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Dirty, immoral, and shameless: What was the response to the 1847
Blue Books' portrayal of Welshwomen, and what legacy did it leave?

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Introduction

The Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the State of Education in Wales (1847), which became known as the Blue Books, was a government investigation into the education provision available in Wales. The 1847 Report was initiated following concerns over social unrest in Wales in the first half of the nineteenth century. Disaffection amongst the Welsh had become a potential threat to social order, and violent protests, such as the Newport Rising (1839) and the Rebecca riots (1839-43), had caused great consternation amongst the authorities. At this time, the majority of the population of Wales were non-conformist and monoglot Welsh speaking, a language considered uncultured and inferior.¹ An English education was considered to be a potential solution to Welsh hostility, and cheaper than having to police and punish the populace.² In addition to the analysis of education provision, the Report proved derogatory about the Welsh character, singling out Welshwomen in particular as sexually promiscuous and dirty.³ The Welsh had initially welcomed a report into education, recognising that improvements were needed in their schools, however they were not prepared for the vitriolic comments made about their character and morals.⁴

The 1847 Report came to be seen as a 'seminal event' in Welsh history, as it was perceived to be a damning attack that changed the politics and culture of Wales.⁵ Much has been written about the Blue Books and their impact on Welsh society and culture, and the historiography has largely focussed on the Report's condemnation of the Welsh language and non-conformity.⁶ However, more recently historians have produced insightful articles which suggest that the reverberations of the Blue Books had a particular impact on Welshwomen throughout the

¹ Gwyneth Tyson Roberts, *The Language of the Blue Books: The Perfect Instrument of Empire* (University of Wales, 1998) pp. 13-14.

² Roberts, *The Language of the Blue Books*, p.24.

³ Roberts, *The Language of the Blue Books*, pp.163-167.

⁴ Roberts, *The Language of the Blue Books*, p.209.

⁵ Geraint. H. Jenkins, *A Concise History of Wales* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), p.213.

⁶ Prys Morgan, 'From Long Knives to Blue Books', in *Welsh Society and Nationhood*, by R. R. Davies, Ralph A. Griffiths, Ieuan Gwynedd Jones, Kenneth O. Morgan (eds.), (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 1984).

nineteenth century. This dissertation aims to build upon this historiography by appraising the initial responses to the Blue Books, exclusively in relation to women, and by paying particular attention to how the Report impacted on women's identity in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

The following questions will be the focus of this study:

- What were the Commissioners' findings concerning Welshwomen?
- What were the responses to the comments about the morality and character of women (1847-1850)?
- What agency did Welshwomen have to defend their character?
- How did the Blue Books influence Welsh female expression and identity throughout the rest of the nineteenth century?

Prys Morgan wrote in *From Long Knives to Blue Books* that 'the treason of the blue books' is an expression 'which every Welsh schoolboy knows'.⁷ Morgan was making reference to the 1854 play by Robert Jones, *Brad y Llyfrau Glesion* (The Treason of the Blue Books) that satirised the 1847 Report, its title a pun on an old Welsh legend 'The Treason of the Long Knives'. In Morgan's summing up of the opening scene in the play, he described the three pronged criticism of the Welsh as attacks on: non-conformity, the Welsh language, and the reputation of Welshwomen. The majority of Morgan's analysis, however, is focused largely on language and religion. Whilst he does make some references to the particular criticisms made against womanhood, he fails to fully address the attack on Welshwomen.

One of the first collections of essays to focus exclusively on Welshwomen's history is Angela V. John's *Our Mother's Land: Chapters in Welsh Women's History 1830-1939*. Published a few years after Morgan's article, these studies help to give further context to the impact of the Blue

⁷ Morgan, 'From Long Knives to Blue Books', p.199.

Books on women in Welsh society. John describes how the 1847 Report gave a 'specific boost' to separate sphere ideology, as it became incumbent upon the women to refute the allegations of sexual and moral impropriety laid against them; the responsibility was 'firmly placed on the shoulders of the female sex'.⁸ John proposes that periodicals such as *Y Gymraes* (The Welshwoman) debated the 1847 report, but were mostly aimed at instructing women how to behave, 'it shaped an ideal rather than reflecting a reality'.⁹

Jane Aaron's *Our Sister's Land: The Changing Identities of Women in Wales* followed three years after *Our Mother's Land*, as a complement to the original research.¹⁰ The Blue Books were again highlighted as an important factor in Welshwomen's identity, and functioned as a 'moral imperative throughout the century'.¹¹ Aaron concludes that Welshwomen were faced with choosing from three routes to restore their reputation: adopt English ideas of femininity (essentially abandoning their Welsh roots), assert their Welshness through strict non-conformist religious propriety, or accept the Report's definition of a Welshwoman.¹² Manon Ceridwen James, in a more recent publication, concurs with this view in her book *Fat chicks, Blue books, and Green Valleys: Identity and Women and Religion in Wales*.¹³

Arguably, the three options presented for Welsh female identity post-1847 are correct, but do not take account of the fact that some Welshwomen, and their supporters, outrightly rejected the Report's findings. Geraint H. Jenkins in *A Concise History of Wales* challenges Aaron's three options when he states, 'Rather than react with shame or penitence, Welshwomen and their male champions furiously rebutted the charges'.¹⁴ Additionally Gwyneth Tyson Roberts states

⁸ Angela V. John, 'Introduction to the 1991 Edition', in *Our Mother's Land: Chapters on Welsh Women's History 1830-1939* ed. Angela V. John (Cardiff University of Wales, 1991), p.14.

⁹ John, *Our Mother's Land*, p.12.

¹⁰ Jane Aaron and Teresa Rees, 'Introduction: Identities in Transition', in *Our Sisters' Land: The Changing Identities of Women in Wales*, ed. Jane Aaron (1994), p.3.

¹¹ Jane Aaron, 'Mid-nineteenth century traumas', in *Our Sisters' Land: The Changing Identities of Women in Wales*, ed. Jane Aaron (University of Wales, 1994), p.188.

¹² Aaron, *Our Sisters' Land*, p.188.

¹³ Manon Ceridwen James, 'Fat chicks, Blue books, and Green Valleys: Identity and Women and Religion in Wales', in *The Faith Lives of Women and Girls* ed. Nicola Slee, (Taylor & Francis Group, 2013). p.106.

