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TRADE UNIONS AND THE PRESS: JOURNALISM AND THE RED DRAGON REVOLT OF 1874*

IN July 1874 a number of Welsh ironworkers were expelled from their trade union. In terms of British trade union politics the event was not seen as one of decisive importance, and the tensions and anxieties to which it gave rise in certain quarters did not unduly occupy the thoughts of representatives of the London Trades Council or the T.U.C. But in Wales the furious controversy which surrounded the decision to expel leading trade union activists caused much public concern, and the trial of the dissident ironworkers by their union became something of a *cause célèbre* in the Welsh Liberal press. For the expelled men represented a wave of breakaway unionism which was engulfing the ranks of Welsh-speaking members of the ironworkers' and the miners' unions with alarming speed. Christened 'The Red Dragon' by supporters among the miners, this trade union revolt found a strong resonance in the preoccupations of local political and cultural institutions, and in consequence it assumed a social significance far beyond the bounds of its immediate industrial context.

An explanatory account of the emergence and the impact of the Red Dragon movement requires reference to be made to at least three distinct but closely related issues. First, the conflict involved disagreements about the internal structure of trade union organisations generally, and of the recently formed 'Amalgamated' unions of the ironworkers and the coal miners in particular. It is evident that much of the discontent centred on the absence of any adequate local controls over the setting and the distribution of union levies and funds, a problem which focused attention on the often fragile relationships which had been established between local members and distant national leaders.¹ A parallel issue

* I would like to thank Professor Ieuan Gwynedd Jones and Yasmin Ali for their comments on earlier drafts of this article.

¹ Such problems were not confined to trade unions in Wales. See, for example, C. Fisher and J. Smethurst, 'War on the Law of Supply and Demand: the Amalgamated Association of Miners and the Forest of Dean Colliers, 1869-1875', in Royden Harrison (ed.), *Independent Collier: the coal miner as archetypal proletarian reconsidered* (1978). For a more general discussion of trade unionism in industrial south Wales, consult J. H. Morris and L. J. Williams, *The South Wales Coal Industry, 1841-1875* (Cardiff, 1958), and W. E. Minchinton (ed.), *Industrial South Wales, 1750-1914: Essays in Welsh Economic History* (1969).

concerned the means whereby these disagreements were presented. For, in challenging centralised control over local union affairs, supporters of the Red Dragon unions had on various occasions expressed their anger in terms which contrasted English dominance with Welsh subservience and perceived the struggle essentially as being one of national or, more specifically, of linguistic identity. Welsh-speaking industrial workers were said to form a nationally cohesive group, entitled to separate representation through independently-controlled trade unions.² The rhetoric of nationality was to have important repercussions, for it was precisely at this level that specifically trade-unionist arguments became absorbed into, and effectively subordinated to, larger questions of politics and culture.

Finally, the impact of the Red Dragon unrest of July 1874 needs to be considered within the context of the ways in which the two above issues, both in essence pertaining to internal conflicts within the closed world of local trade unionism, were appropriated by regional and local journalists and brought into open, public controversy. For such an apparently marginal issue, the tensions within the ironworkers' and the miners' unions were given considerable, and in some papers major, press coverage. As a result, the internal arguments rehearsed by the dissidents, and the language in which they were expressed, reached a very large audience throughout Wales. In this sense, the Red Dragon revolt became what might anachronistically be termed a 'media event' of some importance. Given the significance of journalism in popularising what had begun as a private argument concerning the structure and function of labour organisations, it is imperative to proceed to explore the curious and often neglected relationship which developed between groups of organised workers and representatives of the late-nineteenth-century provincial newspaper press in Wales.

The boom conditions of 1866-73 in the Welsh iron industry provided ample opportunities for the growth of trade unionism. John Kane's National Amalgamated Malleable Ironworkers' Association of Great Britain attracted support in many of the English iron manufacturing districts in the late 1860s, reaching south Wales in 1869 or 1870. From 1871 it began to recruit heavily, and by 1873 it claimed 110 branches in

² I. G. Jones, 'Language and Community in Nineteenth Century Wales', in D. Smith (ed.), *A People and a Proletariat: Essays in the History of Wales, 1780-1980*, offers a stimulating argument concerning the central importance of the Welsh language in nineteenth-century Welsh history.

the district.³ In 1872 two full-time district agents were appointed, G. G. Thomas and Philip Harries. The growth of the union was a defensive response to two basic problems. The first was that wages in the Welsh ironworks in the late 1860s were reported to be 'notoriously lower than those of Staffordshire or the North East'.⁴ The second cause for concern was the fear generated in the traditional ironworking areas that the industry was undergoing a period of profound structural change. Specialization in iron bar, partially in response to northern competition, and the development of new technology by Siemens Martin at Swansea in 1867 and Gilchrist Thomas in Cwmafon, Blaenafon and Dowlais, revolutionized production methods. These changes imperilled the older inland iron centres, particularly as local ore became exhausted and works became increasingly dependent on better quality imported ore. After the mid-1870s iron production in south Wales was never to resume its old pattern of geography and distribution. In view of these general anxieties, the struggles of the ironworkers during the early 1870s in Merthyr and Dowlais, the traditional heartlands of iron production, were of decisive importance.

The unionization of the ironworkers in south Wales was complicated by the development of tinsplate making in the district. The tinsplate industry was initially stimulated by the remarkable, if temporary, boom in iron, but it was soon to overtake iron as the most important metallurgical industry in south-west Wales. Production of tinsplate increased rapidly between 1865 and 1871, and it came to be regarded as a predominantly Welsh industry. Of forty-two new works built in Britain between 1850 and 1875, thirty-five were in the counties of Glamorgan, Carmarthen and Monmouth.⁵ But the growth of the tinsplate industry during the late 1860s and early 1870s rendered more difficult Kane's task of creating a unified metal workers' union in Wales. Nevertheless, despite substantial craft divisions and pay differentials within the industry, the small size of many of the tinsplate firms and, according to one observer, the dogged opposition of the Methodists,⁶ a trade union of

³ E. Taylor, 'John Kane', in J. Bellamy and J. Saville (eds.), *Dictionary of Labour Biography* (1976), Vol. 3, p. 122. Membership of the union in south Wales leapt from 1,800 in 1872 to over 15,000 in 1873. Nationally, the union doubled in size from over 15,000 to 35,000 in the same twelve-month period. See also V. L. Allen, *The Sociology of Industrial Relations* (1971), p. 142, and *Workman's Advocate (WA)*, 27 September 1873.

⁴ D. Burn, *The Economic History of Steelmaking* (1961), p. 15.

⁵ J. H. Jones, *The Tinsplate Industry* (1914), p. 25. Also E. H. Brooke, *Chronology of the Tinsplate Works of Great Britain* (Cardiff, 1944), p. 1; W. E. Minchinton, *The British Tinsplate Industry: A History* (Oxford, 1957), p. 33.

⁶ D. Lleufer Thomas, *Labour Unions in Wales* (Swansea, 1901), p. 13.

tinplate workers was formed in 1871. The new Independent Association of Tinplate Makers led by Jenkin Thomas and William Lewis (Lewys Afan) grew out of a small Welsh-speaking organisation which had been established in Ystalyfera in 1868 by a local rollerman, James Williams. By early 1874, the union claimed a membership of 4,000.⁷ Kane's ambitions to recruit tinplate workers into a Tinplate section of his iron-workers union were thus frustrated by the independent actions of local workers.

Both the iron and tinplate industries, then, were caught in the spasm of trade union activity during the period 1870-74. But the largest new union grew out of south Wales's most dynamic industry, coal mining. The south Wales coalfield was at the time the largest in England and Wales, its two most important areas being concentrated in the Aberdare and Rhondda Valleys. Ownership of coal was divided between the ironmasters and the sale and steam coal owners; but in 1871 both groups of employers resolved, in the face of depressed markets, to enforce a joint wage reduction of 5 per cent on the mining workforce. In the event, the attempt foundered on the rocks of employer disharmony, but if the owners found it difficult to present an united front and to pursue a common wage policy, a movement was gaining momentum among the miners which promised to galvanise the whole district into united opposition to any further wage reductions.

