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THE CARMARTHEN RIOTS OF 1831¹

FROM the last months of 1830 until the summer of 1832 Britain passed through what has become known as 'the Reform crisis'. At certain times during this crisis it seemed to some observers that the country was on the brink of a revolution. In Wales there was considerable industrial violence. The great issue of reform also helped to inflame feelings, and brawls were frequent during the contested elections of 1831 for Caernarvon, Monmouth, Pembrokeshire, Montgomeryshire and Brecknockshire. This, of course, was almost to be expected: the only extraordinary political demonstrations were the Merthyr riots of June 1831 and the troubles at Carmarthen. The latter were exceptional because of their intensity and duration.

* * *

The borough of Carmarthen had a long tradition of violence associated with parliamentary and borough elections. In the middle years of the eighteenth century, there had been serious rioting and even shooting in the town. By the end of that century two rival factions faced each other, the 'Red' party of Dynevor, and the stronger 'Blues' represented by the Whig houses of Golden Grove and Cwmgwili. In 1796 when the Red candidate, a London banker named Magens, was illegally elected for the borough, pistols were fired in the streets and inhabitants barricaded their houses. Six years later rioting again broke out during the expensive 'Lecsiwn Fawr'. Elections were also contested in 1812 and six years later when there was considerable political unrest in other parts of Wales. In 1821 the Red party finally wrested the parliamentary seat from the Blues, and the victor, John Jones of Ystrad, became a popular hero. Although he sometimes acted as a Tory, Jones was strongly independent. In common with most members of parliament, his main concern was local politics, and after his election triumph he made a successful bid to gain control of the town council.

Meanwhile in 1820, with the death of Lord Cawdor, leadership of the Blue or Whig party in Carmarthen passed to certain radical townsmen. No doubt they enthusiastically supported the illumination in November of that year which celebrated the abandonment of

¹ I should like to thank Professor David Williams for his help in the preparation of this material.

proceedings against Queen Caroline. Three years later one of the leading radicals, the Unitarian and attorney George Thomas, attempted to change a county meeting convened to discuss agriculture into a reform demonstration. George Thomas and other Carmarthen sectarians were very concerned about tithes and church rates, the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, and the Catholic Emancipation Bills of the 1820s. Their mouthpieces included the periodicals *Seren Gomer* and *Yr Oes*. When the Catholic Emancipation Bill was rejected by the House of Lords in 1825, there were celebrations at Carmarthen, whilst disturbances in the town four years later may possibly have had a similar *raison d'être*.²

With such a history of bitter conflict over political issues, Carmarthen was a natural storm centre during the reform crisis. Nevertheless, the rioting that occurred then cannot be explained simply in these terms. 'Our population consists of about 12,000 persons', said the mayor and magistrates in June 1831, 'the great majority of whom are in indigent circumstances'.³ Since the beginning of the century, and especially during the post-war depression, many of the Carmarthen 'lower orders' had been fed and kept peaceful only by contributions from the wealthier classes. On two occasions at least, in 1800 and 1818, the situation caused by the shortage of food had been dangerous enough to have necessitated the calling in of soldiers. In the winter of 1830-31, when the poor were again given assistance, the wages of sailors and labourers were low and work difficult to obtain. Craftsmen and tradesmen of Carmarthen were also affected at this time by the slump in agriculture.⁴

Although there was much discontent in the town, few of the leading inhabitants showed much interest in the problem of maintaining order. Only thirteen permanent constables had been appointed. The

² For this section on election disturbances and the growth of radicalism in Carmarthen, the present writer has used M. and E. Lodwick, *The Story of Carmarthen* (1954), pp. 67-68; W. Davies, *Llandeilo-Vawr and its neighbourhood* (1858), pp. 23-24; R. D. Rees, 'The Parliamentary Representation of South Wales, 1790 to 1830' (University of Reading, Ph.D. thesis, 1962), pp. 23, 32, 170, 178, 184, 193-96, 282-93; idem., 'Electioneering Ideals Current in South Wales, 1790-1832', *ante*, II, no. 3 (1965), 238; W. Spurrell, *Carmarthen and its Neighbourhood* (second edition, 1879), pp. 131, 140; D. Williams, *The Rebecca Riots* (1955), p. 22; *The Cambrian*, 1 February 1823. For the story of the very vigorous election fight in Pembrokeshire, which ran parallel to that in Carmarthen, see D. Williams, 'The Pembrokeshire Elections of 1831', *ante*, I, no. 1 (1960), 37-64. For the demonstrations and riots of 1825 and 1829 in Carmarthen, see *The Cambrian*, 11 June, 3 August, and 8 October 1825; and National Library of Wales, Great Sessions Records, Carmarthen 1829, Gaol Files, Wales 4/766-2.

