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WILLIAM POWELL OF NANTEOS AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS IN EARLY NINETEENTH-CENTURY CARDIGANSHIRE

DURING the nineteenth century, and indeed in preceding centuries, most members of landed society aspired to the privilege of representing their county or borough in parliament. This honour, however, was in most cases, and in particular in Cardiganshire, reserved for the few families at the uppermost end of the social spectrum, a position which the Powell family had reached in the eighteenth century. The dominant houses at this time, in addition to Nanteos, were Trawsgoed, Gogerddan and, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Hafod. As the nineteenth century progressed these families were joined by the Lloyd family of Coedmore and Bronwydd and members of the 'new' families whose estates had been bought from non-landed wealth.¹

The parliamentary representation of Cardiganshire at this time was divided into two different constituencies. The first seat was that of the Cardigan borough consisting of the four ancient boroughs of Cardigan, Aberystwyth, Lampeter and Adpar. The remaining voters were represented by the holder of the county seat, the more prestigious of the two. Persons wishing to stand for election were required to have landed property worth at least £600 for the county seat and £300 for the borough seat. Candidates also required sufficient financial resources to fight the occasional contested election. In Cardiganshire it was not unusual for the dominant families to do a deal before an election so that neither seat would be contested. This enabled one seat to be held by the Tories and the other by the Liberals and it also avoided the ruinous costs of a contested election. Even after the Reform Act of 1832 tenants usually voted with their landlords and it was not until the end of the century that the landed stranglehold on politics was loosened.²

It was against this background in 1816 that the young William Powell decided to offer himself as a candidate for the county seat. The vacancy had occurred on the death of Colonel Thomas Johnes of Hafod who had sat since 1796. As was customary, the twenty-eight-year old Powell composed an address 'to the gentlemen, clergy and freeholders of the county of Cardigan' in which he proposed his candidature and asked for their support.³ Following this there was a flurry of activity in which Powell and his agent attempted to build up support in readiness for the poll. The main opponent seems to have been Major Herbert Evans of Highmead near Lampeter, but following much canvassing Powell was selected to stand for election. Both John Beynon and Charles Morgan were employed by Powell to drum up support amongst the other landowners, and in this they were successful.⁴

In the event, Powell was elected at an uncontested election in 1816 and was not opposed at any election for the remainder of his political career. After his election for a fourth time in 1826, Powell wrote a letter of thanks to the electors of the county. 'For the distinguished honour you have conferred upon me by electing me a fourth time as your representative in parliament, accept the expressions of my earnest gratitude.' Powell went on to say that he was supporting a government that had the best interest of the county at heart and would continue to do so.⁵ The years Powell spent in parliament seem to have been uneventful and not enough evidence survives in the Nanteos collection to be able to build a detailed picture of his parliamentary career. Previous to being elected to parliament, Powell had served as High Sheriff of the county in 1810.⁶ This largely ceremonial but money-consuming office involved acting as a returning officer at local polls and arranging the details regarding the holding of assizes and Great Sessions. Powell would have been expected to accommodate and entertain a visiting judge at his own expense.⁷

Later in 1816, the same year that he had been elected to parliament, Powell was appointed Lord Lieutenant and Custos Rotulorum of Cardiganshire. Here now was a man who combined the two most prestigious posts open to a member of landed society and it is fair to say that between 1816 and 1854 Powell was the most important and influential person in the county. The appointment as Lord Lieutenant in 1816 seems to have encouraged Powell to attempt to increase his social standing further, and he began to make discreet enquiries regarding a baronetcy. In a letter on the subject a friend advised Powell to write direct to Lord Liverpool telling him that he felt a baronetcy would be appropriate regarding his social standing in the county. Whether Powell wrote to Lord Liverpool or not, no baronetcy was forthcoming.⁸