Within a month of establishing the Amalgamated Association of Miners (A.A.M.) in Lancashire in August 1869, its founding president, Thomas Halliday, convened a meeting in Pontypridd of delegates from 'every pit in Glamorgan and Monmouthshire'.⁸ Following a wide-ranging discussion on the Trade Union Bill, the eight-hour day and government mines inspection proposals, the delegates resolved to support the A.A.M. and to strengthen its branches in the south Wales coalfield. Recruitment to the A.A.M. was at first rather sluggish, but by April 1871 there were 3,000 members in and around Aberdare, 1,300 organised in nine lodges at Mountain Ash and a further 1,000 in nine lodges in Merthyr. By June 1871 the combined membership of the A.A.M. in the Aberdare and Rhondda Valleys had reached 9,000.⁹ In the same year, a long but successful strike against wage reductions of 5 per cent was led by the A.A.M., at the end of which the employers conceded

⁷ J. H. Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

⁸ E. W. Evans, *The Miners of South Wales* (Cardiff, 1961), p. 101.

⁹ *The Bee-Hive*, 28 January 1871, 8 April 1871.

arbitration and as a result the wages of steam coal colliers were increased by 2½ per cent. Disunity among the coal owners, a revival in trade and the intervention of the A.A.M. made this outcome possible, and wages 'drifted' in an upwards direction for the following eighteen months. Recruitment into the A.A.M. duly accelerated, reaching its peak in March 1874 with nearly 48,000 members in south Wales.¹⁰

Seizing the opportunities provided by the brief spell of economic recovery in the early 1870s, other groups of workers recognised the positive advantages of trade union organisation. New bodies began to agitate among some of the skilled trades in the iron and coal industries. For example, the General Association of Smiths and Strikers was formed in June 1873 and by October of that year stood at a strength of 400. By May 1874 it had more than doubled in size to a membership of 900.¹¹ The National Association of Enginemen and Stokers also began to agitate for the ten-hour day and a 10 per cent wage increase for the enginemen in the Llanelli and the Gwendraeth collieries in 1873.¹² Other workers, long excluded from traditional labour organisations, were also drawn towards forms of industrial militancy in these years. In Cardiff a group of Anglican curates emulated the colliers in demanding higher wages, and argued enthusiastically in favour of the 'principle of competition between the great forces of capital and labour'.¹³ The agitation even included the general labourers, and the first branches of the Bristol, West of England and South Wales Amalgamated Labourers' Union were established in Cardiff and Merthyr in 1874.¹⁴

But the general agitation proved to be a temporary phenomenon, and by the early spring of 1874 it was becoming increasingly apparent that the high tide of union organization was ebbing. Executive committees began to complain bitterly that subscriptions were not being paid into the branches,¹⁵ and membership itself was falling at an alarming rate. In south Wales, membership of the A.A.M. slumped from its peak in March 1874 to under 26,000 within six months.¹⁶ Nine hundred miners

¹⁰ *Wigan Observer* (*Wig. Obs.*), October 1872; *Western Mail* (*WM*), 8 October 1873; *Wig. Obs.*, 10 April 1874. A.A.M. membership in south Wales and Monmouthshire grew from 18,581 in September 1872 to 43,344 one year later.

¹¹ *WA*, 11 October 1873, 9 May 1874.

¹² *WA*, 6 December 1873.

¹³ J. Morgan, *Curates and Colliers: a few facts for Laymen* (Cardiff, 1873), p. 10.

¹⁴ *WA*, 14 February 1874, 21 February 1874.

¹⁵ The south Wales branches were in debt to the executive committee to the tune of £10,962 in October 1874, *Merthyr Express* (*Mer. Exp.*), 17 October 1874.

¹⁶ Nationally, membership fell from 106,368 to 57,766 in the same six-month period, *Glasgow Sentinel*, 10 October 1874; also *Potteries Examiner*, 11 April 1874; *Mer. Exp.*, 17 October 1874.

left the Tredegar district of the A.A.M. between March and September 1874, whilst the membership of the Argoed branch fell from a healthy 269 to a mere 64 during the same period. Worse, the Goginan and Penmaer branches had ceased to function altogether by the time the union met to discuss the crisis at the national conference in October 1874.¹⁷ In the short term, the ironworkers' union suffered a less spectacular decline; even so, its national membership dropped by over 96 per cent between 1873 and 1879.¹⁸ By the summer of 1874, therefore, both the miners' and the ironworkers' unions were losing money and members, and trade unionism in the area as a whole was weakening. It was precisely under these difficult circumstances that a movement of secessionist dissent gathered strength and eventually challenged what remained of the structure of trade unionism in the district.

It would be mistaken, however, to argue that protests against national leaderships had begun abruptly in the summer of 1874. Issues of some gravity had divided district leaders from national executives since the early days of the 'Amalgamated' unions, and each had in various ways contributed to the district's sense of autonomy. One such was the prickly issue of apprenticeship rules in the coalfield, particularly those rules which referred to the payment of fees to the union for the introduction of new and unskilled labour into the pits. The south Wales branches sought to impose stringent conditions under which new miners could be accepted by the union to perform underground work. The Ogmores branch, for example, ruled that 'no person will be allowed to bring to work in the mine one that has not been before, unless he has first specified with the Mine Committee', and sums of between £4 and £10 were to be paid to the union for permission to commence employment in the coal mines of the district. However, neither the general rules of A.A.M. nor those of other districts referred to apprenticeship constraints, nor did they allow for any purely financial restrictions to be imposed on the introduction of new workers into the pits.¹⁹ The discrepancies between national and local rules regarding apprentices were

¹⁷ *Glasgow Sentinel*, 17 October 1874; *Wig. Obs.*, 9 October 1874.

¹⁸ V. L. Allen, *op. cit.*, p. 142; 'One of Them', *Men of Steel* (1951), p. 62. For a list of recently dissolved branches in south Wales, see *Ironworkers' Journal (IJ)*, 1 March 1875.

¹⁹ 'Rules and Regulations of the Ogmores District of the A.A.M.' (Aberaman, 1873), p. 29, Public Record Office (PRO), FS7/4/172; 'Rules and Regulations for the Management of the Abersychan District of the A.A.M. and others engaged in Mining Operations' (Abersychan, 1873), PRO, FS7/4/135. See also 'Rules for the Government of the North Wales District of the A.A.M., Engineers and others engaged in Mining Operations' (Wrexham, 1873), PRO, FS7/4/123; 'General Rules for the Government of the A.A.M.' (Walsall, October 1872), PRO, FS7/2/66.

discussed at some length at the A.A.M.'s national conference in April 1874. Two Welsh delegates, the miners' agents for Loughor, William Abraham (Mabon), and for Aberdare, Henry Thomas, proposed an amendment to the national rulebook in order to introduce new rules on apprenticeship which accorded with those currently operating in the south Wales branches. Opposition to the Welsh amendment was led by the union's president, Thomas Halliday, and two influential miners' agents, William Brown of north Staffordshire and George Pickard of Cannock Chase; following a heated argument, the proposed amendment was heavily defeated.²⁰ Sources of conflict within the miners' union were thus built into the very diversity of working conditions and customary practices which existed in the mining industry. Such issues, however, did not of themselves lead to lasting divisions. On the contrary, the secessionist revolt of 1874 grew out of a combination of considerably more serious problems which were inherent in the internal organisation of both unions, problems which were sharply exposed at a time of declining incomes, rising unemployment and a prevailing mood of acute pessimism.

Both the A.A.M. and Kane's ironworkers' union operated on the principle of executive control over the distribution of union funds and the central co-ordination of any industrial or strike action undertaken by member branches.²¹ A.A.M. rules stipulated a 2s. 6d. entrance fee, followed by monthly contributions of 1s., a further 1s. being added to the monthly levy in May 1874 'to meet the calls of the association'.²² However, at a time when all miners were facing major wage reductions, the financial burden of paying regular levies at the increased rate began to weigh heavily on the membership. Under these less than propitious circumstances, certain A.A.M. members openly canvassed the notion of forming a new local union to represent the miners of south Wales. It was suggested that a union which was confined to a small geographical district would have fewer responsibilities and thus would be cheaper to operate than a large, complex national organisation. Sympathisers within the A.A.M. finally met to discuss the issue in the Corner House Hotel in Merthyr on Saturday, 20 June 1874. Having debated at length the twin virtues of 'unionism and thrift', they resolved to withdraw from

²⁰ *Wig. Obs.*, 17 April 1874.

²¹ PRO, FS7/2/66; 'General Rules of the National Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel, Tin, Blastfurnace and Other Workers Connected Therewith' (Darlington, 1874), PRO, FS7/4/157.