¹⁴ Jenkins, *A Concise History of Wales*, p.218.

that 'in succeeding generations, many writers in Wales seemed to be preoccupied with defending themselves against the Reports slurs', and proving that the commissioners' criticisms were incorrect.¹⁵ It is these views of the outright rejection of the commissioners' findings concerning Welshwomen that this dissertation will aim to examine more thoroughly.

The first chapter will engage with what the 1847 Report asserted about Welshwomen, and the immediate responses to the slurs on their character, using contemporary newspaper publications and periodicals.¹⁶ Moreover, the articles of Jane Williams (Ysfagell) *Artegall: or Remarks on the Reports of the Commissioners of Inquiry into the State of Education in Wales* (1848), and Evan Jones (Ieuan Gwynedd), *Facts, Figures, and Statements in Illustration of the Dissent and Morality of Wales: an Appeal to the English People* will be presented as examples of contemporary counter discourse to the commissioner findings. Both authors wrote a thorough rebuttal of the Blue Books, using the Reports own testimonies and statistics to disprove the Commissioners' findings, which became popular with the Welsh populace.

The second chapter will centre on the long term impact, up to the end of the nineteenth century, of the Blue Books on Welsh female expression through the portrayal of Welsh heroines in literature, and the stirrings of feminism evidenced by individuals and groups who challenged the patriarchy. Welsh female authors and their literary protagonists will be examined who challenged the stereotype of Welsh immorality, such as L.M. Spooner who wrote *Country Landlords*. R. Singer states that even though the novel was written over ten years after the Blue Book's publication, the novel suggests a rejection of the accusations of immorality laid against women.¹⁷ Female authorship was a socially acceptable route available to educated Welshwomen as a means to express their refutation of the Blue Books.

¹⁵ Roberts, *The Language of the Blue Books*, p.215

¹⁶ Newspapers include, *The Welshman*, *The Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian*, *Glamorgan Monmouth and Brecon Gazette*, *The Monmouthshire Merlin*, *the Carnarvon and Denbigh Herald* and *North and South Wales Independent*, and *The Principality*. All are newspapers produced in Wales.

¹⁷ Rita Singer. 'Adapting the Risorgimento: Ideas of Liberal Nationhood in L. M. Spooner's *Country Landlords* (1860)' in *Women's writing : the Elizabethan to Victorian period* 24.4 (2017), p.467-8.

Furthermore, in the later nineteenth century this rejection of the Reports' portrayal of Welshwomen became evident through those individuals who strove for the advancement of women, as well as through groups who fought for women's right to vote. In *Women's Suffrage in Wales*, Lisa Tippings argues that the 1847 Report had a 'long lasting legacy on the women of Wales'.¹⁸ She suggests that the actions of the suffrage movement in Wales were influenced by the stigma of the Blue Books, as the Welsh suffragists used only peaceful means not wanting to portray themselves as 'uncontrollable, or even worse, immoral'.¹⁹ Evidently, the taint of the Blue Books was still felt years after its publication.

In conclusion, this study will assert that Welshwomen, and their champions, expressed their need to outrightly rebut the findings of the Commissioners through counter-discourse, literature, and feminist ideologies. Initially, due to prevailing cultural and social norms, women had to find ways to assert themselves through socially acceptable channels, but, even after the initial furore had subsided, the taint of the Blue Books pervaded Welshwomen's identity and public perception throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century.

¹⁸ Lisa Tippings, *Women's Suffrage in Wales*, (Pen & Sword Books Limited, 2019), p.8.

¹⁹ Tippings, *Women's Suffrage in Wales*, p.8.

The Reports and the immediate aftermath

The Commissioners' Findings

In his instructions to the Commissioners, J.P. Kay Shuttleworth requested that in addition to their inquiry into the state of education in Wales, they should also make an estimate as to the influence an improved education might make on the moral and religious progress of the Welsh.²⁰ Each commissioner devoted the majority of their report to education provision, and the perceived deficiencies thereof, but additionally each gathered statements and drew conclusions about the general morals and conduct of the Welsh, in particular of the poorer classes. The commissioners were, 'all men, all English, all lawyers, all Anglicans, and all members of the upper middle class'.²¹ Naturally this also meant that the commissioners had little or no understanding of Welsh culture, traditions and language, and would likely have held similar opinions and preconceptions about the Welsh. Their conclusions about the morals of the Welsh were derogatory, with drunkenness, cheating, filthy living conditions and lack of chastity common themes across all three Reports. In the aftermath of the Reports, the response in Wales 'was immediate and bitter'.²²

The charges made against Welsh men and women were extreme and damning, but women had less agency to counter those charges made against them than men, and were held responsible in many instances for the actions of men in their families and society. The evidence presented to the commissioners was exclusively from men, not one woman was asked to contribute, yet social norms of the nineteenth century prevented women from a vociferous counter challenge. This essay will examine those specific charges made against women before considering the immediate responses to them.

²⁰ R.R.W.B. Lingen, *The Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the State of Education in Wales Part 1*(1847), p.21. Available at: <https://www.library.wales/discover-learn/digital-exhibitions/printed-material/the-blue-books-of-1847/carmarthen-glamorgan-and-pembroke>. Accessed 13 April 2024.

²¹ Roberts, *The Language of the Blue Books*, p.75.

²² Roberts, *The Language of the Blue Books*, p.209.

The commissioners divided Wales into three parts for the purposes of the inquiry. Ralph Robert Wheeler Baron Lingen conducted his inspection in the areas of Carmarthen, Glamorgan and Pembroke. Lingen presents evidence that the poorer 'girls' of the area are 'almost universally unchaste', but follows this with his personal view that this promiscuous behaviour is due more to an 'absence of all checks' than depravity, implying that it is the lack of good guidance that has caused this outcome.²³ Married women also come in for criticism, however, when it is described how the women of the area are prone to gossiping at each other's houses, so much so that when the husband comes home from work there is no meal waiting for him. Moreover, women are not only acting contrary to their sex by not providing the evening meal, they are also responsible for the drunkenness of the men as their lack of care sends them directly to the public house.²⁴ This process of thinking removes any responsibility of drunkenness from men and places the burden firmly with women.