In January 1817 Powell was 'commanded' to attend a meeting of the Privy Council at Carlton House, London, to be held on the first of February where, at three o'clock that afternoon, he was sworn in as Lord Lieutenant of Cardiganshire and took the oath of allegiance before the Prince Regent who was standing in for his mentally incapacitated father, George III.⁹ The Nanteos collection contains ample evidence to show that Powell took his duties as Lord Lieutenant very seriously. He was in constant contact with members of the London government regarding the appointment of magistrates and Deputy Lieutenants, whom he nominated, as well as officers in the Royal Cardigan Militia.¹⁰ As can be seen from the Appendix, Deputy Lieutenants were drawn exclusively from the ranks of the landed gentry who jealously guarded their privileges.¹¹

The year 1817 witnessed elections for a new parliament and Powell held a number of meetings throughout the county in order to secure his re-election. John Beynon, the Nanteos election agent, was again instrumental in securing the

support of local notables such as Colonel Brigstocke of Blaenpant and Thomas Lloyd of Bronwydd.¹² In early 1817 Beynon wrote to Powell warning him against his solicitor, the seemingly ever troublesome James Hughes who, Beynon believed, was trying to sabotage the Nanteos election campaign. Beynon claimed that Hughes had obtained land tax assessments for various areas in the county which Beynon believed were for political purposes. In the same letter Beynon told Powell that the member for Glamorgan had recently intervened with the Board of Taxes on behalf of his constituents and it would add to the popularity of Powell if he were to do the same.¹³

As a landowner of some substance and influence, Powell was expected to contribute to and support numerous charitable causes. In 1817 Powell received a number of letters from David Williams of Bronmeurig who had recently been appointed secretary of a committee set up by Lord Robert Seymour to alleviate the distress of the poor in the hilly areas of West Wales. Williams was hopeful that Powell would not only donate funds to the cause but would show his support by attending a meeting of the local association for the relief of the poor which was held at Lampeter in March of that year. In his letters Williams described the appalling and 'most dreadful' conditions endured by the poor.¹⁴

In the event Powell donated £10 to the local association but was then urged by Williams to lend his support to the idea of improving road links between Breconshire and Cardiganshire. Williams claimed that 'charity is very well at a pinch' but that road improvements would enable the unemployed of the parish to be put to work, thus doing some good in the community while preventing disease and starvation. It is not clear whether Powell took up this cause or not.¹⁵

Powell also supported a number of charitable causes in Aberystwyth and was active in the public affairs of the town. In 1835 he had become a town improvement commissioner along with a number of other influential gentry. The role of this body was to deal with sanitation, water and light in the town but the following year they were replaced by members of the newly-emerging middle class, a sign that times were changing following the 1832 Reform Act.¹⁶ Powell gave the land for the building of the new St. Michael's church and also the neighbouring site of Laura Gardens, named after his first wife. Land was also provided for the erection of a number of non-conformist chapels in the town. In 1832 Powell built a new Corn Market for the town and people using the building paid him a toll of one penny. The building also served as a polling station for the town at election time.¹⁷

In 1844 the Aberystwyth corporation invited Powell to lay the foundation stone of the new Town Hall which was completed in 1847. On hearing of Powell's decision to vote for the removal of the Quarter Sessions from Aberystwyth to Lampeter, the corporation withdrew the invitation in protest. This was another

sign of the growing independence of the town and their desire not to be totally under the control of the landed interest in a period of evolving democratic change.¹⁸ William Powell also took a great deal of interest in education and health matters and he was the first patron of the infirmary at Aberystwyth, an institution he generously supported. The school at Penparcau was also supported by the Powell family who took a keen interest in the pupils and their welfare. When Colonel Powell was on his way to an official function he would always call in at the school to visit the children. The school prize giving was always held at Nanteos with the children being entertained to tea and the prize-winners flanking Powell at the table.¹⁹

As Lord of the manor of Llanbadarn Fawr which included the town of Aberystwyth, Powell was able to exercise considerable power within the boundaries of the manor through the holding of court leets. The court was presided over by the Lord of the manor and his steward and the duties of this feudal body ranged from fining people for cutting turf on the common land to giving permission for a young couple to marry. Even the clergy were not immune from prosecution by the court leet and in April 1834 the vicar of Llanbadarn Fawr, Richard Evans, was fined for cutting turf on the common.²⁰ Powell and the court leet were also involved in legal action with the Aberystwyth corporation regarding the ownership of Aberystwyth castle and parts of the common and waste ground outside the town wall. After a lengthy legal case the verdict was given in favour of the town but Powell succeeded in exacting the feudal right of receiving five score of the first herrings brought into the port in each new fishing season.²¹

