. There can be scarcely any doubt that this was the effect on Welsh Dissenting congregations. Wales seems to have been peculiarly the seat of Tory hatred during these years.⁶ Up to 1810 alone, more than thirty cases out of a total

⁴ *A Sketch of the History and Proceedings of the Deputies appointed to protect the Civil Rights of the Protestant Dissenters* (1813), p. 4/9 ⁴²

⁵ After describing the efforts of the Deputies on behalf of Rev. Lewis Rees of Llanbrynmair (the father of Dr. Abraham Rees), the authors of the *Sketch* comment thus: 'The knowledge that a body existed in the metropolis for obtaining the protection of the law in favour of Dissenting Ministers served, in a considerable degree, to restrain the violence of their persecutors'. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁶ Manning, *op. cit.*, pp. 289–90.

of about 250 concerned Welsh congregations.⁷ What needs to be stressed is this, that there existed during those difficult years bridging the two centuries a relationship between Welsh Dissenting congregations and their London and provincial brethren by which ideas could be disseminated and action on political matters concerted. It is necessary to stress this, because so many historians of this period have assumed that such connections either did not exist or were at best tenuous and personal merely. Considerations such as these should make us pause before accepting such a view.

The other precursor of the Liberation Society was the Protestant Society for the Protection of Religious Liberty.⁸ Founded, by John Wilkes mainly, in 1811 it existed until 1857 when it was wound up and its assets transferred to the Deputies.⁹ Its effective life was considerably shorter than this, however, for its last annual meeting had been held in 1839, three years after the death of its founder, with whom also the society may be said to have expired. In many ways the aims of this society, and the methods it adopted to further them, resembled those of its older contemporary. On a parliamentary level it aspired to 'the repeal of every penal law which prevented the complete enjoyment of religious liberty', and at a local level it busied itself with the defence of particular congregations throughout the country in exactly the same way as, but with greater publicity than, the Deputies. Where it differed was in its organization and in its composition. In both it was altogether more comprehensive, since the emphasis in its title was on 'Protestant', and it sought to unite members of the Established Church, mainly the Evangelical wing, with Dissenters in the extension of religious freedom. This gives us the essential clue to its nature, its strength, and its weakness. More so than the Deputies it was the child of political fortune: it could not have existed at an earlier period and, as we have already indicated, it was largely defunct by 1839, defeated by political realities. From its inception it was closely identified with the Whig party and it was customary for Whig magnates to preside over its annual meetings. This kind of alliance was obviously of benefit to the Society; without the co-operation of the Whigs no measure of religious liberty could hope to pass through parliament or any obnoxious measure be

⁷ The *Sketch* contains a classified list of cases in which the Deputies interfered. Details of these are to be found in the *Minutes of the Dissenting Deputies*, Guildhall MSS. 3083/1-10.

⁸ For the activities of the Protestant Society see James Bennett, *History of Dissenters during the last thirty years from 1808 to 1838* (1839); B. Brook, *A History of Religious Liberty . . . to the death of George III* (1820), II, 438 *et seq.*; H. S. Skeats, *A History of the Free Churches of England, 1688-1851* (1868), pp. 558 *et seq.*; and Raymond G. Cowherd, *The Politics of English Dissent* (1959), p. 20.

⁹ 'Bond of Indemnity', dated 17 November 1857, winding up the Society, and transferring its assets to the Dissenting Deputies. Manuscript in the Dr. Williams's Library.

opposed. But equally the politicians had much to gain. At a time of party conflict the society could place its organization at the disposal of the Whigs, while the newspapers which it published or was associated with—*The World* and *The Patriot*—provided cheap and reliable forms of propaganda for the party. In addition, the society appealed to the substantial middle-class-merchant-industrial classes with large resources at their command. While this kind of alliance lasted—and it would last only so long as it suited the Whigs—the society was likely to flourish.

Another difference concerned the composition of the Protestant Society. Whereas the Deputies' Committee was confined in its membership to, and largely dependent for financial support upon, the London congregations, the Protestant Society sought its membership in, and looked for support to, every congregation in England and Wales. Every English congregation subscribing £2 annually, and every Welsh congregation £1 annually, was entitled to the support of the society and empowered to send two delegates to the annual meetings. Individuals, of any religious persuasion, could become members on subscribing £1.¹⁰ Welsh subscriptions were never considerable, totalling only about £55 up to 1834 (though the evidence is incomplete). More interesting for our purpose is the distribution of subscriptions. Twelve places were officially associated with the society, six in Monmouthshire, two each in Glamorgan and Denbighshire, and one each in the counties of Pembroke, Carmarthen, and Cardigan. Again on the basis of incomplete evidence, only eight cases of particular grievances were dealt with during its existence, ranging from Caernarvonshire and Montgomeryshire to Brecon, Carmarthenshire, and Monmouthshire.¹¹

This does not, at first sight, appear to be a very impressive record. But the work of this society should be seen within the context of the age. It was the first of the great Dissenting societies (as distinct from the pre-existing Deputies) to make a sustained attempt to organize Dissenting opinion on political lines in the provinces, as it was certainly the first to be aware of the rather special circumstances prevailing in Wales. This was undoubtedly why the Reverend Thomas Charles of Bala was almost from its inception added to the committee and made a member of the deputation called to protest against Lord Sidmouth's Bill of 1811 which would have placed severe restrictions on the licensing of Dissenting ministers.¹²

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, f. 1.

¹¹ *The Protestant Society: Treasurer's Book*. Manuscript in the Dr. Williams's Library.

¹² *The Protestant Society: Minute Book*, f. 10. Manuscript in the Dr. Williams's Library.

Had this bill been allowed to pass into law the expansion of Methodism in Wales, depending as it did almost exclusively on lay evangelization, would have been severely handicapped in the most crucial years of its history. On an issue like this the Protestant Society taught old Dissenter and new Nonconformist the value of united action on political matters.

But evidence such as this would still not enable us to assess the contribution of this society to Welsh political life. The propaganda agencies available to it were of necessity primitive, for during the greater part of its existence there were few Welsh magazines in which its work could be publicized. This is why it depended so much on personal contacts, and the law still forbade the creation of auxiliary or corresponding societies in the provinces.¹³ Nevertheless, these contacts were powerful, and it was through its sympathisers that its literature was disseminated, and its petitions signed and despatched. Indeed, when we study the course of political agitation in Wales during the '30s we must perforce marvel not that so little was done but that so much was accomplished, such sure foundation laid with such inadequate materials and primitive machinery.

Up to the late '30s these two societies were the most influential organizations for the furtherance of Dissenting aims. After 1837 their influence declines, and other societies of a more radical nature, culminating in the Liberation Society, take their place. Why was this? To answer that question would require an analysis of British politics during those years—a task outside the limits of this paper. But some general considerations may be suggested which will throw light on the place these societies occupied in Welsh political life during these decades. Looking first at the Deputies and the Protestant Society we can see that their efficiency was considerably impaired by their failure to adjust themselves to the changing political climate. Their very moderation, and the tradition of co-operation with the Whig party became a hindrance. We can trace the evolution of this change. There had been complete unanimity—if a little jealousy—in 1811,¹⁴ and again in 1828 when repeal had been the fruit of co-operation in a United Committee,¹⁵ when identity of purpose had enabled them to pool their resources, and to co-operate as one in the task of organizing Dissenters behind the parliamentary campaign. There was a common strategy, and common means, and a use in common of the network of ministers in the countryside who acted as

¹³ See *Report of the First Triennial Conference, May 1847* (1847).

¹⁴ *The Protestant Society: Minute Book*, ff. 11–12.