³ Public Record Office, Home Office (H.O.), Letters and Papers, 52/16. Letter of 8 June 1831. According to the census of that year there were 9,955 people in the borough.

⁴ For the distress of the 'lower orders' in Carmarthen, see, for example, M. and E. Lodwick, *op. cit.*, pp. 71, 77-78; W. Spurrell, *op. cit.*, pp. 106, 139; D. Williams, *The Rebecca Riots* (1955), p. 51; D. J. V. Jones, 'The Corn Riots in Wales, 1793-1801', *ante*, II, no. 4 (1965), 335; *The Cambrian*, 23 January and 6 February 1830; H. O. 52/16. Letter from D. Prytherch, 10 December 1831.

London police constable, who had been sent to the town on a previous occasion, had not been given support and had died of drink. If outside assistance were required, there were no soldiers within sixty miles. The nature of the magistracy also left much to be desired. The mayor and six magistrates were elected annually by the party in power, 'not always with a due consideration of their fitness for office'.⁵ In 1831 they were supporters of John Jones and the Red party, and were particularly handicapped by their ignorance of legal affairs, for amongst the leaders of the Blue party was a formidable body of lawyers. The latter never missed an opportunity of summoning a town meeting and of generally badgering their opponents.⁶

The renewed interest in parliamentary reform during the winter of 1830–31 gave the Blue party their chance. Following the example set by Newport (Monmouthshire) and Merthyr Tydfil, on 24 February 1831 a meeting was held in Carmarthen where resolutions in favour of reform were put by George Thomas. Hugh Williams, another lawyer and a future Chartist leader, successfully moved an amendment that the borough should support the system of voting by ballot. When the Reform Bill was put before the House of Commons in March, most inhabitants of Carmarthen were in favour of its general principles, but were against the proposed annexation of Llanelli to their borough.⁷ John Jones of Ystrad, however, disliked the Reform Bill,⁸ and voted against its second reading on 22 March. For this he was vigorously attacked by leaders of the Blue party in Carmarthen.⁹

After the defeat of the Reform Bill, Parliament was dissolved. There were illuminations in several Welsh towns, and mobs attacked the houses of anti-reformers.¹⁰ Violence was also a feature of many of the contested elections in the Principality. That in Pembrokeshire, one of the most fiercely contested in Britain, was even attended by

⁵ H.O. 52/16. Letter from Lord Cawdor, 12 June 1831. See also R. D. Rees, 'Parliamentary Representation', pp. 179–80; and H.O. 52/16. Letters from the mayor, 10 and 21 June 1831, and from the mayor and magistrates, 8 June 1831.

⁶ H.O. 52/16. Letter from the mayor, 10 June 1831; and R. D. Rees, 'Parliamentary Representation', p. 196.

⁷ *The Cambrian*, 28 February and 16 April 1831.

⁸ Or, more accurately, parts of it. See *ibid.*, 14 May 1831. Letter from A BURGESS, 5 May 1831.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 16 April 1831.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 14 May 1831; *The Monmouthshire Merlin*, 30 April and 11 June 1831.

duels.¹¹ At Carmarthen excitement mounted as the election drew near. Captain John George Philipps of the house of Cwmgwili, assisted by the earl of Cawdor's interest, was put forward in opposition to John Jones as a supporter of 'Reform and Retrenchment'.¹² With the help of 'a host of rhymesters and pamphleteers'¹³ he launched a strong attack on the old member. The feeling of the borough was obviously in Philipps's favour, for when reform candidates for other parts of south-west Wales passed through the town, they were warmly received. When Sir John Owen, the anti-reform candidate for Pembrokeshire and a supporter of John Jones, arrived, he was hissed and hooted. According to one report, the cry of everyone in Carmarthen was 'The King, Reform, and the People', and there were even intimations that John Jones would be dealt with violently on the day of the election.¹⁴

The election began on Friday, 29 April at the town hall. John Jones of Ystrad was proposed by the Reverend Edward Picton of Iscoed and seconded by one Charles Morgan. The clergyman spoke of the old member as a true friend of reform, but as an opponent of its more extreme aspects, such as universal suffrage, vote by ballot and annual Parliaments. Captain Philipps was proposed by Thomas Morris, senior, and seconded at some length by Mr. Allen of Cresely. During the speeches a large and noisy mob had entered the hall and they threatened the supporters of John Jones. The old member attempted to reply to Mr. Allen's speech, but his words were drowned in the noise and confusion.¹⁵

