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Dissertation for A329: The Making of Welsh History

A South Wales Ferment:
To what extent and why were Spiritualism and Socialism
linked in South Wales, 1900-1930?

By Nicola Harper

7655 words

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Introduction

By the time Keir Hardie was elected as MP for Merthyr Tydfil in 1900, the growth of socialism in South Wales was well underway. This was not the only movement gathering momentum in the coalfields and valleys, however – South Wales was becoming a hotspot for Spiritualism; a true ‘South Wales Ferment’ as Daily Express journalist Sydney Moseley would go on to call it¹. Hardie, like many of his socialist colleagues of the era, was a Spiritualist. From political leaders to ordinary working-class men and women in South Wales, a belief in Spiritualism often went hand in hand with a belief in socialist principles. But why?

Although both Spiritualism and socialism were growing elsewhere in the UK between 1900 and 1935, this dissertation aims to explore whether there is evidence of a strong Spiritualist-socialist link in South Wales in particular, and if so, why that might be. In particular, it will seek to understand how this relationship played out against the uniquely strong Nonconformist background evident in the Welsh valleys during this period.

Using evidence drawn largely from Welsh newspapers and digitised archives of Spiritualist periodicals, this dissertation’s first chapter will uncover the extent of Spiritualist activity in South Wales, which has been largely overlooked by modern scholarship, and will consider some of the social and cultural factors which allowed for this major growth. In the second chapter, primary evidence will reveal the strength of the link between Spiritualists and socialists of this period and suggested explanations for this will be put forward, focusing in particular on perceived Welsh Nonconformist apathy towards poverty versus Spiritualism’s overt focus on social reform. The final chapter will examine the reaction of Welsh Nonconformist leaders

¹ Sydney Moseley, *An Amazing Séance and an Exposure*, (London, 1919), p. 19. Available at http://iapsop.com/ssoc/1919_moseley_amazing_seance_and_exposure.pdf Accessed 22nd May 2021

to the growth of both Spiritualism and (in brief) socialism, discussing whether their views had an impact on the community's attraction to this alternative faith. This chapter will also consider the perhaps surprising parallels between Spiritualism and the Welsh revival of 1904-5, linking these to discover how the revival may have impacted upon support for Spiritualism. Ultimately, this dissertation will conclude that the Spiritualist-socialist link in South Wales was uniquely influenced by the complex social, emotional, religious and cultural interplay between Spiritualism, socialism and Welsh Nonconformity.

Existing historiography on the Spiritualist-socialist relationship is limited. What research does exist focuses almost exclusively on either England or the US, with Wales mentioned in passing, if at all. It is hoped that this dissertation can start to fill this gap. Throughout, an attempt has been made to look at theories advanced for the Spiritualist-socialist link in England and elsewhere, and to establish whether these theories may also hold true for Wales.

Of the existing scholarship, several pieces stand out in their usefulness. Nelson's comprehensive 1969 work *Spiritualism and Society*² is still the most definitive examination of Spiritualism from a sociological standpoint, covering the movement's eighteenth-century origins right up to mid-twentieth century influences and practices. While Nelson does touch on class and socialism, there is however very little about Wales specifically. Nelson asserts that Spiritualism arises largely out of alienation and deprivation; this theory will be tested against evidence from Wales in this dissertation.

² Geoffrey K. Nelson, *Spiritualism and Society*, (Abingdon, Routledge, 1969)

Gildart's research into esoteric beliefs in the parliamentary Labour Party³ is instructive, although it focuses mainly on the period from 1929 through to the 50s and barely mentions Wales. Nevertheless, it has been helpful in framing the context of this dissertation. Beaumont explicitly links socialism and Spiritualism at the turn of the century⁴, but his focus is on bohemian cultural explorations via socialism and theosophy rather than on working-class Spiritualism, and again, not in Wales.

Barrow's book on plebeian Spiritualists in England⁵ on the other hand has been invaluable in informing this dissertation, although most of his work refers to the late nineteenth century rather than the early twentieth. Barrow's focus on Spiritualism as a fit for the plebeian autodidact culture of the period is beyond the scope of this work but suggests another avenue as yet unexplored in Welsh Spiritualism.

Turning to the reaction of other religions towards the growth of Spiritualism, Catterall's examination of Labour's relationship with the free churches between the wars⁶ has been instructive, particularly with regard to Nonconformist attitudes towards working-class concerns, which can be explored with regard to Wales specifically. Byrne's work on the Church of England's reaction to Spiritualism between 1850 and 1939⁷ has argued that the established church in England was forced to adopt some of Spiritualism's language and concepts, and this has been a useful theory to test against Welsh Nonconformism.

³ Keith Gildart, 'Séance Sitters, Ghost Hunters, Spiritualists, and Theosophists: Esoteric Belief and Practice in the British Parliamentary Labour Party, c1929-51', in *Twentieth Century British History*, 29 (2018), pp. 357-387

⁴ Matthew Beaumont, 'Socialism and Occultism at the Fin de Siècle: Elective Affinities', in *Victorian Review*, 36 (2010), pp. 217-232

⁵ Logie Barrow, *Independent Spirits: Spiritualism and English Plebeians 1850-1910* (London, Routledge, 1985)

⁶ Peter Catterall, 'Morality and Politics: The Free Churches and the Labour Party Between the Wars', in *The Historical Journal*, 36 (1993), pp. 667-685

⁷ Georgina Byrne, *Modern Spiritualism and the Church of England, 1850-1939* (Woodbridge, The Boydell Press, 2010)

It would be unwise to write about religion in South Wales in this period without considering the impact of the Welsh revival of 1904-5. To this end, Williams' 1952 take on the revival⁸ has the benefit of having been written relatively close to the later stages of this dissertation's time period and for that reason has proven illuminating. Williams argues that Nonconformist apathy towards social ills, poverty and industrial conditions paved the way for a religious revival; this dissertation will examine whether that theory may also hold true for the surge in Spiritualism in South Wales. At the other end of the time scale, Harvey's 2007 work on the conflict between the Welsh revival and the upsurge in Spiritualism⁹ highlights convincing parallels between the "spiritual" nature of both events, which this dissertation will examine further in Chapter 3.

This dissertation's research has necessarily been restricted to online sources or purchased books, due to Covid regulations. This has ruled out what might otherwise have been useful avenues of research, particularly into specific Welsh socialists and trade unionists of the era and their religious beliefs; there is more scope there to further expand this work's findings. Further research within the archives of other Welsh socialist newspapers would also be of use; many, like the *Rhondda Socialist*, are not online. Nonconformist church archives will also contain further useful evidence.

This work's reliance on reports, editorials and readers' letters in newspapers and Spiritualist periodicals brings to life authentic voices, passions and feelings from the period, but when dealing with such vast repositories of potential sources, one must be careful not to cherry pick only that which supports a particular argument. There will no doubt have been opposing views expressed to all of the primary sources used

⁸ C. R. Williams, 'The Welsh Religious Revival, 1904-5', in *The British Journal of Sociology*, 3 (1952), pp. 242-259

⁹ John Harvey, 'Revival, Revisions, Visions and Visitations: The Resurgence and Imaging of Supernatural Religion, 1850-1940', in *The Welsh History Review*, 23 (2007), pp. 75-98

in this dissertation, but where possible an effort has been made to trace the progress of a discussion over time.

It is important to note that newspaper and periodical editors, then as now, had agendas and biases of their own, and it is always debatable to what extent mass media shapes or merely reflects public opinion. Overall, however, the evidence herein points towards a vibrant and politically aware Spiritualism-socialist link in South Wales between 1900 and 1935, which was almost certainly boosted considerably by Nonconformism's unwillingness or inability to address the social issues faced by the Welsh working-classes of this period.