¹⁵ *Minutes of the Dissenting Deputies*, Guildhall MS. 3083/7.

agents in collection of petitions and so on. At the height of the Reform Bill agitation, again, there was no hesitation in either camp in raising funds to pay the electoral expenses of Lord John Russell in Devon: even Carmarthen contributed £5 15s. 0d. towards this fund, and an additional £11 which went into the coffers of the Deputies.¹⁶ But even as early as this there were indications that the middle-class leadership was beginning to become uneasy at the implications of such involvement in purely secular politics. In March 1831, during the Reform Bill agitation, the Deputies found it necessary officially to resist the pressure being put upon them 'to interfere as a separate body in a matter purely political', even though they have 'no doubt that Dissenters will be almost universally found in their Individual and Parochial capacities among the foremost to support the laudable endeavours of the Whig party'.¹⁷ But the more extremist Dissenters were already co-operating with Liberals and Radicals, finding in the self-same fundamentals of Dissenting thought a justification for making political demands far in excess of anything the Whigs were likely to concede, and prepared moreover to make use of the existing machinery to press these demands. It was the refusal of men such as these to restrict themselves to moderate political aims which led directly to the foundation of the Liberation Society.

This had become clear by the late '30s, for by then circumstances were favouring the Radicals. In January 1834 a United Committee, formed the previous year and consisting of the Deputies, the ministers of the three denominations, the Protestant Society, and the United Secession Presbytery, dissatisfied with the progress being made in the reformed parliament towards the redress of grievances drew up a statement of what they considered to be the just demands of Dissenters.¹⁸ The details of this need not detain us: the demands for the civil registration of births, deaths, and marriages, for marriages and burials in accordance with rites of their own choosing, for unrestricted entry to the two universities, and for the abolition of church-rates—these are familiar enough, for they remained the basic demands of Dissenters until removed by piece-meal legislation in the course of the century. Discussion arose and differences developed as to the theoretical implications of the principles which underlay these demands.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Guildhall MS. 3083/8, ff. 33 *et seq.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Guildhall MS. 3083/8, f. 19.

¹⁸ 'Brief Statement of the Case of Protestant Dissenters', in *Minutes of the United Committee appointed to consider the Grievances under which Dissenters now labour with a view to their Redress*, Guildhall MSS. 3086/1, ff. 127–33. Also published as a pamphlet and printed in the newspapers (e.g. *Patriot*, 8 January 1834) and magazines.

In the view of the United Committee these principles, stemming from the Reformation, asserted 'the sole and exclusive sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures, the Right of all Men to judge for themselves in the interpretation and use of that Divine standard, and the correlative Right to Act according to their judgment in matters of Religion, so long as its exercise interferes not with the Right of others . . . As such Rights do not originate in human Laws, no human Laws can justly abridge them'. From this it followed that 'the exertion of political power' for religious ends was presumptuous and unjust, subject to no limitations, and partial in its operation in that it was bound to favour one denomination at the expense of all others. With this most Dissenters would agree. But the statement then went on to declare that equal rights and justice could be secured only by a complete separation of Church and State. Now, this represented an advance on the older position, and explained why the Wesleyan body had refused to join the United Committee. Disestablishment had never before gained such respectable backers. Indeed, the most 'respectable' among the Dissenters, including the secretary of the Deputies, shortly after resigned on the grounds that Dissent was becoming identified with extreme views on the establishment question.¹⁹ In fact, this swing to disestablishmentarianism was itself symptomatic of the breaking up of the old alliance with the Whigs and of the hardening of political affiliations along religious lines.

For the time being the alliance continued and the moderates maintained their ascendancy: agitation was to be temperate, petitions were to be directed to the redress of practical grievances and extreme demands to be avoided. Governments, whether Whig or Tory—and party differences tended to become less pronounced—were extremely reluctant to grant anything but the most insignificant of reforms, while, contemporaneously, there was an increasing tendency for Dissenters to distil extreme demands out of their principles. What greatly accelerated this tendency and destroyed the ascendancy of the moderates was the realization, in 1837, that the Whig refusal to support any church-rate abolition bill in parliament spelled the end of the old tradition of alliance and that henceforth Dissenters would be compelled to proceed independently of either Whig or Tory.²⁰ Here was a difficult situation. It appeared to many, and was accepted

¹⁹ Robert Winter resigned mainly because he was convinced that the new policy being pursued was 'incompatible with Christian Obligation', would 'engender religious strife and . . . bring down Protestant Dissenters from the higher Ground of Christian Independence . . . to the much lower grade of political party'. Minutes of the Dissenting Deputies, Guildhall MS. 3083/8, f. 252.

²⁰ Skeats, *op. cit.*, p. 598.

as inevitable by some, that nevertheless the connection must be maintained. But increasingly others saw that Dissenters must move farther to the left in the direction of alliance with the Radicals. It is at this point, in the late '30s and early '40s, that that alliance of the left wing in Dissenting politics with radicalism in secular politics took place which was to be increasingly influential in British politics, and which was to give to Welsh Nonconformity its distinctive tone.

The man most responsible for this alliance—the creation of a new Nonconformist orthodoxy in political affairs—was Edward Miall of Leicester, who, in 1841, came to London and established *The Nonconformist* newspaper.²¹ This paper was devoted to a more radical exposition of the agreed principles of Dissent with a view to stimulating Dissenters into consistent lines of political action on the question of the relationship of Church and State. The novelty in Miall's political creed was its essential simplicity: he saw that there was 'little prospect of a radically improved system of legislation upon ecclesiastical matters excepting the legislature itself were reconstituted, and therefore, side by side with the ecclesiastical, [he] urged the question of political reform, not, however, merely as a means to an end, but as, in itself, a just and necessary step'.²² It was this attitude which enabled him to bridge the gulf between an essentially middle-class movement vainly attempting ecclesiastical reform with archaic means, and a working-class political movement as vainly attempting its own enfranchisement using revolutionary techniques. Moreover, his association with the Christian Chartists, and his attempt, with Joseph Sturge, to unite Chartism with the Anti-Corn-Law League assured him of a kind of support wider than that of the other societies.²³ Both as a Chartist and a Leaguer he understood the need for a simple programme of reform and for massive organization.

It was not until 1843, however, that Miall proposed to give practical expression to these views in the formation of a new society. The time was propitious: the old societies were defunct or divided, the most recent ones ineffective, while in the world of politics Graham's Education of Children in Factories Bill [February 1843] seemed to all Dissenters to be an undisguised attempt by the government to hand over the education of the population to the clergy.

²¹ A. Miall, *The Life of Edward Miall* (1884), pp. 38 *et seq.* See also J. Waddington, *op. cit.*, IV, 551–3, for extracts from articles in the early numbers of the *Nonconformist*, in which Miall expounds his views.

²² H. S. Skeats, *op. cit.*, p. 606.

²³ R. G. Cowherd, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

There was alarm at the growth of Tractarianism, rejoicing at the success of the Scottish secession movement, and the Anti-Corn-Law League was an inspiration and a guide. The new venture began with a meeting on 7 December 1843 of seventy Midland ministers at Leicester which passed a resolution declaring 'that the present juncture of events distinctly and loudly calls upon the friends of the voluntary principle cordially to unite and earnestly to labour, in the use of all peaceable and Christian means to accomplish, as speedily as possible, a separation of the church from the state'. A conference was to be called at London to launch the movement on a national basis. Three secretaries were appointed (among whom was Dr. Thomas Price, historian, and editor of *The Eclectic Review*), a provisional committee of 200, and an executive committee of twenty-one. The conference was to take place in May, and to consist of delegates from congregations, colleges, and properly organized public meetings.²⁴

How did Welshmen respond to this? It is clear that the secretaries corresponded widely with ministers in Wales, and that they could rely on the magazines of the Independents and Baptists in particular for publicity.²⁵ Existing denominational organizations were asked to co-operate, and it is significant that these preparations coincided with the perambulations through South Wales of Henry Richard and another delegate from the Congregational Union charged with the task of persuading local associations of congregations to join the central body.²⁶ This would not perhaps be important were it not for the fact that Article IX of the Union, accepted in 1833, affirmed that 'the power of a Christian Church should in no way be corrupted by union with temporal or civil power'.²⁷ It is interesting to note how frequently local associations visited by the delegates proceeded to pass resolutions affirming the principle of disestablishment and their readiness to assist the new movement.