In a short time, a fight broke out. John Williams, a writer who had been engaged by John Jones as a check clerk, was struck by John Woods, a currier. John Jones demanded that the currier be removed from the hall, but Woods immediately leaped onto a table and called out 'Reform'. Taking upon himself the role of a magistrate, Jones also jumped onto the table and seized Woods. This was the signal for others to join in the *mêlée*, during which Jones was struck by

¹¹ There was rioting, for example, at Caernarvon (*Chester Chronicle*, 14 May 1831; *The Times*, 12 May 1831); at Montgomery and Llanidloes (see, for example, N.L.W. Glansevern Documents, No. 2424; Coedymaen Letters, Bundle No. 3—Letter from J. W. Lyon Winder to C. W. W. Wynn, 26 April 1831; Montgomery Quarter Sessions Roll, Midsummer 1831, and Order Book 1829–33); in Monmouthshire (D. Williams, *John Frost* (1939), p. 67); and in Pembrokeshire (idem., 'The Pembrokeshire Elections of 1831', *ante*, I, no. 1, 1960).

¹² N.L.W., Cwmgwili MSS. and Documents, No. 745. Printed address of 27 April 1831.

¹³ G. Roberts, 'Political Affairs from 1536 to 1900', in J. E. Lloyd (ed.), *A History of Carmarthenshire*, II (1939), 67.

¹⁴ *The Cambrian*, 30 April 1831. H.O. 52/16. Copy of depositions of D. Evans and J. Williams, 7 May and 14 May 1831, enclosed in letter from the mayor, 21 June 1831.

¹⁵ *The Carmarthen Journal*, 29 April 1831. H.O. 52/16. Copy of the depositions of J. Evans, 2 May 1831, enclosed in a letter from the mayor, 21 June 1831.

one Charles Baron Norton. In the uproar Captain Philipps called upon Jones to resign, but he refused. It was impossible, however, to carry on with the election, and so the sheriffs adjourned the meeting.¹⁶

Reporting the events of this day, the local newspaper exclaimed philosophically that such 'rencontres are the usual concomitants of contested elections in populous places, . . .'.¹⁷ The borough magistrates could hardly have been expected to take the matter so lightly, especially after the appearance in King Street that evening of a body of persons armed with make-shift weapons.¹⁸ Fearing another disturbance, the magistrate ordered the constables to summon about 140 people to be sworn in as special constables, but almost half of them refused.¹⁹ The chief constable was instructed to place the rest on the following day at strategic points in the town hall, where they were not to use violence except in case of absolute necessity.²⁰

On Saturday the doors of the hall were opened a little before nine o'clock, and within minutes the building was full of people. After some preliminary discussion, a show of hands was demanded, which one of the sheriffs declared to be in favour of John Jones. George Thomas called the sheriff 'a damned liar', and eventually it was conceded that Captain Philipps had received more support.²¹ When the polling began, George Thomas also told the mob to mark every hollow reformer who voted for Jones and to give him three hisses or groans.

The Reverend Edward Picton was the first to vote for Jones and he was the target of much abuse, especially from David Morgan, a shoemaker, who told him that his soul would go to hell. Other Jones supporters, including Mr. Grant of Knoll in Carmarthen, and John Davies, victualler and burgess, were threatened and finally removed from the jury box, where they had been waiting to register their votes.

¹⁶ H.O. 52/16. Letter from Lord Cawdor, 12 June 1831; and copy of the examinations of R. Rees, J. Williams and M. Thomas, 2 May 1831, enclosed in a letter from the mayor, 21 June 1831; *The Cambrian*, 30 July 1831; *The Carmarthen Journal*, 29 April 1831; Spurrell, *op. cit.*, p. 144.

¹⁷ *The Carmarthen Journal*, 29 April 1831.

¹⁸ H.O. 52/16. Copy of the examination of R. Rees, 2 May 1831, enclosed in a letter from the mayor, 21 June 1831.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* Depositions of five citizens, 29 April 1831; command to the constables of the parish of Saint Peter, 29 April 1831; and schedules of those summoned and of those who refused to take the oath. All enclosed in a letter from the mayor, 21 June 1831. *Ibid.* Letter from the mayor, 10 June 1831, and from the mayor and magistrates, 8 June 1831.

²⁰ *Ibid.* Copy of the instructions to the chief constable, 29 April 1831, in a letter from the mayor, 21 June 1831.

²¹ *The Carmarthen Journal*, 6 May 1831; H.O. 52/16. Copy of the examination of M. Thomas, 2 May 1831, in a letter from the mayor, 21 June 1831.