As Lord Lieutenant of the county and officer commanding the Royal Cardigan Militia, Powell was deeply involved in events following the outbreak of the Rebecca Riots in 1843. Although Aberystwyth was untouched by the unrest the southern half of the county was victim to a number of violent scenes as the rioters rampaged by night destroying tollgates and tollhouses.²² The Nanteos collection of letters and documents contains a large amount of correspondence between Powell and Sir James Graham of the Home Office regarding the unrest. The letters show that both Powell and the Home Office supported the setting up of a rural police force in the 'disturbed districts of Cardiganshire.' The magistrates of the county, however, believed the county to be 'tranquil' enough to entrust the maintenance of law and order to special constables.²³

Much mention is made in letters of the case of Isaac Evans who was charged at Aberaeron with having aided in the destruction of the tollhouse at Llannon. The offender was bailed to appear before the next session of the Cardiganshire Assizes and a Treasury solicitor was dispatched from London to conduct the prosecution.²⁴ In early 1844 Sir James Graham warned Powell that the absence of large numbers of Metropolitan police from London was causing concern in the

city and that the majority of constables would have to leave in the near future. Sir James told Powell that he hoped the local magistrates 'are prepared to ensure the maintenance of the public peace by the local means which the law has placed at their disposal'.²⁵

By early 1844 Powell had realised that a rural police force would have to be established with or without the support of the magistrates, and he set about looking for a suitable person for the post of chief constable. The Lord Lieutenant met with opposition from his fellow landowners who were worried about the cost of maintaining such a force, but Powell, with Home Office support, prevailed. In May 1844 the Home Office received a number of complaints from the inhabitants of Cardigan regarding a new tollgate which, they claimed, was unfairly situated in the town. Having studied a plan of the road and tollgate, Sir James wrote to Powell sympathising with the inhabitants and asking him to use his influence to persuade the trustees to remove the tollgate to a more suitable site.²⁶

Because of his position in society, Powell was required to entertain on a lavish scale at Nanteos and at the Powell residence in London. Despite his permanent precarious financial situation, Powell spent huge sums on entertaining and was constantly being reprimanded by his solicitor and agent. In 1845 Powell decided that it would be fitting to renovate and add to the now century-old mansion which, since 1830, had become his main residence. A portico was constructed together with a new wing, the architect being Edward Heycock of Shrewbury. Timber, stone and other materials were provided by the estate but nevertheless renovations cost Powell almost £3,000 when completed in 1847.²⁷

In 1850 the Rebecca unrest had subsided and Powell spent the remaining four years of his life attending parliament and carrying out various duties in his role as the representative of the Crown in the county. In 1852, at the age of sixty-four, Powell was re-elected to parliament for the last time. His previous record of tolerance was somewhat blemished when five tenants were evicted for supporting the Liberal, Pryse of Gogerddan, rather than the Tory candidate, John Inglis Jones of Derry Ormond, at the borough election in the same year.²⁸ Powell died in 1854, lamented throughout the county and in particular by his tenants, to whom he had been a fair and just landlord. Powell, who served for thirty-eight years as a member of parliament and Lord Lieutenant, represented the pinnacle of the social and political fortunes of Nanteos. William Edward Powell was laid to rest with his ancestors in the family vault in the chancel of Llanbadarn Fawr church, following which his widow and son erected a memorial to him on the chancel wall.

