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A329 The Making of Welsh History - Dissertation

Paul Scullion

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D.A.Thomas: Hated coal-owner, miner's friend or just a businessman? A look at his approach to industrial relations from his time as a Liberal MP to his handling of the Cambrian Combine dispute.

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Introduction

Amongst the items displayed in a search of the Peoples Collection of Wales (1910) using the term '1910 strike' is a photograph entitled 'Police and Soldiers guarding Naval Colliery during the Tonypandy Riots of 1910' (Appendix 1). The picture shows an arranged group of police, soldiers and civilians standing underneath the pithead. It seems to encapsulate how the Cambrian Colliery dispute has become inextricably linked to civil unrest in the Rhondda and the Tonypandy riots in particular. The dispute itself and the negotiations that took place have, to a certain extent, being relegated to that of the riots origins. Unlike other disputes such as the 1898 miners' strike (Williams, 1965), and the general strike of 1926 (Morris, 1973) there has been little modern re-appraisal of the Cambrian Combine dispute itself. This dissertation will look at the origins of the dispute and the negotiations that took place. In particular, it will contrast the role of D.A. Thomas, the Managing Director of the Cambrian Combine, with that of the union leadership which changed in outlook and personnel as the strike evolved.

In popular media Thomas is portrayed as the cause of the strike and associated violence. In a recent article on the Tonypandy riots Thomas is described as one of a new breed of coalowners 'tough, modern, business-minded' who 'merges mid-Rhondda's pits into a single company, the Cambrian Combine. He's determined to flex its industrial muscle to drive down costs. In other words, lower wages' (Geraint, 2022). The view that the riots and the strikes were the result of ruthless management imposing wage cuts on the downtrodden is certainly not unique. Wikipedia describes the strike as workers attempting to improve their life in 'a severely deprived part of South Wales, where wages had been kept deliberately low for many years by a cartel of mine owners' (Tonypandy riots, 2024). In a BBC website on Welsh History the author (Carradice, 2010) also blames Thomas for the dispute. Such opinions are not just the preserve of popular media, Brien in the Welsh History Review (Brien, 1994, p.70) talks of the owners reducing costs by lowering wages. In 1981, Kenneth Morgan wrote of the 'brute insensitivity' of coalowners such as Thomas 'who were intransigent on wage advances' (Morgan, 1981, p.146). Much of the opprobrium heaped on Thomas arose out of his actions during the Cambrian Combine dispute.

In the immediate aftermath of the dispute, Evans (1911) produced a detailed account of the events and negotiations that took place. As Evans was an admirer of Thomas and was later employed as a reporter by one of his companies, some caution has to be used in respect of the opinions expressed in the book. Edwards (1938) and Arnot (1967) have also covered the strike but from a trade union viewpoint. Thomas frequently used the press, particularly the Western Mail to defend the actions of the mine owners and he combined these articles into a pamphlet justifying his actions (Thomas, 1911). Further primary evidence is available in the various parliamentary inquiries into the coal industry and the riots in particular (Parliament. House of Commons, 1910). Macready, who was in charge of the troops sent into South Wales, also wrote an account of his interactions with both sides (Macready,

1925). The dispute was headline news at the time and was covered by most national and Welsh papers. These articles are a good primary source but again some care is required as the individual papers were often biased for one side or the other.

Much of the literature on the dispute looks at the strike through the lens of the riots and civil unrest that followed. Brien (1994, p.70) in his paper on the Tonypany riots, covers causation in a couple of sentences; owners reducing wages, payment for abnormal place working and the Eight Hours Act. Both Leeworthy (2018) and Smith (1980) in their articles on Tonypany only briefly mention the background to the strike. Williams (1973) article details the economic issues peculiar to the South Wales coalfield to explain why both sides proved intransigent during the dispute. Indeed, his account of the economic difficulties the owners faced is in line with Thomas' own assessment (Thomas, 1903a). Chris Williams (1998) has emphasised the importance of economic arguments when looking at the history of the coalfield and there are a number of sources dealing with miners' wages, industry overheads and the cost of living (Digest of Welsh Historical Statistics (2015), Jevons (1915) and Feinstein (1990).