As a result of these exertions, Welsh representation at the founding conference was strong. Twenty-two delegates attended, distributed

²⁴ For details of the Leicester Conference, 7 December 1843, and subsequent arrangements for the London Conference, see the files of the *Nonconformist*, and the paper of Dr. A. F. Cox read at the London Conference, 30 April 1844, 'History of the circumstances which have led to the conference, and justifications of the movement', in *Proceedings of the First Anti-State Church Conference* (1844).

²⁵ *Seren Gomer*, March and April 1844, and *Diwygiwr*, May 1844, the former acknowledging a letter from Dr. Cox on methods of appointing delegates to the proposed Conference, the latter reporting a meeting of the West Glamorgan Independent Association at Swansea which appointed such delegates.

²⁶ *Diwygiwr*, July 1844, *passim*.

²⁷ See *Minutes of the Third General Meeting of the Congregational Union of England and Wales* (1833), Resolution XI, p. 41. The Articles are to be found in the *Congregational Year Book*, and are printed in J. Waddington, *op. cit.*, pp. 652-6. For the relevance of Article IX referred to, see H. S. Skeats, *op. cit.*, p. 591.

thus: from Monmouthshire 8, Glamorgan 4, Montgomeryshire 4, Carmarthenshire 3, Denbigh 2, and Merioneth 1. The other counties were unrepresented, and we may infer that the main appeal of the newly-created Anti-State-Church Association was in the border counties and South Wales. Welsh representation on the Council of Five-Hundred was more extensive though still heavily weighted in the same way, but the five Welsh members of the executive committee of fifty were all from South Wales. The evidence provided by the first subscription points in the same direction. Of the puny sum of £8 7s. 6d. subscribed during the first year, £6 2s. 6d. came from Monmouthshire, the remainder from Denbighshire (£1), Pembrokeshire (10s.), Carmarthenshire (10s.), and Montgomeryshire (5s.).²⁸ Nevertheless, the association had been founded, and had elicited a good response notably in those areas with the oldest Dissenting tradition, which enjoyed the easiest communications with England, and where the Protestant Society and the Dissenting Deputies had been most active.

* * *

Before we can attempt to assess the influence exerted by the new association on the course of Welsh politics between 1844 and 1868 it is first necessary to see how, and in what directions, the association developed in Wales.²⁹ This can be attempted statistically on the basis of the subscriptions contributed annually to the funds of the association. Such information will enable us to mark any fluctuations in growth of membership, and in its geographical distribution. Generalizations based on such evidence must necessarily be crude, but at least they may enable us to ask fresh questions about the nature of Welsh politics during that obscure period.

Looking first at the finances of the association, income as a whole increased six-fold in the period 1844 to 1869—from £1,178 to £7,558. Welsh subscriptions during the same period increased fifteen-fold, from £14 to £217. The trend in both cases is clear, and within it the fluctuations are similar (except at one point), corresponding roughly to fluctuations in the trade cycle. Contributions slump in the first three years of the '50s, rise rapidly to 1856, fall sharply the following year, then rise fairly consistently to 1864, before plunging again during 1864–66. The year 1867–68 sees a peak level. At one point, namely in the middle '60s, there is a marked lack of correspondence

²⁸ Anti-State-Church Association, 'Secretary's Cash Book', London County Council Record Office, MS. A/LIB/89.

²⁹ The analysis which follows is based on statistics abstracted from the annual reports of the Association.

between the British and Welsh trends. Where between 1864 and 1866 Welsh subscriptions decline sharply, income as a whole continues to rise, and steeply in 1865–66. At this point Welsh subscriptions rise while gross income falls. It is necessary to draw attention to this phenomenon, since the explanation, as we shall see, lies not only in changing economic conditions (the slump following the American Civil War), but was determined on the Welsh side by political changes. So far as Welsh subscriptions are concerned we can generalize by saying that, normal fluctuations apart, the volume of Welsh support increased at a fairly consistent rate keeping pace with total income, but rising appreciably in the years after 1862.

When we look at the geographical distribution of Welsh membership, the features which we saw to be characteristic of support for the association's predecessors remain valid up to and including 1862. At the first triennial conference in 1847 the pattern, by counties, was as follows: in Caernarvon, Denbigh, and Montgomery one each—a total of three places in North Wales. In South Wales ten places subscribed, as follows: six in Monmouth, two in Glamorgan, and one each in Carmarthen and Cardigan. In subsequent triennial conferences up to 1862 the geographical spread is mainly in South Wales and less pronouncedly in the northern border counties. More exactly, by 1862 the North Wales counties of Montgomery (5), Denbigh (3), and Merioneth (1) have a total of 9 places contributing. The South Wales counties (excluding Radnor, which had none) have 22 places, fairly evenly distributed, making contributions. After 1862 the pattern changes significantly. In the north, between 1863 and 1868, the number of places rises from 9 to 55. In the south it rises from 45 to 54.

When these distribution changes are looked at more closely, they appear to be highly significant—more so than anything revealed by the financial returns. Looking first at South Wales, the year of expansion is obviously 1862–63 when the number of places rose from 22 to 45. Expansion was greatest in Glamorgan (6 to 17), Monmouthshire (5 to 10), Carmarthenshire and Pembrokeshire (4 to 7 in each). Cardiganshire remained constant at 2 places, and Brecon increased from 1 to 2. This is to say, the greatest expansion takes place in the industrial areas which, of course, were also the regions of maximum Dissenting density. This pattern, on the whole, is sustained to the end of our period. When we look at the actual places within the counties the same tendencies are repeated in microcosm. In Glamorgan it is the towns in the industrial belt which

provide the support—Swansea and its valley, and the sweep from Neath to Hirwaun across to Aberdare and Merthyr, and down to Pontypridd and Cardiff. The Vale is totally unrepresented. The same is true of Monmouthshire, and, after 1864, of Carmarthenshire. Even in rural Cardiganshire it is the seaports which are conspicuous. This is not to say that the society made no impression on rural Wales: it merely indicates that its greatest support, in so far as this can be measured statistically, was to be found in the most heavily industrialized areas.

Turning to North Wales, the period of expansion begins not in 1862 but in 1863–64 and 1867–68. In 1863 there were ten places contributing: in 1864 there were 21: in 1867 this had risen to 32, and in 1868 had reached a peak of 55. 1864 is a conspicuous year because the outstanding feature of the distribution change is not a great increase in those counties already associated with the society. Montgomery, Denbigh, and Merioneth increase by only 3—from 10 to 13. What must be carefully marked is the spread of the society into counties hitherto almost totally innocent of Liberationist cells. In 1864 Anglesey has 1, Caernarvon 3, Flint 3: previously there had been virtually none in these counties. In 1867–68 it is these counties which show the greatest increase: the total of 55 was made up thus: Anglesey 5, Caernarvon 9, Denbigh 13, Flint 9, Merioneth 11, Montgomery 8. Again, the correlation between the spread of Liberationism and industrialism holds good. This is true whether applied to the iron and non-ferrous centres of Flint and south Denbigh, the cloth towns of Montgomery and Merioneth, the slate centres of Caernarvon and Merioneth, or the almost defunct industries of Anglesey.

This changing pattern of distribution corresponds fairly accurately with the conclusions drawn from a study of the finances of the society: there is an upsurge of contributions in 1862–63 and again in 1866–67. But it is a rough correspondence only, since the percentage increase in the numbers of places contributing is considerably higher than that in the other. The explanation is, of course, simple, but nevertheless of great importance in the understanding of the nature of the growth of the society in Wales. It is this: more people in more places are subscribing smaller sums than hitherto to the central fund. It would be tedious to examine the statistics, but the evidence supports this conclusion, that the average amount declines while the numbers of people contributing go up. We might anticipate and conclude further, that the social class attracted by the society had changed during the period.

Unlike the Protestant Society, therefore, the Liberation Society succeeded in establishing itself and in growing at a steady rate throughout our period. Why was this? To find an explanation we need to examine more closely the nature of the society—its policy, the machinery at its disposal, its reaction to political change. We shall then be in a position to understand its impact upon Welsh political life.