This was greeted with great cheers from the mob, and some of the Red party, including the Reverend Rees Goring Thomas and John Williams, a writer, left the hall in fear. When three men had polled for each side, the sheriffs, who had also received many insults, were obliged to adjourn the meeting and make a swift exit.²²

The handling of the day's proceedings by the civil officers was strongly criticised, especially by Captain Philipps's supporters. The earl of Cawdor claimed that neither the sheriffs nor the magistrates had made any effort to maintain order, not even calling upon the special constables to stop the uproar in the hall.²³ Yet this fact, said one writer in *The Cambrian*, proved that the Red party had deliberately magnified the disturbance.²⁴ The mayor of Carmarthen for his part felt that the special constables had been intimidated.²⁵ Certainly, James Evans, the chief constable, had been too frightened to interfere. He did, however, make a mental note of the leaders of the mob. These were John Woods, Thomas Thomas, and Morgan Rees, all of whom were curriers; John Rees and David Woolcock, smiths; David Morgan, shoemaker; John Evans, labourer; George Thomas, ship's carpenter; David Lewis, sailor; and William Thomas, boatman. John Evans was possibly the most aggressive of them all; such were his threats that two burgesses at least, John Williams and Samuel Rees, were deterred from voting.²⁶ When the meeting closed on Saturday, Evans and many others carried Captain Philipps through the streets in a small boat, accompanied by flags and a band of musicians.²⁷

On Monday, 2 May, the town hall was not opened until one o'clock in the afternoon because neither the sheriffs nor Jones's supporters had appeared. An officer of the corporation was sent to bring the sheriffs, but he was told that they had abandoned the election.²⁸ In the evening, as the reformers celebrated at the Boar's Head, the magistrates decided to ask the government for a permanent

²² H.O. 52/16. Copies of the examinations of M. Thomas and R. Goring Thomas, 2 May 1831, and of the depositions of S. Rees and J. Williams, J. Davies, B. Evans, and J. Evans, 2 and 6 May 1831. All enclosed in a letter from the mayor, 21 June 1831. See also *The Carmarthen Journal*, 6 May 1831.

²³ H.O. 52/16. Letter of 12 June 1831.

²⁴ Letter from A BURGESS, Carmarthen, 5 May 1831, in *The Cambrian*, 14 May 1831. See also the letter from Lord Cawdor, 12 June 1831, in H.O. 52/16.

²⁵ H.O. 52/16. Letter of 10 June 1831.

²⁶ Ibid. Copies of the depositions of J. Evans, G. Rees, and J. Williams, 2 May 1831, enclosed in a letter from the mayor, 21 June 1831.

²⁷ *The Carmarthen Journal*, 6 May 1831.

²⁸ Ibid. and H.O. 52/16. Letter from Lord Cawdor, 12 June 1831. On the following day Captain Philipps was to issue a printed address to the independent burgesses accusing the sheriffs of acting under the directions of Jones's committee. N.L.W. Cwmgwili MSS. no. 746.

military garrison.²⁹ In answer to their request, a party of from seventeen to twenty men of the 93rd Regiment marched into the town. Shortly after their arrival fifteen rioters appeared before the magistrates at the town gaol. It seems that these men surrendered peacefully, and they were defended by Lewis Morris of Carmarthen and Thomas Bishop, junior, of Llandovery. In default of bail, the 'reformers' were committed to gaol, an event which caused considerable consternation in the town.³⁰

By the third week in May excitement had subsided sufficiently for the soldiers to be withdrawn.³¹ On 28 May, however, when the prisoners were released on bail, they were at once paraded around the town with banners and music. For days afterwards there were threats of personal violence, nightly demonstrations by a mob numbering some hundreds, and the breaking of windows. In one of the street fights between Red and Blue mobs on 29 and 30 May, a man's arm was broken. On the night of 31 May an attack was made by a currier, cooper, labourer, and others on the property of Thomas Phillips, a miller of Water Street. Two days later, there was 'a tremendous affray' on the quay between coracle fishermen and proprietors. The row arose over a fishing net which the coracle-men tore to pieces and carried away in triumph. This period of violence ended, as it began, with a parade of the ex-prisoners through the town on 10 June to celebrate a visit by Robert Fulke Grenville, the opponent of Sir John Owen in Pembrokeshire.³²

It seems reasonable to ask why these disturbances were tolerated. The local newspaper attacked the police force for not having sufficient energy either to prevent disturbances or to apprehend those responsible for them.³³ Lord Melbourne wanted to know what measures had been taken for guarding the town, and sought the opinions of the earl of Cawdor and Lord Dynevor as to the wisdom of stationing troops in the vicinity.³⁴ Lord Dynevor believed that the

²⁹ Ibid. Letter of 3 May 1831. Within a few days they were notified that a company of infantry had been ordered to proceed to the town from Brecon. H.O. 41/10, folios 45-46. Letter from S. M. Phillipps, 5 May 1831.