Thomas is often portrayed unfavourably as autocratic (Curtis, 2013, p.2), duplicitous (Evening Express, 1898a), and a ruthless individualist only concerned with profit (Morgan, 1995, p.419). Even The Times (1916), during World War 1, published a leader berating the South Wales Coal-Owners as they had 'so mismanaged their relations with their men that the conduct of the war was imperilled'. As Thomas was the largest coal-owner in the region he was clearly in the firing line and the article indicates something of his reputation at the time. Yet he represented the avowedly working class constituency of Merthyr Tydfil from 1888-1910, and consistently polled better than his fellow Merthyr MP, working class socialist Keir Hardie. In 1896 Thomas put forward proposals which may have addressed the grievances of both the coal owners and the miners prior to the 1898 strike (Thomas, 1896). Whether his motives in promoting the scheme were altruistic or driven by self-interest is viewpoint dependent. By 1910, it was Cambrian Combine pits that were at the centre of industrial dispute and from a position as the miners' friend, Thomas became their main enemy. It will be argued here that Thomas does not deserve this reputation and was in many ways far sighted in his view of the coal industry and how it should be run. Apart from the 1896 scheme, he also presented a paper to the Royal Society of Statistics on the coal trade and the problems peculiar to the South Wales coalfield (Thomas, 1903a). Together with biographical works by Mackworth (1921) and Morgan (1918), these sources will provide an insight into Thomas' business beliefs. A comparison will be made with his actions during both the 1898 and 1910 strikes to determine if his behaviour was consistent with his pronouncements.

On the opposite side of the Cambrian dispute, the trade unions had undergone profound changes since the 1898 strike. The formation of the South Wales Miners Federation (SWMF) in that year was in part due to a divide between the rank and file and the miners' agents,

typified by William Abraham commonly known as Mabon, who were perceived to have a cosy relationship with the coalowners (Arnot, 1967, p.48). A younger generation of more militant union activists came to prominence who perhaps inevitably engaged in confrontations with the mine owners. The records of the Federation are poor prior to World War 1 but both Arnot (1967) and Edwards (1932) have covered much of the union material in their respective books about the Federation. In order to keep the dissertation focussed, the Tonypandy riots and much of the civil unrest that ensued will not be covered here. Rather it will look at the role of the Federation in the course of the dispute, the grievances they had with the sliding scale payment, eight hour day and abnormal place working. The effect of internal conflict within the union will also be covered as it had a significant effect on the course of the negotiations.

Chapter 2 – Business life and philosophy prior to 1910

Before dealing with Thomas's business record prior to the Cambrian Combine dispute it is worth looking at the sliding scale method of payment responsible for much of the industrial unrest in South Wales. Miners were paid according to the price of coal per ton obtained at the docks in Cardiff. If the price obtained rose above a certain level, the 1879 standard, the miners were paid a proportionate percentage increase. If the price fell below the standard, set at 8s per ton under the 1892 Sliding Scale agreement, the miners received no percentage increase on their base wage (Jevons, 1915, p.492). The price obtained for South Wales coal was heavily dependent on exports and the price fluctuated wildly. In mid-1891, coal prices were high and the miners pay was 57.5% above the standard. There was a general decline in coal prices over the next seven years and by February 1897 wages had fallen to just 10% above the standard (South Wales Miners Federation, 1924). Calls for the sliding scale to be changed, or abolished and replaced with a minimum wage became increasingly strident and led to the 1898 coal strike.

Although Thomas was an MP until 1910, he was particularly interested in the coal trade and was at different times the sales agent, a member of the Board and later the Chairman of Cambrian Collieries during his political career. He regarded himself as an expert in the applied economics of the coal industry having 'practical experience in business....knowledge of economic science... and of the principles and methods of statistics' (Thomas, 1903a, p. 441). His 1896 pamphlet discussed the importance of the coal trade to the UK backed up by a range of statistics and included a Scheme detailing how to deal with problems of price fluctuations and wage instability by controlling the output of the collieries (Thomas, 1896, pp.31-35). The large number of independent collieries in South Wales led to intense competition to supply coal, often for export. Coal owners would try and increase profit by increasing production leading to lower unit costs. According to Thomas, profits were being made by middlemen who drove down the price of coal with the benefit going to foreign countries. Although Thomas was a 'convinced free trader' (Thomas, 1903b, p.350) and actively campaigned against a proposed tax on coal, he thought the industry was a special case which fell outside the normal laws of supply and demand (Arnot, 1967 p.43). Essentially, he proposed each colliery agree to a percentage share of the total output per month with a substantial fine if limits were exceeded and compensation paid to those who didn't meet the target. Thomas advocated the simplicity of the Scheme, 'It will be observed that the questions of prices and profits are in no way touched upon ; that no attempt is made to fix a minimum selling price ; to classify the various qualities of coal ; or to dictate to the seller the price he should ask for his commodity' (Thomas, 1896, p.31). By preventing over-competition, prices and by extension wages, would achieve a level of stability. Thomas acknowledged that the scheme was not without its drawbacks but it was a genuine attempt

to improve conditions for employers and employed, although Williams has questioned whether it would have been successful (Williams, 1980, p.105).

