

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

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

Efallai y bydd hefyd gennych ddiddordeb yn <u>Papurau Newydd Cymru</u> (papuraunewydd.llyfrgell.cymru), chwaer-wefan gan Lyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru sy'n rhoi mynediad i dros 1.1 milwn o dudalennau o dros 130 o bapurau newydd a gyhoeddwyd rhwng 1805 a 1919.

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

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

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



SIR JOHN GIBSON AND THE CAMBRIAN NEWS*

Nearly eighty years after his death in 1915, Sir John Gibson, first editor and proprietor of the Cambrian News in Aberystwyth. curiously remains both a familiar and an unfamiliar figure. His newspaper has been an integral part of this community for a hundred and twenty years. But in other respects, too, he has enriched the history of our town. He was a prolific writer. He published a novel, Gorwen, and books on The Principles of Architecture, Higher Education in Wales, published in 1878, Agriculture in Wales in 1879, a remarkable book on The Emancipation of Women in 1891, and Gibson's Guide to Aberystwyth in 1909. Recently historians have brought to our attention some further aspects of his frenetic activity. W. J. Lewis rightly affords him a prominent place in his book Born on a Perilous Rock; Dr. E. L. Ellis records Gibson's extraordinarily vituperative engagement with the founders of the University College of Wales in Aberystwyth; and Dr. Gareth Evans has written an exceptionally lucid introduction to the new edition of The Emancipation of Women, reprinted in 1992, which also has much to say about Gibson's commitment to the extension of popular education. These very welcome assessments of John Gibson as an historical figure draw a complex picture of a committed journalist who was also at the same time a Liberal activist and an important element in the social and political life of Aberystwyth, and, in a number of important ways, of Wales as a whole. Dr. Ellis has described Gibson as 'the crusading editor of legend', before adding, wisely as ever, the caveat 'almost'.2 And it is precisely Gibson's role as an editor and a writer, and his self-perception as a 'crusading editor', that I would like to explore further in this article.

As we have seen, Gibson was the author of voluminous writings, which survive in both printed and manuscript forms. We must remember that they took a lifetime to write, and, I

^{*}Alecture delivered to the Society at Ceredigion Museum, Aberystwyth, on 16 October 1993.

suspect, they will take the best part of a hapless historian's lifetime to read. Add to the volume of the writing his voracious appetite for controversy, and you will perhaps agree that, in the space of an hour, we cannot adequately do justice to the almost interminable range of his interests, still less the nature of their impact. But even at a general level, there are things of great interest here. He was a public figure, but he was also a deeply private man. He was an Englishman, but he threw himself into the construction of a distinctively Welsh politics. One of the most intriguing things about him is the way in which he was, simultaneously, both an insider and an outsider. He understood the intricacies of the institutional mechanisms that were present. omnipotently so in some respects, in the society around him. He observed and analysed them, as a Liberal and a dissenter, from the inside. But he was also acutely conscious of his distance from the world which he earned his living by reporting. He was in Wales, but not of Wales. And that sense of detachment and displacement, of which he was continually, even morbidly aware, lends to him a certain mystery and a significance far beyond what one might expect to find in the character of an editor of a weekly provincial newspaper. It explains not only the acuity of his writing, but also his blind-spots, things about the culture which he simply could not grasp. John Gibson was a difficult and enigmatic figure, both for his readers, whom he infuriated and thrilled in equal measure, and for those of us who remain fascinated by the legacy of this English arriviste who claimed to know Wales better than many of Wales's own Welsh leaders. So, the following portrait of Sir John Gibson consists of three parts. Firstly, I want to throw some light on where he came from, and what he came into. Secondly, I would like to make some remarks about Gibson the journalist, or perhaps more accurately, the newspaperman, since he was of course an able editor and a successful proprietor as well as a trenchant writer. Finally, I want to return to the notion of Gibson as an outsider, as an awkward, uncomfortable presence in late-Victorian and Edwardian Wales.

What do we know of his early life? He was born in Lancaster on 14 February 1841. His father, also John Gibson, was a maker of silk hats who died in Gibson's early childhood.

His mother, Dorothy Gradwell, was a worker in a cotton mill. Following the death of her first husband, she returned to work in the mill, and was apparently the first woman in Lancaster to work four looms simultaneously. Previously only men had been given such responsibility, and it is at least conceivable that Gibson's later preoccupation with women's social as well as political rights may have stemmed from this childhood experience. But, by all accounts, it was not the happiest or the most fulfilling time in his life. He attended school only sporadically, and then only half-time. He was left handed, and was punished by the cane for failing to write with his right hand. In later life, he readily confessed to have been a remarkably poor scholar. 'When questions were put in mental arithmetic', he recalled shortly before his death, 'boys would give the correct answer before I had got hold of the question... My handwriting was so bad that when I went to work at Newall's where I served my apprenticeship I could not address parcels ... I do not think I was unintelligent', he reflected, 'but knowledge seemed unintelligible.' Nevertheless, by the age of eleven he had learnt to read and, characteristically, had started to question things. His stepfather, he remembered, took in Lloyd's Weekly News, then edited by Douglas Jerrold, and the two would discuss and argue about its contents. 'In this way', he recalled, 'I got hold of a mass of information which was of no use at school but was of priceless value in the formation of my mind and in enabling me to express myself.' One more example, if further examples were needed, of the enormous importance of newspapers in the self-education of Victorian working people. By now Gibson was running errands for local shops and selling newspapers on the streets. Like the Canadian Max Aitken, who later became the newspaper baron Lord Beaverbrook, Gibson also became hooked on the romantic notion of becoming a journalist by hawking newspapers on the streets of his home town. It was at that moment that he began to organise his considerable intellectual resources for the job in hand. He recognised above all that his early education had been a disaster. A mastery of the English language was essential to journalism, and it was a skill he would have to acquire in order to achieve his ambition. Not for the first time in the nineteenth century, the poor scholar turned to self-education as a means of