Chapter 1: 'A South Wales Ferment'¹⁰

'Almost every other person one came across in South Wales was hot upon the subject of Spiritualism [...] the "mystery" of Spiritualism is taking hold of some of South Wales' leading citizens, and it is safe to say that the simple faith of the country folk has been deeply stirred [...]'¹¹

The later decades of the nineteenth century saw an explosion of interest in Spiritualism in the UK. From its roots in mid-nineteenth century America, the movement quickly gathered speed on these shores too. Most scholarship agrees that Keighley in West Yorkshire can be regarded as the true birthplace of British working-class Spiritualism¹², and certainly it was the midlands and northern England which saw the most rapid growth in Spiritualist churches from 1850 onwards. But what of Wales? Before discussing the links between Spiritualism and socialism, this dissertation first seeks to demonstrate that South Wales, largely absent from the historiography, was in fact a very important location for the Spiritualist movement.

One would normally hope to demonstrate the strength of a particular religion in a particular location and time period via statistical evidence of the number of churches, church buildings or church attendance. It is, however, very difficult to take this approach with Spiritualism. One of the unique things about the Spiritualist movement is its reliance on home circles – informal gatherings at home for spiritual development or group seances, rather than in church buildings.¹³ Matters are further complicated by the grass-roots nature of the religion and the lack of one single over-arching body which truly spoke for all Spiritualists of the period. What statistics there are can be misleading: a survey carried out by the periodical *Two*

¹⁰ Moseley, *An Amazing Séance*, p. 19

¹¹ Moseley, *An Amazing Séance*, p. 25

¹² Byrne, *Modern Spiritualism and the Church of England*, p. 20

¹³ Nelson, *Spiritualism and Society*, p. x

Worlds in 1908 noted just four Spiritualist societies affiliated to the SNU¹⁴ in the whole of Wales, and two further independent societies.¹⁵ The next set of data mentioning Wales at all does not appear until 1940, at which point the SNU has 27 affiliated societies in South Wales, rising to 43 by 1951.¹⁶ Such a scarcity of affiliated societies in South Wales seems at first to contradict the argument that South Wales was a stronghold for the movement – but it should be noted that only a minority of churches were affiliated, and that the number of unaffiliated churches or societies can only be estimated ‘since many churches did not even advertise their existence’.¹⁷ In 1934, journalist and celebrated medium Maurice Barbanell estimated that there were at least 100,000 home circles in England¹⁸ - this figure was almost certainly an exaggeration, but it does serve to illustrate the scale at which Spiritualist activity in England was un-countable, statistically, and there is no reason to assume that the situation was any different in South Wales.

What cannot be demonstrated through raw statistics can however be inferred from newspaper and journal evidence of the period, and here evidence for major interest in Spiritualism in South Wales abounds. The ‘South Wales Ferment’ which gives its name to this chapter title was a term used by renowned journalist Sydney A. Moseley who was sent by the Daily Express to investigate Spiritualism in the Welsh valleys in 1919. Moseley refers to the ‘Spiritualistic revival’ in South Wales at this time, drawing on comparisons to the 1904-5 Christian revival. He attributes the interest in Spiritualism in part to the Welsh being a deeply emotional people; writing just months after the end of the First World War, Moseley also notes that ‘this state has become accentuated, and ripe for such an appeal as Spiritualism makes’¹⁹.

¹⁴ The Spiritualists’ National Union – by far from the only body representing Spiritualists in this period, although it did eventually emerge as the largest.

¹⁵ Nelson, *Spiritualism and Society*, p. 284

¹⁶ Nelson, *Spiritualism and Society*, pp. 286-7

¹⁷ Nelson, *Spiritualism and Society*, p. 161

¹⁸ Maurice Barbanell, cited in Nelson, *Spiritualism and Society*, p.161

¹⁹ Moseley, *An Amazing Séance*, p. 25

However, Moseley's use of the term 'revival' implies that the strength of Spiritualism in the valleys had weakened in previous decades. In fact, this appears to be far from the case. At the very beginning of this dissertation's time period, in January 1900, Spiritualism in South Wales had already become an accepted part of the community, as evidenced by the matter-of-fact reporting of the Barry Spiritualist church's Children's Lyceum²⁰ Christmas party, held in late 1899, which attracted a large number of people.²¹ Growth in South Wales in this early period of the twentieth century was often encouraged by the Spiritualist practice of giving free talks and lectures as well as by the circuit method of organisation adopted by the Spiritualist movement²² – this meant that mediums and speakers from nearby areas could seed interest in new locations. A good example of this was the creation of the Hirwain Spiritualists society in 1905 following the 'substantial increase in the number of members' after a winter of free talks.²³

In 1906, the *Cardiff Times* emotively reported on 'Spirit Rappings – Senghenydd Sensation – Welsh Collier's Torment', talking of a miner being plagued by spirits, who followed him even when he moved home. The situation eventually attracted the police, the local minister and a crowd of 'between 400 and 500 persons around the house'²⁴ so there was clearly an appetite for dealings with the spirit world. By 1909, even the *Swansea Grammar School Magazine* was reporting on séance experiments held during one of their debating society sessions: 'That the Society possesses a strong Spiritualistic section was a pleasant surprise [...] This debate was one of the most successful of the session'.²⁵ At Spiritualist demonstrations, newspapers

²⁰ Children's Lyceums can be thought of as Spiritualist Sunday schools; they were an important element of the Spiritualist movement. See Byrne, *Modern Spiritualism and the Church of England*, pp. 62-65

²¹ Anon., 'An Entertainment', *Barry Dock News* (5th January 1900) p. 8. Available at <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/4599364/4599372/65/> Accessed 21st May 2021

²² As well as being an efficient method of sharing mediums and speakers, this had the added bonus that the Welsh would have already been familiar with the concept of 'travelling preachers' via Methodism.

²³ Anon., 'Spiritualism', *The Aberdare Leader* (25th November 1905) p. 5. Available at <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/3576729/3576734/40/> Accessed 21st May 2021

²⁴ Anon., 'Spirit Rappings', *The Cardiff Times* (3rd March 1906), p. 10. Available at <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/3427699/3427709/286/> Accessed 21st May 2021

²⁵ Anon., 'Literary and Debating Society', *Swansea Grammar School Magazine* (March 1909), p. 21. Available at <https://journals.library.wales/view/2444098/2470433> Accessed 21st May 2021

consistently report good attendance – a medium visiting Merthyr from Bolton in April 1910, for example, ‘gave two eloquent, inspirational addresses, which were listened to with rapt attention by large and appreciative audiences’.²⁶

Newspapers and periodicals also provide evidence that Spiritualism was, before the First World War, already an increasingly accepted part of South Wales society. As well as the growth in the children’s Lyceum movement, the experiments of the Swansea grammar school also suggest that Spiritualism was deemed suitable as an activity for children and teens. Indeed, according to *Llais Llafur*, a socialist weekly paper, ‘nowhere has it [Spiritualism] gained greater hold than in South Wales. Secondary school pupils in our district have taken to table-rapping [...] to establish communication with the un-seen.’²⁷ Schools were regularly used as meeting places for Spiritualist societies in the evening²⁸ – although not always to universal approval, as an argument in the Mountain Ash Education Committee demonstrated, even though in this instance, the school had been used this way for over twenty years.²⁹ Early in this period, the movement had also gained acceptance from other public bodies such as libraries, with the Spiritualist periodical *Light* having been accepted for display at Barry library as early as autumn 1906.³⁰ It was, however, temporarily withdrawn later that year following complaints³¹; then as now, Spiritualism was nothing if not controversial.