Surveying the history of the society from its foundation in 1844 to the climacteric of 1868 we can discern four fairly distinct stages in its development. These are, firstly, a period of consolidation from 1844 to 1847; secondly, a period of exposition and the perfection of organization which lasted until 1853; thirdly, a period of intensive parliamentary activity until 1861; and, finally, a period of readjustment when activity was redirected to the constituencies as the corollary of further parliamentary agitation, for church rate abolition and reform culminating in the general election of 1868.

Between 1844 and 1847 the new association was struggling to establish itself in the country and to create an effective central organization. Constitutionally, authority was vested in the Council of 500 chosen triennially, and executive authority delegated to a committee of fifty chosen from the council members. There was, and for long remained, an air of unreality about this cumbersome and imposing body, and clearly in most respects it was merely a way of associating as many people as possible with the public appearances of the association. A large proportion of its members do not appear to have subscribed: presumably they had been nominated by local enthusiasts.^{29a} The executive council likewise, though intended to be geographically representative of the whole country [15 from London, 7 Scottish, 5 Welsh, 2 Irish, in addition to the English], consisted effectively of the London members. Its meetings were rarely attended by more than eight or nine in addition to the secretaries. The secretariat consisted of three honorary secretaries who shared the work between them, which must have been very considerable. The treasurer was Dr. Thomas Price—a man whose memory is insufficiently regarded in Wales. In the localities the association was represented by registrars whose duty it was to collect

^{29a} Delegates to conferences were not required to be subscribing members: all that was required was 'an implied concurrence in the Society's objects and in the propriety of organized efforts to obtain for them legislative sanction'. Liberation Society Minute Books, L.C.C. MS. A/LIB/2, M.867 (29 October 1858). See also A/LIB/3, M.115 (19 September 1862). I am indebted to the Rev. N. Leslie Stokes for permission to use these documents, and to Miss Ida Darlington, M.A., F.L.A., F.S.A., Archivist to the London County Council, for making them available to me.

funds, distribute literature, arrange meetings, and so on. This was realized to be an unsatisfactory arrangement, but was the best available for the time being, since the establishment of branch or auxiliary societies was still prohibited by law.

The activities of the association in these opening years were thus limited by deficiencies in its organization, in particular, by the lack of a paid secretariat at the centre, and of agents domiciled in the main centres of population. Without these, the purposes of the executive committee could not be translated into action, or the almost complete dependence of the association on the ephemeral enthusiasms of local partisans be lessened. It was limited also in another way. Dissenters at this time were being encouraged to take an active part in the agitation against the Corn Laws,³⁰ and it was essential to avoid any action which might weaken the effectiveness of the Anti-Corn-Law League, or, conversely, cause the association to be regarded as but an auxiliary of the League. Under such circumstances, considerations of expediency demanded that the appeal of the association should be primarily religious, be directed principally at Dissenters, and that it should be concerned with the solidification or the uniting of existing materials among voluntaryists rather than the diffusion of the ideal of disestablishment into areas or among other bodies which were known to be antipathetic to such an ideal.³¹ In short, the immediate purpose of the new movement was to teach those of the Dissenters whose traditions were already voluntaryist that the influence of the Established Church had increased, was increasing, and should, if civil and religious freedoms were to be preserved, be diminished. Politically, this meant that the association had to look forward to some years of intensive propaganda which, it was hoped, would lead to the creation in the localities of powerful Dissenting caucuses. The most difficult part of such a task would be to persuade Dissenters that the old tradition of co-operation with the Whig party was now sterile, and that Dissenters, as individual electors, must concentrate on the long-term policy of returning their own members to parliament even at the cost, it might be, of harming their erstwhile allies. In the House of Commons itself, where the

³⁰ See N. McCord, *The Anti-Corn Law League* (1958), pp. 103–7, for an account of the 1841 Manchester Conference of Ministers, and references therein, especially to J. Waddington, *op. cit.*, IV, 556–64. For the attitude of the Association to the League, see *Report of the First Triennial Conference* (1847): 'They abstained, during the continuance of the Anti-Corn law League, from visiting the centre of the manufacturing districts, in which that powerful and successful organization held its head-quarters' (p. 7). Also, *Address*, dated 1 July 1852, in which the Association claims to be the successor of the League in destroying religious monopolies. A/LIB/1 M.824–6.

³¹ *Report of the First Triennial Conference* (1847), pp. 7–8.

association had only one member,³² it could scarcely hope to exert any influence on legislation. The prerequisite of successful parliamentary action was the creation of a powerful, well-organized body of independent opinion in the country. The political dualism of parliament must be undermined, in the first place in the constituencies.

So far as activity in Wales was concerned, the one event of significance took place after the foundation of the association. At a meeting of the Montgomeryshire Independent Association in August 1844, resolutions supporting the new venture were passed, and a working committee formed to call a conference later in the year at which their solidarity with the aims of the association should be given practical expression.³³ This took place at Machynlleth in September, and was composed almost entirely of delegates from the North Wales counties. A member of the central executive committee was present, and, if we may judge by the numbers who attended and from the resolutions passed, the conference was highly successful. The association's policy of dividing counties into districts and appointing registrars was adopted and partially initiated, and a sub-committee formed to supervise the translation of Anti-State-Church tracts into Welsh.³⁴ But the tangible and permanent results of the conference, once the initial fervour had died down, were negligible. For years—until his departure for America—Samuel Roberts of Llanbryn-mair remained virtually the only subscriber in the whole of Montgomeryshire.³⁵ As we have seen, it was not until the '60s that the association made any significant advances in North Wales. The same is true of South Wales: few permanent organizations were set up,³⁶ and no intensive efforts were made to begin the association's policy of steady indoctrination. For the most part the Welsh magazines, *Y Diwygiwr* and *Seren Gomer* in particular, printed abbreviated reports of the association's annual meetings, and the Rev. David Rees especially welcomed articles on the theme of dis-establishment. The association itself, its resources stretched to the

³² William Sharman Crawford, member for Rochdale, 1841–51, when he retired and was followed by Edward Miall, see *Proceedings . . . 1844* (1844). Crawford and Miall had been associated in the leadership of the Complete Suffrage Union, for which see A. Miall, *Life of Edward Miall* (1884), p. 85.

³³ For detailed reports see *Y Diwygiwr*, September 1844.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 350.

³⁵ S.R. was one of the conveners of the Machynlleth Conference and one of its joint secretaries. He also sat on the publications translation committee. In this context it is interesting to note that S.R. had translated into Welsh *The Faith, Church Order, and Discipline of the Congregational Dissenters* (1834) on behalf of the Congregational Union, 5,000 copies of which were printed. See *Fourth Annual Report of the Congregational Union* (1834), pp. 4–5.

³⁶ Not until 1848 was a local committee appointed at Merthyr Tydfil. A committee had been set up earlier at Cardiff.

limit, could afford to send its lecturer, Kingsley, to Wales only very occasionally, and then only to the densely-populated parts of the southern counties. No tracts appear to have been made available in Welsh, and this, coupled with the fact that none of the established English weekly newspapers published locally were favourable to the aims of the association, necessarily meant that its work in South Wales was gravely hampered.³⁷

During the six years between the second and the third triennial conferences—from 1847 to 1853—the association made considerable progress both in the country and in parliament. As an organization it increased in membership, and its growing resources were an indication of its greater effectiveness and of the leading position it had gained in the estimation both of its friends and of its enemies. Its income rose from £1,178 to £1,723 in 1850, though it had fallen, because of the depression, to £1,623 by the third triennial conference.³⁸ Partly, this growing success may be attributed to a more efficient organization. In the first place, there was now a full-time, salaried secretary, and an office staff.³⁹ The man appointed to this key post in 1847 was a London Welshman, John Carvell Williams, a person of great administrative abilities, a fluent speaker, and controversialist—a man who devoted himself to the work of the association with such vigour and single-mindedness that he soon came to be identified with it in the public mind.⁴⁰ In the second place, the old system of honorary registrars was dropped in 1848, and replaced by a new system whereby local committees empowered by the executive committee, and responsible to it, were established.⁴¹ This new policy proved of permanent value, and was undoubtedly a source of great strength since the committees thus formed were better adapted for the essential propaganda work of the association, were more flexible and pervading than the old system, and, most important of all, could constitute whenever the need arose Dissenting caucuses in the constituencies. Thirdly, it now became the policy of the association to appoint full-time and part-time lecturers who toured the country in accordance with carefully prepared itineraries. In addition, collectors were appointed, usually part-time, who were paid small salaries and a commission on the amounts collected. As

³⁷ Editors of Welsh magazines were constantly drawing attention to this deficiency: e.g., *Y Diwygiwr*, July 1847. Miall regularly opened the columns of the *Nonconformist* to Welsh Dissenting affairs. Writing in 1850, Miall thought the English newspapers in Wales scarcely worthy of notice—though he excepted the *Principality* from this judgment.