Sir John Gibson, editor of the Cambrian News. (by courtesy of the National Library of Wales)

social mobility. But acquiring a mastery of written English was not the only task that faced him. Perhaps even more onerous was that of gaining entry into his chosen career. The commonest route to journalism in Britain at the time, and particularly so in the provincial weeklies, was through the printing trade. Thus, at fourteen, Gibson progressed from errand boy and street seller to an apprenticeship as printer at Newall's printshop in Lancaster. The seven-year apprenticeship to 'the mysteries of the printer's craft' began in 1854, an exciting time for journalists. The Crimean War was boosting the demand for foreign news throughout Britain, and would shortly bring down the Aberdeen government, and in 1855 the remaining penny duty on newspapers, a relic of the Stamp Acts that had sought to price newspapers and the information they contained out of the reach of the poor, was finally removed, leading to a new free-market

in British journalism. Demand increased exponentially, and suddenly it was a good time to aspire to journalism as a career. But by the end of his long apprenticeship, circumstances had changed somewhat. By the close of 1861, when Gibson began to search for work, the cotton famine had come to Lancaster. He later recalled his period of unemployment in the town between Christmas 1861 and early February 1862 as the longest six weeks of his life. But he was fortunate. In February 1862, aged twenty one, he was taken on as a journeyman printer in Leeds.

Freed from the constraints of his terms of apprenticeship, and free also to re-invent himself in a new city on the Yorkshire side of the Pennines, Gibson began to engage in a variety of activities. He became an enthusiastic member of the Leeds branch of the Young Men's Christian Association, where debates were regularly held on important topics of the day. At one such discussion, not surprisingly on the American Civil War, Gibson, against his better judgement, advocated the case of the Southern States against that of the North, an experience which not only left him a deeply committed supporter of Abraham Lincoln and of the Republic versus the Confederacy, but also taught him an important lesson which he was to remember as a journalist in Aberystwyth, which was never publicly to defend a case to which he was personally opposed. Thus his programme of self-education continued, although he found it difficult and slow. He was also aware that, given the demands of his job, his educational progress would continue to be slow, and that time was beginning to run out. In the midst of all this, of working by day as a journeyman printer, and continuing his education in the evenings, a remarkable offer was made to him by one of his evening class tutors. He was to be given a grant to attend St Bee's College in Cumberland for four years as a full-time student. It was an extraordinary opportunity, surely one to be grasped firmly with both hands. At the end of four years, moreover, he would have a permanent job as an ordained minister of the Anglican church. There was only one problem: Gibson was a Congregationalist. Even so, the decision whether or not to accept the offer was not an easy one to make. In the words of a friend, that night Gibson 'went to Wodehouse Moor and literally rolled on the ground in agony of mind. To put the

things he had hungered for away from him seemed too cruel and he tried to think of some way of escape. There was none. He returned to his lodgings and wrote the letter which condemned him to ignorance and the life of a printer'. Having turned down the opportunity of a lifetime, Gibson found it difficult to settle back into his job at Leeds, and, following the example of many other printers at the time, took to the life of a tramping artisan, moving from one printshop to another, from one town to another, wherever demand or opportunity led. Intending eventually to emigrate to New Zealand, Gibson found himself instead in Oswestry. With a few short breaks, he was to stay in Wales for the remainder of his life. Taken on as a journeyman printer with the Oswestry Advertizer in 1863, he soon began to contribute articles to the paper. He quarrelled with the owners in 1864, and continued his peripatetic life as a journeyman in the north west until he returned to the Advertizer at Oswestry the following year. Here, once more, he threw himself into social activities. He established a friendly society and a housing scheme for workmen which enabled them to become houseowners. He was also in demand as a preacher, and gave non-sectarian sermons twice each Sunday in Congregationalist, Primitive Methodist and other independent chapels. This experience, by all accounts, made him a lucid public speaker, but it also served to alienate him from many of the faithful. A friend recalled that Gibson at that time would often receive 'hints that his sermons were not what were called gospel sermons, and the more he read and thought the more heterodox his utterance became'. His skills as a communicator may have been honed by the experience, but so was his scepticism and his increased preoccupation with political solutions to social and religious problems. Each one had its part to play in the making of a late-Victorian newspaper editor.

In 1873 Gibson was sent to Aberystwyth, 'somewhat against his own inclination', to manage and edit the Cambrian News, a satellite paper originally established at Bala in 1860 as the Merioneth Herald, becoming the Merionethshire Standard in 1864 and the Cambrian News in 1869. The paper at that time was split-printed, that is to say it consisted of four pages of material reprinted directly from the parent paper, the Oswestry Advertizer, with the addition of a few columns of news from

Merionethshire and Cardiganshire. It was not a promising posting. But Gibson was given considerable free rein, and he did begin for the first time to think and act like an editor, particularly in setting up a news gathering network of local correspondents in his new catchment area. Circulation began to increase, thanks largely to the extension of the railway network which had reached Aberystwyth in 1864, and which from 1867 had allowed the paper to penetrate new markets for sales and advertisements in the coastal towns of Merionethshire and as far north as south-west Caernarfonshire, the 'armpit of Wales', as one historian has put it, where a young David Lloyd George was hungrily eyeing the world around him. After seven years hard work, Gibson had established an efficient distribution network. By 1880 the paper was being sold by grocers, drapers and in post offices throughout Cardiganshire, from Llanddewibrefi and Cardigan in the south to Tregaron and Cwmystwyth in the east and north-east. The Cambrian Coast line not only carried bundles of the paper to sellers along the coast of Merioneth, but also to pickup points along the way which took them deep inland to Bala, Corwen and Ffestiniog. In Caernarfonshire there were agents in Bangor, Caernarfon, Cricieth, Dolwyddelan and Pwllheli, and in Porthmadog there were three agents, including a publishing office run by David Lloyd. The mid-Wales line naturally took the paper to Newtown. Welshpool, and from there to Oswestry and Wrexham. Agents were also secured for the Welsh in their diaspora in London, Liverpool, Chester, Manchester and Birmingham.3

