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CEREDIGION

CYLCHGRAWN CYMDEITHAS HYNAFIAETHWYR SIR ABERTEIFI JOURNAL OF THE CARDIGANSHIRE ANTIOUARIAN SOCIETY

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JOHN JOHNES (1800—1876)1

FIRST of all I should like to thank you most sincerely for the honour you have done me in inviting me to read a paper. I had considered several subjects, but I decided on Judge John Johnes of Dolaucothi, not because he happened to be my own great-great-uncle or because he was descended from two of the former principal families of this county, the Johnes's of Llanfair-clydogau and the Lloyds of Maes-y-felin, but because he was a distinguished Welshman and a very worthy representative of the squirarchy of West Wales. The Johnes's, formerly of Abermarlais in Carmarthenshire, had by marriage and purchase become extensive landowners in this county by the early years of the eighteenth century. Their main seat was at Llanfair-clydogau, a large house which used to stand a few hundred yards west of the present church (a paved pathway from house to church can still be seen in places). The house survived until it was demolished to provide building materials for the new house at Hafod but it had ceased to be their home after Colonel Johnes's father, also a Thomas, moved to his wife's more convenient house Croft Castle, near Ludlow. The opening of lead mines in the vicinity no doubt hastened their departure. A smaller property also in their possession was Pen-y-bont, near Tregaron. This is still a substantial farmhouse and is one of the lesser houses of Cardiganshire which I have dealt with in CEREDIGION.2 By marrying the Herbert heiress of Hafod the family were able to add this large, if unprofitable, estate to their holdings. It was said that Colonel Johnes in his hey-day owned over 90,000 acres, mainly in Cardiganshire. Another branch of the family was settled at what is now known as Old Abermade in the parish of Llanilar. Thomas Johnes of Abermade served as High Sheriff of Cardiganshire in 1737. The members of this

²Vol. II, pp. 170-1.

¹Address given at the Society's meeting at Aberaeron, 20 October 1956.

family, however, were thoroughly disreputable. They were active in the riots which were directed against poor Lewis Morris when he was Surveyor of the King's Mines. Both Thomas Johnes and his son could fairly be described as gang leaders who were engaged by the greater landowners to do their dirty work at election time and even on occasion in private feuds. Sir Herbert Lloyd of Peterwell in his younger days played much the same part in the stormy life of eighteenth-century Cardiganshire.

In his recent book on the Rebecca Riots Professor David Williams severely castigates the local landlords but he excepts John Johnes by name, describing him as an enlightened landlord who did much to keep his district quiet during the agrarian troubles of those years.

He was born in the year 1800, being descended from a very ancient family, derived from the old sept of Gruffydd ap Nicholas of Dinefawr. He was the only son of John Johnes by Elizabeth, daughter and heiress of John Bowen of Maes-llan-wrthwl in the parish of Llansawel. This latter house, now a substantial farmhouse, is an excellent example of one of the lesser country houses of West Wales.

I feel that we may digress a little here and try to visualize what kind of life was lived by the squirarchy in West Wales at the turn of the century. It is fortunate that several members of the family were great hoarders, John Johnes's mother was one; she kept everything, from her son's school letters to the tradesmen's bills in the year that she died. Local historians should bless such magpies; I fear I am one myself!

Dolaucothi house, the centre block of which dated from the end of the seventeenth century, had been altered by Nash in the 1790's, but it was without the wings, which were added by John Johnes himself in the next century. The ground floor consisted of a parlour and diningroom on either side of the narrow hallway that led to a large kitchen which in later times served as a servants' hall. The staircase was of Regency date, being lighted by a dome. The ground floor was saved from insignificance by some excellent plaster work in both the reception rooms and the corridors. The first floor consisted of five bedrooms and two dressing rooms, while the third storey contained large day and night nurseries and three small servants' rooms. The general effect was simple and dignified. Dolaucothi even at this time compared favourably in comfort with an older house like Maes-llan-wrthwl which dates back unaltered to the seventeenth century. The idea held today by many that the gentry then lived in luxury, waited upon by countless servants, may be true of great establishments and noble households in England but it was certainly not true of Wales in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It only became common in the Victorian era.