Although Cambrian Collieries were not part of the Monmouthshire and South Wales Coalowners Association he persuaded a committee of both Associated and non-Associated members to adopt the Scheme in early 1897. Thomas believed that if 80% of the coalfield output was part of the Scheme it would succeed. It was effectively defeated by the insistence of Sir W.T. Lewis, Chairman of the Coalowners Association, that 95% of the owners had to agree. Lewis later admitted he was not in favour of the scheme and had insisted on such a high figure to ensure its failure (Evans, 1911, p.109). The character of Thomas can be seen clearly in his promotion and defence of the scheme in the press. In an interview in the Cardiff Times (1896, p.6) prior to the publication of his scheme he outlines the benefits to both employers and the miners and challenges those who oppose it 'in place of barren criticism there should be some endeavour to suggest practical proposals for the end they have in view'. In March 1898 after Lewis admitted he had never supported the Scheme, Thomas accused him of 'heartless hypocrisy' (Mackworth, 1921, p.109). When the miner's leaders, led by Mabon, began to waver in their support for the Scheme he was extremely critical, accusing him of 'advocating doing nothing' (Thomas, 1897, p.5). His press articles were generally forceful and combative and occasionally sarcastic, perhaps consistent with his political background.

While the Cambrian Collieries weren't involved in the lockout of 1898, one of their pits, Clydach Vale did join the stoppage. In a previous dispute in 1893, the Clydach miners held an unofficial strike in support of the Hauliers strike that year. At the time, Thomas had refused to allow work to resume unless the miners promised they would not break existing agreements again. In April 1898, the Clydach miners asked for a pay rise of 10% in part fuelled by Thomas' outspoken stance in support of the striking miners. Although Thomas supported the rise, the Cambrian Board refused and he remained loyal to their decision. Thomas personal stance was not known at the time and the Clydach miners therefore came out on strike without giving notice, with many on both sides believing Thomas was hypocritical and deserving of the consequences. Thomas, having initially agreed to meet the men after they decided to return to work on 6 April, then reversed his decision after they immediately came out again on 7 April (Evening Express, 1898b, p.3). The strike became a lock-out as the Cambrian Board refused to allow the men back. On 13 April after more details of the negotiations emerged the men made a remarkable turnabout and admitted 'they had done wrong by leaving work and not working on' (Evening Express, 1898c, p.3). The Clydach men received a 10% pay rise which was the amount the striking Association miners were requesting and were also given help in setting up a levy scheme to assist the miners on strike. Thomas was consistent in his belief that agreements should not be broken.

Thomas's behaviour during the course of the 1898 strike resonates with the picture of him obtained from the biographies by Mackwoth (1921) and Morgan (1918). A chapter in the

Mackworth (1921, pp. 278-291) book is devoted to an interview with Thomas in which he discusses his philosophy in terms of business. He was an avowed capitalist believing that an industry had to have a captain. Profit was not a dirty word but something to be proud of; successful businesses provided employment, livelihoods and paid taxes to be used for the benefit of society. He contrasted this with socialism which he believed was the 'negation of individualism and therefore the negation of freedom' (Mackworth, 1921 p 282). In keeping with a certain sense of mischief he referred to Trade Unions who he believed had sufficient funds to buy an industry but preferred to 'spend their time in the abuse of capitalists' (Mackworth, 1921, p.280). Begbie describes him as inflexible in his convictions and who believed that if an agreement was reached it should not be broken (Mackworth, 1921, p.299). People were driven by selfish desires but he was hopeful it would be 'enlightened self-interest'.

There may have been an element of political calculation and personal antipathy in the methods used by Thomas during the strike negotiations (Williams, 2008). Popularity with the miners would undoubtedly help at election time and the chance to embarrass Lewis would have been too good to miss. However, at different times his pronouncements had upset the Coalowners Association, union leaders and the miners but in no instance did he retract his views, indicating a belief in what he was proposing. He supported the minimum wage and increased wages for the miners. As Arnot (1966, p.44) noted, he had a politician's habit of 'plunging into public controversy'.