What did the Cambrian News look like in the late 1870s? As was customary, the first page was devoted to advertisements: 'Phillips and Son's Original Manufacturers of the Celebrated Dandelion Coffee'; 'Potatoes, potatoes, potatoes. Just arrived A Splendid Cargo, per the S.S. "Welsh Girl", Consisting of Finest French White and the Celebrated Blackwood Blues and also Prime Parcel of Onions. Such Quality has not been imported here these many years. Apply to Evans Brothers, 9 Market Street, Aberystwyth. Terms: Strictly cash'; The Allan and White Star Lines offered 'the shortest ocean passage to America'; and notices advertising the services of schools and grocers, builders and tailors offered a shop window for Aberystwyth's

bustling and growing commercial life. Pages two and five reported the local news, and on page three, farmer's markets. Page four: more advertisements and the all-important editorial columns, all-important for the editor, that is. Page six reported political meetings and social events, while the seventh page offered a miscellany under such sub-headings as 'Tipyn o Bob Peth', 'Facts and Fancies', 'Bye-Gones', 'Football', 'Sport', 'Farmer's Column', and the 'London letter'. The last page, in some respects the most important of all, carried news from the magistrates and county courts and, on the left hand of the back page, Gibson's own remorselessly hard-hitting, satirical column, 'Up and Down the Coast', printed under the byline 'Perry Winkle'.

So much for the catchment area and the format. What of the immediate context, the town of Aberystwyth itself? Prophetically, Gibson's first editorial as the paper's owner in 1880 had this to say about the role of newspapers in society: 'A newspaper is at the same time a public institution and a private business adventure.' That much was surely uncontroversial, an axiom of the Victorian 'Fourth Estate' after the abolition of taxation in the early 1860s. But Gibson then went on to say this: 'An independent newspaper is a valuable, though sometimes unpleasant, possession in a community.' I will return to the question of its value and its 'unpleasant' aspects later, but what of the community which took possession of the Cambrian News after 1873? It was a town of some 6,720 people, which we can divide very roughly into three social groups. The first we might describe as a combination of an entrepreneurial and a professional middle class, originally drawn to the area by lead mining. Secondly, we can identify a strong craft sector servicing the surrounding industries, including of course sea transport. Finally, there was a private service sector, focused on tourism and shopkeeping. John Gibson made the Cambrian News preeminently the paper of this commercial middle class.

The community which he entered in 1873 was already served by a weekly newspaper, the *Aberystwyth Observer*, run by John Morgan and established in 1858. This paper, which had seen off a previous rival, the *Aberystwyth Times*, in 1870, coexisted uneasily with the *Cambrian News* until May 1915, when it was incorporated into the *Montgomery County Times*. There

was also in the town a tradition of what the Americans called 'muscular journalism' dating back to the activities of an earlier newspaper hell-raiser, David Owen, Brutus, schoolmaster and editor of Lleuad yr Oes in 1828 and 1829. You will recall that Brutus was later the controversial editor of the conservative paper Yr Haul until his death in 1866. Aberystwyth in the late nineteenth-century was also a town that could display a vibrant intellectual life. It was the home of John Jones (Ivon), who agitated in support of the evicted tenant-farmers; George Eyre Evans (1857-1939), Unitarian minister, historian and secretary of the Carmarthenshire Antiquarian Society, and his protégé David Ivon Jones, Unitarian and a founder of the South African Communist Party; Henry Tobit Evans (1844-1908), editor of the Carmarthen Journal at the turn of the century, a Quaker and, with David Davies, Llandinam, a leader of the Cardiganshire Liberal Unionists. One could no doubt name many others. But what is significant is that people such as these were shaking up the town before the University College was established in 1872. Gibson and the academics who gatecrashed into the town virtually at the same time certainly did not initiate a political and cultural renaissance in Aberystwyth, but they did accelerate a process that was already underway.

What, then, of its politics? Aberystwyth was for the most part a Liberal town, from the grandees of Gogerddan to the noisy polemicists of the Aberystwyth Junior Radical Club, who in 1889 condemned 'the inhuman treatment' of the 'parliamentary representatives of the Irish People'. 5 A Liberal Club was formed in 1891. But the dominance of Liberalism did not mean that the town was free of political strife. On the contrary, it was alive with political debate. But as Professor Ieuan Gwynedd Jones has shown, Aberystwyth politics did not cleave along conventional Tory - Liberal lines, but rather into the old and the new. Gibson was undeniably one of the newer men representing and articulating, in his own inimitable way, perhaps, the solid, lower middle class core of the town's population. The emergence on to the political stage, at municipal and national levels, of such new social forces indicated that the period between the 1870s and the 1890s was one of significant and far-reaching change. Gibson once told a story of how he and Mynyddog (the poet and musician

Richard Davies from Llanbryn-mair), who died in 1877, had once met at Dyfi Junction. One can imagine the scene, the two men huddled together, deep in conversation. Mynyddog had surprised Gibson by telling him that 'the Welsh people are slaves, made drunk with religion. They neither understand you nor me, and do not really want freedom'. 'Since then', Gibson observed excitedly in 1887, 'there has been a change in public feeling and the people do want freedom and are not so religiously drunk as they were.' The phrase 'religiously drunk', incidentally, is one of the many deliciously mischievous 'thought-charged aphorisms', as one admirer once put it, that Gibson delighted so much in writing.

The change Gibson had witnessed had taken many forms. Six years before his arrival in Aberystwyth, Evan Matthew Richards had won the seat for the Liberals at the extraordinary General Election in 1868, and had done so with the express approval of the Gogerddan estate. The town swung to the Conservatives in what was nationally a good year for Disraeli in 1874, but Aberystwyth was won again for the Liberals by David Davies, Llandinam, in 1885, beating the Tory squire Vaughan Davies who, incidentally, finally won the seat in 1895 as a Liberal. But closer to home than parliamentary politics, other, equally significant, changes were taking place. The School Boards were in the process of being formed, sanitary reform and housing were firmly on the political agenda, and the growth of local democracy through local government was becoming a distinct possibility. Vote by ballot had been conceded in 1872, and Nonconformity intensified its fight for religious equality. As one contemporary wrote, the 'Liberals were beginning to rub their eyes in the light of the coming dawn'.