Furthermore, evidence is offered from the Reverend John Griffith, vicar of Aberdare, that men and women live and sleep in the same room, freely undressing and washing in front of one another, 'the women do not hesitate to change their undergarments before the men'. He goes on to say that, 'Promiscuous intercourse is most common, is thought of as nothing, and the women do not lose caste by it'.²⁵ Clearly, the Reverend feels that it is women who should be accountable for any unseemly behaviour between the sexes. This is further compounded by his apparent incredulity that women's reputations do not suffer from their licentiousness, yet never mentions the reputation of Welsh men.

The second report, authored by J. Elinger C. Symons, covers the areas of Brecknock, Cardigan, Radnor and Monmouth. Symons also renders a scathing report of the women of Wales, although he suggests that it is with great reluctance that he presents evidence as to the 'alleged

²³ R. R. W. Lingen, *Reports of the Commissioners of Inquiry into the State of Education in Wales*. Part 1, p.21.

²⁴ Lingen, *Report, Part 1*. p.22.

²⁵ Lingen, *Report, Part 1*. p.22.

want of chastity in women'.²⁶ Despite this apparent reticence, Symons expresses his concern that if this alleged lack of chastity is true then 'it is sufficient to account for all other immoralities', as, by his logic, the children will be influenced by their immoral mothers and 'it would be vain to expect virtues in the offspring'.²⁷ Hence, not only are women responsible for drunkenness, as put forward in Lingen's report, they bear the burden of every corruption of society by the fact they are mothers. Women are not only responsible for their own moral welfare, but that of the whole of society.

The Report goes on to give many accounts of the prevalence of promiscuity. The Reverend L. H. Davies of Troed y Raw makes a statement that the 'want of chastity' is so prevalent amongst the females that he offered to refund the marriage fees to all couples if their first child was born at least nine months after the wedding. He states that only one couple claimed it in six years. He describes promiscuity as 'the giant sin of Wales'.²⁸ The commissioner blames the want of chastity on the practice of 'bundling', the tradition of courtship where the man and woman would spend the night in the same bed before marriage, a practice which he states is 'still widely prevailing'.²⁹ Contributors to the report are recorded as linking promiscuity to illegitimacy, such as one resident who claims that 'bastardy, which is scarcely considered a crime or disgrace, is very prevalent with young women'. He goes on to say that whilst some do go on to marry they have little idea of cleanliness and comfort' making a link between promiscuity and lack of cleanliness.³⁰ Once more, the responsibility for chasteness is placed with women in society.

Some of the most critical commentary of women, however, is to be found in the third report written by Henry Robert Vaughn Johnson. He reports that a Wrexham shopkeeper gives

²⁶ J. E. C. Symons, *Reports of the Commissioners of Inquiry into the State of Education in Wales. Part 2*, p.57. Available at: <https://www.library.wales/discover-learn/digital-exhibitions/printed-material/the-blue-books-of-1847/brecknock-cardigan-radnor-and-monmouth>. Accessed 13 April 2024.

²⁷ Lingen, *Report, Part 2*, p.57.

²⁸ Lingen, *Report, Part 2*, p.60.

²⁹ Lingen, *Report, Part 2*, p.57.

³⁰ Lingen, *Report, Part 2*, p.61.

evidence that girls have no industrial skills and cannot sew, and that 'the women have no knowledge of housewifery or economy'.³¹ The Reverend P. M. Richards also complains that, 'the women have no kind of knowledge of the duty of their sex'.³² A number of other witnesses concur in their own attestations, and draw a link between women being ignorant of housewifery, and dirty, overcrowded homes. The Wrexham shopkeeper concludes that these lack of womanly skills cause 'all kinds of domestic dissension and distress'.³³ Clearly, the perception is that if women lack the skills expected from them in one area, it will lead to a breakdown in other areas of home life too.

Similarly to the first two reports, Symons also reports on 'the want of chastity' amongst Welshwomen.³⁴ Once more 'bundling' is portrayed as the 'evil' and 'barbarous' vice that leads to promiscuity and illegitimacy.³⁵ The Reverend J. W. Trevor gives a scathing account of the Welsh attitudes to illegitimacy and expresses his outrage that the women demonstrate no contrition, having an 'utter disregard of common natural decency and shame' He states that Anglesey has the highest proportion of illegitimate children than any other county in the Kingdom, apart from one which is also in Wales, and he cannot see this situation improving as children are brought up with these 'filthy practices'.³⁶ The Reverend evokes a graphic image of the character of women in his parish, giving a savage rendering. It is no coincidence that some of the most critical descriptions of women to be found in the Reports come from the Anglican clergy. The Reports link the Welsh language and non-conformist worship in the chapels (which were also conducted in Welsh) with dissent from Anglicanism, and therefore a threat to the established Church of England.

³¹ H. R. V. Johnson, *Reports of the Commissioners of Inquiry into the State of Education in Wales, Part 3*, p.65. Available at: <https://www.library.wales/discover-learn/digital-exhibitions/printed-material/the-blue-books-of-1847/north-wales-comprising-anglesey-carnarvon-denbigh-flint-meirioneth-and-montgomery>. Accessed 13 April 2024.

³² Johnson, *Report, Part 3*, p.65

³³ Johnson, *Report, Part 3*, p.65

³⁴ Johnson, *Report, Part 3*, p.68

³⁵ Johnson, *Report, Part 3*, p.68

³⁶ Johnson, *Report, Part 3*, p.68

However, common to all faiths in British society was the idealised role of women. The view of the woman's role in society was very much entrenched in popular Victorian beliefs and any woman that deviated from that idealised view would have been seen as unnatural. The doctrine of separate spheres meant that women were considered to be the homemakers, existing in the private sphere, whilst men belonged to the public sphere and provided for the family.³⁷ In the context of the Reports, Welsh womanhood is being presented as deviant to the expected standards set for women in society. Unsurprisingly, not everyone in Wales was prepared to accept these conclusions.