In 1903, Thomas described an attempt by the Coalowners Association to try and reduce wages in return for concessions given to the miners as tactically naïve, even 'if the employers can make out a case' (Arnot, 1967, p.103). The quote indicates that Thomas is a businessman first and foremost. He is not against wages being reduced if such a case makes business sense. An attempt to reduce weekly hours in coal mining with the introduction of the Eight Hour Bill in 1894 failed, after Thomas led opposition to the act in the Commons (Thomas, 1894). He claimed that it would lead to lower wages, higher prices, the introduction of a double shift system in South Wales and was doubtful it had the support of the miners. By 1908 when the act was re-introduced, Thomas was chairman of the Cambrian Collieries, a member of the Coalowners Association and fully supported their opposition to the bill. Again, Thomas' primary concern was commercial with the belief that what was good for business would be good for the employees.

The Cambrian strike changed the perception of Thomas from an outspoken, maverick individualist into a hard-headed, greedy unscrupulous capitalist. The next chapter will examine the events of the dispute to try and ascertain if this was an accurate picture.

Chapter 3 – The Cambrian Combine dispute

The immediate cause of the Cambrian dispute was the disagreement over the price paid per ton of coal obtained from a new seam, the Bute, at the Ely Pit. The Ely was a member of the Naval Colliery Company which had been incorporated into the Cambrian Combine, headed by Thomas. The seam was classified as an 'abnormal place' due to difficulties in extracting the caused by various geological factors. Miners pay was based on the amount of coal extracted per shift; working on a difficult seam would lead to lower wages. To counteract this, it was normal practice to negotiate an agreement between the workmen's representatives and management on a minimum payment per ton of coal to bring the miners wages to an acceptable level. Although such payments were standard throughout the South Wales coalfield it was a voluntary arrangement, a fact which had been tested in a legal case brought by the SWMF in 1908 (Evans, 1911, p.216). The wrangling over an acceptable price for the Bute seam had gone on for months with the miners asking for 2s 6d per ton and management offering 1s 9d. While price negotiations were taking place, the miners on the Bute seam were paid a minimum of 6s 9d per shift. The dispute was eventually referred to the Conciliation Board but no agreement could be reached. On 1 August 1910 the general manager at the Naval Colliery Company, Leonard Llewelyn, served notice on all 900 men employed at the colliery that they would be laid off at the beginning of September.

Thomas justified the effective closure of the Ely Pit claiming its future was dependant on the new seam as two existing seams were close to exhaustion (Thomas, 1911, p.1). Llewelyn stated 'we cannot work this pit at a profit unless we get a reasonable cutting price fixed upon the new seam, and so we must stop the whole pit' (Thomas, 1911, p.2). From the miners' viewpoint the closure was a provocative act and their response was immediate with the remaining pits in the Cambrian Combine agreeing to strike; some immediately and the remainder after giving a week's notice. On 9 September the senior miners agent, Mabon, made an appeal not to strike. This was ignored but the miners agreed to delay the strike in order that a coalfield conference could take place. The Executive Council of the SWMF recommended strike action for the Cambrian Combine men and a levy on the remaining men in the Federation in order to support the strike. This was rejected by the delegates to the conference who insisted on a ballot to decide if the strike should be confined to the Cambrian men or involve all members of the Federation. The ballot was in favour of just the Cambrian men striking. The difference between the delegates and the Executive Council, and the rejection of Mabon's advice were early indicators of the divisions that would become increasingly evident on the union side.

On 22 October negotiations took place between miners agents, Mabon and D. Watts Morgan, together with a committee representing the Naval Colliery workmen and Thomas

and Llewelyn representing the owners. An agreement was reached between the owners and miners agents, with the committee not expressing an opinion, by increasing the additional payment per ton from 1s 9d to 2s 1.3d. The offer, still short of the 2s 6d demanded by the miners, was rejected at a mass meeting on 26 October (Evening Express, 1910a). At the meeting, despite warnings from one of the senior union officials of the difficulty in striking over the winter, the vote was unanimous. For Thomas, an agreement had been made with the union but was now being dishonoured by the workmen. Again, the negotiations highlighted the union divisions. The miners' agents recommended the settlement, the committee representing the Naval Colliery men refused to take a position on the offer and the men rejected it. The Executive Council then sent a four man delegation, including two MPs, to persuade the Cambrian Combine Committee (CCC) to accept the offer, or at least trial it and allow a ballot of the men. The Committee refused all entreaties claiming the terms had already been rejected at the mass meeting and a ballot was not necessary.