John Gibson was there, just as the sun was rising. By 1877 he was an active member of the Liberal Committee for the Aberystwyth polling district, and in the same year he was one of the largest contributors to the Aberystwyth Liberal Party accounts. Significantly, only four years after his arrival in Aberystwyth, he proposed to the Liberal Committee that no future candidate should be acceptable unless he supported disestablishment and disendowment of the 'English Church'. The proposal was not carried.

Already by this time, Gibson had made his mark. Like all good journalists, he had become closely and personally acquainted with a vast number of people, some of them clearly marked for political prominence. This, and his grasp of detail, helped him to understand political formations and how they worked, and added cogency, authority and critical thrust to his journalism. But this had its less attractive side; in short, he got up people's noses. Thomas Jones famously noted that 'every public man in the counties of Cardigan and Merioneth lived in fear of being dipped in his inkpot',10 and in some quarters he became reviled as 'that Universal Blister'. His propensity to rub people up the wrong way began to be made apparent to the good people of Aberystwyth almost as soon as he arrived. He was appalled by the untidy and insanitary state of the town, and had the temerity to say so. He not only wounded the town's pride, but also angered those engaged in the tourist trade. correspondent to the Wrexham Guardian appealed for journalists in north Wales to stop using Gibson's exposés of poor sanitary conditions in Aberystwyth as a means of boosting the tourist trade in the north. Allegations were made that Gibson's articles were being distributed on railway stations in Chester and Oswestry in order to persuade tourists to cancel their visits and take their holidays instead in Llandudno, Colwyn Bay and Bangor.

Later, in 1879, he upset another section of the population by pouring ridicule on the otherwise dignified heads of members of the 'Smokey Faced Club', which he re-christened 'the Thirsty Club', a gentlemen's association whose annual party at a local hotel had been extended beyond the normal drinking-up time of 11.00 pm, thanks to the presence at the party of two magistrates who signed documents on the spot exempting the landlord from any by-law. In other words, it was a legalised lock-in. What annoyed Gibson was not so much the drinking as the hypocrisy of the magistrates. Thanks to Gibson's needling, the Thirsty Club was lampooned even in the London press, including *Punch*. A follow-up story, 'The Festive Season', printed on 9 January 1880, led to a libel case, culminating in 30 January 1880 with Gibson's apology and an undertaking to pay the legal costs of the case. When the apology appeared, a crowd rampaged through

the town behind the Militia Band playing the Dead March. Gibson's effigy was carried through the streets and burnt on the beach, and a rather cruel cartoon was distributed depicting his wife as a widow and his children as orphans. It should be noted that this was not an unusual fate for an unpopular character in rural Ceredigion in the early and mid-nineteenth century, but by the early 1880s this kind of charivari had become a much less The Oswestry-based owners of the common occurrence. Cambrian News, not unnaturally, were becoming restive with their maverick editor, and accepted an offer by him to buy the paper. Shortly after the anti-Gibson demonstration, Alderman John James had suggested that the paper be bought by a local consortium, which could keep a closer eye on what Gibson was up to. Gibson, however, was not a consortium man, and £7,000 was raised from various sources, including David Davies, Llandinam, for the purchase of the paper. The paper, now owned outright by John Gibson himself, was printed in Aberystwyth for the first time in May 1880.

The responsibilities of ownership, however, did not blunt the sharpness of his pen. Though a Nonconformist and a Liberal, he continued to harrass both Nonconformists and Liberals. Referring to Y Goleuad, the organ of the Calvinistic Methodists, as the Family Herald 'because', he explained, 'it always goes for the Rev. T. C. Edwards and his family - the Charles o'r Bala clique', he was puzzled by the hostility of their reaction.11 And having charged T. E. Ellis with having 'ridden to personal success on the back of his nation' on the occasion of his elevation to the office of Liberal Chief Whip in 1894, he was dismayed that Ellis no longer regarded the Cambrian News as a newspaper worthy of Liberal support. 12 In other respects, too, he shocked and angered those who might have been his allies. He disrupted public meetings, and at least on one occasion egged on students to heckle an address to the College by David Davies, Llandinam.

I doubt, however, whether we should be as critical of his conduct as were many of his contemporaries. Associated with his endless agitation were some powerfully redeeming features. Firstly, more than anything else, he despised apathy. He firmly believed that no democracy could operate without the

conscientious participation of the people. His job as a journalist was to awaken his readers to that fact. On 11 January 1901, for example, he once more printed a punishing atack on his own customers. 'We are at war in South Africa. There have been more than thirteen thousand deaths among our soldiers ... A hundred millions of money have been squandered. All sorts of wrong and hardships have been endured...and yet the inhabitants of Aberystwyth, or Lampeter, or Dolgelley, or Pwllheli, or Corwen, or Ffestiniog ... have themselves suffered nothing ... we are apathetic, just apathetic.' This, Gibson argued, simply would not do. His task was to mobilise opinion, and to construct a viable, critical and democratic political culture in the government of Wales and of Britain as a whole.