³⁰ H.O. 52/16. Letters from D. J. Edwardes, 2 June 1831, and from Lord Cawdor, 12 June 1831; *The Cambrian*, 14 May 1831; G. Roberts, op. cit., p. 68; N.L.W., Dolaucothi MSS., Carmarthenshire Elections, etc. Printed poster, published on 14 May 1831.

³¹ H.O. 52/16. Letter from Lord Cawdor, 12 June 1831; H.O. 41/10, folios 55, 58. Letters from S. M. Phillipps to Major General Lord Fitzroy Somerset, 17 and 21 May 1831.

³² For details of this period of violence, see H.O. 52/16. Letters from the mayor and magistrates, 2, 8 and 21 June 1831; and from Lord Cawdor, 12 June 1831. Information and complaint of T. Phillips, and examination of others, 6 June 1831, enclosed in the mayor's letter of 21 June 1831. See also *The Carmarthen Journal*, 3 June 1831, and Spurrell, op. cit., p. 144.

³³ *The Carmarthen Journal*, 3 June 1831.

³⁴ H.O. 41/10, folios 85-86. Letter from S. M. Phillipps, 4 June 1831; *ibid.*, folios 88, 106-7. Letters from Lord Melbourne, 4 June and 11 June 1831.

presence of troops was essential, and he also advised moving the militia arms from the dépôt at Carmarthen.³⁵ The earl of Cawdor, on the other hand, thought that a visit by a London police constable would be as beneficial as calling in military aid.³⁶ The mayor and magistrates of Carmarthen disagreed, maintaining that no constabulary force alone could secure the peace of the town, especially as the leading inhabitants were so apathetic (and frightened?) that they had made very few formal complaints about the outrages.³⁷

* * *

The House of Commons debated the new Reform Bill from June until September. Some contemporaries believed that public enthusiasm for the Bill was waning. In the industrial areas of South Wales working-class political unions were formed, some of whose members looked back contemptuously at the earlier agitation for parliamentary reform. In Carmarthen it was not so easy to forget the events of the spring. The 'reformers', who had been committed to gaol after the election riots, were now brought before the local assizes, and, much to the delight of the Blue party, they were acquitted.³⁸

The town authorities expected further trouble. Their chief constable had failed to retrieve most of the staves which had been delivered to the special constables during the election troubles. Depressed by the lack of assistance from all quarters, the magistrates informed the principal secretary of state for the Home Department that they refused to accept responsibility for the future peace of the town.³⁹ This statement brought a rebuke from the government, and a remarkable demand, in view of the many previous requests for military aid,⁴⁰ that Lord Melbourne should be given 'timely notice' if soldiers were needed at Carmarthen.⁴¹ The magistrates gave such notice on 12 August, when they heard that a new writ was going to be issued for another election in the borough.⁴² It was no doubt with considerable relief that they received the assistance of six police officers from London and a troop of fourteen dragoons. Sixty-one

³⁵ H.O. 52/16. Letter of 13 June 1831.

³⁶ Ibid. Letter of 12 June 1831.

³⁷ Ibid. Letter from D. J. Edwardes, 10 June 1831; letter from the mayor and magistrate, 8 June 1831.

³⁸ *The Cambrian*, 6 August 1831.

³⁹ H.O. 52/16. Letter from D. J. Edwardes, 21 June 1831.

⁴⁰ And the government's reluctance to help. See, for example, H.O. 41/10, folios 122-25. Letter from S. M. Phillipps, 15 June 1831.

⁴¹ Ibid., folios 144-46. Letter from S. M. Phillipps, 24 June 1831.

⁴² H.O. 52/16. Letter of 12 August 1831.

special constables were also sworn in, whilst some miles away at Llandeilo Major Hopkins of the 98th Regiment was prepared to render further help if needed.⁴³

Despite these precautions, the new election was no less violent than that of the spring. During the evening of Friday, 19 August, the six police officers and a number of special constables were assaulted when trying to suppress a riot in Spilman Street. The election began on the morning of 20 August, but was soon adjourned for two days. Even so, there were no signs of passions cooling, and on Monday the sheriffs were obliged to order several people to be removed from the Guildhall. Seizing their opportunity, the police officers made a bid to apprehend those who had assaulted them on previous days, but the mob resisted. Evan Lewis, a labourer, struck Hubbard on his side, and David Rosser, a tailor, threw a stone at John Jones. The meeting was then closed, with Jones in the lead by fourteen votes.⁴⁴