³⁸ Statistics are abstracted from the annual reports.

³⁹ *Minutes of Meeting of Council, May 1848* (1848).

⁴⁰ *Dictionary of National Biography, sub. nom.* John Carvell Williams.

⁴¹ *Minutes of . . . Council, 1848.*

a result of these and other changes the organization was greatly improved, so that by 1853 the executive committee was sufficiently confident of its eventual success to embark on a radical change in policy.⁴²

Before enquiring into this it is necessary to mark the effects of these organizational changes on the fortunes of the association in Wales. The appointment of a secretary with Welsh antecedents and connections, and of a full-time lecturer, certainly made a difference in that henceforward meetings were held more regularly in the Principality. Attempts were made to send either the secretary himself, or a lecturer, or a member of the executive, to Wales at least once a year.⁴³ In fact, South Wales was visited twice in the three years up to 1850, and again in 1851 and 1852.⁴⁴ North Wales was visited in 1850 only.⁴⁵ In addition, soirées—that typical Victorian institution—were arranged at the request of certain Monmouthshire gentlemen in South Wales in the autumn of 1852.⁴⁶ These visits were intended, of course, not only to stimulate interest in and provoke discussion of the association's principles, but also to organize the setting up of local committees and to collect subscriptions. In neither objective, during this period, were their efforts very successful. By 1853 there were still very few local committees, and subscriptions actually fell.⁴⁷ But it appears not to have been the policy of the association, thus early in its history, to concentrate its resources on Wales. It was more profitable to concentrate rather on the heavily-populated Midland areas and on London, visiting the outlying parts of the country only as frequently as was deemed necessary to keep alive existing organizations. Wales presented difficulties which were not present elsewhere. For example, the language was a positive hindrance, but more serious was the lack of a sympathetic press. Apart from the denominational Welsh press the English-language weeklies were almost all hostile or, at best, indifferent to the existence of the association. Apart from *The Principality*, founded at Narberth in 1851, there was virtually no weekly in which the association could be certain of being given generous space.

Nevertheless, the association was becoming increasingly influential in British politics. At each election after 1847 it had taken an active

⁴² *Report of the Third Triennial Conference, November 1853* (1853).

⁴³ *Report of the Second Triennial Conference, April 1850* (1850), p. 8.

⁴⁴ Liberation Society Minute Books, vol. 2, M.429 (27 March 1851), M.763 (15 April 1852).

⁴⁵ A/LIB/2 M.287 (31 October 1850).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, M.885 (14 October 1852) and M.929 (28 October 1852).

⁴⁷ *Report of . . . 1853* (1853).

part in organizing Dissenting opinion in certain carefully chosen constituencies, with the result that its leaders could claim in 1853 to have been partly responsible for the appearance in the new parliament of that year of a group of nearly forty Dissenters or Dissenting sympathizers.⁴⁸ It was this accession of influence within the legislature backed by a disciplined and vocal opinion in the country which persuaded the executive committee to embark on a new policy in 1853. The recent election in particular had demonstrated its strength, so much so that the established parties, though they still coupled it with extreme radicalism, were no longer disposed to ignore its existence, and were even ready to concede that it had achieved an impressive degree of respectability. It was for this reason that it was felt to be prudent to change the name of the association to 'the Society for the Liberation of Religion from State Patronage and Control' as being less liable to misapprehension, less offensive, and in other respects more desirable than the negativity of 'Anti-State-Church Association'.⁴⁹ This, indeed, was part of the new policy which Miall now proposed at this third triennial conference. The society should now aim 'at the accomplishment of an exclusively political change' based on the affirmation of the old religious principles as interpreted by the society and which it had been actively propagating with success in the country during the previous decade. Since the political change envisaged was a change in the law, and since any but moral and constitutional means were repudiated, and that only in parliament could such legal changes be made, the aim of the society could be 'practically narrowed to this point—the return of a House of Commons in which the majority of members shall hold, and be willing to carry into effect, our views'. Somewhat sanguinely, Miall thought that this was not an impossible ideal, and the steps he now proposed that the society should take were eminently practical. In the first place, the society could now embark on a cautious parliamentary career designed to lead, rather than, as in the past, merely to take advantage of, adventitious parliamentary circumstances. To this end he proposed the setting up of two sub-committees, a parliamentary and an electoral sub-committee, consisting of three to five members each (not necessarily members of the executive) with power to sit as one when necessary. The first of these, which would be headed by a permanent salaried lawyer, would

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 6–7. On the question whether these m.p.s would work together as a party the *Report* was cautious, but it was emphasized that 'in the present balanced state of parties even so small a force as that at the disposal of Anti-State-Churchmen may be able, at times, to exert a decisive influence'.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, Resolution IX, moved by Edward Baines.

watch business in both houses, scrutinize all bills, inspect notices of motion, receive all parliamentary papers. It would deliberate weekly, discuss strategy, communicate with members, and concert action on specific measures. In short, this standing committee would act as a kind of unofficial whips' office, unobtrusively impressing upon the proceedings of the Liberationist sympathizers a certain continuity and persistency of action which would in time make its authority known and respected in party and government circles.⁵⁰ The electoral sub-committee was to be a separate body but intended to work in association with the parliamentary, and its task was to direct the political activities of the society in the constituencies. It was to have a separate budget, and it was empowered to employ electoral agents as the need might arise. An important part of its work was the collection and analysis of electoral statistics for each borough and county constituency throughout the country—the creation of a body of facts which could be used not only for propaganda purposes but which would provide the executive committee with the necessary up-to-date information on which to plan its campaign in the country.⁵¹

Reporting these changes at the end of the year in *Y Diwygiwr*, David Rees commented thus: 'Ymddengys yn eglur bod y Gymdeithas hon a wawdid ac a ddirmygid fel peth ffôl yn ymgeisio at ryw ddyfeision utopaidd, wedi dod yn ffaith led fawr'⁵² ('It seems clear that this Society, which was mocked and scorned as a foolish affair aiming at some utopian schemes, has now become a fact of some importance'). The echo of *The Times* comment on the growth of the Anti-Corn-Law League is unmistakable, and indeed, in some respects the achievements of the society in the years which followed were even more remarkable than those of its great predecessor. Its machinery was now 'almost perfect', for in addition to the two standing committees already mentioned and the network of local committees throughout the British Isles, the society was now its own publisher,⁵³ issuing under its own imprimatur not only tracts and pamphlets but substantial controversial and historical works as well. In addition, 1855 saw the foundation of its own periodical, *The Liberator*, which soon gained a wide circulation and which could be printed in very substantial numbers in times of emergency and

⁵⁰ Edward Miall's paper 'The Prospects and Duties of the Society in relation to the House of Commons, and to its constituent bodies', in *ibid.*, pp. 29–41.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁵² *Y Diwygiwr*, December 1853, p. 381.

⁵³ An editor was appointed for the first time in October 1851.

distributed at comparatively little cost over the whole country.⁵⁴ There appeared thus to be every justification that the society could now embark on a policy of cautious advance in parliament with some hope that its increasing influence in the country would sooner than later enable it to take the offensive in the very citadel of the entrenched privileges of the establishment.