Responses to the Blue Books (1847-1850)

The three volumes of the Blue Books were so vast and detailed that it took some time for the public to fully comprehend their contents, but what followed was a series of articles in the press which argued 'with evidence and passion' against its criticisms of the Welsh character.³⁸ The attack on the sexual morality of the Welsh, and therefore the womenfolk of Wales, ensured that the Report was met with hostility from the Welsh, and especially from writers willing to argue against the Reports methods and conclusions.

One of the more forthright challenges to the findings of the Blue Books came from minister and journalist Evan Jones (Ieuan Gwynedd, 1820-1852) in his article '*Facts, Figures, and Statements in Illustration of the Dissent and Morality of Wales: an Appeal to the English People*' (1849). Jones wrote a carefully considered argument, underpinned by facts and statistics, that defended the Welsh against the attacks on their character. He recognised that, with regard to morality, the majority of the most competent witnesses gave evidence contrary to the conclusions of the commissioners.³⁹ He purported that with regard to the charge of unchastity

³⁷ Roberts, *The Language of the Blue Books*, p.151.

³⁸ Roberts, *The Language of the Blue Books*, p.210.

³⁹ Evan Jones (Ieuan Gwynedd) (1820-1852) '*Facts, Figures, and Statements in Illustration of the Dissent and Morality of Wales: an Appeal to the English People*' (1849)(vii p26). Available at: <https://www.library.wales/discover-learn/digital-exhibitions/europeana-rise-of-literacy/the-blue-books-reports/facts-figures-and-statements-of-illustration-of-the-dissent-and-morality-of-wales-an-appeal-to-the-english-people>. Accessed 17 April 2024.

on the part of the women, 'they are not sustained by the evidence'.⁴⁰ Jones's study used the Reports own evidence to determine that of the fifteen responses to the question of female character, and whether the duties of mothers and wives are adequately performed, ten replied favourably and only five unfavourably, meaning two thirds of the testimonies were actually positive.⁴¹ Tellingly, most of the unfavourable replies came from Anglican clergymen. Of particular note is the Rev. John Griffith of Aberdare, who, despite only being in his position for about a month, had much to say about the low morals of the Welsh. Jones pointed out that the charges of immorality and unchastity made against the women of Wales were 'greatly and invidiously exaggerated'.⁴²

As for the illegitimacy claims, Jones made a direct comparison with illegitimacy in England and Wales and concluded that the difference was negligible. He reported that in 1846 the illegitimacy rate for England was 6.7% and in Wales for the same year 6.8%.⁴³ Thereby, Jones proved through data rather than opinion that in actuality there was hardly any difference at all between the illegitimacy rates of England and Wales, invalidating the Commissioners' findings that the Welsh custom of 'bundling' led to promiscuity, which in turn led to high numbers of babies being born out of wedlock. Jones did not accept the judgement of the Reports concerning women and had this to say, 'the daughters of Cambria need not blush when their reputation is measured with that of their Anglo Saxon sisters'.⁴⁴

Evan Jones' article was produced in pamphlet form, but also reproduced in part in the *Shrewsbury Chronicle*, *Yr Amserau*, *The Nonconformist*, *John Bull* and the *Monmouthshire Merlin*, meaning his commentary had a wide coverage in Wales. His defence of women led him to publishing the first Welsh magazine specifically for Welshwomen in 1850, *Y Gymraes* (The Welshwoman), through the support of Lady Hall, an advocate for Welsh culture and language.

⁴⁰ Jones, *An Appeal to the English People*, p.27.

⁴¹ Jones, *An Appeal to the English People*, p.28.

⁴² Jones, *An Appeal to the English People*, p.31.

⁴³ Jones, *An Appeal to the English People*, p.31.

⁴⁴ Jones, *An Appeal to the English People*, p.35.

Despite his initial vindication of women, however, *Y Gymraes* was instructional in nature, with emphasis on self-restraint and correct behaviour for women.⁴⁵ Jones felt that women needed support and education on how to be better citizens and fulfil their role of wife and mother, not to become independent, educated women.⁴⁶ A contributor to the *Carnarvon and Denbigh Herald and North and South Wales Independent*, who referred to themselves only as ‘The Welshman’ wrote that it was evident that the aim of *Y Gymraes* was ‘to instil doctrines into the minds of my country-women’, suggesting that not everyone supported Jones’ philosophy.⁴⁷ However, following his death in 1852, a eulogy to Evan Jones in the *Monmouthshire Merlin* remarked that he was ‘indefatigable’ in his defence of ‘his country women from the infamous scandal thrown upon them’.⁴⁸ Despite some controversy, he was remembered as a champion of Welsh women who defended their honour against the slurs of the 1847 Report.

Another writer acclaimed for her condemnation of the 1847 Report was Jane Williams (Ysgafell). Gwyneth Tyson Roberts wrote that when Jane Williams wrote *Artegall: or Remarks on the Reports of the Commissioners of Inquiry into the State of Education in Wales* (1848), her pamphlet soon became popular and drew her ‘favourable attention’ as a defender of the Welsh people.⁴⁹ Williams’ father’s family were Welsh and were once landowners, but from Williams’ childhood they had lived on reduced means, so she relied on the support of Lady Hall for publication. *Artegall* is a clever and sardonic commentary on the injustice of the Reports and the ‘illogicality of their arguments’.⁵⁰ Interestingly, Williams first piece of evidence in question,

⁴⁵ Jodie Kreider, “*Degraded and Benighted*”: Gendered Constructions of Wales in the Empire, ca. 1847, *Studies* Vol II, No 1, (Winter 2002, University of Arizona) p.32.

⁴⁶ Sian Rhiannon Williams. “The True ‘Cymraes’: Images of Women in Women’s Nineteenth-Century Welsh Periodicals.” *Our Mother’s Land*. 2nd ed. University of Wales Press, 2011. p.79.

⁴⁷ Anon. ‘Y Gymraes’, *Carnarvon and Denbigh Herald and North and South Wales Independent*, 20 April 1850, p. 6. Available at <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/3598622/3598628/40/instil%20doctrines%20into%20the%20minds%20of%20my%20country-women>. Accessed 20 May 2024.

⁴⁸ D. Rhys Stephen, ‘Evan Jones’, *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 12 March 1852. Available at, <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/3395286/3395289/13/infamous%20scandal>. Accessed 20 May 2023, p.3.