Thomas was adept at using the press to emphasise his arguments. In an interview on 29 October (Evening Express, 1910b) he stated that not only had the offer on the seam increased, but at the prompting of the union side, the overall price would be based on the 1877 pay standard rather than that of 1879, again favourable to the workmen. Further, he recommended a ballot of the workmen should be taken, rather than the mass meeting which could be open to intimidation and also attacked the 'lack of moral courage' of the Naval Colliery Committee who refused to give an opinion on the terms. The article encapsulates Thomas's approach; combative, confident and arrogant. As Mackworth noted he had 'a love of a fight' (Mackworth, 1921, p.144) and didn't shy away from confrontation. Whether this was the best approach to take to try and reach an agreement is doubtful but it became clear the local union leaders were equally combative.

On 1 November all miners of the Cambrian Combine, approximately 12,000 men, went on strike. The Chief Constable of Glamorgan, Lionel Lindsay called for police reinforcements from neighbouring counties and later from the Metropolitan police. Lindsay also had to deal with a number of other disputes in the South Wales coalfield at the same time but these will not be considered here. On 7th Nov, a mass meeting of the strikers in Tonypany agreed 'it is our intention to prevent any man from doing any work at the collieries' (Arnot, 1967, p.183). Picketing of the collieries led to confrontations with the police, particularly over the issue of non-union labour. Thomas and Llewelyn were determined to keep the engines and pumps operating to prevent flooding and had therefore hired non-union labour from Cardiff. The subsequent events of the Tonypany riots and the arrival of troops under the command of Sir Nevil Macready have been detailed in a number of articles (Brien, 1994, Leeworthy, 2018, Smith, 1980 and Williams, 1977) and will not be covered here. However, Macready later wrote about the dispute in his memoirs and gave his impressions of a number of the protagonists in the strike. He describes Thomas 'as under the impression that his standing as an MP gave him the right to lay down the law on any matter in which his interests were concerned' (Macready, 1925, p.141). Llewelyn he found to be forceful and

autocratic although generally well liked by the miners. He was particularly scathing of the men of the Rhondda strike committee described as 'fanatical socialists' who exercised a strong hold over the strikers (Macready, 1925, p.141). As the strike progressed he noted that many of the older men complained about the conduct of the committee, of whom they had little respect, but hadn't the energy to challenge them (Macready, 1925, p.142). Nevertheless, he observed that whenever the strike committee made a promise to him they were always kept; something he contrasted unfavourably with the actions of the employers (Macready, 1925, p.142). Macready by general consent was scrupulously fair in his dealings with both sides (Arnot, 1967, p.201). It may be thought that a general in the British Army would naturally favour the coalowners but Arnot interviewed a retired miner in Tonypany, some fifty years after the riot, who stated 'General Macready was the fairest and most straightforward gentleman you could meet' (Arnot, 1967, p.204).

During the disturbances in mid-November the CCC, together with colleagues from Aberdare who were involved in a separate dispute, called for another coalfield conference. When that was refused by the Executive Council they tried to hold an unofficial one. Arnot described the CCC and the Executive Council as behaving 'like two potentially hostile bodies' (Arnot, 1967, p.221). A conference was eventually called on 7 December but could not reach agreement on the Cambrian dispute. It did, however, agree to ask for help from the Miners Federation of Great Britain (MFGB) and requested a national conference on the question of a minimum wage and abnormal place working. The call for a minimum wage was in effect a widening of the dispute from local to national level. Thomas and Llewelyn rejected any attempt to widen the dispute as a minimum wage agreement could only be made on a coalfield wide basis in conjunction with the Coalowners Association. Thomas had previously supported calls for a minimum wage during the 1898 strike but was now against. In his 1911 pamphlet he states 'when the Miners Federation are in a position to guarantee a minimum day's work, the employers will no doubt be ready to guarantee a minimum days wage' (Thomas, 1911, p.9). Towards the end of the same pamphlet after dealing with the miners' grievances he lists some of the problems the employers faced. These include working 'canny' - deliberately working slowly in abnormal places to increase payment; malingering - claiming only around one third of the men worked the shifts they were contracted for and carelessness - where accidents were caused by men not following safety guidance (Thomas, 1911, pp.13-19). He blamed the newer socialist element in the unions for many of the problems, in particular that 'they have an imperfect appreciation of the binding nature of a contract' (Thomas, 1911, p.19). For Thomas this was a key point.