Moseley was nonetheless right to intuit that Welsh interest in Spiritualism had increased even further during the years of the First World War. *The Pioneer* reports

²⁶ Anon., ‘Spiritualism’, *Merthyr Express* (23rd April 1910), p. 6. Available at <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/3815535/3815541> Accessed 21st May 2021

²⁷ Anon., ‘A Melancholy Dane’, *Llais Llafur* (20th December 1919), p. 2. Available at <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/3980133/3980135/12/> Accessed 21st May 2021

²⁸ On example: Anon., ‘Spiritualism’, *Merthyr Express* (1st May 1909), p. 10 Available at <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/3814872/3814882/115/> Accessed 21st May 2021

²⁹ Anon., ‘Mountain Ash Education Committee’, *Aberdare Leader* (7th June 1919), p. 5. Available at <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/3581552/3581557/35/> Accessed 21st May 2021

³⁰ Liberty, ‘Denominationalism at Barry Public Library’, *Barry Dock News* (30th November 1906), p. 5. Available at <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/4610234/4610239/33/> Accessed 21st May 2021

³¹ Anon., ‘Barry Public Library Committee’, *Barry Dock News* (7th December 1906), p. 6. Available at <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/4610243/4610249/48/> Accessed 21st May 2021

that membership of the Temple in Merthyr Tydfil had reached 130 in 1915 ‘and that Spiritualism continues to attract attention [...] is evidenced by two other congregations [...] at St Margaret’s and the Trevethick Hall.’³² By 1918, a writer to *The Pioneer* commented that ‘South Wales must be one of the strongest centres of Spiritualism in the country – and that is saying a lot. There are societies everywhere, home circles are extremely common and little bodies of believers meet to worship [...] in a hundred and one out of the way corners. Mediums are very numerous.’³³ By 1919, the sanitary inspector of Aberavon Council was forced to intervene when a Spiritualist service with over 170 people was found to be taking place in a room which was meant to hold only 18 people.³⁴

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was hosted by Merthyr Spiritualists on a number of occasions during this period and it was noted in 1919 that ‘the Drill Hall is a big building to fill, but they had filled it to the full,’ with the same correspondent lamenting that it would left to local Spiritualists to capitalise ‘on the ground that Sir Arthur may have indicated as fallow by attracting that huge audience’.³⁵ Increasing interest in Spiritualism during and immediately following the First World War is often attributed to huge numbers of bereaved people desperately seeking answers. However, Welsh interest in Spiritualism showed no signs of waning during the post-war recovery years either. In 1921, the Spiritualist periodical *Two Worlds* reported effusively on the visit to South Wales of the SNU President, including the President’s talk at Porth’s Grand Cinema: ‘The people of the Rhondda are becoming thinkers. Hundreds were turned away.’³⁶ Right up to the end of this dissertation’s period, Spiritualism in South Wales remained a strong force. Writing in May 1932, journalist

³² Anon., ‘Spiritualism’, *Pioneer* (5th June 1915), p. 1. Available at <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/4000910/4000911/6/> Accessed 21st May 2021

³³ A.P.Y. ‘A Morning with Spirits’, *Pioneer* (28th December 1918), p. 4. Available at <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/3999958/3999962/27/> Accessed 21st May 2021

³⁴ Anon., ‘Seances in South Wales’, *Llais Llafur* (22nd March 1919), p. 7. Available at <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/3979782/3979789/68/> Accessed 21st May 2021

³⁵ A.P.Y. ‘If a Man Die?’, *Pioneer* (6th November 1919), p. 3. Available at <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/4000211/4000214/21/> Accessed 21st May 2021

³⁶ Anon., ‘Our National President in South Wales’, *Two Worlds* (23rd September 1921), p. 449. Available at

http://iapsop.com/archive/materials/two_worlds/two_worlds_v34_n1767_sep_23_1921.pdf Accessed 21st May 2021

Hannen Swaffer, co-founder of the *Psychic News*, responded indignantly to the attacks made by the Daily Mail, his former newspaper, on Spiritualism. ‘Some of these churches have been going on for forty years or more [...] No one would dare prosecute them [...] You will find them all over Wales. In some Welsh towns, the miners have built the churches themselves, in their spare time, being too poor to pay for labour’.³⁷

Having uncovered evidence of the ‘South Wales Ferment’, it is important to understand why it took place – to discern what it was about South Wales in this period which made it such a Spiritualist hot spot. From the very beginning of the Spiritualist movement, there had always been interest from the middle and upper classes. Beaumont elegantly argues that this bourgeois, bohemian dance with Spiritualism and theosophy reflected the hunger for political and social change at the turn of the century, the rise of utopianism and the disappointment with the slow pace of reform. Spiritualism, he suggests, was a natural interest for those ‘disappointed by the unpunctuality of history’.³⁸ In South Wales, however, it was largely ordinary, working-class communities which embraced Spiritualist ideals and practices.

Nelson makes the distinction between middle and upper class intellectuals, who were attracted to Spiritualism for philosophical reasons, versus working-class Spiritualists, attracted perhaps for more emotional reasons, such as the reassurance of life after death.³⁹ In the South Wales coalfields between 1900-14 at least 1000 miners a year were killed in colliery accidents⁴⁰; in some years the toll was very much higher, and that doesn’t include the many thousands more disabled or suffering serious illnesses induced by their work. Certainly the South Wales mining communities of this period were known to be intensely superstitious – for example,

³⁷ Hannen Swaffer, ‘I Challenge the Daily Mail’, *Psychic News* (28th May 1932), p. 1. Available at <https://digitalcollections.lib.umanitoba.ca/islandora/object/uofm%3A2939924> Accessed 22nd May 2021

³⁸ Beaumont, ‘Socialism and Occultism at the Fin de Siècle’, p. 12

³⁹ Nelson, *Spiritualism and Society*, p. 229

⁴⁰ Philip Jenkins, *A History of Modern Wales 1536-1990* (Routledge, 1992) pp. 351-2

a *Cardiff Times* article from September 1901 reports under the heading ‘Superstitious Colliers’ on the robin which was discovered underground at the Llanbradach colliery shortly before an explosion there killed eight miners, and the fact that a robin had also been discovered before the Cilfynydd disaster which claimed 276 lives and the Senghenydd disaster too, just months earlier.⁴¹ It is not surprising that those working in such dangerous occupations and in constant fear of death may have been drawn towards both superstition and Spiritualism – but it is likely that there was significantly more to it than this.

Between 1891 and 1901, the population of Wales increased by over 12%; in the following decade to 1911, it increased by a further 20%⁴² with the vast majority of this growth centered on the industrial areas of South Wales. By 1911, 24% of adult males and 19% of adult females in the population were migrants from outside Wales.⁴³ Nelson points out that Spiritualism swept America in the 1850s largely in locations linked to heavy migration patterns, where social and cultural norms were necessarily shifting as the populations grew and changed.⁴⁴ South Wales, just as much as the industrial towns of northern England, faced similar pressures and it is likely no coincidence that it these areas which formed the bedrock of British Spiritualism.

Economic and social pressures were of course present in England’s working-class communities too, as was the fear of death in English communities dependent on mining and other dangerous industries. What marked Wales out as different, and perhaps even more susceptible to Spiritualism than industrial England, was the backdrop of unique Welsh Nonconformist chapel culture. It is widely accepted that

⁴¹ Anon., ‘Superstitious Colliers’, *Cardiff Times* (14th September 1901) p. 6. Available at <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/3432372/3432378/156/> Accessed 23rd May 2021

⁴² GB Historical GIS/University of Portsmouth, ‘Wales Dep Through Time: Population Statistics’, *A Vision of Britain Through Time*. Available at https://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/unit/10001055/cube/TOT_POP Accessed 23rd May 2021.