⁴⁹ Gwyneth Tyson Roberts, *Cambrian Tales and other selected writings, Jane Williams (Ysgafell)*, (Honno Press, 2023) p.11.

⁵⁰ Roberts, *Jane Williams*, p.11.

given by the Rev. John Griffith of Aberdare, concerns women when 'he conveys the impression that such heinous doings are among their predominant characteristics'.⁵¹ Williams brings into question his deposition by pointing out that another in the same district gives a glowing testimony concerning women, describing them as kindly, chaste and industrious. Williams continues in this vein, highlighting depositions from others in Welsh communities who, rather than slander the Welsh people, were well disposed to them. To all intents and purposes, Williams is a defender of the Welsh people, but not expressly of women. Her underpinning argument against the Blue Books was to point out the illogicality of the commissioners argument, not to feature the positive attributes of Welshwomen. Kreider states that Jane Williams wrote under a 'relatively silenced position', even using the pseudonym of Artegall rather than her own name, as gender was of no benefit to her argument.⁵² Williams was dealing with two sets of prejudices, being part Welsh and being a woman. Although it may be considered that being a Welshwoman she would have had better insight than her male counterparts, in fact it meant she may have been taken less seriously as a writer on the subject of the Reports. Therefore, it was the people of Wales as a whole she chose to defend.

More challenging to uncover are the opinions of the ordinary people of Wales, especially women. Whilst there was a huge amount of reporting concerning the Blue Books in Welsh newspapers, and letters to the editors responding to the furore, most of the commentary was from journalists or key figures from Welsh communities and was not specific to the slurs against women. Furthermore, it was overwhelmingly a male response. However, there are a few nuggets to be found in local newspapers that give an insight into the Welsh opinion of the Reports' slurs against women. An article in the *Carnarvon and Denbigh Herald and North and South Wales Independent*, published a letter that had been sent to the *Liverpool Journal* concerning the 1847 Reports findings. The anonymous author makes an impassioned plea to the women of Liverpool, 'how would your cheeks burn with shame', if they had been maligned like the women of Wales? The author goes on to state that the veracity of the claims are so

⁵¹ Roberts, *Jane Williams*, p.24.

⁵² Kreider, *Degraded and Benighted*, p.34.

questionable that it is a wonder that the women of Wales could be, 'branded with the stigma of being lost to virtue'.⁵³ This entreaty to the women of Liverpool gives an idea of the emotion and sense of unfairness felt by the author on behalf of Welsh womenkind.

Further accounts of public opinion in defence of the women of Wales can be found in various Welsh newspapers in the period following the publication of the Reports. At a public meeting in Pontypridd, the Rev. David Jones is reported as saying 'The attacks made upon our females in this production is unmanly and un-Christian, and essentially unjust.'⁵⁴ He goes on to advise the women of Wales to, 'sign a memorial and lay it before her Majesty, in order to protest against the in-justice done to them in the Reports'.⁵⁵ At a public meeting in Aberdare, a Mr Price was reported as having been cheered as he addressed the crowd stating, 'The women of Aberdare stood as high with regard to moral purity as any women in the kingdom'.⁵⁶ One anonymous contributor to the *Principality* described that attack on women by Commissioner Johnson as 'groundless libel upon the fair dames and damsels of the Principality'.⁵⁷ Interestingly the Rev. Jones ended a speech in Aberdare by stating that the Welsh press 'had not, as yet, paid special attention to the claims of females, but he hoped this defect would be speedily remedied'.⁵⁸ It would appear, from the press reports in the immediate years following the Blue Books

⁵³ Anon. 'Moral Condition of Wales', *Carnarvon and Denbigh Herald and North and South Wales*, January 22nd 1848, p.3. Available at:

<https://newspapers.library.wales/view/3643820/3643823/10/branded%20with%20the%20stigma%20of%20being%20lost%20to%20virtue>. Accessed 13 March 2024.

⁵⁴ Anon. 'The Commissioners' Reports', *The Principality*, 21 April 1848, p.3. Available at:

<https://newspapers.library.wales/view/3613681/3613684>. Accessed 02 April 2024.

⁵⁵ Anon. 'The Commissioners' Reports', *The Principality*, 21 April 1848, p.3. Available at:

<https://newspapers.library.wales/view/3613681/3613684>. Accessed 02 April 2024.

⁵⁶ Anon reporter, 'Public meeting at Aberdare', *The Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian Glamorgan Monmouth and Brecon Gazette*, 26th February 1848, p.3. Available at:

<https://newspapers.library.wales/view/3089159/3089162/21/in%20the%20kingdom%20AND%20the%20women%20of%20aberdare>. Accessed 01 May 2024.

⁵⁷ Anon, *Carnarvon and Denbigh Herald and North and South Wales Independent*, 15 January 1848, p. 4. Available at:

<https://newspapers.library.wales/view/3643811/3643815/22/groundless%20libel%20upon%20the%20fair%20dames>. Accessed 15 April 2024.

⁵⁸ Anon. 'The Commissioners' Reports', *The Principality*, 21 April 1848, p.3. Available at:

<https://newspapers.library.wales/view/3613681/3613684>. Accessed 02 April 2024.

publication, that special attention was never given to the 'claims of females', and their voices remained unheard.

Seemingly then, it was incumbent upon Welsh men to defend women against the attacks on their character. Although it is tantalising to wonder if anonymous letters to the editors were from the pens of women, sadly this cannot be known. It is unsurprising that there is a lack of women's response to the Reports, however, considering the societal expectations placed on the conduct of women at the time. A contemporary article entitled the 'Influence of Women in Society', in *The Ladies Companion*, edited by Mrs Loudon, sums it up best, 'It is not desirable that the influence of women should be universal: far from it - there is a proper sphere in which a woman should act and revolve, and beyond that she is out of her place'.⁵⁹ Evidently, a woman defending her sex against the Reports' slurs would have been viewed as so improper as to be unthinkable. Welsh women are never the focal point of the defence, more an afterthought.