²² 'By-laws for the Government of the Spring of Hope Lodge of the A.A.M., of the Cwmbran District' (Pontypool, 1874), p. 6, PRO, FS7/4/163; *Colliery Guardian*, 22 May 1874.

the A.A.M. and to establish a new miners' trade union. A brief six-point programme, hastily assembled during the meeting and published in the local press within the week, reduced the miners' levy to 6*d.* a month and limited the geographical area of the union to south Wales and Monmouthshire, on the grounds that 'the smaller the union, the smaller the expenditure, and the bother too'.²³ Significantly, the new union was given the title 'Y Ddraig Goch/The Red Dragon', 'the heraldic symbol of the ancient nation of the Welsh'.²⁴ Calling on all Welsh-speaking miners 'who detest waste and love thrift' to enrol, the Red Dragon opened a recruiting office in Aberdare and by the end of July 1874 had established five or six branches in the district.²⁵

The A.A.M. was sufficiently alarmed by these developments to dispatch Thomas Halliday in person in an urgent attempt to calm the situation in the troubled area. Accompanied by union agents Mabon, Henry Thomas and Isaac Connick, Halliday embarked on an intensive speaking-tour of the coalfield, commencing in Pontypridd on 16 July and proceeding to Aberdare, Merthyr, Swansea and Llantwit. In each of these five towns, representatives of the A.A.M. leadership urged miners to resist the temptation to join the independent local union, impressed on them the need to prevent divisions in the ranks and encouraged them to continue to pay levies to the A.A.M. in order to support the members then on strike in south Staffordshire.²⁶ 'Grand show card days' were planned to rally the faithful and to 'find out those who have not paid up and have joined the new union, so that those who are really 'good and true' may be distinguished from the renegades and deserters'.²⁷

Halliday's mounting sense of unease as he denounced the Red Dragon union throughout the south Wales coalfield was compounded by parallel developments in John Kane's National Amalgamated Association of Ironworkers (N.A.A.I.). Again, sections of the Welsh membership were complaining of the weight and the inequitable distribution of union levies and contributions. The union had agreed in 1869 to impose a 5*s.* entrance fee and a weekly levy of 6*d.*,²⁸ and, befitting a centralised

²³ *Y Gwladgarwr*, 27 June 1874. See Appendix I, clause 6, p. 222 below.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, clause 1.

²⁵ *Y Gwladgarwr*, 11 July 1874; *South Wales Daily News (SWDN)*, 22 July 1874; *WM*, 21 July 1874.

²⁶ *Aberdare Times*, 25 July 1874, though only 'a small percentage of the number present . . . (were) favourable to contribute the levies' to support the Staffordshire strike. See also *South Wales Press*, 23 July 1874, and *WM*, 17 August 1874, 18 August 1874.

²⁷ *SWDN*, 29 July 1874.

²⁸ PRO, FS7/4/157, p. 4.

'Amalgamated' union, all contributions made by the members automatically became the property of the union as a whole, rather than of the individual branches or districts. Thus, it was clearly stipulated in the Association rules that 'any lodge leaving the Society would forfeit all the money it had accumulated'.²⁹ Many Welsh members of the N.A.A.I. were disturbed by the possible implications of the latter clause, and were further enraged in June 1874 when the 6*d.* levy was doubled to a 1*s.* a week. At this point, even the loyal district agents became worried and appealed unsuccessfully on behalf of their members for a reduction in the increase of the levy.³⁰

Growing financial demands on the members, however, coincided with a sudden slump in iron production and the return of distress to the ironworking districts. Mills and forges in the Cyfarthfa and Plymouth works were at a standstill by early June, and wage reductions of up to 20 per cent were being contemplated by the ironmasters.³¹ One observer was concerned to find 'cases closely allied to starvation amongst the men, who, a little while ago, earned £10 or £12 a month'.³² The men's initial response to the crisis, however, was not to abandon trade unionism but to reassess their loyalty to the N.A.A.I. In Rhymney, for example, four of the area's seven lodges had been dissolved shortly before the end of June 1874, two of them having illegally divided the accumulated funds among their members. The three remaining lodges, moreover, were 'determined to sever their connection with the English section'.³³ At a meeting of forty Rhymney ironworkers, John Kane was heckled by members of his own union who were 'diametrically opposed to the continuation of the connection of Wales with the English Executive'.³⁴ The district agent, Philip Harries, located the main centres of opposition

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 23. Thus Kane to the Monmouthshire tinworkers: 'We wish the agent and the members to understand—who talk about secession over an increased contribution—that the secessionists cannot hold one penny of the funds of our association, hence when they leave the association they will have to give up all books, property, and money in and out of bank, in the hands of the trustees or treasurer, in fact everything must be given up when they cease to acknowledge the power and authority of our association', *IJ*, 1 December 1873.

³⁰ *IJ*, 15 June 1874.

³¹ *Colliery Guardian*, 12 June 1874, 10 July 1874. A 10 per cent reduction for millmen and a cut of 1*s.* per ton for puddlers, bringing wages down to 11*s.* and 6*d.* per ton, was imposed by the Welsh ironmasters in the first week in July.

³² *Colliery Guardian*, 17 July 1874.

³³ *Cardiff Times*, 4 July 1874.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

to the N.A.A.I. in Rhymney, Dowlais and Tredegar, and recommended in June 1874 that the organisers be expelled from the union.³⁵

Having visited the area to enquire into the causes of the problem, Kane was confident that the new secessionist challenge to the authority of his union did not arise from 'anything like what might be termed a "national feeling"' in south Wales. The unrest, he believed, essentially concerned the allocation of union funds. Some Welsh members were under the impression that their difficulties arose principally from what they mistakenly regarded to be heavy and unnecessary expenditure by the union's management on the salaries of officers and agents and their travelling and other incidental expenses.³⁶ Opposition leaders agreed with this diagnosis and emphasised that the underlying 'cause of the conflict was the sum paid to the union's treasury'.³⁷ In this sense, a striking resemblance may be discerned between the causes and the consequences of the factional in-fighting within both the miners' and the ironworkers' unions. Occurring simultaneously, often in the same areas, the combined energies of the rebel unionists constituted what may be termed a secessionist Red Dragon movement.

Initial steps towards the formation of an autonomous local ironworkers' union were taken by the members of the Rhymney lodge, led by their respected but mercurial district secretary, Frederick Evans. On 22 June 1874, he circulated the area representatives of the union in south Wales and Monmouthshire with a letter announcing his lodge's withdrawal from the N.A.A.I. and calling for a delegate meeting 'of all the lodges in south Wales and Monmouthshire to consider the question of forming an independent Society'.³⁸ The meeting was to take place in the Cross Keys Inn, Merthyr, on Saturday morning, 4 July.

The proposed meeting was not the first attempt of its kind by Welsh ironworkers to organise opposition to Kane's leadership. In November 1873 a similar circular had been received by district organisers, but the meeting of potential secessionists had been declared illegal by the General Council of the N.A.A.I. in sufficient time to prevent any lasting

³⁵ *IJ*, 15 June 1874.

³⁶ *SWDN*, 4 July 1874.

³⁷ Opponents of schism, however, argued that the executive had paid strike pay of £909 to the Rhymney lodge and £1,487 to Dowlais, whereas only £675 and £904 had been returned to the union respectively by the two lodges, *Y Gwladgarwr*, 11 July 1874. Furthermore, one secessionist leader, David Price, in his capacity as national auditor, had approved the union's most recent financial report, *IJ*, 15 June 1874, 15 July 1874.

³⁸ A full text of the circular was sent by Anthony Rowlands, Pentyrch delegate to the Cross Keys meeting, for publication in *IJ*, 15 July 1874.

damage being done to the organisation in Wales.³⁹ In June 1874 Kane again responded swiftly and positively to the Rhymney initiative, and shrewdly decided to hold a meeting of the union's general council at the secessionists' own venue, the Cross Keys in Merthyr, on the Friday and Saturday of the same weekend.⁴⁰ Thus, on the appointed day, eighty astonished delegates were greeted at the door of their meeting by union president William Aucott, general secretary John Kane, national treasurer Edward Trow, two full-time agents, James Capper and Philip Harries, and a representative of the Warrington District, Mr. Shufflebottom.⁴¹ Angered by the unannounced and unexpected appearance of the general council, Frederick Evans and a small group of sympathisers which included David Price, secretary of the Dowlais lodge, and William Gay, secretary of No. 2 Penydarren, made a hurried exit from the Cross Keys and reconvened an alternative conference in the nearby Railway and Locomotive Inn.