The diary of Jane Johnes, the wife of Thomas Johnes of Hafod, described what kind of life was lived at Dolaucothi in the 1780's, a way of life that had altered little since the seventeenth century. Jane's life as a girl of eighteen consisted largely of minding the poultry, helping to winnow the corn, gardening, and needlework. This life was varied by occasional visits to important houses like Coldbrook in Monmouthshire, the home of her cousins the Hanbury-Williams's, and by the excitement of visits from magnates like her uncle and cousin of Croft, who broke their journey at Dolaucothi on their rare visits to their Welsh estates in Cardiganshire. Dolaucothi was one of the smaller Johnes properties and had either been let or had been the home of younger sons. John's grandfather, another John, was also a younger son and, like John's father, had been an officer in the 60th Regiment of Foot (now the K.R. Rifles). The latter had served in Ireland during the rising of 1798 and a vivid letter describing the horrors he saw during that campaign still survives. Whether it was due to their army service or not we do not know but it is sad to relate that both John's father and grandfather were drunkards and even in those days their topings were a source of alarm and anxiety to their relations. In their younger days both had been sportsmen and John's father's game books are now preserved in the National Library of Wales. As they grew older and retired from the service both suffered agonies from the gout and they died comparatively young men. John's father was sent to the Charterhouse but he was so unhappy that he ran away and arrived late at night at the Berkeley Street house of his sister and her husband, Colonel Johnes of Hafod. His only claim to local eminence was that he was high sheriff of Carmarthenshire in 1803 and a magistrate and deputy lieutenant for that county.

John was sent first of all to a small school at Lampeter and then to Carmarthen. Letters to his parents from the latter place are in my possession and one, written in April, 1810, shows his early interest in current local affairs:

The Judges came to town on Monday, the 23rd. and went out on the 27th, there was but 33 prisoners, they were all acquitted. The Misses Lewis's (of Barnsfield) took me to the Ball on Wednesday night last which was kept up till four oclock and I got up at nine. Mr. John Saunders and Miss James-Hughes opened the ball. Miss Davies of Maescrugiau and Miss Saunders danced with me. The local Militia commanded by Colonel Hughes has commenced exercising here for twenty days.

Late nights for boys of ten are, therefore, no new thing. John rode home on his pony for the holidays and in the autumn we find him at a

¹A pheasant was as rare a bird in Carmarthenshire in 1790 as it is today.

boarding school at Bath kept by the Reverend Israel Lewis. In 1811, Mr. Lewis writes to John's father: 'Johnny is a very good boy in every sense of the word, his abilities are excellent and his sense of duty to his Creator, his parents and superiors is remarkable'. This rather sententious statement gives the impression of a young prig but it was far from the truth. John was a good horseman, fond of sport and engaged in the usual schoolboy escapades. In those days boarders only returned home in the summer holidays, and John appears to have remained at Ashton with Mr. Lewis until he went to Brasenose College, Oxford, matriculating on 28 October 1817. He graduated B.A. in 1826 and M.A. in 1829, but before that much was to happen. His father, always ailing, died in 1815.

The estate was small and it was only by the foresight of my greatgreat-grandfather, Herbert Lloyd of Carmarthen, that John's father was not involved in the financial ruin of Colonel Johnes of Hafod, his cousin and brother-in-law. Over and over again John's father was asked for loans by his sister Jane to bolster up her husband's dwindling resources. Refusal resulted in great bitterness between the two families, and contacts ceased between the two houses. Jane Johnes in her will left all that she had, pictures, plate, etc., to strangers, which accounts for the total disappearance of many relics relating to Colonel Johnes. Dolaucothi remained the home of John's mother and on the death of her husband in 1815 she resided there with her three surviving daughters. Little information has come down about John's university life but I strongly suspect that he had financial difficulties and that he saw for a short time the inside of the Marshalsea, the great prison for debtors. The following undated letter from him gives some idea of life at Oxford at that time:

As this is the commencement of another term and we have had a few days' vacation I feel happy in taking up my pen to address you and give you some idea account [sic] of the life I now lead. I believe I informed you before that we rise rather early and I conclude you will say that it is good for my health. I perfectly agree with you on that subject but I do not think that wine is a good thing for the constitution, which flows in great plenty down the throats of many in this college but it has only once affected my head since I have been here but scarce a night passes but somebody comes reeling to bed, generally carried, which is very laughable to those who look on but it is not very likely that I shall be conveyed in that state as I shall not drink more than sufficient for a man to drink. My rooms are very dark and my bedroom is exceedingly small, it is about 3½ ft. wide and ten feet long, so that the bed takes up six feet and the rest is left for me to dress in. The smallness of the room makes me so sleepy that it is with difficulty I can get up in the morning in time to go to Chapel.

When John went to Oxford in March 1818, straight from his school at Ashton, near Bristol, he writes to his mother and demands a hundred

guineas, three pairs of sheets, some table cloths, and also some silver

spoons.