It's instructive to look at how rates of pay for colliers compared across the coalfields to give context to the claims made by the CCC. Thomas stated that in the two week period prior to the strike, the average rate of pay for the colliers at Naval Collieries, excluding the 80 workmen on the disputed seam, was 7s 9.26d (sic) per shift (Thomas, 1911, p.7). On the disputed seam the colliers had received a rate of 6s 9d prior to a negotiated price. A comparison with other coalfields is not available for 1910, but Jevons collated data shortly

after the Minimum Wage Act was passed in 1912 (Appendix 2). The minimum wage agreed in 1912 for South Wales at 6s 10.5d was virtually equivalent to the price paid on the Bute Seam and well below the average wage at the Naval Collieries. Although comparing a minimum with an average wage is not ideal, it indicates that the wages were not at 'starvation' level as claimed by the Committee of the Naval Lodge (Arnot, 1967, p.177). In 1913, the average wage for miners in South Wales was 7s 3d per shift again below the average wage paid at Naval Collieries in 1910 (Digest of Welsh Hist. Stat., 2015, Table 3.2). Comparison with other trades in Wales again show miners generally received higher wages than agricultural labourers, building workers, the police and was on a par with certain shipbuilding trades (Digest of Welsh Historical Statistics, 2015). Thomas highlighted this point claiming there had been an influx of 15,000 men into the South Wales coalfield in the course of the previous eighteen months (Thomas, 1911, p.8). Wages are only one part of the cost of living equation but local information on rents and prices local are difficult to estimate at the turn of the twentieth century. An official enquiry into industrial unrest in Wales noted there had been a decrease in real wages since the mid-nineties but without any statistical evidence (Parliament. House of Commons, 1917, p.30). However, Bowley (1937, p.30) estimated real wages were relatively constant over this period. Recent research has tended to support Bowley's estimate (Feinstein, 1990, pp.351-2). It's possible that after a period of growth prior to the mid-nineties the static nature, or slight decline, in living standards may have led to a feeling of austerity at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The MFGB conference took place on 24 January 1911. Tragically, three members of the South Wales Executive Council died in a railway accident on their way to the conference and together with one member who resigned, were replaced by three members of the CCC and Noah Ablett, all either committed socialists or syndicalists. The new council members indicated how the Federation was moving away from the consensus style of Mabon to a more confrontational approach. In a speech to the conference Thomas was described as trying to break the union, due to the prohibitive cost of the strike 'our funds are flowing out at the rate of £6-7000 a week' (Arnot, 1967, p.240). The MFGB agreed to contribute £3000 per week to the strikers by imposing a levy of 3d per member. At the same time as the conference was taking place, T. Ashton and W.E Harvey of the MFGB together with members of the South Wales Executive Council and the CCC met G.R Askwith at the Board of Trade to try and facilitate a settlement. Askwith read out a letter from Thomas who gave 'a definite assurance that we have no desire or intention to reduce the general level of wages at the Naval Collieries' (Arnot, 1967, p.245). Combined with a willingness to give the terms a trial period of one year the prospect of an end to the dispute seemed possible. Askwith and the MFGB representatives advised that a ballot of the men should be conducted. The CCC refused, stating the lack of trust in management and that the assurances had no monetary value.

Nonetheless, a meeting was held to discuss these assurances in Cardiff on 10 February 1911, although Thomas was absent on holiday. Llewelyn, who was present, stated a

willingness to settle any dispute over the price on a particular seam personally, by meeting with the miners agent at the seam itself and to put any agreement in writing (Evans, 1911, p.148). William Brace of the Executive Council repeatedly pressed for a monetary value to the assurance, in effect a minimum wage of 6s 9d per shift as paid in the negotiating stage, which the owners insisted was not the intention. The Executive Council rejected the terms as the pay rate would still be set by the managers and highlighted the 'absence of mutual trust' at the colliery (Arnot, 1967, p.246). On the coalowners side there was some disquiet and an initial reprimand to Llewelyn, later withdrawn, over the concessions he had made on abnormal working and allowances (Evans, 1911, p.150). Whilst there was much made of what was seen on the miners side of an empty promise there appears to be no examples of Thomas having behaved duplicitously in negotiations previously. Both Askwith and the representatives of the MFGB accepted Thomas's word on the pay rates, or at least felt it worthy of a one year trial. In December 1911, three months after the strike finished, Ashton on behalf of the MFGB queried whether the assurances given by management were being kept and was told they were. He also asked if any collier had received less than 6s 9d per day and none had. Further he was informed 'most of the men since they resumed work had earned big wages' (Arnot, 1967, p.267). Thomas had insisted during prior to the strike that any man putting in a fair days pay on the Bute seam would earn more than 6s 9d per shift and the evidence seems to back this up.