In the conspicuous absence of its organisers, the Cross Keys meeting began in some confusion. A number of delegates were clearly annoyed by Evans's abrupt refusal to meet the general council, and many had come 'prepared to vote for either side, whichever (they) found in the right'.⁴² A deputation sent to the Locomotive on Kane's request failed to persuade Evans, Price and Gay to return to the main assembly, but asked why they were persisting in their opposition to the N.A.A.I. Evans reiterated the argument 'that there was too much expense on the association with regard to the funeral fund that is in connection with the association, as well as too much money going to pay agents' salaries etc. . . .'.⁴³ His reply, when reported to the general council, provoked a lively discussion which focused on the union's new policy of allowing unemployed members to be supported by the central fund, a controversial policy which contained clear implications for the level of contributions paid into the union by employed members. Later in the afternoon, however, Evans returned to the Cross Keys, but was refused admission on the grounds that the meeting was about to cast its vote on what action the union should take regarding the various attempts which had recently been made to undermine the N.A.A.I. in the district. The resolution, moved by John Williams of Ebbw Vale, noted the

³⁹ *IJ*, 1 January 1874.

⁴⁰ *IJ*, 15 June 1874.

⁴¹ *SWDN*, 6 July 1874; *Weekly Mail*, 11 July 1874.

⁴² *SWDN*, 6 July 1874.

⁴³ *IJ*, 15 July 1874.

'unprincipled conduct of Messrs. Price, Evans and others in endeavouring to divide the ironworkers of Wales', called for a council inquiry into their specific complaints and asked for the expulsion of Evans, Price and Gay from the union. The motion was carried unanimously, and a final resolution was then moved pledging the delegates' 'confidence in the officers and General Council of the Association'.⁴⁴ The expelled men responded to this apparently decisive general council *coup de grâce* by establishing a new and independent ironworkers' union in south Wales and Monmouthshire.⁴⁵

The month which followed the Merthyr meetings of 4 July witnessed the brief but remarkable expansion of the new union. Within a fortnight it had recruited between 2,000 and 3,000 members into sixteen lodges,⁴⁶ and on 1 August the representatives of a further 2,000 ironworkers resolved to abandon the N.A.A.I. and formally to join the South Wales and Monmouthshire Ironworkers' Association. Freed from the many constraints imposed by Kane's Darlington-based council, contributions were reduced from 1s. to 4d. per week, and additional payments, such as those previously made towards a funeral fund, were discontinued as they were held to 'complicate the immediate aims of the union'.⁴⁷ But despite the early enthusiasm occasioned by the reduction in contributions, the new union was short-lived. Following its disastrous failure to resist a 20 per cent reduction in ironworkers' wages imposed in July 1874, the newly acquired membership began to leave in large numbers. Even in its stronghold in Rhymney, it was reported that 'members had fallen off from the new body by the hundred'.⁴⁸ By the end of August some disillusioned ironworkers were eager to rejoin the N.A.A.I. and after consulting with the general council the Dowlais men, including David Price, were formally readmitted as a lodge in early September 1874.⁴⁹

During the summer of 1874, the causes and consequences of the Red Dragon revolt were subjected to an unusual degree of scrutiny in the

⁴⁴ *SWDN*, 6 July 1874.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* The new union was formally entitled the Ironworkers' Association for south Wales and Monmouthshire. It was not registered as a Friendly Society.

⁴⁶ *Weekly Mail*, 25 July 1874; *Swansea and Glamorgan Herald*, 29 July 1874.

⁴⁷ *WM*, 3 August 1874.

⁴⁸ *SWDN*, 15 August 1874.

⁴⁹ *IJ*, 15 September 1874, 1 November 1874. A new division movement in south Staffordshire and Worcestershire, led by Thomas Ray of Darlaston, was reported in *IJ*, 15 November 1874. The Red Dragon colliers' union survived until the winter, *Y Fellten*, 13 November 1874; *Amddiffynydd y Gweithiwr (AG)*, 28 November 1874.

pages of the Welsh press. Newspaper editors interpreted the significance of the events in very different ways, and by bringing their conflicting views to the attention of a broader public they inaugurated a debate which was concerned more with abstract notions of freedom, independence and Welshness than with specific issues of trade union reform. Not only were the actions of the secessionist unions exposed to the glare of the public eye, but their struggles were drawn inexorably into the complex web of the political and commercial calculations of rival newspaper editors.

With the notable exception of the Baptist journals,⁵⁰ the papers of Liberal nonconformity were uniformly hostile to the 'Amalgamated' unions of Halliday and Kane.⁵¹ 'The silent struggle between the leaders of Political Dissent and the labourers of south Wales who are members of unions',⁵² according to the editor of the Conservative *Western Mail*, had intensified since Halliday's candidature as a 'Working Man's Representative' in the Merthyr Election of January 1874.⁵³ On the other hand, the editor of the Liberal *South Wales Daily News* dismissed the A.A.M. as an 'advertising medium for the *Western Mail*' and accused Halliday's campaign of being 'subsidised by Tory journals'.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ *Y Greal*, July 1874; *Seren Cymru*, 4 September 1874. For a history of the Welsh Baptists, consult T. M. Bassett, *Bedyddwyr Cymru* (Abertawe, 1977).

⁵¹ For example, see contemporary editorial expressions of support for the Liberal Party in *Y Diwygiwr*, July 1874, pp. 207-13; *Y Traethodydd*, 1874, p. 216; *Cronicl Canol y Mis*, series on 'Y Gweithiwr' beginning January 1875, particularly July 1875, essay on 'Labour and Capital'. For Tory journals in Wales, see *Yr Haul*, April 1874, p. 151; *Amdiffynydd yr Eglwys*, 1874-75, p. 106. Dr. Maurice Milne has effectively challenged the 'facile assumption that radical political beliefs would predispose their holder to espouse the cause of organised labour', M. Milne, 'Strikes and Strike Breaking in North East England, 1815-44: The Attitude of the Local Press', *International Review of Social History*, XII (1977), 240.

⁵² *WM*, 1 August 1874.

⁵³ The editor argued that 'because the miners had to a great extent disregarded the Dissenting leaders (in the General Election), the Dissenting leaders are attempting to break up the union', *WM*, 1 August 1874. For political developments in Victorian Merthyr, see I. G. Jones, 'The Election of 1868 in Merthyr Tydfil: A Study in the Politics of an Industrial Borough in the mid-Nineteenth Century', in I. G. Jones *Explorations and Explanations: Essays in the Social History of Victorian Wales* (Llandyssul, 1981), and Kenneth O. Morgan, *Wales in British Politics* (Cardiff, 1980), particularly ch. 2, pp. 28-75.

⁵⁴ *SWDN*, 17 August 1874, 19 August 1874. The editor accused Halliday of receiving a payment of £60 from the *WM* for his history of the 1873 miners' strike. Moreover, profits from 10,000 copies of this pamphlet, printed by the *WM*, were given to the A.A.M. The editor of the *WM* denied the charge: 'No payment was made for giving a history, but we gave the miners the benefit of our own work, simply charging the cost of reprinting', *Weekly Mail*, 29 May 1873; *WM*, 25 July 1874. More general accounts of newspaper politics in the nineteenth century include S. Maccoby, 'Newspaper Politics: A Footnote to Nineteenth-Century History', *Politica*, August 1934; Stephen Koss, *The Rise and Fall of the Political Press in Britain: The Nineteenth Century*, Vol. 1 (1981); J. Vincent, *The Formation of the British Liberal Party, 1857-1868* (Harmondsworth, 1972); A. J. Lee, *The Origins of the Popular Press in England, 1855-1914* (1976).

Journalists and editors thus transformed the Red Dragon revolt from an internal trade union debate into a pre-eminently newsworthy event, open to a myriad of conflicting interpretations.

Leader columns in the *South Wales Daily News* employed powerful and rhetorical language in support of the secessionists in both unions. In mid-August the editor argued that the divisions provided ample evidence 'that the principle of foreign intervention is beginning to be objected to in South Wales'.⁵⁵ The struggle was regarded essentially as one in which native genius was thwarted by an alien English power. 'Both masters and men are tired of "strangers", continued the same editor. 'The theory that Wales should be for the Welsh in the sense of local government, as regards matters having reference to Capital and Labour and the relation of the employers with the employed, is about to be carried into practice.'⁵⁶ Four days later the same paper berated the corrupting influence on Welsh workers of the 'outside unionists' of the A.A.M. and the N.A.A.I. Such people, it was argued, 'having no personal interest in the locality, and being for the most part unacquainted with the character and temperament of the Celtic race . . . sought to apply principles wholly at variance with the instincts of a people unaccustomed to be controlled by hard, matter of fact decrees [applied by the] foster hand of sinister agitators'.⁵⁷

Such sentiments were echoed by Merthyr's local press. 'The split in the Miners' Union and among the ironworkers is to be regarded with hope', argued the editor of the *Merthyr Telegraph*, Peter Williams, in August 1874. 'It is an indication of a desire on the part of the men no longer to submit to foreign domination, but to strike a blow for freedom.'⁵⁸ Other nonconformist Merthyr papers, notably Joseph

⁵⁵ *SWDN*, 11 August 1874.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *SWDN*, 15 August 1874. The *Swansea and Glamorgan Herald*, 29 July 1874, explained the schism in similar terms. 'The colliers have been influenced by a variety of causes, not the least potent of which is the old and never thoroughly extinct jealousy of race.' The phrase 'jealousy of race' was also used to explain the Red Dragon phenomenon in *Capital and Labour*, 19 August 1874.