The hostility of the mob continued unabated for another three days. In that time George Thomas, the attorney, acted as their mouthpiece. At the Guildhall on 23 August he attacked John Jones as the man who had sent for the London 'Thief Takers'; who had brought colliers from Llanelli to intimidate the people of Carmarthen; and who had declared that the streets of the town would flow with blood before he would give up the contest. The attorney also said that soldiers were ready at Llandeilo to dragoon and bayonet the peaceful inhabitants of Carmarthen. In another speech, on 24 August, George Thomas asserted that the mob would clear the hall of people if he gave the word. During the evening of that day the mob again assaulted special constables and also smashed window-panes in the house of David Jones, a 'Red' magistrate.⁴⁵

This violence, however, had no effect on the result of the election. At mid-day on 25 August John Jones was returned as the member for the borough with a majority of seventy-one.⁴⁶ Showing great bravery, but a little folly, John Jones agreed to be chaired by his friends and led through the town. As soon as he was seated, he was pelted with stones, one of which struck him on the forehead.⁴⁷ With blood

⁴³ Ibid. Letter from the deputy mayor and magistrates, 26 August 1831. See also Spurrell, *op. cit.*, p. 144.

⁴⁴ H.O. 52/16. Copies of the depositions of J. Lazenby and others, 5 September 1831, and copy of the brief account of several assaults and beating of several special constables during the election contest, 5 September 1831; both sets of evidence being enclosed in a letter from the deputy mayor and magistrates, 6 September 1831. *The Cambrian*, 27 August 1831.

⁴⁵ H.O. 52/16. Copy of the deposition of J. Lazenby, 5 September 1831.

⁴⁶ Ibid.; *The Cambrian*, 27 August 1831; *Seren Gomer*, 1831, p. 318.

⁴⁷ A woman named Anne Jones was said to have thrown the stone which hit John Jones. H.O. 52/16. Copy of the deposition of J. Lazenby, 5 September 1831; copy of the examinations and depositions of M. Lewis, M. Davies, E. Griffiths, and T. Phillipps, 30 August 1831, enclosed in a letter from the deputy mayor and magistrates, 6 September 1831.

streaming down his face, the victorious candidate was taken by his friends to his house outside the town. Because of the injury he was not able to attend the dinner given that evening to celebrate his success.⁴⁸

In a way, John Jones was fortunate to have left the town so early, for after his departure a kind of pitched battle took place. John Lewis Rees, a yeoman on his way to join in the victory procession, was pulled from his horse and beaten.⁴⁹ The chief constable and his underlings suffered a similar fate. In a last symbolic gesture, the mob, under the direction of about six ringleaders, removed the Red colours flying on the steeple of St. Peter's Church and tore them into shreds. When the police officers arrived, however, the mob dispersed quickly, leaving behind four or five of their number as prisoners.⁵⁰ This incident marks the end of serious rioting,⁵¹ and for the next few days the magistrates occupied themselves in taking depositions and hearing complaints. Major Hopkins at Llandeilo was informed that his men were no longer needed, and four of the police officers returned to London.⁵² The other two constables were to remain at Carmarthen as a precautionary measure.

The magistrates of the town expected further trouble on Charter Day, 3 October, when corporation officials were to be elected. During the election it was said that the Red party brought a number of Pembrey colliers into Carmarthen to be sworn in as special constables. An attack on them was made by the Blue party in the town hall, and they were soon driven out. The staff of the Carmarthenshire militia were quickly on the scene, but their services were not required.⁵³

Fortunately, this election had preceded by five days the defeat of the Reform Bill in the House of Lords. The people of Carmarthen were shocked by the news from London. On 11 October a reform meeting was held in the town and, by the morning of the following day, about a thousand people had signed a petition to the king.⁵⁴

⁴⁸ *Seren Gomer*, 1831, p. 318; G. Roberts, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

⁴⁹ H.O. 52/16. Copy of the deposition of J. L. Rees, 30 August 1831, enclosed in a letter from the deputy mayor and magistrates, 6 September 1831.

⁵⁰ The ringleaders were George Thomas, a ship's carpenter; John Evans of Ball Court; David Jones, a shoemaker; William Jones; Daniel Williams and David Howell. *Ibid.* Copy of the deposition of J. Lazenby, 5 September 1831; copy of the examinations and depositions of M. Davies, M. Williams, M. Rees, T. Evans and C. Davies, 27 August 1831, enclosed in a letter from the deputy mayor and magistrates, 6 September 1831.

⁵¹ Although there was a minor altercation at the Guildhall on the following day. *Ibid.* Copy of the examinations and depositions of J. L. Rees, J. Lazenby, W. T. Turner, E. Williams and T. Morgan, 30 August 1831.

⁵² *Ibid.* Letter from the deputy mayor and magistrates, 26 August 1831.

⁵³ *The Cambrian*, 8 October 1831.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 15 October 1831.