D. Gorman

- 1 These new families consisted of bankers, businessmen, solicitors and even cattle drovers who stood, not always successfully, as parliamentary candidates in the later part of the nineteenth century. These included John Lloyd Davies of Alltyrodyn, John Inglis Jones of Derry Ormond and the Harford family of Falcondale.
- 2 R. J. Colyer 'The Gentry and the County in Nineteenth-Century Cardiganshire', *Welsh History Review* 10 (1981), 512-513.
- 3 N.L.W. Nanteos collection L5299. W. E. Powell to the electors of Cardiganshire. 30/4/1816.
- 4 *Ibid.* L485, John Beynon to W. E. Powell. 3/5/1816: L1018—1020. Charles Morgan to W. E. Powell. 5/5/1816, 6/5/1816.
- 5 *Ibid.* L5302. W. E. Powell to the electors of Cardiganshire. 1826.
- 6 R. J. Colyer, 'Nanteos—A Landed Estate in Decline 1800—1930', *Ceredigion*, 9 (1980), p. 60.
- 7 D. W. Howell, *Patriarchs and Parasites*, (Cardiff, 1986), pp. 140-141.
- 8 Nanteos L5291. Henry Esher to W. E. Powell. 22/11/1816.
- 9 *Ibid.* L1183. Lord Sidmouth to W. E. Powell. 31/1/1817.
- 10 *Ibid.* L1184-1185. Lord Sidmouth to W. E. Powell. 12/3/1817, 11/7/1818.
- 11 See Appendix for a transcript of L1185 regarding the appointment of Deputy Lieutenants.
- 12 Nanteos L484. John Beynon to W. E. Powell. 3/5/1817.
- 13 *Ibid.* L486. John Beynon to W. E. Powell. 7/2/1817.
- 14 *Ibid.* L1248. David Williams to W. E. Powell. 22/2/1817.
- 15 *Ibid.* L1252. David Williams to W. E. Powell. 23/7/1817.
- 16 W. J. Lewis, *Born on a Perilous Rock*, (Aberystwyth, 1980), p. 20.
- 17 *Ibid.* p. 133.
- 18 Nanteos. L1036—1037. John Parry (town clerk) to W. E. Powell. September 1844. 19. Lewis, *op. cit.*, p. 163.
- 20 E. G. Bowen, *A History of Llanbadarn Fawr*, (Aberystwyth, 1979), p. 94.
- 21 Lewis, *op. cit.*, pp. 10-11.
- 22 See D. Williams, *The Rebecca Riots*, (Cardiff, 1955).
- 23 Nanteos L1342. Sir James Graham to W. E. Powell. 21/1/1843.
- 24 *Ibid.* L1343—1345. Sir James Graham to W. E. Powell. 2/12/1843, 8/12/1843.
- 25 *Ibid.* L1346, Sir James Graham to W. E. Powell. 1/5/1844.
- 26 *Ibid.* L1348. Sir James Graham to W. E. Powell. 1/5/1844.
- 27 Colyer. *op. cit.* p. 68.
- 28 *Ibid.* p. 514.

APPENDIX

TRANSCRIPT OF LETTER FROM LORD SIDMOUTH

TO WILLIAM POWELL OF NANTEOS. 11/7/1818.

(Nanteos Collection L1185)

Whitehall.
11th July 1818.

I have laid before the Prince Regent your letter of the 8th instant, recommending the undermentioned gentlemen to be Deputy Lieutenant of the county of Cardiganshire:

Thomas Lloyd of Bronwydd Esq.
John Nathaniel Williams of Castle Hill Esq.
John Lewis of Llanaeron Esq.
William Henry Webley Parry of Noyadd Esq.
William Tilsley Jones of Aberystwyth Esq.
Thomas Lewis of Clynfiew Esq.
David Thomas Davies of Maesycrugiau Esq.
David Davies of Pentre Esq.
William Owen Brigstocke of Blaenpant Esq.
John Lloyd of Gilfachwen Clerk.
Daniel Bowen of Waunifor Clerk.
Benjamin Millingchamp Clerk.
John Colby of Ffynone Esq.
John Griffiths of Llwyndurus Esq.
Alban Thomas Jones Gwynne of Mynachdy Esq.

and I am to acquaint you that His Royal Highness, in the name and on behalf of His Majesty, is graciously please to approve thereof.