⁴³ Martyn Ives, *Reform, Revolution and Direct Action Amongst British Miners: The Struggle for the Charter in 1913* (Brill, 2016), p. 143

⁴⁴ Nelson, *Spiritualism and Society*, p. 256

chapel culture formed a backbone of social and cultural life in South Wales in the late nineteenth century and that religion played a larger part in Welsh lives of the period than it did in most English lives; Williams, for example, asserts that its pervasive influence was comparable to the influence of the Roman Catholic church in Ireland.⁴⁵ By the early twentieth century, however, Nonconformism was under threat in South Wales, for a number of reasons, including changing Christian theologies and new forms of entertainment and culture.⁴⁶ The revival of 1904-5 would help to boost allegiance once again, but this boost was not long-lived.

In the meantime, Spiritualism's evidence of life after death must have seemed very appealing to Welsh coalfield communities. With its informal, democratised organisational structures⁴⁷, which mimicked Nonconformist structures in some ways, Spiritualism would have felt familiar to Welsh chapel-goers and yet cutting edge. Spiritualist home circles, societies, gatherings and children's Lyceums replaced, for some, the societal and cultural elements of chapel life. Crucially, home circles and home seances were often conducted in Welsh; public demonstrations were normally in English, not least due to mediums visiting from England and beyond⁴⁸ but the use of Welsh in private Spiritualistic sittings would have been another factor giving Spiritualism a degree of Welsh authenticity.

All of these things account in part for the rising popularity of Spiritualism in the South Wales valleys. Perhaps the most crucial reason, however, was the perceived 'apathy of the ministers and the chapels towards the social conditions of the

⁴⁵ Williams, 'The Welsh Religious Revival, 1904-5', p. 242

⁴⁶ Williams, 'The Welsh Religious Revival, 1904-5', p. 246

⁴⁷ Nelson, *Spiritualism and Society*, p. 243 – Most Spiritualist churches and societies then as now were run democratically via elected officials. Although much has been made of the leadership of some charismatic mediums, on the ground their influence on grass roots activities was less than one might expect.

⁴⁸ Although there is an intriguing account from 1895 of Welsh-speaking spirits at a London séance, which concludes, perhaps only half-jokingly, that Welsh must be 'one of the tongues, if not the only language, used in the spirit world'. See Anon., 'Welsh in the Spirit World', *North Wales Express* (25th October 1895), p. 7. Available at <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/3565815/3565822/46/> Accessed 23rd May 2021

industrial workers'.⁴⁹ Despite having been of 'paramount importance' in shaping Welsh social conscience during the nineteenth century⁵⁰ Nonconformism was losing working-class hearts and minds as the twentieth century dawned – just as socialism was surging. Spiritualism, with its overt concern for social justice, offered industrial Welsh communities something their chapels did not, and it is this link between Welsh Spiritualism and Welsh socialism which will be explored in the next chapter.

⁴⁹ Williams, 'The Welsh Religious Revival, 1904-5', p. 246

⁵⁰ Williams, 'The Welsh Religious Revival, 1904-5', p. 245

Chapter 2: A Spiritualist Soul for the Socialist Body

*'Socialism, until united with Spiritualism, [had been] a body without a soul.'*⁵¹

Robert Owen, the pioneering Welsh social reformer, atheist and founder of utopian socialism, converted late in life to Spiritualism. Aged 83 at the time in 1854, he nonetheless quickly became one its most outspoken leaders until his death in 1858. Indeed, in 1871, it is believed to have been Owen's spirit, through the mediumship of Emma Hardinge Britten⁵², who first formalised the Spiritualist movement's seven guiding principles⁵³, which still form the basis of the faith today. Because Spiritualism offered to 'prove' its assertions of life after death, it held a unique appeal for those seeking a more rationalistic or scientific view of religion. This meant that scientists like Alfred Russell Wallace, the Welsh co-discoverer of natural selection, played a key role in popularising Spiritualism. Indeed, Wallace, a prominent socialist himself, developed a separate cosmological theory where he proposed that Spiritualism was a natural conclusion of evolution.⁵⁴ Owen held a rationalist but millenarian view of Spiritualism, believing that it was the key to transforming society in both this world and the next, creating change driven primarily by people, rather than by a deity⁵⁵ - and yet, even as the new century dawned, Owenite Spiritualism was transforming into something else.

Barrow argues that working-class Spiritualism maintained Owen's fierce opposition to the established Christian church (in contrast to middle class Spiritualism, which mostly sought to find an accommodation through Christian

⁵¹ Robert Owen, cited in Barrow, *Independent Spirits*, p 26

⁵² Byrne, *Modern Spiritualism and the Church of England*, p. 82

⁵³ These are: 1- The Fatherhood of God; 2 – The Brotherhood of Man; 3- The communion of the spirits and the ministry of angels; 4 – The continuous existence of the human soul; 5 – Personal responsibility; 6 – Compensation and retribution hereafter for good or evil deeds done on earth; 7 – Eternal progress is open to every human soul. For more information see <https://www.snu.org.uk/7-principles>

⁵⁴ Charles H. Smith, 'Alfred Russell Wallace on Spiritualism, Man and Evolution: An Analytical Essay, (1992). Available at <https://people.wku.edu/charles.smith/essays/ARWPAMPH.htm> Accessed 23rd May 2021

⁵⁵ Barrow, *Independent Spirits*, pp.19-29

Spiritualism)⁵⁶ but that plebeian Spiritualism in the early twentieth century became more modest, and more patient, accepting that even if one did not see the dawn of socialism in one's lifetime, one would see it eventually in 'the Summerlands'⁵⁷. In this way, Spiritualism managed to blend millenarian elements with secularism and rationalism; something which made it a natural bedfellow for the 'new socialism' of the Independent Labour Party. After all, both socialism and Spiritualism had the same enemies, according to the spirit of Robert Dale Owen, speaking via a Cardiff medium some eleven years after his death: wealth and priestcraft.⁵⁸

When we consider the 'long association that has existed between Spiritualism and socialism'⁵⁹ however, most scholarship makes little to no mention of Wales. Yet clear links between working-class Spiritualism and socialism in South Wales can be found via the newspapers and periodicals of the day. 'Come in crowds – of interest to all socialist colleagues!'⁶⁰ was a common rallying cry in adverts for Spiritualist demonstrations and circles in Keir Hardie's *Pioneer*, a socialist weekly paper published between 1911 and 1922. The editorial voice of the *Pioneer* seemed in little doubt that Spiritualism and socialism were – or should be – inherently linked, on one occasion congratulating a Welsh medium who went to speak in Bournemouth on 'the Social Gospel of Spiritualism', noting that '[this] fighter for socialism [...] Our comrade is doing a great deal to awaken the Spiritualist movement out of the apathy of its other worldliness'.⁶¹ Readers' correspondence on the Spiritualist-socialist link was frequent in this periodical, with strong views on both sides⁶². *Llais Llafur*, later known as *Labour Voice*, was another socialist weekly paper in South Wales which

⁵⁶ Barrow, *Independent Spirits*, p. 98

⁵⁷ Barrow, *Independent Spirits*, pp. 111-13

⁵⁸ Anon., 'Spirit Robert Dale Owen on Socialism', *Two Worlds* (6th July 1888), p. 450. Available at http://iapsop.com/archive/materials/two_worlds/two_worlds_v1_n34_6_jul_1888.pdf Accessed 23rd May 2021

⁵⁹ Nelson, *Spiritualism and Society*, p.122

⁶⁰ For just one example, see Anon., 'Spiritualism!', *Pioneer* (10th May 1919), p. 2. Available at <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/4000053/4000055/7/> Accessed 23rd May 2021

⁶¹ Anon., 'A Fighter for Socialism', *Pioneer* (28th August 1915), p. 5. Available at <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/4001018/4001023/37/> Accessed 23rd May 2021

⁶² For example, this reader's indignation that a fellow reader had claimed that socialism had nothing to do with Spiritualism: M. J. Jones, 'Re Jones, Seion', *Pioneer* (22nd July 1916), p. 4. Available at <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/4001407/4001411/31/> Accessed 23rd May 2021

frequently reported on Spiritualist news and issues in a favourable light; further examples from both of these newspapers have already been introduced in chapter 1.