The third stage in the history of the society is the story of increasing success in the country matched by an almost correlative failure in parliament. There were many measures which the society considered its own, and which the parliamentary sub-committee carefully watched over in their often depressing passage through the houses. But the measure nearest their heart was the perennial and venerable Church Rates Abolition Bill which, entrusted to one or other of the society's supporters, annually made its appearance on the table of the House. Friends and foes alike regarded the fortunes of this bill as a barometer of the popularity and effectiveness of the society. Up to and including 1854, it had never got beyond the second reading. After that date it consistently passed that stage but failed in the Lords. Until 1859, moreover, the majorities in the Commons in favour tended to get larger: after that date they declined, until in 1862 the bill was lost on second reading by the casting vote of the Speaker.⁵⁵

It would be interesting and illuminating of the nature of parliament during those years to trace the detail of this curious story, but space does not permit. For our purposes what is important is the reaction of the society to this decline in its parliamentary fortunes. Despite increasing evidence that both the major parties were opposed to unconditional abolition and prepared to make use of it for purely tactical reasons with only an almost cynical disregard for feeling in the country, the society persisted in pressing its demands on parliament. The effect of this was to drive the parliamentary committee further to the left into closer co-operation with radical groups of members who had their own peculiar reasons for desiring the destruction of the deadly dualism which so effectively strangled reform.⁵⁶ Liberationist members were now to be found acting in unison with dissident groups vainly working for parliamentary reform and the

⁵⁴ The circulation of this periodical during the first six months of its existence (June to December 1855) was a little under 1,600 copies. Of these, 1,440 were distributed gratuitously (to £1 subscribers, m.p.s, editors, colleges, etc.). The total cost to the Society was a little over £66. A/LIB/2 M.470 (14 December 1855). Later, in May 1856, the *Liberator* was sent gratuitously to 5s. subscribers; *ibid.*, M.374.

⁵⁵ S/LIB/2 M.1187 (21 June 1861); Hansard, 3rd series, CLXIII, col. 1322, 19 June 1861.

⁵⁶ *Eighteenth Annual Report*, 2 May 1863 (1863) and A/LIB/3 M.286 (23 October 1863). (Liberation Society Minute Book III, A/LIB/2 M.1206 (27 September 1861).

ballot, with the result that in the country the society was coming to be identified with the reform movements. At the same time agitation in the country was stepped up, and an all-out effort made in 1857 to secure the return of more radical members. But this cost money, and the deficit by 1858 was running at the rate of £700 per annum.⁵⁷ Consequently, it was more than ever necessary to canvass the country in order to raise additional money. Special delegations were sent to most of the industrial areas, including those of South Wales, as a result of which subscriptions rose sharply.

The activities of these years both in parliament and in the country bore but little fruit. This was the age of Palmerston, of massive indifference to any kind of reform, and the society suffered a loss of influence along with most other reforming movements. The results of the 1859 election could not be regarded with complacency since the gains which followed 1857 were lost, for not only had Liberationist candidates been defeated but the popular party, with whom also the society so closely worked in parliament, had likewise been reduced.⁵⁸ This was reflected in the voting on the Church Rates Abolition Bill of 1861: for the first time since the society had taken over this measure it had lost its Commons majority. The session exhibited an almost unbroken succession of defeats, and this despite the almost unprecedented intensity of effort in the country. 'The present House of Commons is too evenly balanced, and too strongly reactionary, in all questions affecting religious equality, to admit of the hope that we can secure a majority in favour of the measures we have heretofore urged upon its adoption'. Consequently, parliamentary activity of a direct kind was to be abandoned as unprofitable, the agitation against Church rates transferred to the localities, and the society's whole efforts concentrated upon securing the return of a parliament more amenable to legislation on voluntaryist principles—in short, the aim of the society should now be 'to convert the House of Commons into a more efficient instrument for our designs'.⁵⁹

A fourth stage in the history of the society began therefore in 1861 with the initiation of a policy designed to bring pressure to bear on a parliament liberal in its professions, but hostile to reform

⁵⁷ Liberation Society Minute Book III, A/LIB/2 M.789 (19 February 1858).

⁵⁸ *Report of the Fifth Triennial Conference, June 1859* (1859). 'An issue which has involved a loss to the popular party in Parliament must necessarily affect unfavourably the parliamentary position of Voluntaries.' Cf. also Liberation Society Minute Book III, A/LIB/2 M.946 (27 April 1859).

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, A/LIB/2 M.1207 (27 September 1861).

in both Church and State. In this final stage Wales was to play a notable part. In a minute dated 27 September 1861,⁶⁰ it was resolved that since parliamentary work was now to be in abeyance and electoral activity in the country intensified, special attention should be paid to the Principality. 'Looking to the great preponderance of Nonconformity in Wales, and to the fact that it is at present scarcely represented in Parliament, we think it important that a special and decided Electoral effort should be made in that part of the Kingdom.' One or two gentlemen well acquainted with Wales, who would be able to suggest and, more or less, carry out such measures as might be proposed, ought forthwith to be engaged, and a campaign quickly initiated. Consultations with Welsh friends began almost immediately, and by the middle of January it had been decided in principle to hold two conferences in Wales during the year, one in the south in May or June, the other at a later date in the north. Henry Richard was to be asked to join a deputation from the society consisting of Miall and the secretary, and the movement's organization in Wales perfected by the appointment of a full-time agent.⁶¹ Later, in June, Richard became a member of the executive, and the arrangements for a high-powered conference in South Wales completed.⁶²

There had been some doubt of the wisdom of such a drastic change in policy when it had first been mooted. Now, the utter disregard for Liberationist aims in the new session confirmed the society in the rightness of the course it was pursuing. In another respect, also, the emphasis on local agitation and on South Wales in particular proved to be fortunate. The depression in the cotton industry excluded the possibility of any lucrative activities in Lancashire:⁶³ subscriptions from that area could be expected to fall: and it is clear that one motive in turning to South Wales was that Welsh subscriptions could be so raised as to make up the deficiency.

The Swansea Conference of September 1862 extended over two days, and was attended by 200 delegates from the southern counties with a few from North Wales.⁶⁴ The various speakers were all prominent Dissenting laymen or ministers, the one exception being L. Ll. Dillwyn, the member for Swansea, and a prominent Liberationist in parliament. He explained that he was able to co-operate

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., vol. IV, A/LIB/3 M.23 (14 January 1862).

⁶² Ibid., M.79 (13 June) and *ibid.*, M.112 (3 September 1862).

⁶³ Ibid., M.104 (1 August) and *ibid.*, M.142 (14 November 1862).

⁶⁴ *The Cambrian*, 26 September 1862, gives lists of delegates and a full report of proceedings. Later, the Liberation Society produced a report of proceedings in English, and a Welsh translation.

with the Liberation Society because it endeavoured 'to maintain and enforce the great principle that the Established Church of this country is not a corporation existing for the benefit of any particular section of the community, but that it belongs entirely to the people; and that they have a full right at any time to resume its possessions or reform its doctrines, as they have done in times past, if a majority of the nation should so determine'.⁶⁵ This, as John Batchelor of Cardiff explained, was precisely what they were now about—the conference had been called 'to decide upon the best mode by which the Welsh people can assist' in creating such a majority in favour of disestablishment. Later speakers carefully analysed the present position of Dissent in the country, and there was unanimous agreement that the lack of correspondence between their numerical and what was called their moral superiority on the one hand, and the character of their representation in parliament on the other, was a standing reproach to them as Dissenters. Miall and the other two delegates were extremely forthright. Judging by the members returned by Welsh electors, Wales was 'an almost perfectly unanimous nation of State Churchmen'. Yet the statistics showed Nonconformists to be victorious, and therefore able 'to do as you please'. There was not, moreover, the social clash which inhibited English Nonconformist political action—no middle class which, when it attained wealth, fell away into the fashionable church. Carvell Williams, armed with statistics gathered by his agents, drove home these truths, and argued that 'the division lists of the House of Commons . . . showed . . . that Welsh Dissenters were either unconscious of the latent power at their command, or were strongly neglectful of their duty'. He attributed much of the laxity of Welsh Liberal members to 'abstinence from out-door agitation', and argued from evidence supplied by the parliamentary sub-committee that even unsatisfactory members could be compelled to vote in ways favoured by their constituents. Henry Richard spoke in the same strain, and moved a resolution urging Dissenters to carry their principles to the polling-booths and supply Dillwyn, their greatest champion, with supporters in the House, so that members might say, 'Here comes Dillwyn with his Welsh reserve'.