⁵⁸ *Merthyr Telegraph*, 7 August 1874, 27 November 1874. Direct lines of communication between the secessionist unionists and local nonconformist leaders are difficult to establish, but it appears that, in Dowlais at least, the new ironworkers' union held its lodge meetings in school rooms adjoining nonconformist chapels. This may be explained partially in terms of the cheapness of school rooms as opposed to the more traditional venue of the public house. It might also be argued that since trade unionists and chapel leaders inhabited the same moral world, chapel rooms were the most natural location for secessionist meetings. The *WM's* Dowlais correspondent, however, was sceptical about the trade union-nonconformist alliance. 'This I do not think will last. The Ironworkers' Welsh union will be certain to be brought into strong antagonism with the employers in which case the chapel management might not like to be so closely identified.' *WM*, 23 July 1874. For a brief insight into the influence of nonconformity on industrial relations in south Wales in 1874, see the eye-witness account of Tom Griffiths in 'Lewis Afan and Tom Phil's Union, and the Formation of the Conciliation Board' (1950?), loose MS., Iron and Steel Trades Confederation Research Department, p. 3.

Williams's *Tyst a'r Dydd* and Rees Lewis's *Y Fellten*, adopted a similar approach to the issue and gave the secessionists considerable and sympathetic editorial coverage in July and August 1874.

In order to retaliate at the level of ideas on a public platform, the national leaders of trade unions were obliged either to depend upon the captive labour press or to take advantage of the unexpected support given to their cause by an Anglican and Conservative newspaper editor, Lascelles Carr of the *Western Mail*. Halliday, leader of a young and poor organization, chose the latter strategy. Thus, his repeated denunciations of the *South Wales Daily News* in miners' meetings throughout the south Wales coalfield in August 1874 were eagerly reported in the industrial and editorial columns of the *Western Mail*.⁵⁹ An indignant *South Wales Daily News* retorted that Halliday's 'extraordinary outburst of abuse was interspersed with continued advocacy of the Cardiff Tory paper'.⁶⁰ Significantly, Halliday on one occasion admitted his debt to the *Western Mail* 'in spite of the fact that its political views were contrary to his own'.⁶¹ The *Western Mail* had previously lent Halliday powerful support during the election campaign of January 1874, and had continued to give strong coverage of Halliday's meetings and of A.A.M. affairs. Furthermore, Carr was remorseless in his leader-column attacks on the breakaway trade unionists. 'Now comes the struggle', he warned his readers in late July 1874, 'The Red Dragon of Wales is flashed over the country, and it will need every effort to keep the union from being imperilled by this new offspring of union against union.'⁶²

This curious alliance between a trade unionist and a leading Conservative journalist may partly be explained in terms of Carr's Tory critique of the political activities of the Welsh Liberal élite. Carr, undoubtedly, used the opportunity afforded by defending the A.A.M. effectively to deliver a series of blows against what he termed 'the recession element' in Welsh political and cultural life. The dispute within the unions appeared to him to be symptomatic of a deeper malaise. 'We are on the eve of stirring times if the signs abroad are read

⁵⁹ Halliday publicly denounced the *SWDN*: 'This so-called Liberal organ . . . is the lickspittle of the masters . . . a rag, or little better than a rag . . . well up with the large masters of South Wales', *WM*, 17 August 1874, 18 August 1874; *SWDN*, 17 August 1874.

⁶⁰ *SWDN*, 17 August 1874.

⁶¹ *Llais y Wlad*, 21 August 1874. Texts of Halliday's speeches in south Wales were also printed in *The Welshman*, 19 June 1874 (Begelly Common); *Star of Gwent and South Wales Times*, 18 July 1874 (Ystrad Rhondda); *South Wales Press*, 25 July 1874 (Pontypridd Common); *Aberdare Times*, 25 July 1874 (Aberdare).

⁶² *WM*, 23 July 1874.

aright. With consummate art the national prejudices of the people are being worked upon . . . The Red Dragon—Y Ddraig Goch—is a happy selection in the effort to wake up prejudices which time and education had, one would have thought, overwhelmed⁶³ The editor of the *Western Mail* was thus concerned to use the issue of the Red Dragon revolt as a convenient peg on which to hang his distaste for the *South Wales Daily News* in particular and for the Welsh Liberals in general. Moreover, the *Western Mail* was not typical of Welsh Conservative newspapers in supporting the A.A.M.⁶⁴ But despite his own personal hostility to trade unionism, particularly to those in the newspaper industry,⁶⁵ Carr supported the A.A.M. through its most difficult months, and maintained an extraordinary political relationship with Halliday which was grounded essentially in what might appropriately be termed a mutually acknowledged opportunism.

If the leader columns of the Liberal papers and of the *Western Mail*, in their different ways, had effectively avoided the specific questions of levies, contributions and the structural reforms which the Welsh rebels demanded, so also, significantly, had John Kane's trade union monthly, the *Ironworkers' Journal*. Kane's skillful use of the paper, which he personally owned and edited, to popularise an alternative reading of the situation in south Wales is an interesting and important example of the way in which journalists can, under certain circumstances, materially affect the events which they ostensibly report. Two instances stand out in this respect. First, Kane used the *Ironworkers' Journal* to cast serious but largely unsubstantiated aspersions on the personal integrity of individual secessionists. One anonymous article denied that Fred Evans was a *bona*

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ K. W. Douglas's Bangor weekly, *Llais y Wlad*, for example, strongly supported the split, and used its coverage of the Red Dragon events to persuade its readers in north Wales that trade unionism deserved no support whatsoever. 'The Quarrymen of the North should remember this, before going too far.' The miners' levies, it claimed, had been used to keep 'the miners of Staffordshire, all drunks and rogues, dog and cockerel fighters, comfortably on strike'. *Llais y Wlad*, 31 July 1874, but see also 7 April 1874. Douglas and Bros. were also proprietors of *The North Wales Chronicle* and the *Llandudno Director and Cronicl Cymru*. *Llais y Wlad* began life in Bangor in February 1874 as an election sheet in support of G. S. D. Pennant. A Conservative newspaper aimed at a working class readership, it survived until August 1884.

⁶⁵ Carr was deeply unpopular with the compositors' union, the Provincial Typographical Association (PTA), PTA Minutes, Report of the Cardiff Deputation, 29 August 1887, pp. 99-100, University of Warwick Modern Records Centre MSS. 39A/TA/1/3. See also John Davies, *Cardiff and the Marquesses of Bute* (Cardiff, 1981), p. 13. The *WM*'s proprietor, the Marquess of Bute, 'contributed substantial sums to Conservative Party funds' and was converted to Roman Catholicism in 1868, *ibid.*, pp. 23-26. For Carr, consult Lord Riddell, *The Story of the Western Mail* (1927); *Who was Who, 1897-1916* (1920), p. 121; Western Mail Company File, No. 46946, Companies Registration Office.

fide ironworker, claiming that he was in fact an insurance salesman and a bricklayer by trade. The clear implication was that Evans had joined the N.A.A.I. under false pretences. 'The reason why he complains about the funeral fund', the correspondent explained, 'is because he is collector of a few death clubs about Rhymney district, and since the ironworkers have become members of the association, it is natural enough for them to do without Mr. Evans's insurance.'⁶⁶ The same source denounced David Price for his inconsistency and hypocrisy on the grounds that only a month previously he had approved, as one of two national auditors, the union's controversial benefit fund, which in recent weeks he had been so eager to condemn. Most seriously, the correspondent accused William Gay of illegally appropriating the accident fund of the Dowlais, Penydarren, Cyfarthfa and Plymouth lodges of the union in October 1873.⁶⁷ These accusations caused disarray in the secessionist camp, and Evans and Gay denied strenuously the allegations made against them in the *Ironworkers' Journal* in union meetings and in the pages of the local press. Their denials and counter-accusations were never adequately answered. Instead, Kane engaged in protracted bouts of editorial sniping, the aim being to discredit the papers, particularly the *South Wales Daily News* and the *Merthyr Telegraph*, which lent Evans, Price or Gay any moral support.⁶⁸

Secondly, it is apparent that Kane, in his articles in the *Ironworkers' Journal*, sought to turn the crisis to his advantage by holding the secessionists responsible for the declining fortunes of the N.A.A.I. The consistent position of the *Journal* was that if members 'break the union, (they) divide and wage war against (their) own class',⁶⁹ and in August 1874 Kane again made explicit his view that the 'Dowlais and Rhymney traitors' were 'responsible for the evil that has been done to our members'.⁷⁰ His explanation was accepted by delegates to a regional conference of the union held in Merthyr in the same month.⁷¹

Apart from the substantive demands of the secessionist ironworkers, the aspect of the matter which most angered Kane and the Darlington leadership of the N.A.A.I. was that at least part of the debate in Wales

⁶⁶ *IJ*, 15 July 1874.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *IJ*, 15 May 1874.