In so doing, and in addition to his satire and opinionated interventions in local disputes, Gibson innovated in highly positive ways as a Liberal journalist. For one thing, he thought in a surprisingly modern manner about the reporting of politics, which he regarded not only as covering the speeches of local political leaders, but far more comprehensively in terms of developing a Liberal press strategy. Many of these ideas were developed in a correspondence extending over forty years with Stuart Rendel, an artillery expert and a director of Sir William Armstrong's arms manufacturing company, who won Montgomeryshire for the Liberals in 1880, a seat held for the previous eighty years by the Williams-Wynn family. Rendel was a key figure in late nineteenth-century Welsh politics, becoming the first President of the North Wales Liberal Federation in 1886, and, in the following year, the first President of the Welsh National Council. He was honoured by Gladstone with a peerage in 1894. For Rendel, the primary function of the Liberal press was to help smooth his road to Parliament, particularly at election times. Writing to his friend and successor as member for Montgomeryshire, A. C. Humphreys-Owen, he noted with approval in October 1879 how the Oswestry Advertizer, then still the owners of the Cambrian News, had covered his activities. 'In the report of my speeches', he wrote, 'I have noticed an able hand ... a word softened here and a phrase dropped out there ... Of what service a first-rate provincial paper can be to the country and how highly repaid.'13 Seven years later, he urged

John Gibson to put the substance of a telegram into a leader column. To his astonishment, Gibson refused, reminding Rendel that he wrote 'leading articles, but never ... in the shape of speeches'.14 But, by the late 1880s, Gibson was in any case at odds with his party over its cavalier treatment of sympathetic From his point of view, it was essentially a newspapers. financial problem. In confidential letters to Stuart Rendel, he painstakingly laid out his case for a full review of the Liberal press. The Cambrian News was sold at a price that was well below its actual value, and while advertisements guarded against losses, Gibson calculated that to cover the expense of producing and distributing the paper he 'ought to sell it at 4½ a copy and sell over 3,000 a week'. The paper actually sold for one penny, and it is doubtful if the circulation could have much exceeded three thousand copies weekly. If the paper was to continue in business, he argued, additional revenue would have to be forthcoming from other sources. The financial difficulties had been exacerbated by the passing in 1883 of the Corrupt and Illegal Practices (Prevention) Act, which prevented substantial sums of money from being donated by parliamentary candidates. According to Gibson's account, 'under the old system, if a candidate wanted to contest a constituency in which he was comparatively unknown, he came down as soon as Parliament was dissolved, set all the printers at work, practically took possession of the newspapers for the time being, hired an army of clerks and lecturers and made himself known at a cost of £8,000 or £20,000 as the case might be'. Thus, an ailing newspaper could repay its accumulated debts as well as enable the favoured candidate to assume a high profile in the constituency. After 1883, however, the new law governing the conduct of elections severely reduced a newspaper's income by institutionalising the election agent and introducing stricter codes regarding election expenses. Candidates' agents, anxious to work within smaller budgets, required newspapers to tender for the insertion of a reduced number of candidates' addresses. Also, papers were expected to cover election campaigns at their own expense, which in Gibson's case would have entailed hiring more reporters and issuing special editions. Election coverage was thus becoming a prohibitively expensive undertaking.

involving 'serious pecuniary loss upon newspapers'. An inevitable consequence of these changes, Gibson warned, was that the local press would lose interest in politics, and even as committed a Liberal as himself could not afford to take the financial risks involved in supporting a political party. In 1887, exasperated by the fact that 'services rendered to the Liberal Party...are requited with brutal neglect', he pleaded with the party leadership. through Rendel, to devise a system whereby not only could the costs of political journalism in local newspapers be defrayed, but the balance in the relationship between the press and the party might reach a new state of equilibrium. Gibson proposed that Government advertisements, normally published exclusively in the London press, should also be printed in provincial papers, and that local authorities likewise should be compelled to advertise their proceedings, accounts, and so forth, in the local press. He also suggested that the power to place advertisements should be taken away from the public auditors and the poor law districts and given instead to unspecified 'local bodies'. With regard to the Liberal Party, Gibson took the view that both the parliamentary party and the local associations should be 'urged to take interest in their papers' and to send their own items of news to the local press. Finally, a debate within the party should reconsider 'the whole question of newspapers and reporting during contested elections', which would include the possibility of candidates being charged for reports, publicity and all other material at a standard rate per column. Henceforth, he implied, supportive political journalism was a commodity that would have to be paid for. 15 A Liberal press policy as envisaged by John Gibson was neither enacted nor framed by the Welsh Liberals. but the correspondence does reveal a more cautious, practical and forward-looking side to the 'Universal Blister' than a reading of his journalism alone might suggest.

But even here, in his public utterances, there are revealing instances of self-reflection. In his 'New Year's Address', of 2 January 1880, the thirty-nine year old Gibson greeted his readers in an unorthodox and challenging way. It was yet another attempt to educate his readers, but it did not make for comfortable reading. I would ask you to listen very carefully to the style of Gibson's writing:

I beg leave to say a few words to you on Newspaper Readers. As this address is all about yourselves, and what I think about you, it ought to be interesting...The newspaper reader is too much inclined to underestimate the influence of newspapers, just as he is inclined to underestimate the skill and capital embarked in the production of newspapers worthy of the name.

Gibson then proceeded to expound an astonishingly sophisticated theory of press influence.

The influence of a newspaper depends on its bias - not its political or religious bias - but its general bias. A newspaper has a tone which finds its way not only into the leading articles, but into the news paragraphs, the cuttings from other papers, the local reports &c. The newspaper reader cannot choose what he will have placed before him, nor can he choose what shall be prominent and what shall be obscure. Every week there is placed before him a mass of matter which exercises influence over him, and tends to mould his mind. The reader is unconscious of the power that is wielded, not so much by the editorial opinions, as by the recorded facts. The reports carry pleasure, pain, dismay, or hope according to their nature and the condition of the readers.