Perhaps some of those present recalled the similar enthusiasm displayed at the 1844 Machynlleth Conference, and the apathy and neglect which followed. This was not again to be the case, for the society, which at the time had been attempting a new thing, had over

⁶⁵ Ibid.

the years gained a vast amount of experience. None understood better the nature of politics in parliament and in the constituencies than Miall and Williams, and both, despite their impossible aims, were eminently practical men. The society did not expect revolutionary results to issue from this conference, but they saw to it that measures were immediately taken which would initiate the kind of changes they hoped for. A committee for South Wales, with headquarters at Cardiff, was immediately established, and a district agent appointed.⁶⁶ The proceedings of the conference were published in English and Welsh and widely distributed along with specially-written tracts in Welsh and a selection of English ones in translation. Of great importance was the appointment of an electoral agent in South Wales. This was made in October 1865 when it had become evident, after the general election of that year in Cardiganshire, that with adequate preparation Henry Richard could be expected to be returned for that constituency at some future election. A local man was chosen for the post, and it was his task, carried out with great success, to nurse the constituency for Richard at the Society's expense.⁶⁷ Henry Richard himself paid regular visits to the area, and though at the next general election he chose to contest the much safer seat of Merthyr Tydfil, Cardiganshire was in fact won for, if not in the name of, the society by a Welsh Nonconformist. It was during these years from 1862 onwards that Richard became a leading member of the executive and the Liberation Society's expert adviser on Welsh political affairs.⁶⁸

It is important to emphasize that this activity in Wales was an essential part of the new policy of the Liberation Society. It was clear that the leaders had now realized the importance of the outlying areas, and of the Celtic fringe in particular.⁶⁹ The Lancashire

⁶⁶ Minute Book IV, A/LIB/3 M.119 (3 October 1862) and *ibid.*, M.120, for the appointment of the Rev. John Rees of Swansea. In December 1865, on the recommendation of the South Wales Committee, the terms of his appointment were changed to include the whole of Wales. He resigned in May 1866 and was replaced by the Rev. Watkin Williams of Pen-coed. *Ibid.*, M.711 (25 May 1866) and M.764 (5 October 1866).

⁶⁷ The appointment of Mr. Thomas Harris of Llechryd, Cardiganshire, was recommended by the South Wales Committee in October 1866. *Ibid.*, M.598 (October 1865). At the general election of 1865 in Cardiganshire, Henry Richard, despite unexpectedly large support, had withdrawn from the contest on the eve of the poll so as to avoid splitting the Liberal vote. For the Society's views of this election, see *ibid.*, M.560 (21 July 1865).

⁶⁸ Richard became a member of the Executive Committee in June 1865: Minute Book IV, A/LIB/3 M.79 (13 June 1862). Thereafter, no decision of importance respecting Wales was taken without first consulting him and Miall. Thus, all recommendations of the South Wales Committee were referred to him: e.g., the decision, in May 1866, to hold conferences in North Wales. *Ibid.*, M.711-13 (25 May 1866).

⁶⁹ E.g., in October 1862 the executive accepted the views on strategy of a sub-committee that in future emphasis should be placed on the anomalies of the Established Church in Wales, Scotland, and Ireland 'with a view to preparing the public mind for parliamentary action when it shall be deemed advisable'. *Ibid.*, M.114 (5 September) and M.115 and 117 (19 September) and M.127 (17 October 1862).

distress may, to a certain extent, have compelled them to look away from the areas of primary support: more likely, the change was based on deductions based on a study of the electoral facts which the society's agents had been collecting over the past six years or so. The whole emphasis was on electoral action. The society did not think of itself as a party, though it is probably true to say that its machinery was as perfect, if less powerful, as any of the existing party machines. It thought of itself rather as a distinct pressure group, allied officially with no party, and prepared, in the present juncture of politics, to act independently of party. Indeed, in 1865 it seemed to the executive that the most they could expect of the Liberals under Russell's leadership was for them to keep their ascendancy in parliament but use it only as the Conservatives should please. In such a situation, it was clearly vain to work for Liberal gains in elections: the policy should be rather to demand the co-operation of local Liberal caucuses in those constituencies where Liberationists or Liberationist sympathizers were in a majority on the register. Local action was therefore imperative—the building up of strong Liberationist caucuses loosely allied to Liberal parties but prepared, if need be, to act independently. For such a policy the Welsh constituencies, both on religious and sociological grounds, were peculiarly suited.

Not until September 1866 did the society attempt a similar assault on North Wales. The original intention had been to initiate systematic efforts there at the same time as those in South Wales, but this had been postponed presumably on the advice of the society's supporters in those areas.⁷⁰ In the meantime, North Wales had not been forgotten entirely: efforts were made to interfere in the Montgomeryshire elections in 1863;⁷¹ but it is clear that for the time being the society could expect to make no headway there. South Wales, with its now highly organized and smooth-running committee and agencies, and, of course, its greater numerical and financial resources, was a far more profitable enterprise. It is significant, also, that when the society did turn its attention to North Wales, it was in response to the suggestions of the South Wales committee meeting at Pontypool that a series of six county conferences should be held in the autumn, three of which should be in Denbighshire, Montgomeryshire, and Merioneth.⁷² Urgency was given to the request, and

⁷⁰ Ibid., M.113 (5 September 1862).

⁷¹ Ibid., M.253 (26 June) and M.266 (7 August 1862).

⁷² Ibid., M.711 (25 May 1862). See also the introduction to *Welsh Nonconformity and the Welsh Representation, papers and speeches read and delivered at the conferences held September and October 1866*, published by the Society.

a favourable response elicited from the executive, by the change in the political situation. The defeat of the Liberal government on the question of reform indicated either a change of government or a dissolution, and the society's electoral machinery, always held in readiness for such an emergency, was quickly put into action.⁷³ It was, perhaps, the realization that such electoral activity could scarcely be effective in areas where there existed no local machinery to manipulate, which finally persuaded the executive to begin a large-scale operation in the northern counties. The Liberal defeat had been followed by a change of government only, but, like most political observers, the society's leaders were convinced that a general election could not long be delayed. Moreover, it was in the interests of the society to do everything possible to help put an end to the frustrations of successive minority governments.

In July, therefore, it was decided that Miall and Richard should attend a series of conferences in North Wales in the autumn. The following month Miall reported that he had visited the main towns in the counties of Flint, Denbigh, Merioneth, and Cardigan, and had arranged for four conferences to take place in September at Newtown, Denbigh, Bala, and Aberaeron. There were to be further meetings in the Cardiganshire towns during the following month, and, depending on the response to the conferences, further meetings in the other counties later on.⁷⁴ It is quite clear that the society did not expect a repetition of their success in South Wales in 1866: the deliberations of the executive were those of cautious and not over-sanguine politicians. In the event, the success of the conferences exceeded their expectations. At Denbigh alone there were more delegates from the county than those furnished by the whole of South Wales in 1862, and there were gratifying attendances at Bala and Aberaeron, despite poorer communications and a late harvest.⁷⁵ This must be attributed to efficient preparation—to the fact that during the previous three years the South Wales organization had been running smoothly and that a great deal of experience had been accumulated which was now at the disposal of the local committees again coming into existence in North Wales. In both series of conferences the theme was the same, that is to say, the political ineffectiveness of a majority religious movement. 'Whatever the

⁷³ Liberation Society Minute Book IV, A/LIB/3 M.726 (22 June 1866). See also *Twenty-first Annual Report*, 2 May 1866 (1866).