⁶⁹ *IJ*, 1 September 1874.

⁷⁰ *IJ*, 1 and 15 August 1874.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

was conducted in the Welsh language. Kane confessed to have been shocked and bewildered when delegates at an Aberdare conference began 'speaking in an unknown tongue', and was further incensed by letters concerning the secessionist issue being published in the Welsh language press.⁷² In one leader column, he condemned the type of correspondent 'who can speak and write the English language, and who writes in Welsh, but only to slander those who cannot speak nor write a word in Welsh', as 'the more despicable traitor to his class'.⁷³ The language question had been brought forcefully to Kane's attention at the Newport conference in September 1873, when a group of Welsh members proposed that three pages of the *Ironworkers' Journal* be published in Welsh. Most of the delegates, according to Kane's report of the meeting, were surprised 'at such a strange request', but all were obliged to take the issue seriously as the matter, if left unresolved, 'threatened . . . the stoppage of the *Journal*'.⁷⁴ It is instructive to examine Kane's three arguments against the proposal. First, the editor lamented the small size of his journal, and informed the proposers that the paper was 'not at present sufficiently large to admit the Welsh language to be printed in it'.⁷⁵ But in addition to the assumed practical problems, Kane questioned the grounds for such a reform. It had been put to the conference that many Welsh members could not read English, and thus deserved at least some recognition from their own trade journal. Kane remarked that the proposers' account was 'highly coloured', and that in any case his own readers in England suffered similar problems of illiteracy. 'Many of our readers cannot read', he retorted, 'but they take the *Journal*, and get the matter read to them.'⁷⁶ But his final argument is the most interesting, for in closing the debate Kane identified at this early stage the supporters of the proposal with those 'ambitious men . . . moved by mean motives'⁷⁷ whose mission he believed was to form an independent ironworkers' union in south Wales. The motion was heavily defeated, but from that point onward Kane regarded the use of the Welsh language as the issue which ultimately defined subversive breakaway unionism in the district.

Ironically, this view was accepted by journalists on both sides of the

⁷² *IJ*, 1 December 1873, 1 January 1874.

⁷³ *IJ*, 1 November 1874.

⁷⁴ *IJ*, 1 December 1874.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

ideological divide, from *Capital and Labour* to *Y Diwygiwr*.⁷⁸ Yet it is abundantly clear that a vigorous campaign against the secessionists was conducted in Welsh as well as in English. Both ironworkers' agents, Philip Harries and G. G. Thomas, were Welsh speakers, as were those of the A.A.M., Mabon and Henry Thomas; and the Merthyr Baptist minister, the Reverend T. D. Matthias, among others, continued to defend Halliday and Kane publicly, in Welsh, throughout 1874. However, reactions to the Red Dragon revolt within Wales raise the intriguing question of how the debate was conducted at the local level.

Arguments for and against the breakaway trade unionists were also rehearsed in the pages of the local newspaper press, often in a lively and near-libellous fashion. For such papers, in Merthyr and Aberdare at least, developments in the trade unions in July and August 1874 became major items of local news. Broadly, the issue was presented by editors in two ways. First, editorial judgements and opinions were paraded in leader columns, in which rival newspapers were often as much the subjects of calumny as the ostensible targets in one or other of the trade union camps. Secondly, editors allowed considerable space in their papers for readers' letters, many of which in July and August in a number of local newspapers were devoted to the Red Dragon controversy. Thus, due to its diversity and, one suspects, the urgent requirement to fill editorial space with cheap local material, the local press became by far the most accessible popular medium for local workers and their representatives.

Readers had for some time used this facility to considerable effect. Letter columns often featured debates and arguments concerning political and cultural issues, conducted over time in the same journal, or between the letter columns of rival local newspapers. This suggests that the local press was of considerable importance in the cultural experience

⁷⁸ The former attributed the growth of the A.A.M. in Wales to the influx of English miners. 'The Englishness of the Rhondda . . . was the one element required to give the union a start . . .', having hitherto been prevented from growing by native ignorance of the English language, *Capital and Labour*, 19 August 1874. The latter, the paper of the Welsh Independents, expressed the notion that the Welsh language protected the people against the 'low and irreligious practices' of the English, *Y Diwygiwr*, June 1874, p. 181. Other Welsh newspapers in 1874, notably *Yr Herald Cymraeg*, *Baner ac Amserau Cymru*, and the *North Wales Chronicle*, were preoccupied with events in the north, particularly the growth of the North Wales Quarrymen's Union.

of the literate working class,⁷⁹ and that some were in the regular habit of reading more than one local paper. Ironworkers' agent Philip Harries, for example, assured a friend that he obtained and read *Amddiffynydd y Gweithiwr* (the Welsh-language sister paper of the *Workman's Advocate*) each Thursday evening, *Y Gwladgarwr* each Friday morning, *Reynolds's Newspaper* on Fridays and the *Western Mail* daily.⁸⁰ He appears to have avoided assiduously those papers which were most critical of his union, namely *Y Fellten* and *Y Tyst a'r Dydd*. 'The *Fellten*', he added contemptuously in December 1874, 'I would not take as a gift.'⁸¹

Both *Y Gwladgarwr* and *Y Fellten* printed letters by a number of correspondents who were directly involved in the internal struggle. In the late spring and summer of 1874, fourteen letters relating to the Red Dragon unions appeared in *Y Gwladgarwr*, and they were evenly divided between those in favour of the schism and those against.⁸² *Y Fellten*, on the other hand, was heavily weighted towards the rebels in both editorial leaders and letter pages. Editor Rees Lewis printed thirteen letters in support of secession, and only three against.⁸³ *Y Fellten* was popularly regarded as being the rebels' chief mouthpiece, a fact which explains Harries's evident distaste for the journal and its editor. Letters in *Y Fellten* thus articulated the demands and the aspirations of the secessionist unionists in the clearest and most immediate way.

The majority of the *Fellten* letters were written as articles in the form of official press statements by one representative of the Red Dragon, John Garmon, 'by the order of the Society', and were intended to

⁷⁹ Consult R. K. Webb, *British Working Class Reader, 1790-1848* (1955); R. D. Altick, *The English Common Reader* (Chicago, 1957); H. Perkin, 'The Origins of the Popular Press', *History Today*, 7 July 1957. The importance of literacy for the skilled and 'respectable' working class in the nineteenth century is discussed briefly in R. Q. Gray, *The Labour Aristocracy in Victorian Edinburgh* (Oxford, 1976), p. 130, and more generally in M. Sanderson, 'Literacy and Social Mobility in the Industrial Revolution in England', *Past and Present*, 56 (1972). In 1874, six or seven weekly newspapers were published in Merthyr Tydfil (population in 1871, 51,949): *Merthyr Telegraph*, *Merthyr Express*, *Y Fellten*, *Tyst a'r Dydd*, *Workman's Advocate*, *Amddiffynydd y Gweithiwr* and *Western Observer* (?). For a recent review of the political significance of the Merthyr newspapers in this period, consult R. Wallace, 'Wales and the Parliamentary Reform Movement, 1866-68', *ante*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (December, 1983), pp. 484-85.

⁸⁰ *Y Gwladgarwr*, 23 May 1874.

⁸¹ *IJ*, December 1874, supplement.

⁸² Among those who argued in defence of the A.A.M. were Mabon (4 July 1874) and Samuel Davies (25 July 1874), and those against, John Garmon (4 July 1874) and D. Phillips (18 July 1874). The remaining eight correspondents employed pseudonyms.