By December his mother, who was living at that time in London, was complaining about his expenses at the University and John writes that he is as frugal as possible and 'if I visit you next week it will not be for the purpose of plays and amusements but to remain with you as much as possible. I wish Mr. Lewis to sell the coal under Pen-y-fan which will clear all debts and enable you to live comfortably in town.' This was a reference to coal under farms owned by the Dolaucothi estate at Llanelly. It was these mineral rights which kept the Dolaucothi estate flourishing up to recent times. The family could not have survived on their rentrolls alone.

In March 1819 he writes:

Oxford looks much gayer this term than it did last as the gas has lately found its way into this place and will shortly I have no doubt be in common use all over the Kingdom. The assizes were held here about nine days ago, a great many were condemned to be hanged but I do not believe that any of them will suffer . . . I am at present very much engaged in reading, etc. I row a great deal on the river but my hands are now as hard as stones and as brown as berries . . . I hope to leave on Friday night provided I get money to pay my expenses at College for which they begin to become clamorous and the more so as I used to be very punctual in paying them when it was due, at present five pounds are the utmost of my purse out of which forty-four pounds are due.

And again on June 13, 1820, he writes:

This place is at present very full, it being Commemmoration time on account of the King's Accession to the throne. The Duke of Wellington is to be here . . .

I am up at seven every morning, read most part of the day. If I do take exercise it is a game of tennis. I seldom go to bed before one or two in the morning.

John must have found the daily life at Dolaucothi in his holidays rather dull and unexciting. The game books show that a hare and a brace of pheasants was not an abnormal bag. Better-off relations sent them presents of wine and dress materials from time to time. Luxuries were rare and the table at Dolaucothi varied little from those of the better-off tenant farmers. Visits outside the county were rare. Their social life was limited to visits to Carmarthen during Assize week and at militia training times. In daily life the local gentry associated more freely with tenants and local tradesmen and with them the local squires would gather together over their pots of ale and pipes at the fairs and markets of the little county towns. There was far less class distinction at this time than was to come later. A portrait of John painted by the Carmarthenshire artist Thomas Brigstocke (a painter whose accomplishments, in my opinion, have not received their just

due) shows a ruddy-faced young man with brown hair and blue eyes, the head being rather large, perhaps, for the short broad figure. The

Johnes men were inclined to be short of stature.

Before taking his degree John married in 1822 Elizabeth, daughter of the Reverend John Edwardes of Gileston Manor in the county of Glamorgan. The Edwardes's of Gileston were cousins of the family of the same name at Rhyd-y-gors near Carmarthen and were thus distant relations of the Dolaucothi family. This alliance was suitable in every way. The courtship, however, had not been without serious difficulties owing to trouble over the settlements and the problem of the young couple's future home. His mother offered him her own property, Maes-llan-wrthwl, as a home but John was determined to live at Dolaucothi and this led to a partial estrangement between the mother and son. After living at Gileston for a year the young couple left on a lengthy visit to the Continent and in the following year a son, John Frederic, was born. It appears that the unfortunate infant, overcome by the excessive heat of a French summer and the usual postnatal methods of those days, died in convulsions in a short time. They had no more male children. The Johnes's remained in France for some time and John became a fluent French and Italian speaker. He is said also to have spoken Welsh extremely well.

On their return to this country Dolaucothi became their home, and Mrs. Johnes and her daughters retired to a house in Carmarthen. The

stage was now set for a full and successful life.

A daughter, Charlotte, was born in 1828 and a second girl, the future Lady Hills-Johnes, in 1834. John now began seriously to study law and he was called to the Inner Temple in 1831. He practised on the South Wales Circuit until the passing of the Tithe Commutation Act, when he was appointed one of the Assistant Commissioners under that Act. Subsequently he was placed on the Admiralty, Copyhold, Enclosures, and Lunacy Commissions. The obtaining of this appointment to the Tithe Commission had not been at all easy. In those days such appointments could only be obtained by influence in high places. Here John was fortunate in having the help and support of his second cousin, the Reverend Samuel Johnes-Knight. This remarkable old man, who lived to be nearly a hundred, was the younger brother of Johnes of Hafod, with whom he had been on bad terms for a number of years before the latter's death. A Fellow of All Souls, Oxford, the squire of Healey Hall in Shropshire, and later rector of Welwyn in Hertfordshire, Samuel Johnes had added his mother's name of Knight to his own. He is an excellent example of the squarson of those flamboyant days. In fact it was he who had been asked to marry The Prince Regent to Mrs. Fitzherbert and he was a well-known man about town.