Although not exclusively, most of the readership of the *Pioneer* and *Llais Llafur* would have been working-class citizens – the very types of people who, a range of sources suggest, were now becoming mediums themselves. Writing about the situation in England, Byrne notes that ‘miners, pit-men, weavers and factory hands found their mediumistic voices [...] uneducated people found powers of spirit healing, trance speaking, automatic writing and spirit drawing’.⁶³ And, the evidence suggests, so it was in Wales too. ‘Spiritualism is catching hold of the miners’⁶⁴, reported Moseley during his 1919 visit to the valleys. National Spiritualist periodicals too praised the depth and scale of working-class Spiritualist activity in South Wales. According to the *Psychic News*:

Of all the countries I have visited, none exceeded Wales in possessing natural mediums, especially the South Wales valleys [...] Such hard and unpleasant labour [...] has all the elements calculated to destroy these delicate gifts. Yet most of the natural psychics I met in Wales were coal miners [...] The miners were very enthusiastic for Spiritualism and would often travel many miles across the mountains to attend my meetings.⁶⁵

Evan Powell (1881-1958), one such miner medium from Merthyr, would go on to be described by Arthur Conan Doyle as having ‘the widest endowment of spiritual gifts of any medium at present’.⁶⁶ Interestingly, as Harvey notes, Powell was among the first generation of powerful Welsh mediums and would have faced a hostile time from Nonconformist congregations during the 1904-5 revival.⁶⁷ The next generation

⁶³ Byrne, *Modern Spiritualism and the Church of England*, p. 43

⁶⁴ Moseley, *An Amazing Séance*, p. 28

⁶⁵ Horace Leaf, ‘Man Who Was “Whisked Away” From a Service’, *Psychic News* (27th May 1933), p. 4. Available at <https://digitalcollections.lib.umanitoba.ca/islandora/object/uofm%3A2944991> Accessed 23rd May 2021

⁶⁶ Arthur Conan Doyle, cited in Harvey, ‘Revival, Revisions, Visions and Visitations’, p. 93

⁶⁷ Harvey, ‘Revival, Revisions, Visions and Visitations’, p. 93

fared considerably better, growing up amid already established Spiritualist networks. Prominent among these was the celebrated physical medium⁶⁸ Jack Webber (1907-40), also a miner from Merthyr, and the Thomas brothers⁶⁹, both miners from Gorseinon, all three of whom were also staunchly supported by Conan Doyle.

These working-class people from ordinary South Wales backgrounds may have even had some advantage over their English counterparts in making their mediumistic voices heard. Against the backdrop of the inescapable Welsh chapel culture, it is likely that many such men and women had become skilled at debate and leadership. Indeed, Harvey contends that ‘Spiritualism and [Welsh] Nonconformity, in different ways, both democratized religion; each gave a participatory prominence to the working-class.’⁷⁰ A chapel background would have helped, in that sense at least, those wishing to set up their own Spiritualist circles and churches – and in turn, it would also have helped those Spiritualists who wanted to advance socialist ideals. Catterall argues that ‘though the chapels may not have been generally Labour in sentiment, they often provided particularly good training grounds for Labour politicians.’⁷¹

In order to understand what may have driven some working-class people to turn away from chapel and towards Spiritualism, the context of diminishing chapel attendance in South Wales is important, as is the prevailing attitude of Nonconformism towards the poverty and social conditions in South Wales during this period. Nelson argues that the rise in Spiritualism was part of a general alienation the working-classes felt towards organised religion⁷² – however, he relies

⁶⁸ Physical mediumship (extremely rare today) is where mediums produce ectoplasm, spirit voices, trumpet movements and other visual and auditory phenomena, compared to the much more common mental mediumship, where the medium provides verbal evidence of survival.

⁶⁹ Accounts of seances with the Thomas brothers take up a large section of Sydney Moseley’s book, *An Amazing Séance*, previously referenced.

⁷⁰ Harvey, ‘Revival, Revisions, Visions and Visitations’, p. 91

⁷¹ Catterall, ‘Morality and Politics: The Free Churches and the Labour Party Between the Wars’, p. 681

⁷² Nelson, *Spiritualism and Society*, p. 260

upon work by Inglis⁷³ in order to reach this conclusion, while other scholarship has noted that Inglis may have been too quick to conflate a fall in church attendance with a fall in religious belief⁷⁴. If such general alienation did exist, it would not have been helped by the fact that, as Davies contended, Nonconformist leadership had stopped being predominantly working-class when coal became the dominant industry in South Wales, and had instead drifted towards the middle classes⁷⁵, potentially leading to a breach of trust between ordinary Welsh workers and chapel leaders. Certainly, as Catterall notes, 'Nonconformist views on matters such as drink and gambling were rarely concordant with those of the working-class'⁷⁶, which may have led to a feeling that chapel leadership was out of touch with real people's lives.

To make the leap from Nonconformist chapel to Spiritualism, however, there must have been something more than simple alienation at work. As Kidger notes, where chapels and the Anglican church had been hot on the condemnation of personal sin, they 'did not seem to have a concept of corporate sin'.⁷⁷ Williams makes this point too, noting that Nonconformists condemned "the drink" while simultaneously 'sheltering [...] the landlords and the employers who caused far greater social evils'.⁷⁸ In an industrial society where a toxic combination of over-production and low wages kept people in poverty and simultaneously created dangerous working practices⁷⁹, this was a deeply questionable stance. Nelson attributes some of Spiritualism's growth to deprivation theories of religion advanced by Glock⁸⁰ but he contends that the movement's main role was to fill the gap left by

⁷³ K.S. Inglis, *Churches and the Working Classes in Victorian England* (London, Routledge, 1963)

⁷⁴ Byrne, *Modern Spiritualism and the Church of England*, p. 3

⁷⁵ Ebenezer Thomas Davies, *Religion in the Industrial Revolution of South Wales* (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 1965)

⁷⁶ Catterall, 'Morality and Politics: The Free Churches and the Labour Party Between the Wars', p. 680

⁷⁷ Margaret Eleanor Kidger, 'Colliers and Christianity: Religion in the coalmining communities of South Wales and the East Midlands c1860 to 1930s with a particular focus on the Rhondda Valleys in South Wales and the Hucknall and Shirebook areas in Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire', PhD Thesis (University of Nottingham, 2012) Available at http://eprints.nottingham.ac.uk/13391/1/Colliers_and_Christianity_-_Margaret_Kidger.pdf Accessed 23rd May 2021

⁷⁸ Williams, 'The Welsh Religious Revival, 1904-5' p. 248

⁷⁹ Jenkins, *A Modern History of Wales 1536-1990*, pp. 351-2

⁸⁰ Nelson, *Spiritualism and Society*, p. 266

what he calls 'psychic deprivation'. In South Wales, however, it could be argued that Glock's theories on social deprivation were equally relevant.

Dire poverty can be found via countless pieces of newspaper evidence – as can discontent with the Nonconformist attitude towards it. In May 1905, a sermon by Dr Waldo James at Beulah Baptist Chapel preached that 'from time immemorial [...] they would find the two classes known as rich and poor. These had their respective places to fill on earth [...] It was the duty of the poor to be obedient to the rich [...]'⁸¹ – a typical example of the belief that poverty was ordained by God and that it was an affront to Him to seek to challenge it. A few years later, the Rev. John Owen, a prominent Calvinistic Methodist, preached on the subject of industrial disputes: 'Had the workmen the right to expect the Church to interfere in these cases? He did not believe that they had. [...] It was the Church of the master no less than the Church of the servant and it was no part of its mission to interfere with their quarrels.'⁸² This latter example is from North Wales, but it is reasonable to assume that the attitude towards industrial disputes in South Wales was no less indifferent.