The habit of newspaper reading, however, by 'normalising' the cheap supply of news and comment, had inured readers to its proper role in society. He continued:

You have come to look at the newspapers so much as a mere matter of course that you forget much of its meaning and fail to recognise most of its significance. You read the parts which are interesting to you, but you forget that all the rest of the columns are interesting to somebody else, and that if you were to read carefully you might participate in that interest. It would be an easy task to show how expensive and difficult a labour the production of a newspaper is, but I am mainly desirous

of explaining to you that there is a great deal in a newspaper that the proprietor does not think about. that the editor does not consciously put there, that the readers are unaware of, and that nobody detects, except occasionally. There is in the newspaper the spirit of the times - that indescribable something which will reveal to future readers just the sort of people you are. That spirit is in good and bad papers, in the feeble and the strong. the Liberal and the Tory, the Conformist and Nonconformist. It is to newspapers just what life is to men - a common possession that neither makes nor mars, but is a simple condition of existence. Yet the spirit of the times is everything in the long run. The financial success or failure of a paper depends on what is called the power to reflect the spirit of the times; but that spirit is editorial and sub-editorial - mainly the latter. Now and then the editor is stronger than all, and then he reigns and has power; but that is only at long intervals. Readers do not think of it, but human lives are wrought into the texture of newspapers, and that is the reason why even weak newspapers and papers that are mean and untruthful are stronger than individual men - stronger than the proprietor or the editor. newspapers are young yet, but the time will come when they will be older than six or seven generations of men. Think of the power and authority of a newspaper that has delivered its message steadily week after week for say five hundred years! This paper which you are reading, and this weekly letter. Do you think you can measure their influence? These words are read by the young, who cannot resist their influence, as well as by you who imagine you have great power in that direction. Next week, next year, the year after, the year after that, and untold years afterwards the newspaper comes with its silent message... When a book is written it remains, but a newspaper grows, is many sided, has a sort of collective life, is moral or immoral, like a man, and reflects the passions, hates, joys, sorrows, and hopes of mankind.

Then he subtly explains the way in which a journalist like himself can wield real social power:

> I will try to make clear to you a curious feature of newspapers. Whatever appears in these columns, or in the columns of any other paper, is common property. The editor of a newspaper may expound a theory of great originality, and of incalculable importance to the nation. One of you may take the theory, adopt it, and in two or three years may make a speech at a public meeting, and expound that self-same theory. The editor will see your speech is reported, and will praise your theory, and bring out its strong points, but will be quite silent as to the real author of the theory. An editor is a being who makes reputations for other men. He daily sees his ideas appropriated and acted upon, and hears himself abused, and yet praises his detractors, and allows them to use unquestioned the hard won fruits of his brains ... More than once or twice it has been my lot, first of all to urge a thought until one of my readers took it up and adopted it, then to praise my copier as if he were the original discoverer, and afterwards to be lectured by him for not doing justice to his idea!! This may seem hard to some of you, but it is great fun to me. Almost all readers talk as if the good things newspapers contain were the spontaneous growth of a prolific soil - mere weeds of the fancy. There is, however, a real man - a throbbing suffering human being just like yourself behind every newspaper, but you cannot realize the fact. My Dear Reader, you surely do not think that all this mass of type has arranged itself; that there has been no care in omitting, no judgement in inserting - but that the whole thing comes to you as a sort of miscellaneous jumble presided over by Accident. And now, my friends, I am entering on a new year. Some of you have been reading this column as long as you have been reading anything. You think you know me.

Now, that is the clearest piece of self-examination by any non-Fleet Street journalist that I know of. It repays careful rereading. But were you not struck by the sense of his own invisibility, his self-effacement, his deliberate yet hurtful reduction in the public mind to the newspaper itself? Twelve years later, in October 1892, Gibson, then 51 years old, wrote privately to Rendel of the refusal of his readers to adopt him as their spokesman. 'Still they do not accept me as their exponent ... although they do everything I want because they never see me...I am only a voice, and they often forget that I even have human needs and feelings'. ¹⁶

One of the reasons for their refusal to accept him may have been his attitude to the Welsh language. He made little attempt to learn Welsh, although Welsh columns did appear in the pages of the Cambrian News. He was scathing on the subject of the 1891 language census, accusing Welsh speakers of lying in order artificially to boost the numbers of the monoglot Welsh. 'Nobody can either kill or keep alive a language', he pronounced with his usual self-assurance in January 1894, but they can lie about it.'17 'What matter does it make', he asked in exasperation, 'nationally, whether the people speak Welsh or English?'18 Now this, I think, is significant, in the sense that the things about Wales that he rejected are as revealing about him as are the things that he embraced. Wales was his world, yet it was not. He, perhaps more so than his critics, was aware of this paradox. His attachment to Stuart Rendel may, partly at least, also be explained in terms of what Gibson regarded as being a shared sense of personal dislocation, even of alienation. In 1887 he wrote to warn Rendel that most of the leaders of Welsh Liberalism were opportunists, 'professed politicians' who would 'thwart' him because he was not Welsh born. 19 Whether or not this is true is almost immaterial. What is significant is that Gibson believed it to be true.

His unease in Wales may also be shown by his constant references to his need to 'escape' from his 'exile'. And he succeeded in doing so, though only briefly, in 1891. During a period of recuperation following a surgical operation carried out in London, he began writing to the London papers, including the Daily News, the Chronicle, the Star, the City Press and the

Atheneum. 'I have, I think, definitely turned my face in the direction of change', he wrote confidently to Rendel, adding modestly that '... I do not want to begin by editing the Times', whilst clearly aspiring to a position as a political columnist on a Fleet Street newspaper.20 However, it was not to be. He finally returned to what he called his 'long exile' in Aberystwyth in October 1893.21 The following year, he wrote again to Rendel, now Lord Rendel, a letter which even today expresses the man's heart-rending weariness and resignation. 'My paper is successful as far as it goes', he informed Rendel, 'and I have earned a fairly clean living in a land whose people are opposed to me in nationality and religion and temperament ... I have my faults. First I am an Englishman. Second, I have not, in bigoted Wales, conformed to the conventional religion of the day, and have aggravated my offence by expressing my opinions freely. Third, it has been my fate to fight many national idols'.22

A conscientious biographer, acquainted with psychoanalytical theory, would rightly insist that it is possible to interpret these feelings of estrangement in a variety of ways. But however we choose to explain these private signs of disappointment and low self-esteem, it is quite clear from the surviving evidence that continuing ill-health played its part in eroding Gibson's spirit. From at least the late 1880s he suffered from what contemporaries called the petit mal, attacks of epilepsy which occurred every six or seven weeks. In March 1894 he confessed that 'my task is too heavy for me, and I have known since 1891 that I am paying with life for the means of living ... I had a debt, and it had to be paid. It is paid: net result, periodical fits of unconsciousness'.23 Further debts of £4,000 were incurred the following year in the building of new printing works.24 In December 1895 he remarked in a disturbingly bitter tone that 'anything I do with the paper is only possible because I have frankly accepted poverty, obscurity and friendlessness. I expect nothing, and therefore can say just what I think is true'.25 For Gibson, editorial independence had been bought at a terrible price.