⁸³ In *Y Fellten*, 26 June 1874, 3 July 1874, 10 July 1874, 17 July 1874, 24 July 1874, 31 July 1874, 7 August 1874, 14 August 1874, 21 August 1874, 28 August 1874, 4 September 1874, 11 September 1874, 25 September 1874, 16 October 1874, 6 November 1874.

perform a number of specific functions. Most directly, they enabled the new unions to present their case to the public and to publish their manifestos and union rules;⁸⁴ but they also allowed the leaders of the new movement to answer their critics, some of whom had published their attacks in other papers,⁸⁵ and to denounce in turn the editors of newspapers who opposed the split.⁸⁶ In addition, these letters point to deeper motivations. Some correspondents felt that new all-Welsh trade unions were but the beginning of a process which would lead eventually to cultural and political autonomy, and the language used was frequently proto-nationalist in character. Branches of the new unions were to be called by Welsh names,⁸⁷ and all business was to be conducted through the medium of Welsh. One writer asked rhetorically,

Pa beth yw yr hen undeb . . .? Ateb: Sais-addoliaeth, gwastraff a thra-arglwyddiaeth. [What is the old union . . .? Answer: worship of the English, waste and tyranny.]⁸⁸

Another compared the making of the Red Dragon unions to the establishment of the Welsh colony in Patagonia. Both ventures, he argued, shared the same principal objective:

sef annibyniaeth Cymru . . . a dyrchafiad Gweithwyr Cymru . . . fel y gallent lywodraethu eu hunain. [the independence of Wales . . . and the elevation of the Workers of Wales . . . so that they may govern themselves.]⁸⁹

Some even discussed the possibility of the new unions organising the migration of some of their unemployed members and their families to the Patagonian settlement.⁹⁰

Letters and press statements in *Y Fellten* and in other local papers undoubtedly brought the debate to public attention in a way which was directly under the control of the protagonists themselves. Their distrust of newspaper reporters was well known locally, and unlike the organisers of the A.A.M. and the N.A.A.I. who were often eager to invite

⁸⁴ See, for example, Appendix I, page 222 below.

⁸⁵ *Y Fellten*, 31 July 1874; Garmon replied to three critics, two of whom had published letters in *Y Gwladgarwr*.

⁸⁶ For example, *Y Fellten*, 25 September 1874.

⁸⁷ *Y Fellten*, 2 August 1874: Rhydderch Hael, Tydfyl, Teml Cariad etc.

⁸⁸ *Y Gwladgarwr*, 1 August 1874.

⁸⁹ *Y Fellten*, 16 October 1874.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.* See also Arthur Madog's criticisms of the A.A.M. in *Tyst a'r Dydd*, 3 September 1874. The involvement of Victorian trade unions in emigration schemes is discussed in Charlotte Erickson, 'The Encouragement of Emigration by British Trade Unions, 1850-1900', *Population Studies*, 3 (December 1949).

journalists to attend and report their meetings, members of the Red Dragon met in secret and refused admittance to any representatives of the press.⁹¹ Hostile newspapers were regarded almost as living entities, possessing mysterious but very real and dangerous powers which should be resolutely resisted. One correspondent to *Y Fellten* indicated that he was convinced that the Red Dragon unions had delivered a body blow to the *Western Mail*, and confidently predicted that the growth of the new Welsh unions would seriously reduce the paper's popularity and circulation in Wales.⁹² This curious form of anthropomorphism, or the ascription of human qualities to newspapers, which is commonly found in both the leader columns and the letters of the period, is more understandable in the local context, given that most local weeklies were essentially one-man operations whose editorial pages reflected the preoccupations and the personality of the individual editor-proprietor. Moreover, some of these editors were themselves politically active outside the newsroom, an important point which is well illustrated by the brief but stormy career in Merthyr of the maverick radical journalist John Thomas Morgan.

Morgan began his editorial career with the establishment of the weekly *Merthyr Times* in March 1871, and followed it up with the midweek *Western Observer* in July 1872. In September 1873, in direct response to the growth of trade-union membership and militancy in the area, Morgan incorporated the *Merthyr Times* into a new bilingual workers' paper, the *Workman's Advocate*. Its initial objective was to challenge the new employers' federation in the coal industry, and the paper is an interesting example of how a traditional republican and anti-clerical radicalism came to recognise the potential of the new workers' movement and to tune into its demands and organisations. One year later, in August 1874, in the very midst of the Welsh secessionist crisis, he formally divided the two language sections into separate weeklies, the *Workman's Advocate* and *Amddiffynydd y Gweithiwr*.

As a firm advocate of Halliday and Kane, and depending largely on funds raised by local members of their unions, Morgan used his papers, particularly *Amddiffynydd y Gweithiwr*, to combat the corrosive pro-secessionist influence of Rees Lewis's *Y Fellten*. In Morgan's view, the

⁹¹ A meeting of ironworkers in Merthyr refused to admit journalists in late June 1874, but a reporter from the *Cardiff Times* who attempted to attend the meeting assured his readers that 'the blame for this management is in no wise attributed to Mr. Kane, or his colleague, Mr. G. G. Thomas, both of whom expressed their desire for publicity'. *Cardiff Times*, 4 July 1874.

⁹² *Y Fellten*, 28 August 1874.

Red Dragon unionists were engaging in futile and harmful activities at a most critical moment for British trade unionism, and their supporters either knowingly or unwittingly were contributing to the collapse of the workers' movement in south Wales. His blunt and consistent campaign against the secessionists took three basic forms. First, he argued forcefully against the unholy alliance between the Liberal press and the men of the Red Dragon organisations in leader columns in both his papers. The following extract is typical of his style and approach:

Trwy gyfrwng y wasg Ryddfrydol (?) a chyfryngau rhagrithiol eraill, y maent wedi plannu rhyw bren Upas gwenwynig yng nghanol yr Undeb, dan gochl y faner Gymreig—y Ddraig Goch . . . Mewn undeb a Lloegr y mae ein nerth; ar wahan y mae ein gwendid a'n diynustr. [Through the medium of the Liberal (?) press, and other hypocritical publications, they have planted a poisonous Upas tree in the midst of the Union, and sheltered it beneath the Welsh banner—the Red Dragon . . . Our strength lies in union with England; in independence lies our weakness and our destruction.]⁹³

Like other editors, he also used his papers to provide a forum for the public debate between the warring factions. Nine letters were printed between late July and early October, the majority consisting of fierce exchanges between William Gay⁹⁴ and Philip Harries, and later between the editor and John Garmon.⁹⁵ In addition, however, Morgan also campaigned vigorously against the new unions outside his editorial office. In November 1874, for example, he spoke strongly against local unions at a colliers' meeting in Ystradgynlais, and moved a vote of confidence in the A.A.M. Not surprisingly, his apparently intemperate intervention at this meeting was roundly condemned by the leaders of the breakaway union in *Y Fellten*.⁹⁶ But Morgan received valuable and influential support for his intransigent position from the radical minister, Rev. T. D. Matthias, who, from June 1874 onwards, put the case for centralised national trade unions with characteristic eloquence in the pages of the *Western Mail* and the *Ironworkers' Journal*.⁹⁷

⁹³ *AG*, 22 August 1874.

⁹⁴ Gay used the *WA* to reply to hostile correspondence in the *WM* concerning accusations first levelled against him by Kane in the *IJ*! In the same issue, Philip Harries issued an 'open letter' to the Welsh ironworkers urging them to renounce the secessionists, *WA*, 25 July 1874.

⁹⁵ *AG*, 3 October 1874, 10 October 1874.

⁹⁶ *Y Fellten*, 13 November 1874.

⁹⁷ For example, *IJ*, 15 June 1874. Matthias was a seasoned correspondent; see, for instance, his letters to the *Bee-Hive*, 15 March 1873, 22 March 1873, 19 April 1873, 26 April 1873, 10 May 1873, 31 May 1873. See also Aled Jones and John Saville, 'Thomas Davies Matthias (1823-1904), Christian Radical', in Joyce Bellamy and John Saville (eds.), *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, Vol. 7 (1984), pp. 178-82.