Attitudes such as these often provoked outrage. A lengthy 1905 contribution from Lloyd Meyrick, former deputy mayor of Cardiff, relates several incidences of horrendous poverty just doors from various chapels, in a particularly scornful piece:

While men, women and children are starving, the adherents of Nonconformity are to be seen on nearly every street with collecting books [...] for their eternal building fund [...] these churches are soul-less, and little better than debt collecting agencies [...] I will continue to accuse the Nonconformist ministry of the grossest lethargy.⁸³

⁸¹ Anon., 'The Rich and Poor: A Sermon Criticised', *Aberdare Leader* (6th May 1905) p. 8. Available at <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/3576486/3576494/91/> Accessed 23rd May 2021

⁸² Anon., 'Christianity and Socialism', *North Wales Express* (28th August 1908), p. 5. Available at <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/3572221/3572226/37/> Accessed 23rd May 2021

⁸³ Lloyd Meyrick, 'The Churches and the Poor', *Evening Express* (8th December 1905), p. 2. Available at <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/4158756/4158758/5/> Accessed 23rd May 2021

Meyrick was a Liberal, not a socialist, but he did have Spiritualist sympathies. Meanwhile, faced with at best apathy and at worst condemnation by their local chapels, the working-classes of South Wales could instead opt for Spiritualist talks and services dealing with poverty and social matters. And many of them did, perhaps encouraged by newspapers informing them that ‘Spiritualism stands for the dignity of labour, for the doing of right because it is right; it stands for reform, progress and equality; it is against cut throat competition where the one becomes the millionaire while the many toil in poverty and distress’.⁸⁴ ‘What a pity they would not wake up to the conditions around them and endeavour to have the ethics of Christianity applied,’⁸⁵ wrote GE Owen, Secretary of the South Wales Spiritualists Union in 1913, following an attack on Spiritualism by the combined ministers of Abercynon. Although some Nonconformist ministers did advocate for their churches taking a more proactive stance against poverty⁸⁶, it was typically to little avail. Again and again, evidence suggests that South Wales working-class communities would have known that Spiritualism was on the side of the worker where Nonconformism refused to break trust with the rich.

The message certainly appeared to have cut through, across several decades. Against the backdrop of widespread deprivation in the area, ‘Spiritualism continues its triumphant march,’ reported the *Psychic News*, noting that ‘Although seventy people out of every hundred in the vicinity of Maesteg are unemployed, the local National Spiritualist Church has opened a new building – and paid for it’.⁸⁷ This church, the piece went on, would seat up to 1000 people and was constructed by the Spiritualist community themselves with the assistance of just one mason, ‘following

⁸⁴ E. J. Taylor, ‘To the Editor of the Barry Dock News’, *Barry Dock News* (18th January 1901), p. 7. Available at <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/4607502/4607509/50/> Accessed 23rd May 2021

⁸⁵ G. E. Owen, ‘Abercynon Ministers’ Attack on Spiritualism’, *Aberdare Leader* (4th October 1913), p. 6. Available at <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/3578891/3578897/69/> Accessed 23rd May 2021

⁸⁶ Williams provides some examples of this in ‘The Welsh Religious Revival, 1904-5’, pp. 255-6

⁸⁷ Anon., ‘A New Church for South Wales’, *Psychic News* (29th July 1933), p. 3. Available at <https://digitalcollections.lib.umanitoba.ca/islandora/object/uofm%3A2942038> Accessed 23rd May 2021

the example set by the neighbouring church of Caerau, which is also in one of the blackest areas of depression’.

Inside this and other Spiritualist churches and home circles across South Wales, mediums and speakers continued to link Spiritualism and progressive politics. National Spiritualist publications and leading influencers were also becoming increasingly politicised. In a passionate editorial for *Psychic News* in 1933, Swaffer wrote that ‘If all Spiritualists were as keen for social reconstruction as their Spiritualism is capable of achieving it, we should soon have a different world [...] We have proved survival – that part is over. We have got communication [with spirit] but unless we use it, what is the good of it?’⁸⁸ Following criticism from some readers who didn’t want to see the periodical tackle politics, Swaffer was unapologetic. ‘Spiritualism does not end in the séance room. The individual [...] who is not concerned with the problems of unemployment, slums, malnutrition, infantile morality, war and vivisection does not understand spirit teachings.’⁸⁹ Among those supporting the periodical’s political stance were readers from Wales, including a Mr Price from Newport, who noted that ‘work for the emancipation of the poor, the needy and the downtrodden [...] is not only socialistic but Spiritualistic doctrine [...] We cannot be true Spiritualists and be Tories or Liberals.’⁹⁰

Clearly not all Spiritualists were socialists, in Wales or anywhere else, and certainly not all socialists were Spiritualists. However, for those who felt an affinity with both movements in Wales, much can be explained by the shared principles of brotherhood, the urge for social reform and the rationalistic appeal of a religion which could ‘prove’ its beliefs. Evidence from newspapers and periodicals suggests a certain symbiotic relationship between Spiritualism and socialism in South Wales in

⁸⁸ Hannen Swaffer, ‘Spiritualism and Socialism’, *Psychic News* (8th July 1933), p. 5. Available at <https://digitalcollections.lib.umanitoba.ca/islandora/object/uofm:2944966> Accessed 23rd May 2021

⁸⁹ Hannen Swaffer, ‘Politics’, *Psychic News* (23rd November 1935), p. 6. Available at <https://digitalcollections.lib.umanitoba.ca/islandora/object/uofm:2941196> Accessed 23rd May 2021

⁹⁰ R. Price, ‘Work for Down-Trodden’, *Psychic News* (29th July 1933), p. 9. Available at <https://digitalcollections.lib.umanitoba.ca/islandora/object/uofm%3A2942044> Accessed 23 May 2021

this period. Socialist ideals were promoted by Spiritualist churches; furthermore, since most socialist speakers did not speak Welsh and most socialist literature was not published in Welsh⁹¹, Welsh-speaking home circles and the philosophies their spirit visitors talked about and shared would have also benefited the socialist cause among Welsh speaking workers. Meanwhile, evidence shows that Spiritualist views were often promoted by socialist papers and speakers.

Politically active Welsh Spiritualists would have felt at home within the Independent Labour Party. As Barrow notes, 'It was quite easy to translate from ILP to Spiritualist idiom'.⁹² This was as true for armchair politicians as for professional ones. Keir Hardie, icon and hero for much of South Wales, was elected to represent Merthyr Tydfil in 1900. He did not shout his Spiritualism from the rooftops and was indeed at pains to engage wholly and constructively with Nonconformist churches⁹³ but evidence of his consistent engagement with Spiritualism is presented by Gildart⁹⁴ and Hardie is thought to have spoken through numerous mediums following his death. As Gildart notes, Spiritualist interests within the Labour party continued to be prominent well into the 1950s.

Interestingly, although Spiritualism and socialism both flourished in South Wales in this period, socialism struggled to gain a foothold in North Wales.⁹⁵ So did Spiritualism. North Wales was, at least until 1934, 'under the sway of priestcraft as narrow as any of old', and in order to hold a meeting the Colwyn Bay Spiritualist church had to defy the 'local Jeremiahs' in the face of 'almost insuperable

⁹¹ Richard Lewis, 'Political Culture and Ideology, 1900-1918' in *The Labour Party in Wales, 1900-2000*, Duncan Tanner, Chris Williams and Deian Hopkin eds. (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2000), p. 93; and see also Martin Wright, 'Wales and Socialism: Political Culture and National Identity, c1880-1914', PhD Thesis (Cardiff University, 2011), p. 262. Available at <https://orca.cf.ac.uk/26969/1/2012wrightmkphd.pdf> Accessed 23 May 2021; and see further Robert Griffiths, *Turning to London: Labour's Attitude to Wales, 1898-1956* (1980), p. 5.