His contacts in Government circles were of great help to the younger man and his letters show him to be a man of great kindliness and good sense combined with such a robust constitution that he thought nothing of following hounds all day even in his late eighties. survived, a straggler of the eighteenth century, well into the nineteenth, dying in 1852 at the age of 97. A number of his letters to John survive and it is obvious that without his help John would never have secured the public appointments for which he so eagerly yearned. He had the ear of the Duke of Bedford and through him Lord Russell, who was then Home Secretary. They appear to have first corresponded in 1833 when John informs his cousin of the death at Exeter of his aunt Jane Johnes, widow of Colonel Johnes of Hafod. John asks for his help to secure an appointment under the Poor Commission. In 1835 he writes again, 'I shall with confidence apply to you when an opportunity occurs of increasing my scanty income.

In April 1836, in answer to a letter on the state of the Hafod property, Johnes-Knight writes: 'Your account made me melancholy when I reccollect what a very large fortune had entirely gone away from our family thro' the imprudence of a single person [Col. Johnes]. This

makes me doubly anxious to do all I can to help you.'

Again, in August 1836, he promises to write to Lord John Russell about a place on the Tithe Commission. He was successful, for in November John went before the board in London and was appointed. In 1837 there is an angry note about the Johnes's of Garthmyl in Montgomeryshire,—' Have you observed what a numerous class have sprung up from a medical man in Montgomeryshire, who was originally a Mr. Johns; but who now spells his name as do his descendants with an 'e' in the name. Surely your family and mine now are only entitled to the spelling we now use. Perhaps they are illegitimate.' I fear Johnes-Knight would be greatly shocked if he could glance at the present London Telephone Directory!

The old man was a fanatical Whig. In 1839 he writes: 'From a very long acquaintance with Tory principles and Tory politics, I know there is no bribery, no intimidation, they will stick at to gain their ends.' Again in 1843 he writes: 'The Duke of Newcastle [who] has now left Wales for ever is a rash Tory. He got all the information I could give by employing a mutual friend to find out some particulars about Hafod, but without telling His Grace's name. I was rewarded by the Duke's strange conduct in refusing to sell me a very indifferent picture, that possessed no other value, than having at the Reformation been presented by the monks of Talley to one of our ancestors. I meant to give it to my daughter as the only possession left of what her grandfather had in Wales.' This is a reference to the picture of Elijah being

fed by the ravens which was acquired by my father at the Clumber sale

in the 1930's and presented by him to St. Davids Cathedral.

There were questions about the new police force which had just been raised and in 1844 Johnes-Knight, writing from his rectory at Welwyn, informs John how well the new police force works in Hertford-

shire. It was formed in Cardiganshire in 1843-4.

With regard to the Rebecca Riots the old man shows true Whig principles. In a letter to John he says: 'I am truly sorry that South Wales should have disgraced itself and trust that such old gentry as yourself will bring things right again and show the farmers how much they have been deceived by mere agitators who have not one inch of land in our county; I still must call it ours, tho' I can only show my daughter by the map what once was the property of Johnes of Llanfair.'

His last act of kindness was to help John to secure his County Court judgeship, now that the latter's work on the Tithe Commission was

nearly completed.

Though John in the course of his work travelled constantly all over South Wales he was able to keep a close eye on Dolaucothi. Farms were rebuilt, the fields were properly limed, and the house itself was enlarged by the addition of a large wing on the west side which contained the new dining-room and a large drawing-room to balance it on the east side.

It was said at this time that John was a three-bottle man and that for a bet he killed twenty-seven out of twenty-eight swallows flying consecutively under the arch of Pumpsaint bridge. He was certainly a second for Lloyd of Brunant in his duel with Lloyd of Glansevin. This followed some stupid dispute over game rights which culminated in

each tweaking the other's nose!

In 1834 a second daughter, Elizabeth, the future Lady Hills-Johnes, was born. For ten years life went on happily but in 1844 fate struck a cruel blow; his wife fell ill and died. A shadowy figure, few of her letters and only one small silhouette remain, but their marriage had been a happy one, and through her the estate of Gileston passed in due course to her two daughters. For a busy man left a widower in the prime of life with two young daughters it was not an easy position to be in, but John rose to the occasion and no father was closer to his children than he. In 1846 his elder daughter, Charlotte, married Captain Charles Cookman of Monart House, co. Wexford.

In 1847 John was appointed County Court judge, an office he held until 1861. A magistrate for the counties of Carmarthen, Pembroke, Cardigan, and Glamorgan he was in 1853 appointed Chairman of Quarter Sessions for Carmarthenshire. He was also Recorder of the

borough of Carmarthen from 1851 to 1872.