Kreider writes that women were 'doubly marginalised', ethnic prejudice called into question their morality and separate sphere ideology prevented them from defending themselves.⁶⁰ None of the commissioners, or those called to give evidence to the inquiry, had any real understanding of what it was to live the life of a Welsh woman, and no-one thought to ask one. Equally those who responded with condemnation to the Reports, did not seek the opinion of women. Despite them being central to the debate, 'women were never allowed to participate as women, or as members of the Welsh nation'.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Anon. 'The Creation of Woman' *The Pembrokeshire Herald and General Advertiser* 14th June 1850, p.4. Available at: <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/3053178/3053182/41/influence%20of%20women>. Accessed 01 May 2024.

⁶⁰ Kreider, *Degraded and Benighted*, p.9.

⁶¹ Kreider, *Degraded and Benighted*, p.10.

The Reports' Legacy

Nineteenth Century Women's Writing in Wales

Evidently, Welshwomen had little agency in the immediate aftermath of the 1847 Reports to defend themselves against the attack on their sex. Indeed, Prys Morgan states that by the 1870s the controversy had been forgotten, entering Welsh myth and legend.⁶² However, this seems an oversimplification and a dismissal of the impact it had on the identity of women post-1847. Jane Aaron calls into question Morgan's view when she states that instead of the Blue Books fading into myth and legend, they 'continued to function as a moral imperative throughout the century'.⁶³ *Y Gymraes* (The Welshwoman) was an important publication, albeit it did not promote any kind of equality, but it led to further womens' magazines such as *Y Frythones* (The British Woman) (1879) edited by Sara Jane Rees (Cranogwen) that continued to demonstrate that Welsh women were undeserving of the tarnished reputation left as a legacy of the Blue Books. Aaron asserts that the published articles were evidence of the 'burdened sense of their responsibility for the nation's good name'.⁶⁴ The second version of *Y Gymraes* was published in 1896 and continued until 1934, this publication focused much more on the rights of women. However, it is notable that it was only middle class men and women who were involved in these periodicals and the voice of working class women is not heard.

Jane Aaron concludes in *Our Sister's Land: The Changing Identities of Women in Wales* that the Blue Books had such an impact on Welsh female identity that it necessitated women to make a distinct choice over how they were to change the negative perception of their character. The first of the three options she suggested was to adopt the English ideal of femininity and outrightly reject Welsh identity, abandoning language and culture. The second option was to assert their Welshness through strict non-conformist religious propriety, by being so visibly pious that no-one could question their sexual morality. Or the final option was to accept the

⁶² Morgan. 'From Long Knives to Blue Books', p.214-5.

⁶³ Aaron, *Our Sisters' Land*, p.188.

⁶⁴ Aaron, *Our Sisters' Land*, p.188.

Report's definition of a Welshwoman.⁶⁵ To accept that they were inferior to English women and that they were essentially morally corrupt. A number of historians agree with these three identities post-1847, including, Manon Ceridwen James, in her book *Fat chicks, Blue books, and Green Valleys: Identity and Women and Religion in Wales (2013)*.⁶⁶

However, other academics have noted that educated middle class Welsh women were able to express their rejection of the Blue Books through another route, that of writing. Furthermore, through writing, statements of Welsh female identity were made that challenged not only the Blue Books assertions, but also of Anglicisation and non-conformist propriety. Essentially there was a fourth route where women were able to demonstrate that the identity of the Welsh woman could be independent, moral and uniquely Welsh.

Louisa Matilda Spooner (1820–86) published *Country Landlords* in 1860, although she was from an English family she spent much of her life in Merionethshire and wrote about the people and the environment. Rita Singer states that even though the novel was written over ten years after the Blue Book's publication, the literary construction of Welsh communities 'suggests the formation of a counter discourse that particularly rejects the accusations issued against Welsh women for their supposed lewdness.'⁶⁷ The novel implies a rejection of the accusations of immorality laid against Welsh women by portraying an idealised Welsh community with upstanding and virtuous female characters. Singer professes that Spooner wished to educate the reader about her country and that this was likely a 'strong defensive reaction' to the Blue Books.⁶⁸ In her first novel *Gladys of Harlech* (1858), the fact that the heroine Gladys is 'sensitive, intelligent' and a 'pure heroine' is evidence of a positive and uniquely Welsh female

⁶⁵ Aaron, *Our Sisters' Land*, p.188.

⁶⁶ Manon Ceridwen James, 'Fat chicks, Blue books, and Green Valleys: Identity and Women and Religion in Wales', in *The Faith Lives of Women and Girls* (2013) edited by Nicola Slee, (Taylor & Francis Group, 2013). p.106.

⁶⁷ Rita Singer. "Adapting the Risorgimento: Ideas of Liberal Nationhood in L. M. Spooner's *Country Landlords* (1860)." *Women's writing : the Elizabethan to Victorian period* 24.4 (2017), p.466–481.

⁶⁸ Singer, *Ideas of Liberal Nationhood*, p.467-477.

identity that the writer wished to portray, that did not conform to anglicisation, religious propriety, or immorality.⁶⁹

Dawn Williams' thesis entitled *Constructing Modern Welsh Womanhood: The Blue Books' Impact on the Portrayal of Women in Anglophone Welsh Literature 1847–1907* illustrates that contemporary views of Welsh womanhood were present in popular novels, but that in the later part of the nineteenth century, heroines started to appear that defied the stereotype of working class women that 'embrace their Welshness'.⁷⁰ Williams' thesis is in literature, not history, but relevant due to her research which makes links between the 1847 Reports and the literature that followed this date. She purports that Allen Raine's, *A Welsh Singer* (1896) and *A Welsh Witch* (1902) are examples of this type of genre which exemplify the positive Welsh female. The heroines are independent, socially aware Welsh working class women that do not need anglicisation or 'saving', instead taking fate into their own hands.⁷¹ Williams states that Raines' protagonist Mifanwy in *A Welsh Singer* 'represents what can be achieved in spite of the attitudes of the Blue Books',⁷² and concludes that the 1847 Report 'continued to be felt at the end of the nineteenth century'.⁷³ Arguably, this rejection of the Report is a subtle route for female authorship and not a direct attack on the Blue Books, but it was a socially acceptable route that educated Welshwomen could take to express Welsh female identity. Ironically, Welsh female writers in the latter part of the nineteenth century would have been the ones who had benefited from the improved education for girls that was a consequence of the 1847 Reports.