⁹² Barrow, *Independent Spirits*, p. 112

⁹³ Wright, 'Wales and Socialism', pp. 144ff

⁹⁴ Gildart, 'Séance Sitters, Ghost Hunters, Spiritualists and Theosophists', p. 360

⁹⁵ Lewis, 'Political Culture and Ideology, 1900-1918', p. 91

difficulties', according to the *Psychic News*⁹⁶. Coincidentally – or not – Nonconformism held firm for longer in the north of Wales than it did in the south. This speaks to the complex relationship between Nonconformism, Spiritualism and socialism in this period and it suggests that the reactions of the Nonconformist chapels towards Spiritualism (and socialism) may have been key in the level of success Spiritualism enjoyed; it is this theory that we will examine in the next chapter.

⁹⁶ W. T. Coathup, 'Power Blazes a Trail', *Psychic News* (23rd June 1934), p. 9. Available at <https://digitalcollections.lib.umanitoba.ca/islandora/object/uofm%3A2941273> Accessed 23rd May 2021

Chapter 3: Necromancers, Witches and Sorcerers

*'Concerning [Spiritualism], God is out to destroy it.'*⁹⁷

In a seminar for the University of Sunderland's Department of Culture, Jamie Spears suggested that North East England's Nonconformist history made it easier for Spiritualism, as a non-traditional faith, to spread in that part of the UK.⁹⁸ If that were true then it must surely be a factor also in the Welsh spread of Spiritualism. Furthermore, it could be suggested that Wales' experiences of religious revivals may also have influenced the extent and ease to which a new movement could take hold. Writing on the background to the 1904-5 revival, Williams notes that Nonconformist apathy towards social conditions, plus the gradual spread of new knowledge from scientists such as Darwin, created fertile conditions for a revival⁹⁹. However, these arguments could equally show how Wales was ripe for the growth of Spiritualism.

Harvey has argued extensively that the Welsh revival shared many commonalities with Spiritualism, in particular with regard to visions, visitations and spiritual imagery.¹⁰⁰ Some Spiritualists of the time felt so too – as did at least one Welsh minister who objected to Evan Roberts' 'spiritistic' claims that he could communicate with people hundreds of miles away through thought alone¹⁰¹. Prominent socialist and theosophist Annie Besant claimed that the revival represented a 'flood of spiritual' energy¹⁰², particularly in terms of the astral lights which were seen to accompany some revival phenomena. The *Society for Psychical Research* devoted a great deal of time to investigating the auditory and visual

⁹⁷ Firebrand Pastor Stephen Jeffreys at the Aberaman Wesleyan Church: Anon., 'Impressions of the Aberaman Revival,' *Aberdare Leader* (6th December 1919), p. 2. Available at <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/3581786/3581788/11/> Accessed 23rd May 2021

⁹⁸ Jamie Spears, 'Spiritualism in North East England', Talk given in February 2014. Available at https://www.academia.edu/8270662/Spiritualism_in_North_East_England Accessed 23rd May 2021

⁹⁹ Williams, 'The Welsh Revival, 1904-5', p. 246

¹⁰⁰ Harvey, 'Revival, Revisions, Visions and Visitations'

¹⁰¹ Anon., 'A Welsh minister', *Light* (4th March 1905), p. 98. Available at http://iapsop.com/archive/materials/light/light_v25_n1260_mar_4_1905.pdf Accessed 23rd May 2021

¹⁰² Anon., 'Mrs Besant on Revivals', *Light* (26th August 1905), p. 406. Available at http://iapsop.com/archive/materials/light/light_v25_n1285_aug_26_1905.pdf Accessed 23rd May 2021

phenomena of the revival, including the telepathic elements and the spirit lights, producing an 80 page report which concluded that most of the experiences were inexplicable.¹⁰³ Not all Spiritualists were excited by the Welsh revival or saw it in Spiritualistic terms – Hudson Tuttle, a prominent American medium, received a particularly scathing rebuke from *The Cambrian* for his criticisms of it¹⁰⁴ - but many viewed it as Nonconformists experiencing mediumship and Spiritualism without realising it. Spiritualism already had a strong hold in South Wales, as demonstrated elsewhere in this dissertation, but it could be argued that an indirect consequence of the Welsh 1904-5 revival was a greater openness towards and acceptance of phenomena which would otherwise be considered part of Spiritualism.

As much as historic Welsh newspapers are full of praise for Spiritualism from some sectors, and healthy debate about it from others, they are also not lacking in reports of condemnation, both before and after the revival period, particularly from Nonconformist pastors and ministers. Necromancers, witches and sorcerers were common terms used to describe Spiritualists¹⁰⁵ and newspapers witnessed frequent claim and counter claim from those supporting Nonconformist sermons and those opposing them.

A good example of how these arguments raged on (and on, and on) can be seen across a range of different newspapers right through 1901, all publishing letters both vehemently for and against a series of anti-Spiritualist lectures given by Dr Morgan (aka “Thalamus”) initially in December 1900 at Calfaria Welsh Baptist Chapel,

¹⁰³ Rev. A. T. Fryer, ‘Psychological Aspects of the Welsh Revival, 1904-5’, in *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, 19 (1907), pp. 80-162. Available at http://iapsop.com/archive/materials/spr_proceedings/spr_proceedings_v19_1905-7.pdf Accessed 23rd May 2021

¹⁰⁴ W. D. Evans, ‘In Defense of the Welsh and the Welsh Revival’, in *The Cambrian*, 25 (1905), pp. 287-293. Available at <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=nyp.33433074924154&view=lup&seq=9> Accessed 23rd May 2021

¹⁰⁵ Just two examples, nearly two decades apart: Anon., ‘Spiritualism Ancient and Modern’, *Barry Dock News* (27th September 1901), p. 7. Available at <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/4607822/4607829/61> and Anon., ‘Spiritualism’, *Glamorgan Gazette* (20th June 1919), p. 4. Available at <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/3887509/3887513/40/> Both accessed 23rd May 2021

Cadoxton and then elsewhere¹⁰⁶. Two other pastors followed immediately in his footsteps. It took a somewhat exasperated E J Taylor, President of the Barry Society of Spiritualists, to eventually point out in May 1902 that although all three pastors had condemned Spiritualism, each had contradicted the other in what Taylor described as an 'extremely ludicrous' situation: one had said it was all fake and fraud, one had said it was real but the work of the devil and one had said it was real and nothing to do with the devil, caused instead by spirits trapped in the body – if any one of them were correct, Taylor argued, then the others automatically were not¹⁰⁷. The apparent inability of either Nonconformity or the Anglican church to get their stories straight, as it were, in opposition to Spiritualism, was definitely a weakness. Pointing out logical fallacies in Nonconformist argument, as in this case, seems to have been a popular and probably effective Spiritualist tactic.