Also the newspaper world in Wales was changing. In July 1896, Gibson, along with many others, including Lloyd George, T. E. Ellis, Humphreys-Owen and F. E. Hamer of the *Manchester*

Guardian, had honoured the great Thomas Gee by contributing generously to his testimonial fund. Gee's death two years later marked the passing of an era. Gibson soldiered on. The circulation of the Cambrian News had climbed to around 7,000 by 1904, but Gibson did not appear to be cheered by its success. In November 1907 he complained that he had not been away from Aberystwyth for eight or nine years, but just go on writing, writing, writing endlessly. If I am too ill to get up I write in bed, but every week I produce the eight columns...Life is a sad profession'. 27

But then, miraculously, Gibson found a new cause, or, to be more accurate, rediscovered an old cause in a dynamic new form. What he found, indeed could hardly fail to find, was the Welshman who was turning British politics upside down: David Lloyd George. Gibson and Lloyd George had been on the same political wavelength since at least the early 1890s. Both were natural polemicists, both were ambivalent about the more puritan aspects of their Nonconformity, both were democrats with a strong aversion to Labourist socialism. In May 1909, on the occasion of Lloyd George's budget, Gibson wrote ecstatically in a powerful leader that 'it is out of the wealth of the rich and not out of the poverty of the needy that, according to the budget, the financial requirements of the country are to be met. This is the great principle Mr Lloyd George has embodied, and it should be driven home from every Liberal platform and in every Liberal newspaper in the United Kingdom'. Already Gibson was in no doubt that Lloyd George was one of Britain's supreme statesmen, and two years later, in 1911, he regarded Lloyd George's National Insurance Scheme as 'a great triumph'.28 His support for Lloyd George was unflagging virtually throughout the Edwardian years, and in August 1914 he thought Lloyd George's conduct at the beginning of what he termed a 'senseless war' to be 'strong and wise'.29

Despite Lloyd George's appeal to the London Welsh on 19 September 1914 to defend the little 'five foot five nations' of Europe, Gibson was appalled by the turn of events brought about by the First World War, particularly in Aberystwyth. The shameful harassment of Professor Herman Ethé in October 1914 aroused in him the anger that had so characterised his

youthful and more exuberant journalism. Ethé, an exile from Bismarck's Germany, and an erudite linguist who had served the College devotedly since 1875, deserved better than to be hounded violently out of Aberystwyth. In a tantalising piece entitled provocatively 'What do I think of the war?', printed in the Perry Winkle column on 23 October 1914, Gibson confessed that 'in the days of peril silence is best'. Yet he could not resist the challenge. His defence of Ethé was as courageous as it is memorable. 'I think the German Emperor is mad...but that does not seem to me to be a good reason why a German barber should not cut my hair, or why a German professor should not teach Welsh students how to speak the German language'. Then, at the very end he blurts out the truth, taking little heed of his own prudent advice. 'I have not said what I think about the war, but I have appealed, I hope not in vain, for unity, and tolerance and enthusiastic action against this blasted European crime'. The following week, he printed a splendid article by Idris Bell condemning the xenophobic anti-German disturbances in the town. Even in days of peril, Gibson could not avoid controversy when things that he cared deeply about were at stake.

In the course of the following month his health deteriorated rapidly, and by Christmas 1914 he was a seriously ill man. But Gibson's capacity to astonish was even then not exhausted. On 1 January 1915, it was announced that he was to receive a knighthood. In a New Year's Honours List praised by The Times as being 'almost entirely free from political honours', Gibson was the only journalist among the sixteen persons knighted, the others including Frank Dyson, the Astronomer Royal, and the novelist and poet, Henry John Newbolt. Precisely why Gibson was singled out for the honour remains unclear. There does appear to be a certain inconsistency in the distribution of honours at this time. Edward Anwyl, Professor of Celtic at the College, had been knighted in 1911, but despite the strong backing of Lord Rendel, Sir John Williams, David Davies and even Lloyd George, Asquith had refused to extend the same honour to the College Principal, T. F. Roberts. Asquith, incidentally, had visited Aberystwyth in November 1907, when he was still Chancellor of the Exchequer, to preside at the official opening of the Edward Davies Chemistry laboratory in Buarth

Road, an event extensively covered by the *Cambrian News*. Stuart Rendel, Gibson's confidant of forty years, had died in 1913, and it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Gibson's strong support for Lloyd George might have had something to do with his inclusion in the first Honours List of the war years. But whatever the reason, Gibson, sadly, did not have much time to enjoy the honour. He died on 18 July 1915 at his home in North Parade. He was seventy four. At the funeral, blinds were drawn along North Parade and Lanbadarn Road as the cortège made its way to the town cemetery.

What, then, was Gibson's achievement, or, to put it another, less loaded, way, what is the nature of his legacy? It should be noted that, in January 1915, a long-standing colleague answered this question by drawing up his own list. First, Gibson had secured 'for the people of his adopted country a fuller measure of civil and religious and national liberty'. Secondly, he had introduced into that country 'a great breadth of thought, and a larger toleration for new and unconventional points of view than could have been deemed possible half a century' previously. What is interesting here is the absence of any reference to the provision of news or the establishment of a successful commercial enterprise. Journalism is regarded, in a typically Victorian way, as a moral crusade. I don't think we can answer the same question in the same way today. Perhaps that is our loss.