Jane Aaron describes how by 1855, 'a very distinctive model of the ideal female' had come out of England, exemplified in Coventry Patmore's poem *The Angel in the House* (1854)⁷⁴ which essentially made women appear 'perpetually childlike'.⁷⁵ This ideal of the woman in the home,

⁶⁹ Singer, *Ideas of Liberal Nationhood* p.467-477.

⁷⁰ Dawn Williams, *Constructing Modern Welsh Womanhood: The Blue Books' Impact on the Portrayal of Women in Anglophone Welsh Literature 1847–1907*, p.116.

⁷¹ Williams, *Constructing Welsh Womanhood*, p.116.

⁷² Williams, *Constructing Welsh Womanhood*, p.141.

⁷³ Williams, *Constructing Welsh Womanhood*, p.148.

⁷⁴ Jane Aaron, *Nineteenth-Century Women's Writing in Wales: Nation, Gender and Identity* (2010) p.88.

⁷⁵ Aaron, *Nineteenth-Century Women's Writing in Wales*, p.92.

attuned with ideas of female anglicisation in Wales. Nonetheless, there were women in Wales who came to the fore who rejected this idealised view of women from England. The memoirs of Mary Ann Edmunds (1813-58) were published shortly after her death.⁷⁶ Aaron describes her memoirs of being a teacher, as ‘the first consciously constructed as an answer to the accusations of the 1847 Report and to the servile feeling of the Welsh’.⁷⁷ Mary Ann Edmunds was born into a Calvinist Methodist family in Carmarthen, in later life becoming a headteacher at a girl’s school in Bangor. Aaron describes her as an early feminist who believed in sexual equality. Edmunds rejected Welsh female anglicisation stating in her memoirs ‘nothing makes us less than the English, except our own belief that we are lower’.⁷⁸ Aaron states that Edmund’s memoir is evidence of how the Welsh feminine ideal hardened.... as part of the response to the ‘Treason of the Blue Books’.⁷⁹

The last half of the nineteenth century was a period when female authors could express Welsh feminist identity through the constructs of a novel. Furthermore, it was a time when certain individual women in Wales began to express themselves in a male dominated sphere whilst keeping a distinctly Welsh ethnicity that did not conform to English preconceptions, albeit these women were the exceptions rather than the norm. However the Blue Books remained a lingering injury to the character of Welsh women throughout the rest of the century.

Stirrings of feminism post-1847

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, this rejection of the Reports’ portrayal of Welshwomen became evident in the emergence of feminist ideas. Women were slowly but definitely making breakthroughs into male domains, despite impediments to women in Welsh society. Certain individuals were able to defy the stereotype and characterise themselves as strong, independent, female and Welsh, and additionally women’s liberal organisations and female suffrage groups galvanised that fought for women’s causes. Nonetheless, the taint of

⁷⁶ Aaron, *Nineteenth-Century Women’s Writing in Wales*, p.92.

⁷⁷ Aaron, *Nineteenth-Century Women’s Writing in Wales*, p.92.

⁷⁸ Aaron, *Nineteenth-Century Women’s Writing in Wales*, p.92.

⁷⁹ Aaron, *Nineteenth-Century Women’s Writing in Wales*, p.94.

the Blue Books was ever present and a consideration that Welshwomen knew affected their public perception.

Frances Hoggan (1843-1927) was the first woman in Wales to qualify as a medical doctor and was an advocate for girls education in the 1880s.⁸⁰ She had been a child when the 1847 Reports were published, and her father had given testimony admonishing women in his role as an Anglican clergyman, yet Hoggan felt the need to defend women against the slur on their character many years later. She gave a speech on co-education in 1882 at the National Eisteddfod, where she used the opportunity to warn her audience against the dangers of holding women responsible for the state of society, harking back to Symons Report of 1847 that placed the burden firmly with women. Angela. V. John in her analysis of Dr. Hoggan, asserts that she made this statement 'doubtless bearing in mind the Education Report of 1847'.⁸¹ Thirty-five years after the Reports publication, the suggestion that women carried the moral responsibility of the whole of society was still prevalent and being felt by key female figures in Welsh society.

The social structures of society dictated that only men should speak publicly, and, whilst female speakers such as Hoggan were heard on occasion, many women were reluctant to break social taboos. Lisa Tippings in *Women's Suffrage* describes how it was difficult for women to express themselves freely and publicly and those women who did attempt to break through these social barriers were met with derision. A journalist reporting on a suffrage meeting in Cardiff, 10 March 1881, referred to the 'shrieking sisterhood', reinforcing the idea that women who spoke out publicly were unstable and lacking in female virtue.⁸² These comments are a reflection of the Commissioners comments in the Blue Books, suggesting that Welshwomen who stepped outside of their sphere were still being tarnished by the Reports slurs long after the initial

⁸⁰ B. R. Jenkins, HOGGAN [née Morgan], FRANCES ELIZABETH (1843-1927), physician and social reformer. *Dictionary of Welsh Biography* (2016). Available at: <https://biography.wales/article/s11-HOGG-ELI-1843>, Accessed 24 May 2024.

⁸¹ Angela V. John. *Rocking the Boat : Welsh Women Who Championed Equality 1840-1990*. (Parthian Books; 2018), p.67.

⁸² Tippings, *Women's Suffrage in Wales*, p.26.

publication. Tippings purports that women were, 'haunted by the treachery of the Blue Books,' its legacy deleterious to women even decades later.⁸³

Tippings suggests that it was this legacy, at least in some part, that contributed to the suffrage movement in Wales not taking any action that could be deemed as aggressive. In Wales the women's suffrage movement did not gain the support that was experienced in England, and it is only recently that historians have recognised the contribution Welshwomen made to this movement. The suffrage movement in Wales erred toward peaceful action through lobbying and parliamentary means and did not want to associate with militant action. Tipping puts forward that the reason for the Welsh taking a less radical approach to supporting the cause of female suffrage is that they did not wish to give rise to suggestions that they were 'uncontrollable' or even worse 'immoral'.⁸⁴ To do so would have only proved the Blue Books correct in their summations about the character of the Welsh womenfolk. Whilst English women would have had to confront similar prejudices from the patriarchy concerning their perceived role in society, they did not have to counter the additional racial stereotyping of the 1847 Report.