⁷⁴ Liberation Society Minute Book IV, A/LIB/3 M.748 (20 July) and M.757 (7 September 1866).

⁷⁵ *Welsh Nonconformity and the Welsh Representation*, introduction, and *Twenty-second Annual Report*, 1 May 1867 (1867).

shortcomings of English, Irish, and Scotch Dissent', said Carvell Williams, 'it shapes public opinion. Its influence is traceable in the conduct of the public press. It is an element in the decisions of cabinets and in the calculations of politicians.' But, it was argued, Welsh Nonconformity did not occupy a corresponding place, and this despite the fact that the wrong inflicted by the Church of England was greater than that inflicted in England, indeed, a wrong commensurate with the wrongs inflicted on the Irish. This was the theme, and in each county delegates were presented with electoral facts and figures which demonstrated beyond cavil the anomalies in the Welsh representation of the counties concerned. County electoral histories were prepared, contests analyzed, or the deplorable lack of contests accounted for. On the whole, the speakers agreed that the situation resulted from apathy, or traditionalism, or a feeling of helplessness in the face of an unscrupulous use of the advantages which economic power conferred on the parliamentary families. The Rev. Michael D. Jones of Bala, in particular, made a speech of peculiar force and bitter irony on the theme of the misrepresentation of Merioneth. He dealt scornfully with the so-called justifications for oligarchic rule: the wealthy say to the working classes, 'Allow us to take out your eyes, and we shall very kindly lead you by the hand': delineated the moral, social, and economic consequences of 'influence', and ended on a note of passion which must have been unforgettable for those who heard it.⁷⁶

These conferences resulted in the setting up of a network of committees in the counties concerned⁷⁷—committees which were charged with the task not only of spreading the doctrines of disestablishment but of building up a political organization in readiness for the forthcoming general election. Controlling and co-ordinating the activities of these committees (and of those in South Wales) was a sub-committee of the executive formed on the return of Miall from a series of meetings in Cardiganshire which had rounded off the North Wales conferences. It consisted of Miall himself, Richard, Williams, and the editor.⁷⁸ The inclusion of the editor was significant, for not the least important of the society's labours was the production of literature in Welsh. By August 1867 the Welsh sub-committee was of the opinion that an agent for North Wales should be appointed, his area to include all places on the Cambrian Railway as far as Aberystwyth. The post was offered to the Rev. Dillwyn

⁷⁶ *Welsh Nonconformity and Welsh Representation.*

⁷⁷ *Liberation Society Minute Book IV, A/LIB/3 M.766 (5 October 1866).*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, M.772 (19 October 1866).

Davies of Llanfyllin at £30 per annum—raised later to £50 after a correspondence with the candidate.⁷⁹

There thus existed by 1867 an organization covering almost the whole of Wales, a staff of agents and of political experts, the whole efficiently directed from the centre. We have already noted the striking advances made throughout the Principality, but especially in North Wales, after 1866.⁸⁰ This must be attributed to the tremendous drive of the society, its ability to generate, and to channel into political action, the enthusiasms latent in Welsh Nonconformity. Neither did the society have to wait for any tangible results. It lent its support, both financial and otherwise, to newly founded political organizations, as, for instance, when a South Wales Liberal Registration Society was formed at Carmarthen in July 1867,⁸¹ and a Welsh Reform Association in July 1868.⁸² More so, perhaps, than any other evidence of growth, movements such as these demonstrated the enhanced influence of the society and of its effectiveness. Surveying the results of their work in Wales, the executive committee in May 1867 reported that the conferences held in Wales had proved successful beyond their most sanguine expectations. They were convinced that in Wales the society had found 'a soil which will ultimately repay diligent culture, and that that country, when it is energized into political life, as it is already influenced by religious feeling, will not let its voice be unheard, and its power be unfelt, in the Legislature'.⁸³

Nevertheless, the success was only indirectly the fruit of the Liberation Society's exertions. For the times were propitious, conducive to great advances, and both the great parties, under the leadership of Gladstone and Disraeli, were passing into a phase of constructive reform, the very antithesis of Palmerstonian conservatism. The Liberals, in opposition, were again disposed to take up questions of ecclesiastical policy, while both parties found themselves unable to resist the popular movement for parliamentary reform. The society took up again an active parliamentary programme. A Church Rates Abolition Bill, sponsored by it, after a lapse of seven years, again passed the Commons by a substantial majority,

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, M.521 (2 August) and M.535a (30 August 1866).

⁸⁰ See above, pp. 220–221.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, M.495 (7 June), M.503 (21 June), M.509 (5 July) and M.520 (2 August 1867). Mr. Samuel Morley was reported to have consented to contribute £500 towards the first-year expenses, and the Society agreed to contribute £200. For the impact of this on Welsh Nonconformist Liberals see the speech of Dr. Thomas Price in May 1867 in *Aberdare Times*, 11 May 1867.

⁸² Liberation Society Minute Book V, A/LIB/4 M.131 (26 June 1868). £50 was voted to this Association—and the same amount to the Reform League (M.132).

⁸³ *Twenty-second Annual Report*, op. cit.

only to be lost at third reading in the Lords.⁸⁴ But the society had the satisfaction of knowing that Gladstone would introduce an official Liberal abolition bill early in the next session, and, above all, that the election would be fought on the question of the disestablishment of the Irish Church. Moreover, parliamentary reform, as the statistics collected by the society's agents showed, would inevitably benefit the society, and nowhere more so than in Wales. It was essential that the society, while co-operating closely with reform organizations, should also make its own dispositions, and it is vitally important to realize that so far as Wales was concerned it was the Liberation Society which was mainly responsible for reform agitation rather than either the Reform League or the Reform Union. These latter had their supporters, particularly in the industrial valleys where the League was active.⁸⁵ But in Wales, and partly due to the exertions of the Liberation Society, parliamentary reform had a religious or ecclesiastical, rather than a secular, flavour. It alone had a powerful organization, and it alone enjoyed the confidence of the leaders of that peculiar culture which the forces of industrialization and a numerically resurgent Nonconformity were rapidly creating in Wales.

This paper, did it aim at a comprehensive analysis of Welsh politics at the end of the period with which it is concerned, would end with a study of the ways in which the organization thus created functioned in the Welsh constituencies at the general election of 1868. Such a study would not show, except possibly at Merthyr Tydfil, the overwhelming success of Liberationist candidates. Indeed it would show, on the contrary, at least one example of an avowed Liberationist candidate repudiating any connection with the society rather than endanger his candidature,⁸⁶ and even in Merthyr Tydfil, where the society's supporters most vociferously claimed their greatest victory, it would clearly demonstrate that other factors were equally important in the return of Henry Richard.⁸⁷ Nevertheless, such an analysis would show to what an extent and in what ways the nature of Welsh politics had changed in the previous twenty-odd years. In particular, it would show that Welsh Nonconformists were now more prepared to give political expression to

⁸⁴ Hansard, 3rd series, CLXXXI. See also *Twenty-first Annual Report, May 1866* (1866), col. 1691, 7 March 1866.

⁸⁵ E.g. in Merthyr Tydfil.

⁸⁶ E. M. Richards at Cardiganshire. See his 'Address' in *Aberystwyth Observer*, 22 August 1868.

⁸⁷ I have analysed this election in detail in a forthcoming article 'The general election of 1868 in Merthyr Tydfil: a study in the politics of an industrial borough in the nineteenth century' in *Journal of Modern History*.

224 THE LIBERATION SOCIETY AND WELSH POLITICS, 1844 TO 1868

their religious sentiments. Here was a change of great significance not only to Wales itself, but to the larger political unit of which Wales was a part. If the year 1868 was indeed an *annus mirabilis*, that it was so was due in no small part to the work of the Society for the Liberation of Religion from State Patronage and Control.

IEUAN GWYNEDD JONES.

Swansea.