With chapel attendance falling steadily during this period, aside from the short-lived fillip provided by the 1904/5 revival¹⁰⁸, it seems that no amount of derision or horror from Nonconformist ministers was enough to stem the rising interest in Spiritualism. Nonconformism, in common with the Anglican church, therefore faced a dilemma. Spiritualism was offering proof of life after death, which was a key element of Christian faith, but the evidence Spiritualism appeared to provide contradicted Christian teachings on the afterlife. To continue to denounce it would call into question a Christian's own faith, but to embrace it would also suggest their teachings were incorrect. Byrne effectively demonstrates that for the Anglican church at least, the solution was something of a fudged compromise, where 'Spiritualist language and ideas that already gained currency in all levels of English society were slowly incorporated into the Church's doctrine of the afterlife and

¹⁰⁶ For a flavour of these, see for example: E. Taylor, 'Spiritualism and "Thalamus"', *Barry Dock News* (11th January 1901), p. 5. Available at <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/4607493/4607498/34/> and Anon., 'Thalamus at Treorchy', *Rhondda Leader* (30th November 1901), p. 3. Available at <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/3827250/3827253/23/> Both Accessed 23rd May 2021

¹⁰⁷ E. J. Taylor, 'The Attack on Spiritualism', *Barry Dock News* (9th May 1902), p. 6. Available at <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/4608110/4608116/59/> Accessed 23rd May 2021

¹⁰⁸ Williams, 'The Welsh Revival 1904-5', pp. 254-5

presented as part of orthodox Christian teaching'.¹⁰⁹ Intriguingly, evidence suggests that this also happened with Nonconformism and the church in South Wales.

Spiritualists had always contended that much of the Bible was an example of mediumship via spirit control¹¹⁰ - by 1918, the *Aberdare Leader* was reporting on the Rev Jeffrey's admission that 'Spiritualism was rife in the Bible' and that a type of Spiritualism 'was integral' to Christianity.¹¹¹ It was a slow process, although as early as 1906 the Curate at St Peter's, Senghenydd, admitted that he believed spirit activity around a local collier was real.¹¹² The shift towards a softer stance on Spiritualism was far from universal; in 1916, for example, the Rev Griffiths at Trinity Presbyterian Church was preaching that Spiritualist phenomena weren't trickery but rather 'terrible realities [...] beings, called demons'.¹¹³ However, in a long piece about Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's linking of Christianity and Spiritualism, *Y Llan* admitted that telepathy existed;¹¹⁴ earlier that year on the same subject the renowned Baptist minister Rev Pedr Williams spoke at length in a respectful and conciliatory manner, noting that 'there could be no doubt whatsoever as to the presence of psychic phenomena'.¹¹⁵ Fast forward just over another decade and the *Psychic News* would jubilantly report that the Bishop of Llandaff was using Spiritualist language about life after death in the invisible spirit world.¹¹⁶ The situation had shifted considerably; writing in 1932, Swaffer would inform *Psychic News* readers that 'Survival is fact [...]

¹⁰⁹ Byrne, *Modern Spiritualism and the Church of England*, p. 3

¹¹⁰ "Ograps.", 'Orthodoxy and Spiritualism in Conflict', *Barry Dock News* (25th January 1901), p. 4. Available at <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/4607511/4607515/21/> Accessed 23rd May 2021. For a detailed account of this argument, see two 1938 books by Rev G Maurice Elliott: *When Prophets Spoke* (Old Testament) and *The Psychic Life of Jesus* (New Testament)

¹¹¹ Anon., 'Tabernacle, Aberdare', *Aberdare Leader* (2ⁿ November 1918), p. 6. Available at <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/3581282/3581288/67/> Accessed 23rd May 2021

¹¹² Anon., 'Under a Spell', *The Cambrian* (2nd March 1906), p. 5. Available at <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/3348080/3348085/97/> Accessed 23rd May 2021

¹¹³ Anon., 'Spiritualism and Demonology', *Glamorgan Gazette* (24th March 1916), p. 2. Available at <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/3886496/3886498/8/> Accessed 23rd May 2021

¹¹⁴ Anon., 'Spiritualism and Christianity', *Y Llan* (24th October 1919), p. 12. Available at <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/3689548/3689560/69/> Accessed 23rd May 2021. *Y Llan* was a weekly newsletter of the Anglican church in Wales.

¹¹⁵ Anon., 'An Impression', *South Wales Weekly Post* (1st March 1919), p. 2. Available at <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/4110884/4110886/47/> Accessed 23rd May 2021

¹¹⁶ Anon., 'A Bishop on Our Side', *Psychic News* (1st July 1933), p. 6. Available at <https://digitalcollections.lib.umanitoba.ca/islandora/object/uofm%3A2945308> Accessed 23rd May 2021

leaders of nearly all the churches [admit that] communication is possible. They disapprove of it, of course, but they have to admit that it is true.’¹¹⁷

During this period, Nonconformity was also almost universally hostile to socialism. Williams points out that Nonconformist church halls were almost never made available for socialist meetings¹¹⁸, even though they were used for all manner of other things; he contends that many young chapel-goers in particular were nonetheless attracted to the ILP and willing to risk being ostracised by their chapel in order to follow socialist ideals¹¹⁹. It is not unreasonable to surmise that many of them may have turned towards Spiritualism.

It seems likely that the eventual willingness of some Nonconformists in South Wales to at least tolerate Spiritualism would have contributed to its continued rapid growth; the relative difficulties of Spiritualism in North Wales support this hypothesis. It is possible too that those Nonconformists who continued to vehemently oppose Spiritualism may have unwittingly driven people towards it. As one reader put it, ‘The more you oppose and condemn Spiritualism, the more you will advertise it [...] Your condemnation will create interest; we shall find your hearers coming to investigate for themselves.’¹²⁰ The continued hostility from chapel culture towards socialism would have also been a push factor in South Wales, again in contrast to the slower growth of this movement in the north. It appears that increasing acceptance from the chapel community for Spiritualist teachings and Spiritualist-like phenomena, together with growing awareness of Spiritualism’s socialist leanings, worked as a pincer movement which encouraged many working-class families to at least investigate Spiritualism as a faith.

¹¹⁷ Hannen Swaffer, ‘Spiritualism’s Crisis Now’, *Psychic News* (2nd July 1932), p. 7. Available at <https://digitalcollections.lib.umanitoba.ca/islandora/object/uofm%3A2939840> Accessed 23rd May 2021

¹¹⁸ Williams, ‘The Welsh Religious Revival, 1904-5’, p. 258

¹¹⁹ Williams, ‘The Welsh Religious Revival, 1904-5’, p. 248

¹²⁰ “Congregationalist”, ‘Sir, - The Rev. W. T. Griffiths’, *Glamorgan Gazette* (7th April 1916), p. 2. Available at <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/3886514/3886516/11/> Accessed 23rd May 2021

Conclusion

This dissertation has uncovered evidence that Spiritualist activity and interest in South Wales between 1900 and 1935 was considerable and sustained, although largely un-researched to date. Through examining working-class concerns of the period and Nonconformist apathy towards social reform - compared to Spiritualism's clear reform message - a strong link between Spiritualism and socialism in South Wales has been demonstrated. Effects of the Welsh revival of 1904-5 have been considered, and this dissertation has argued that the revival may have inadvertently played a part in the growth of Spiritualism, or at the least did not over the long term dampen interest in the movement. Opposition to Spiritualism from the Nonconformist chapels throughout this dissertation's time period has been shown to have been ineffective at best, and arguably counter-productive.

This work set out to answer not only whether a Spiritualist-socialist link existed in this place in this period, but if so, why. Population pressures made it easier for new movements to take hold, while dangerous working conditions and terrible poverty created a people looking for hope and reassurances which were not forthcoming from chapel culture. The distinct pro-reform message of Spiritualism would have cut through to a restless audience. It seems likely that Spiritualism helped to share socialist ideals, while the support of prominent socialists for Spiritualism would have also helped the faith to grow. On the limited evidence herein, it would be unwise to claim more than a happy and somewhat mutually beneficial co-existence for the two -isms, but it seems likely that further research would uncover a correlation in the growth of these movements in South Wales. Any such future research would need to take account of how Welsh chapel culture either helped or hindered both Spiritualism and socialism. This dissertation has therefore attempted to draw out the complex links between Spiritualism, socialism and, crucially, Welsh Nonconformism, to demonstrate how and why the Spiritualist-socialist link in South Wales was unique, and worthy of further investigation.

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