A ballot on the terms agreed was eventually held on 25 March. It had the support of the MFGB and the Executive Council but not the CCC. The vote was almost unanimous with over 7000 against the proposals and only around 300 for. Evans writes of the hostile atmosphere in which the vote took place. According to Evans the ballot paper was perforated in the middle with 'For' and 'Against' on either side. Miners were instructed to show their colours by displaying the 'For' part of the ballot paper on the way out (Evans, 1911, p.156). On the same day, there were reports of outbreaks of violence directed against 'blackleg' labour and of huts set on fire at the colliery (Rhondda Leader, 1911a). Ashton and Harvey also wrote of the hostile reception they received from the miners, with Ashton bemoaning 'the men are out of hand entirely' and describing a state of anarchy (Evans, 1911, p.157). A statement by Harvey, declared that he witnessed such behaviour that 'the end is not far off of all trade unions' (Rhondda Leader, 1911b).

An attempt to submit the dispute for arbitration was refused by the Coalowners but negotiations resumed between the owners and representatives of both the SWMF and the MFGB. By mid-May they agreed on the same terms as negotiated on 22 October 1910 and that the assurances given by Thomas and Llewelyn would be implemented and monitored by the Conciliation Board or, the Independent Chairman if the Board failed to agree. Again the miners rejected the terms saying 'the surrender policy of our apologetic leaders must stop' (Arnot, 1967, p.254). The terms were finally rejected at a special conference in Cardiff on 27 May despite the Executive Council supporting them. Instead a resolution was passed arguing for a strike of all South Wales miners or failing that a national stoppage (Arnot,

1967, p.255). A war of words took place in the press between the old and new school of miners leaders with the Rhondda Leader declaring 'if it were not so intensely tragic it would be grotesquely funny'(Rhondda Leader, 1911c).

After a turbulent couple of weeks in Wales, Ablett and supporters tried to get the upcoming MFGB special conference on 13-15 June to discuss a minimum wage which was refused. Instead, despite pleas from Tom Smith and William Brace of the South Wales Executive Council, members from each of the other coalfields urged the South Wales men to accept the terms agreed by MFGB representatives. Further, they withdrew the grant of £3000 per week amidst criticism that they their own men had not paid their levies fully. Dr. John Wilson of the Durham miners was particularly critical saying 'they have solicited alms like beggars' and 'they have not paid their levies fully for their own men on strike' (Arnot, 1967, p.260). On the same day the conference ended, Thomas re-iterated that his assurance did not mean a minimum wage of 6s 9d per shift as some of the MFGB members had claimed (Evans, 1911, p.176). This was construed as evidence of Thomas' duplicity and the Federation went back to the MFGB asking for the grant to be re-instated, again refused.

The SWMF agreed to raise the levy to 3s per month and to try bypassing the MFGB leadership and appeal to miners directly. William Brace thought the move provocative, unconstitutional and possibly the 'beginning of a civil war' (Arnot, 1967, p.261).The Rhondda Leader in an editorial piece on 17 June said 'the local leaders would bear a great responsibility for the striking men and families if they prolonged the dispute'(Rhondda Leader,1911d). It went on to state that the local leaders had 'a loyal following from a large section of the men, although it must be conceded that a great deal of the following has been 'a silent one with doubtful sincerity'. Thomas was interviewed on the same day by the Rhondda Leader and challenged anyone to give an example of when he had broken his word in his thirty year business career (Rhondda Leader, 1911e). Finally on 12 August the Executive Council together with a deputation from the CCC in attendance held a conference in what Evans claimed was a 'tumultuous atmosphere'(Evans, 1911, p.189) and therefore had to be adjourned to the 14 August. A proposal by the CCC to extend the strike to the entire South Wales coalfield was rejected and the council voted twelve to two in favour of ending the dispute. The miners were asked to choose between the terms agreed in either October 1910 or May 1911 and chose the latter in a mass meeting. Thomas and Llewelyn refused to meet the CCC, instead dealing with the committees from the individual collieries (Evans, 1911, p.191). Evans reported that Thomas refused to agree any variation in the terms agreed and also refused to sack the non-union workers he had employed stating, that he wanted the workmen to appreciate the men had gained nothing from the strike.

The key issues of the strike appeared to be money and trust. The price paid for the disputed seam after the strike was the same as agreed in October 1910. Anecdotal evidence from Arnot supports Thomas' assumption that the colliers would earn more than the 6s 9d paid prior to negotiations. The money earned was clearly not at a starvation level and was

comparable with the best paid miners in the UK. Whilst it was the union leaders, particularly the CCC, who constantly stated they couldn't trust Thomas, the evidence appears to the contrary. There is nothing in the record of Thomas not honouring his assurances and he was extremely critical of the breaking of agreements. The turmoil in the union was particularly detrimental to their own cause and by the end of the dispute they had alienated the rest of the MFGB.