Despite societal barriers, Welsh middle-class educated women organised themselves in ways which countered the slurs on the character of Welshwomen and furthered their ability to express themselves publicly through feminist causes. Women's Liberal Groups such as the Women's Liberal Federation (est. 1886) and the Women's Liberal Unionist Association (est. 1888) became closely linked with female suffrage and by the 1890s these groups had a 'distinctive character' through their unique mix of feminism and Welsh nationalism.⁸⁵ In *The Emancipation of Welsh Women*, Rosanne Reeves and Jane Aaron describe how Cymru Fydd - Welsh Home Rule movement (1886-1898) - also identified with the female suffrage cause and

⁸³ Tippings, *Women's Suffrage in Wales*, p.8.

⁸⁴ Tippings, *Women's Suffrage in Wales*, p.8.

⁸⁵ Ursula Masson. (2003). 'Hand in hand with the women, forward we will go': Welsh nationalism and feminism in the 1890s', *Women's History Review*, 12(3), p.357.

included it as one of its goals.⁸⁶ Notwithstanding the legacy of the Blue Books, Welsh organisations came to the fore who not only advocated for female voting rights, but gave it a distinctly Welsh flavour by championing female suffrage and Welsh nationalism under the same banner.

Liberal groups were not the first Welsh organisations to campaign for female suffrage. In 1865 the new Welsh colony of Patagonia attempted to set up a self-governing colony giving all members of the community over the age of eighteen the right to vote. The colonists in Patagonia established a Welsh community in South America to retain their Welsh language and culture, but they also took with them a bitterness marked by the calumny of the Blue Books. Reeves and Aaron suggest that the settlement was a long term consequence of the 1847 Report on Education in Wales; the leaders of Welsh society were keen to publicly advance Welsh women so intent were they on 'proving the falsity' of the Reports' claims.⁸⁷

Evidently, feminist historians keenly note the influence the 1847 Report had post publication, throughout the nineteenth century. Seemingly, the Blue Books were a persistent thorn in the side of Welsh women affecting all aspects of public self expression, a constant impediment to their identity. Gender prejudice was faced by all British women during this period, but it was magnified for the Welsh due to the Reports' enduring legacy.

⁸⁶ R. Reeves & J. Aaron, *Gwyneth Vaughan, Eluned Morgan and the Emancipation of Welsh Women. Women's Writing*, 24(4), (2017)p. 517–534.

⁸⁷ Reeves & Aaron, *Women's Writing*, 24(4), p.517–534.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, the Commissioners of *The Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the State of Education in Wales* was a damning attack on the women of Wales. The Commissioners chose to use the most condemnatory testimonies to make their case that Welshwomen were promiscuous, dirty and shameless, concluding that they were deviant from the standard of what it meant to be a woman in the nineteenth century. The implication was that these aberrant women were responsible for all the ills in Welsh society, as they were mothers and homemakers and therefore responsible for the moral standards of the family, which by the Commissioners reckoning fell short of English ideals. The Commissioners' findings were prejudiced against the Welsh people as an ethnic group, but additionally women were encumbered with sexual stereotyping, which meant they carried the double burden of being Welsh and being a woman.

Following the Reports publication, it took some time for the full contents to be read and understood as the three Reports were hefty tomes, but when the full implication of its accusations concerning morality were understood there was an outpouring of shock and anger in Wales. Women were constrained by the 'private sphere' so it was left to men to champion Welshwomen and refute the charges made against them in periodicals, newspapers and pamphlets. The exception to this is Jane Williams with her book *Artegall*, a critical discourse of the Reports' findings. Yet, even though she was a female author, she did not press the cause of women in her writing, to do so would likely have only undermined her credibility. One of the most vociferous supporters of women was Evan Jones through his book, *Facts, Figures, and Statements in Illustration of the Dissent and Morality of Wales: an Appeal to the English People*. As editor of the first periodical produced for Welsh women, he failed to promote equality but produced articles that were instructional in nature, suggesting that even Evan Jones felt that women needed guidance to maintain good morals and housewifery. However, he was considered a champion of Welsh women for his challenge to the Reports conclusions.

The voice of women is lacking in the Reports themselves as well as in the furore of the aftermath; unsurprising given that outspoken women were contrary to societal expectations of the role of women, and therefore would have only proven the claims of the Reports correct. Therefore women were essentially suppressed and had little agency to defend themselves against the slurs, at least in the immediate aftermath of the Reports.

Welshwomen continued to feel the stigma of the Blue Books throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century, and it pervaded female self-expression through literary writings, public speaking and political involvement. The stigma was ever present and something women had to be mindful of in all their public dealings. Female authors were able to combat Welsh female stereotypes through literature, producing novels that showed Welsh womankind to have a unique character that was strong, moral and proud. Women started to break down some of the social barriers by entering previously male only domains, such as Frances Hoggan the first Welsh female medical doctor, who spoke up for women's education and warned against placing the burden of society on women's shoulders. The fight for female suffrage was developing at this time across different nations, and Wales was no exception, but Welsh suffragists were ever aware of the extra responsibility they carried to not prove the slurs of the Blue Books correct, to not take part in radical action that would portray them as unruly or hysterical women.

Ultimately, the Blue Books had a profound impact on the identity of Welshwomen, and its reverberations were felt throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century. The Reports slurs both galvanised women in their outrage, compelling them to conform to a prescribed identity post-1847, but at the same time the Reports constrained them, holding them to feminist ideals that prevented them from publicly defending themselves. Women and gender historians have made significant inroads in developing an understanding of the Welsh female perspective in nineteenth century Wales, and of particular note are, John, Aaron, Tippings and Kreider who have been invaluable for this dissertation and helped to shed light on the impact the Blue Books had on what it meant to be a woman in nineteenth century Wales.⁸⁸ However,

⁸⁸ Angela, V, John, Jane Aaron, Lisa Tippings, Jodie Kreider.

more generally, historians have dealt with the legacy of the Blue Books on Welshwomen's identity as an afterthought, not a key area for study. Hopefully, this dissertation will, in a small way, prove that there is much more to be considered and researched with regard to the legacy of the Blue Books on female Welsh identity.

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