Ten days later a county meeting was held at Llandeilo, and there again the middle classes expressed themselves strongly in favour of reform, although George Rice Trevor, son of Lord Dynevor, suggested that support for it had declined.⁵⁵ Even *Seren Gomer* now warned reformers against apathy, whilst the Tories made much of the victory of Sir John Owen in the Pembrokeshire election.⁵⁶

In parts of Wales there were signs that people were annoyed by the delay in passing the Reform Bill. At Brecon 300 people paraded the streets, shouting 'Watkins and Reform' and smashing windows.⁵⁷ The National Political Union of the Working Classes now established branches in the industrial regions of Wales.⁵⁸ Delegates from the Merthyr working-class clubs also visited Carmarthen, canvassing support for their radical policies and alarming magistrates. The town gaol was threatened, and on 10 December an address was circulated at Carmarthen market advising farmers and labourers against paying tolls. When several people did refuse to pay the tolls, they were supported by a body of 'idle and disaffected persons' so that the magistrates could do nothing. Daniel Prytherch, the mayor, saw this disaffection as the beginning of an 'avowed design of enacting at Carmarthen the scenes that have disgraced Bristol,⁵⁹ several letters having been distributed threatening the respectable portion of the inhabitants and amongst others my own life and property'.⁶⁰

Although in December the second reading of the third Reform Bill was passed by a large majority, a number of Carmarthen people, including Hugh Williams, awaited the final outcome with impatience and some cynicism.⁶¹ In an effort to exert pressure on the House of Lords in the spring of 1832, the inhabitants of Carmarthen not only held a reform meeting, but also threatened to stop paying taxes.⁶²

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 29 October 1831.

⁵⁶ See I. David, 'Political and Electioneering Activity in South-East Wales, 1820-52' (University of Wales, unpublished M.A. Thesis, 1959), p. 81.

⁵⁷ *The Cambrian*, 26 November 1831; H.O. 52/16. Letters from T. Bold, 13, 14 and 29 November 1831.

⁵⁸ *The Monmouthshire Merlin*, 12 November 1831, quoted by D. Williams, *John Frost* (1939), p. 69; *The Shrewsbury Chronicle*, 18 November 1831, quoted by A. H. Dodd, *The Industrial Revolution in North Wales* (1951), p. 409 n. 1; H.O. 52/16. Letters from Lord Dynevor, 10 and 13 November 1831.

⁵⁹ After the defeat of the Reform Bill in the House of Lords a number of spectacular disturbances had broken out at Bristol. See Butler, *op. cit.*, pp. 305-9. There was considerable sympathy for the Bristol rioters in Wales. See H.O. 52/16. Letter from Lieutenant-Colonel Love, 7 November 1831; H.O. 52/14. Letter from W. Powell, 7 November 1831.

⁶⁰ H.O. 52/16. Letter of 10 December 1831, enclosing the address of 9 December 1831. The tolls of Carmarthen were a source of trouble some years later. N.L.W., Dolaucothi MSS. (Uncatalogued). Carmarthenshire Elections, etc. Printed poster from A FARMER, and a reply by J. Jones, 15 January 1835. See also H.O. 52/16. Letter from Lord Dynevor, 10 November 1831.

⁶¹ See his letter in *The Cambrian*, 21 January 1832. 'Let Reformers—radically honest Reformers—be no longer deluded by that lullaby word *patience*, . . .', etc.

⁶² *The Cambrian*, 28 April and 5 May 1832.

When the government was defeated on 7 May several 'respectable' persons carried out this threat.⁶³ There were similar manifestations of unrest throughout the country. The House of Lords was forced into submission, and on 7 June the Reform Bill was given the royal assent. News of its passing was received with great delight all over Wales. At Carmarthen bands paraded the streets, and the bells of the churches rang for almost a whole day.⁶⁴

* * *

It would be wrong to exaggerate the importance of the Carmarthen troubles. Violence had accompanied elections before and would do so again. For instance, in October 1832, when the new mayor and corporation officials were chosen, a mob again roamed the streets of the town.⁶⁵ The riots of 1831 were, therefore, typical of many political demonstrations, the mob indulging in personal abuse and violence, and being highly susceptible to oratory and popular slogans.

Their displays, however, had no effect on the election result, nor was the triumph of June 1832 in any sense *their* victory. The increase in size of the Welsh electorate was small, and it hardly destroyed the middle-class monopoly in many Welsh boroughs.⁶⁶ John Jones of Ystrad, who remained in Parliament until the next election and whose Red party controlled borough politics for four more years, was annoyed rather than worried because he had simply lost the support which the mob had given him in 1821.⁶⁷ The hero of the mob was now George Thomas, the attorney. He acted as their spokesman in the Guildhall, and paid the fines of some offenders who appeared before the magistrates.⁶⁸ Although he was only a moderate reformer, there was an undoubted *rapprochement* between him and the 'lower orders', perhaps because of his frenzied behaviour. During the Pembrokeshire election of May 1831 Thomas spat at John Jones, and in October 1832 he was imprisoned in Carmarthen gaol for his part in the Charter Day disturbances.⁶⁹

⁶³ *The Welshman*, 11 May 1832, quoted in *The Cambrian*, 19 May 1832.