Conclusion

At the end of the Cambrian dispute Thomas was according to Morgan 'the most hated coalowner in South Wales' (Morgan, 1995, p.432). Even now, as noted in the introduction, the popular view is of a ruthless tycoon maximising profits by driving down wages at the expense of the working man. Such a view seems undeserving in the context of the events that occurred. He could be arrogant and high-handed as is clear from some of the sarcastic responses made during the negotiations and was confirmed in Macready's memoir (Macready, 1925). However, allegations that he was driving down wages seem unfounded. Average wages in the Naval Collieries were higher than for the South Wales coalfield in general and certainly higher than many other occupations in the region. A number of his biographers mention his belief that a bargain once struck should be kept and again there is no record of him having broken his word. Thomas believed in capitalism and business principles, however imperfect, as the best way of improving society. That he was not simply motivated by greed and profit is shown in his actions following the outbreak of World War 1. After surviving the sinking of the Lusitania in 1915 he agreed to serve as a special envoy to the USA for Lloyd George which involved another crossing of the Atlantic. Upon his return he was then appointed as Food Controller in 1917 even though medical advice indicated the stress could kill him. By May 1918 he was seriously ill but was persuaded by Lloyd George to remain in post and he died less than two months later.

On the union side, the miners were badly served by the divisions between the old and new 'guard'. Allegations that the union had been captured by extremists seem to be a time honoured managerial way of preserving the status quo, but perhaps had some element of truth in this case. The Rhondda Leader, a paper generally supportive of the miners, intimated as much in an editorial piece in July claiming the strike was not as unanimous as recent public meetings would indicate (Rhondda Leader, 1911f). Even after the MFGB had withdrawn the grant from the Federation in July and it was clear the strike was finished, Vernon Hartshorn and two other representatives on the Executive Council wanted the adoption of 'guerilla warfare' (Arnot, 1967, p.264). When the men went back to work there were efforts to prevent the non-union labour employed during the strike from working and the Workmen's Committee even threatened another strike over the issue (Evans, 1911, p.192). Attempts to change the nature of the dispute from a local altercation to a national debate over a minimum wage were partly successful. Thomas concentrated on the immediate cause of the dispute believing the minimum wage was a separate issue. However, the MFGB agreed to debate the proposal and it eventually led to the Minimum Wage Act of 1912. What is clear from the statistics is that this was not a panacea for all the ills of the coalmining industry. The first Minimum Wage award for the South Wales coalfield, 6s 10.5d (Appendix 2) was roughly equivalent to the wage paid on the contested seam prior to the dispute, 6s 9d.

In his overview of Welsh historiography of the twentieth century Johnes (2010, pp.1257-1260) refers to the dominant trend of writing from an industrial working class viewpoint. Reviews of Thomas as a businessman are either negative or at best neutral and perhaps a re-evaluation is overdue. His actions during the Cambrian dispute were in line with his business principles and contrast with that of the various union factions. Whilst the introduction of the Minimum Wage Act was a major achievement for the miners, those of Cambrian Combine and their families paid a heavy price.

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Appendix 1.

Police and soldiers guarding Naval Colliery during the Tonypandy Riots, Dec 1910



From: Peoples Collection Wales: Created 01 Dec 1910, Owner: Glamorgan Archives Ref: DNCB/14/1/4/1. Available at:

<https://calmview.cardiff.gov.uk/Record.aspx?src=CalmView.Catalog&id=DNCB%2f14%2f1%2f4%2f1&pos=1> Accessed 27 May 2024

Appendix 2

Minimum Wage Requests and Settlements for individual coalfields

Area	MFGB – Final Schedule	First Minimum Wage - 1912	Present Minimum Wage - 1914
South Wales	7s 1 ¹ / ₂ d -> 7s 6d	6s 10 ¹ / ₂ d	7s 4d
South Yorkshire	7s 6d	6s 9d	7s 4 ⁹ / ₁₂ d -> 8s
West Yorkshire			
Derbyshire	7s 1 ¹ / ₂ d -> 7s 6d	6s	
Nottinghamshire	7s 6d	7s 3d	7s 11d
Scotland	6s	5s 10d	
Durham	6s 1 ¹ / ₄ d	5s 6d ->5s 10d	
Northumberland	6s -> 7s 2d	5s 6d	
Lancashire	7s	6s 6d	
Cumberland	6s 6d	6s	

From: Jevons, H.S. (1915), The British coal trade, A.M. Kelley, NewYork. Available at:

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