Both men were active members of the newly established Merthyr Trades Council, Morgan being its founding secretary. He was also a trade-union leader in his own right, being president of the Conference of the Bristol, West of England and South Wales Amalgamated Labourers' Union. Throughout the critical months of 1874 he maintained close and co-operative relations with the national leaders and the regional agents of the Amalgamated Unions whose cause he defended with such energy. One article in the *Merthyr Express* referred to them all in the same breath: 'Halliday, Harries, J. T. Morgan and Co. would keep the world a continual boil to answer their selfish ends'.⁹⁸ The three men fought a desperate rearguard action to sustain trade unionism in the face of divisions in the ranks and a steadily encroaching employers' offensive. At a large meeting at the Craven Arms in Merthyr on 29 December 1874, Halliday, Morgan and the two regional ironworkers' agents, Philip Harries and G. G. Thomas, defended the 'necessity and advantages of Union amongst working men', and moved a vote of confidence in the National Amalgamated Association of Malleable Ironworkers.⁹⁹ The *Workman's Advocate*, moreover, had long been sold as the 'official organ' of the trade unions in Wales and, from December 1874, of the west of England as well. In late 1875, Morgan discontinued both *Workman's Advocate* and the *Amddiffynydd y Gweithiwr* and launched a new English language labour weekly, the *Star of the West*, based on the principle of co-operative ownership. Despite the support of an impressive array of regional trade union officials, the new paper lasted only six weeks.¹⁰⁰

Journalists working in the regional and local press thus took more than a passing professional interest in the declining fortunes of trade unionism in south Wales in the summer of 1874. It is evident that they were not only attracted by the newsworthy nature of the Red Dragon

⁹⁸ *ME*, 17 July 1875.

⁹⁹ *WA*, 8 January 1875.

¹⁰⁰ Supporters and investors included Isaac Connick, Merthyr District miners' agent; W. R. Jones, Merthyr District miners' treasurer; John Williams, Merthyr District miners' secretary; Philip Harries, Merthyr ironworkers' agent for Glamorganshire; Jenkin Thomas and William Lewis (Lewys Afan), president and secretary of the Independent Association of Tin-plate Makers; Miles Davies, general secretary, National United Association of Enginemen, Firemen and Fitters; John Fox, general secretary, Bristol, West of England and South Wales Amalgamated Labourers' Union; Peter Shorrocks, general secretary, Amalgamated Society of Tailors; William Abraham (Mabon), Loughor District miners' agent; Samuel Davies, Aberdare District miners' agent; Philip Jones, Abertillery District miners' agent and James Windsor, president of the Neath District of miners. *Star of the West*, 15 January 1876. See also 'Rules of the Labour Press, Industrial and Provident Society Ltd.' (Merthyr, 1875), PRO, FS8/38/1934.

story, but also that they participated in the war of words which surrounded it. By applying the magnifying glass of newspaper reporting to the minutiae of internal trade union politics, they brought the secessionist phenomenon squarely to the attention of the Welsh newspaper-reading public. But in the process of reporting the events, journalists also to some extent and for a variety of reasons redefined the issues. Leader columns avoided the specific problems of apprenticeship rules and workers' complaints against high subscriptions and top heavy trade union bureaucracies, choosing instead to interpret the revolt generally in political and denominational terms. However, editors rarely either managed or desired to impose a rigid uniformity on their newspapers by prohibiting conflicting viewpoints on issues of keen local interest or concern. Thus, crucially, protagonists were able to intervene directly, by way of letters and jointly prepared statements, in the way in which coverage of the conflict was structured and presented. In consequence, distinctions between journalists and readers in the local press were frequently blurred, and the active involvement of certain journalists in the trade union in-fighting further complicated the relationship between reporters and the events which they reported. In effect, the combination of editorial pontification and readers' correspondence in a variety of local newspapers in Merthyr and Aberdare, cumulatively over a period of two or three months, added a dynamic new dimension to the trade union crisis. The precise issues involved in the inter-union disputes, mediated as they were by the language in which they were sometimes expressed, intersected with larger intellectual and political concerns. In this respect, local journalists were instrumental in relocating the significance of the Red Dragon revolt within a broader, though still problematic, contemporary discourse on the politics of cultural identity.

ALED JONES

Aberystwyth

APPENDIX I

Rules, *Undeb y Ddraig Goch*, 20 June 1874.

Wedi llawer o ymddyddan ar y cwestiwn undebol, daethant yn unfrydol i gydolygu ar y penderfyniadau canlynol:—

1. Fod cangen o Gymdeithas Undebol ar ffurf newydd, i ddechrau yng ngwesty Mrs. Jones, Corner House, Mehefin 20fed, yr hon a adnabyddir wrth yr enw “Y Ddraig Goch” sef arwydd banerawl hen genedl y Cymry, “Y Ddraig Goch a ddyry gychwyn”.
2. Fod pob Cymdeithas o’r Undeb hwn i gadw ei harian yn nhref, sef chwech cheiniog y mis, gan drefnu a diogelu y cyfryw yn y modd goreu a welo yn addas, a’i talu allan pan fyddo gofyniad cyfreithlawn, yr un fath ag y gwneir gan gymdeithasau buddiol ac Undebol eraill.
3. Nad oes un swyddog i dderbyn tâl sefydlog i berthyn i’r Undeb hwn o gwbl, oddieithr yr hyn a fernir yn gyfiawn i ysgrifenyddion, yn ol maint a swm eu gwaith, yr un fath ag y gwneir gan gymdeithasau eraill.
4. Fod llywydd pob cyfarfod undebol neu adranol i gael ei ddewis o blith y cenadyddion presenol, a’i dalu am yr amser fel rhyw genadydd arall, a thraul deithiol pob un yn ol pellder y ffordd.
5. Fod taflen mantoliad (balance-sheet) undebol i gael ei pharatoi bob chwech mis, a’i danfon i bob cymdeithas, ac i bob aelod, os mynir, yn cynnwys rhif aelodau pob cymdeithas ar wahan, gwerth ei thrysorfa, a threulion a dalwyd, i bwy, ac am ba beth.
6. Nad ydyw yr Undeb hwn i estyn ei linydd pellach na therfynau Deheudir Cymru. Bydd llai o gylchfesur yn ogystal, o herwydd lleiaf yr Undeb, lleiaf y draul, a’r drafferth hefyd.

Dyna ryw awgrym o natur Undeb sydd yn gydweddol a sefyllfa gweithiwr, sef Undeb buddiol a gonest, ac heb fod yn feichus. Nid da gormod o rwysg. Cyfarfyddir y tro nesaf yn y Corner House, nos Sadwrn, y 27ain cyfisol, ar yr awr arferol.

Merthyr

John Garmon, Ysg.

Source: *Y Gwladgarwr*, 27 June 1874.

APPENDIX II

Rules, *Undeb y Ddraig Goch*, as amended and published 23 July 1874.

1. That this union be governed by a yearly meeting, composed of persons such as may be chosen by the members, and that a secretary be appointed to account for all things relating to the said union, and that he be remunerated according to their decision.
2. That the annual general meeting of the union be removable from place to place.
3. That the president of the annual meeting be chosen from the delegates present, and that he be paid as one of the delegates, likewise his expenses, etc., according to the distance he may travel. That he is authorised to govern everything relating to the union until the following annual meeting, where, if thought proper, he will accordingly be re-elected.
4. That this union be divided into sub-divisions.
5. That every sub-division shall hold their meetings quarterly, or oftener if particularly necessary; or, in the case the time be too short, to wait the quarterly meeting.
6. That the sub-division be removable from place to place.
7. That every sub-division meeting be presided over by a delegate chosen by the society—that is one of every society—and to receive payment as the society may decide. Likewise, also, the most competent sub-division secretary must account for all things relating to the union, and to be remunerated as the society may decide.
8. That every sub-division president be chosen from the delegates present, and to be an official authority until the next meeting, and that he be sent as a delegate the second time, if thought proper.
9. That this union take all men working under ground as members.
10. That the secretary is to prepare a quarterly report and enclose therein a balance-sheet of all expenses, etc., incurred during the three months, and give the number of members that are in the sub-division according to their respective returns, and forward to every society a copy, for which the sum of 1*d.* will be charged.
11. That the union secretary prepare a yearly report, balance-sheet, and list of members, and forward a copy to each lodge.
12. That all money collected is to support lawful members during strikes and lockouts. Also, if agreed upon, shall support or assist any member who may meet with an accident and be disabled thereby.

13. That every member pay 7*d.* per month, out of which 1*d.* must go to the expense of the room.
14. That each member be taxed in proportion as lawfully required unless sick or out of work.
15. That each sub-division keeps its money in town, and pay out when necessary.
16. That no permanently paid officer belong to the union.
17. That no mass meetings, board of conciliation meetings, or 'show cards' take place.
18. That this meeting do not assist any further than Monmouthshire.
19. That all business be secretly carried on, and all unsettled questions be decided by ballot.
20. That members do not betray their brethren at work.

Source: *Western Mail*, 23 July 1874.