Though strong Royalists during the Civil War (a Johnes was fined £1,500 by Parliament) the Johnes's were by the eighteenth century Whig in sympathy. John followed the family tradition and was more than once asked to stand for Parliament in the Whig interest. He was zealous in diffusing education, especially elementary education among the poor, and was an early and firm supporter of the Eisteddfod. During the Rebecca Riots he did much to keep his own district quiet and in 1843 he wrote An address to the Inhabitants of Conwil-Caio. This was also published by William Rees of Llandovery in a Welsh translation. Annerchiad at Drigolion Plwyf Conwil-Gaio, yn Swydd Gaerfyrddin, a'r Plwyfau Cymdogaethol. His advice to the local Caio people was to impress upon them the very grave dangers they ran from the rigours of the law with its vicious sentences of transportation for many years, or even for life, and the danger of blackmail, perhaps in years ahead, or the risk of denunciation by some informer for purposes of gain or private vengeance. He underlined the increase in the rates due to the replacement and repair of toll-gates and houses which had been wantonly destroyed. Again, on grounds of religion he begs them to abstain from violence and destruction, but, what is far more important, he draws their attention to the recent great improvement in the roads due to the expenditure of funds obtained from the tolls. 'But I am addressing some whose memory can extend so far back as to recollect the state of the roads to have been such that scarcely a waggon, or even a cart, was kept by any farmer in the neighbourhood. Within my own recollection I think I may fairly state that the same weight which was formerly conveyed by three, if not four, can now be conveyed by two horses; is this of no advantage to you?'

John Johnes was also a warm supporter of Lampeter College and took an active part in its running. A keen Freemason, he rose to be Provincial Grand-Master for the Western Division of South Wales. An enthusiastic geologist, he was the friend of Professor Edward Forbes and on several occasions the host of Sir Roderick Murchison when that scientist was engaged on his great work on the Silurian System. The former large library at Dolaucothi was in itself a record of the varied interests of this widely cultivated man. In the '60's ill-health, caused largely by frequent attacks of asthma, compelled him to relax some of his activities. His elder daughter, Charlotte, had married an Irishman named Cookman, who was heir to a large estate but he died young and his widow returned to look after her father.

Besides his interest in geology John was a keen antiquary and, living as he did close by the site of an old Roman station, he made a collection of the remains found there. Some of the most valuable of the Roman gold ornaments are now in the British Museum and others are at

Carmarthen. Men eminent in their various departments of knowledge, science, and art always found a cordial and congenial welcome at his house, so that Dolaucothi became under him and later under his

daughters a centre of culture and knowledge in West Wales.

On this peaceful and quiet scene a frightful tragedy was to descend. On 19 August 1876 John was murdered at ten o'clock in the morning, while sitting in his study, by his Irish butler, one Henry Tremble. In a hundred years there have only been three butlers, so long was their period of service. Tremble had served for seventeen years as butler at the time of the crime. It appears that he was anxious to become landlord and tenant of the Dolaucothi Arms in Pumpsaint. The Judge considered that Mrs. Tremble was unsuited for such work and he refused to agree. An Irishman of quick temper, Tremble made one final appeal and then, lifting his shotgun which he had brought with him, he discharged both barrels into the Judge's stomach. Then, rushing to the kitchen, he attempted to kill Mrs. Cookman, the Judge's elder daughter, who was ordering the meals for the day. Her life was saved by the courage of the cook, who stood in front of the victim, but Mrs. Cookman was hit once in the hip and she was lame for the rest of her life. The younger daughter was away from home. Tremble, after shooting the dogs, then made his way, still armed, to his house in Caio village. A groom was sent galloping for the doctor at Llandovery but by the time the latter had arrived John Johnes was dead. In the year 1934, when I was shooting near Tewkesbury, a very old man rode up on a pony. His strong Welsh accent made me ask him from what part of Wales he came and I was told that it was Caio in Carmarthenshire. Mr. Davies then told us that as a small boy he had been at Dolaucothi on that morning in 1876 and had seen Tremble come out, his gun smoking in his hands.

The murderer, after defying the police for some time, shot himself. His body was first buried at Caio but the villagers dug it up and removed it to some hilltop over the Brecknockshire border. The people there, however, would not have it and to its horror Caio found the corpse deposited in the middle of the village. I believe that he was

finally buried just outside the churchyard.

The feelings of the country may be best depicted by the affecting incident which took place at the Wrexham Eisteddfod on 22 August, for on hearing the news the whole assembly of eight thousand people stood up and uncovered in solemn silence. Thus died a man whose name and virtues were justly honoured in his own day and who as a loyal Welshman deserves to be remembered today.