But I think we can say two things. The first is that he succeeded in establishing what became under his editorship a remarkably good newspaper, better, perhaps, than any town of Aberystwyth's size deserved. His obituarist remarked in July 1915 that 'the *Cambrian News...* in thought and treatment of high affairs, (was worthy of) any capital in Europe, or any city in America and the greatest unrecognised advertisement of Aberystwyth'. If one disregards an understandable measure of hyperbole, that perception of the paper's success was perhaps Gibson's main problem. A rival newspaper, *The Welsh Gazette*, was started in April 1899 by George Rees, himself a Gibson protégé, with powerful political support from those like Tom Ellis, whom Gibson had at some time or other upset or reviled. The *Gazette* saw itself as a local newspaper, unlike the *Cambrian*

News which, rightly in some respects, they regarded as a regional, or even a national newspaper, more akin, perhaps, to the Western Mail than, say, to the Montgomeryshire Express. Gibson would no doubt have preferred to think of himself as a Welsh Delane, and the Cambrian News as his Thunderer. We should perhaps note the coincidence that John Thadeus Delane, the most powerful of all nineteenth-century editors of The Times, died just weeks before Gibson began to negotiate the purchase of the Cambrian News.

Secondly, Gibson was a nineteenth-century democrat, though one who did not court popularity. 'I have no faith except in the masses of the people, and to them I look', he wrote to Rendel in 1887.31 More unexpected was his panegyric on Robert Owen, printed in 1894. 'What is required is that the mind should be freed from prejudice', he wrote, exhorting his readers to 'Read the life of Robert Owen. Think of what he did. A memorial of him is required, not for his sake, but in order that the youth of Wales. and especially the youth of Newtown, may be reminded that they are akin to one of the world's greatest men. Robert Owen was not a man for a village or for a day. He was a man for the world and for all time.' 'Newtown', he added rather wistfully, 'will awake one day.'32 And in a final attack on his renegade bête noire Tom Ellis, he reminded the world that 'the hope of Wales does not lie in her members of Parliament, nor in her few sons and daughters who reach place and power, but in the unknown, unhonoured masses of her people who live beautiful, inglorious lives'. They were, after all, his readers.

Are we any closer to understanding this strange, truculent, often exasperating person? I doubt it. Soon after his death in 1915, a colleague confessed that he had found Gibson to be 'reckless, relentless, cruel oftentimes; but I never could fear him. Neither could I love him and still I was glad that such a prophet was sent by God to Cardiganshire "to search Jerusalem with lanterns".' He was convinced that Gibson was 'conscious of great powers and great virtues, [and] like all prophets, he found no place to receive him'. Well, up to a point perhaps. We must remember, of course, that Aberystwyth did receive him. Yet, remaining until the very end ill at ease with his environment. Gibson was a difficult man for his contemporaries to understand.

What the obituarist was subtly alluding to was the suggestion that the Wales of 1915, stricken as it was by the debilitating effects of an European catastrophe, did not possess the critical means to make sense of a man like John Gibson. Some time in the future, though, he was convinced that Gibson and those like him were sure to be re-evaluated, and embraced as parts of a confident, diverse and complex culture. Looking towards that future, the article concluded with these words: John Gibson will live in the emancipated life of a greater Wales'. That remarkable sentence was written nearly eighty years ago. I wonder sometimes whether we are today sufficiently emancipated to make our peace with John Gibson, a man who, one might justifiably say, was Aberystwyth's necessary outsider.

Aberystwyth

ALED JONES

NOTES

- W. J. Lewis, Born on a Perilous Rock (Aberystwyth, 1980), pp. 115-18; E. L. Ellis, The University College of Wales, Aberystwyth 1872-1972 (Cardiff, 1972), passim; Sir John Gibson, The Emancipation of Women (repr. Llandysul, 1992).
- 2 E. L. Ellis, op. cit., p. 53.
- 3 Cambrian News, 12 January 1915.
- 4 Worrall's Directory of South Wales (Oldham, 1875).
- 5 National Library of Wales (NLW) 5426C. Minutes, Aberystwyth Junior Radical Club, 12 February 1889.
- 6 NLW 19450C/171, Gibson to Rendel, 15 May 1887.
- 7 Cambrian News, 28 July 1915.
- 8 NLW 5424C, NLW 5423B, Minute book, Aberystwyth Liberal Party.
- 9 NLW 5424C.
- 10 Thomas Jones, Leeks and Daffodils (Newtown, 1942), p. 13.
- 11 NLW 20571D/241, Gibson to Rendel, 28 February 1888.
- 12 NLW 20571D/243, Gibson to Rendel, 13 March 1894.
- NLW Glansevern Coll., vol. 1/35, Rendel to H. Owen, 2 October 1879.
- 14 NLW 19450C/165, Gibson to Rendel, 2 December 1886.
- NLW 19450C/167; NLW 19450C/167; NLW 19450C/167. Gibson to Rendel, 21 January 1887. See also A. Jones, 'Reporting Nineteenth-Century Elections: The Gibson-Rendel Correspondence', Journal of Newspaper and Periodical History, vol. iii, no. i, (1986-7), 17-22.
- 16 NLW 19450C/181, Gibson to Rendel, 11 October 1892.
- 17 Cambrian News, 12 January 1894.
- 18 Cambrian News, 19 January 1894.
- 19 NLW 19450C/169, Gibson to Rendel, 19 February 1887.
- 20 NLW 19450C/174, Gibson to Rendel, 16 November 1891.
- 21 NLW 19450C/188, Gibson to Rendel, 9 October 1893.
- 22 NLW 20571D/243, Gibson to Rendel, 13 March 1894.
- 23 *Ibid*.
- 24 NLW 19450C/189, Gibson to Rendel, 30 December 1895.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 NLW 8313B, NLW 8319E, Welsh National Testimonial to Mr. T. Gee.
- 27 NLW 20571D/245, Gibson to Rendel, 7 November 1907.
- 28 Cambrian News, 12 May 1911.
- 29 Cambrian News, 14 August 1914; 11 September 1914.

- 30 Cambrian News, 28 July 1915.
- 31 NLW 19450C/169, Gibson to Rendel, 19 February 1887.
- 32 Cambrian News, 5 January 1894.
- 33 Cambrian News, 28 July 1915.