⁶⁴ *The Cambrian*, 9 June 1832.

⁶⁵ Spurrell, *op. cit.*, p. 145; H.O. 52/21. Letter from G. Philips, 12 October 1832, enclosed in a letter from Lord Dynevor, 13 October 1832. Rioting was also feared in 1835. H.O. 52/27. Letters from J. Williams, 3 and 10 January 1835.

⁶⁶ David, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

⁶⁷ R. D. Rees, 'Parliamentary Representation', p. 197; G. Roberts, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

⁶⁸ H.O. 52/16. Copies of various depositions, and a brief account of assaults, 5 September 1831, enclosed in a letter from the deputy mayor and magistrates, 6 September 1831.

⁶⁹ *The Cambrian*, 24 March 1832; H.O. 52/21. Letter from H. Yelverton, 23 October 1832.

The commanding presence of George Thomas cannot disguise the fact that the disorders of 1831 were more than ordinary election troubles; they were also the outward signs of a social malaise. The violent sections of the community were the small craftsmen, the curriers, blacksmiths, shoemakers and tailors, who were to become more apprehensive in the following years as the population of the town ceased to rise and trade contracted. Already unemployment was an important problem, and one class of people who suffered from this and from low wages included sailors and fishermen. Some of the most aggressive members of the mob were from this group, a phenomenon which was repeated in the serious rioting of 1843. These 'idle and disaffected' persons were prepared to commit outrages even after the August election.⁷⁰ It comes as no surprise, therefore, to find that Carmarthen in the late '30s and early '40s was one of the most disturbed of all Welsh towns.⁷¹

One feature of this unrest was the sympathy extended by respectable people to rioters. Lord Melbourne never fully appreciated this difficulty when he reprimanded the magistrates of Carmarthen for failing to carry out their duties during the reform crisis. It was found impossible to remove the maintenance of order from the influence of politics. When many of the 'better class of house holders'⁷² refused to act as special constables, the mayor and his magistrates were probably wise not to provoke trouble by prosecuting them. Those who were sworn in were not only useless but were also suspected of being in league with the Red party. More serious was the general reluctance to register complaints against known rioters. Like the magistrates, the wealthier inhabitants may well have been wary of the lawyers who were ranged behind the mob.

The reason for the co-operation between the middle-class reformers and the poorer people was that they shared common enemies. Since the end of the Napoleonic Wars, some of the landowners of Carmarthenshire had become increasingly unpopular.⁷³ During the winter of 1830-31 several of them, including the Reverend Edward Picton of Iscoed, had received threatening or *Swing* letters,⁷⁴ which demanded the abolition of tithes, lower rents and higher wages. The Carmarthen reformers also disliked certain landowners because they were Tories. To the large group of Nonconformists in the town,

⁷⁰ H.O. 52/16. Letter from D. Prytherch, 10 December 1831.

⁷¹ See, for example, D. Williams, *The Rebecca Riots* (1955), p. 55.

⁷² H.O. 52/16. Letter from D. J. Edwardes, 10 June 1831.

⁷³ G. Roberts, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

⁷⁴ See, for example, H.O. 41/9, folios 4-5, 85. Letters from Lord Melbourne to Lord Dynevor, 13 and 17 December 1830.

the right-wing clerical farmers were especially obnoxious. They received much abuse from local publications, including the *Efangylydd*, which was founded in 1831. This hostility helps to explain why there was no serious breach between the middle and lower orders of Carmarthen in 1831 and 1832. Within four months of the passing of the Reform Act, reformers were demanding the ballot as a necessary antidote to *landlordism and compulsion*.⁷⁵ Only against this background can we understand the middle-class support behind the great Rebecca Riot of 19 June 1843, the widespread hostility to Church rates and tithes, and the growth of the Chartist movement in the town.⁷⁶ Carmarthen in the second quarter of the nineteenth century shared with Merthyr Tydfil the distinction of being a hotbed of Welsh radicalism.

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⁷⁵ N.L.W., Dolaucothi MSS. (Uncatalogued). Carmarthenshire Elections, etc. A poster addressed 'To the Electors of Carmarthenshire from a Radical' and printed on 15 September 1832.

⁷⁶ D. Williams, *The Rebecca Riots* (1955), p. 26, and G. Roberts, op. cit., p. 65.