

MERTHYR AND SIR SAMUEL: Griffith's Welsh Odyssey

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When Samuel Walker Griffith first returned briefly to his birthplace, Merthyr Tydfil in Glamorganshire, South Wales in late 1866 as a lowly articulated clerk, the town paid him virtually no heed. And he too was disheartened and even repulsed by it. He noted in his travel diary that it was “grimy and dirty exceedingly” with immense, unsightly slag-heaps of iron ore lying all about. Touring the Cyfarthfa Ironworks, he would have observed some of its 4,000 workers, their bodies illumined by the huge pig-iron furnaces ... as one recent historian describes them, “with their deafening blasts, snapping, crackling and hissing escaping gases, vivid furnace flames, glowing ribbons of molten metal and thunderous hammering”.

He stayed for a mere two days in the Castle Inn at the town's centre, close by the Congregational Chapel in Market Square where his father, Edward, a Biblical scholar, had once preached, before himself escaping to “greener parts of Wales”. Did Griffith know that in 1831 the town's Iron Masters and Coal Kings had been held under siege inside this same hotel by around 10,000 striking workers? Scottish troops of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders had opened fire from its windows onto the huge crowd, chanting, in Welsh, “Cheese with the Bread!”, leaving some 25 dead and 70 injured in the High Street outside. It was the first place where the Red Flag was flown on British soil.

So this was the place of Griffith's birth – a place that, through much of the nineteenth century, was an epicentre of incipient industrial struggle and, indeed, of the Industrial Revolution itself, producing 40 per cent of all the pig-iron for global railways, naval vessels, bridges and machinery from four enormous industrial establishments – at that time the largest factories in the world, employing tens of thousands of men, women and children. Griffith was born here in June 1845. The philosopher and essayist, Thomas Carlyle, who visited five years later, dubbed this metropolis, with explicit horror and disgust, “the squalidest, ugliest place on earth”. Its Ironworks, he wrote, were “like a vision of Hell that will never leave me” with their “hard, fierce and miserable looking” workers, “broiling all in sweat and dirt amid their furnaces, pits and rolling mills.”

A century earlier, the region had been relatively uninhabited, save by scattered farmers and shepherds, almost completely isolated in the Brecon Beacon mountains; but had been transformed by rapid industrialization into one of the fastest growing urban centres in the western world. It was a narrow, triangular

company town, thrown up in higgledy-piggledy fashion along a ten mile stretch of the River Taff. As a product of pecuniary and uncaring private enterprise, it was an unplanned, insanitary disgrace – houses without latrines or drainage, “built in scattered confusion”.

Just after Griffith’s parents-to-be moved there late in 1842, the London *Times* noted that this “miserably ill-built, dirty place” was somewhere “where nobody would live for choice except to make money”. But Edward Griffith, with his new wife, Mary Walker, had come to harvest souls rather than to amass wealth. For Merthyr was also the main population centre of Welsh religious non-conformity since the sixteenth century, bristling with tiny chapels. Yet, its dangers and drawbacks soon outweighed its spiritual advantages. The Griffiths’ first child, a son, was born in September 1843 with Samuel following some twenty months later. Infant mortality was so rife, with epidemics of whooping cough, diphtheria, scarlet fever, cholera and typhus, that roughly 80 percent of babies died before their first birthday. Average life-expectancy was a staggeringly low 17.5 years. Furthermore, Edward Griffith found that that factory fumes were detrimentally affecting his preaching voice. So, before Samuel was a year old, the family had decamped to the English fishing port of Portishead, ten miles from Bristol, and a far more salubrious two-story home.

So much then for Griffith’s Welsh birth-origins: when he returned in 1866, he would not have carried the slightest childhood recollection of Merthyr consciously within him. And so discouraged had he been by the sight of it, when he returned to Britain for 13 weeks in 1880-81, he did not set foot back in the place, even though his mansion, Merthyr House in Brisbane, had just been completed. Yet, some four years later, an unfolding string of events would bring him back there in some high degree of welcome and acclaim.

It all unfolded like this: during 1885, a journalist from Cardiff’s *Western Mail* newspaper, writing under the pen-name of ‘Morien’, was covering the annual meeting of the Congregational Union in London when he saw “a venerable preacher ascending the platform” - Edward Griffith, Samuel’s father. He listened as this man related “old recollections of Merthyr Tydfil”, eventually informing his audience that his own Merthyr-born “boy” was now “the Prime Minister of Queensland, Sir S.W. Griffith”.

So when, the following year, Morien happened to mention in the *Western Mail* that “the Prime Minister of the great Colony of Queensland” was “a native of Merthyr Tydfil”; and a copy of that paper arrived in Brisbane, things began to happen. A Welsh migrant named Ben Jones who received that news at Clydach Cottage, Fortitude Valley rapidly conveyed it to the Colonial Secretary’s Department on 10 January 1888. The Premier, the Rt Hon. Sir Samuel Griffith, a man not averse to the sweet touch of praise and fame, replied almost

immediately to Jones, confessing that “it gives me great pleasure to think that I am not unknown in my native land”. He hoped he might find time for a revisit when in Britain for the Queen’s Golden Jubilee and the 1887 Colonial Conference in “a few weeks time”.

Thus, wheels were set in motion for a triumphal return. Ben Jones communicated to Morien – or Owen Morgan to give him his birth-name – that Sir Samuel was “undoubtedly the most popular man in Brisbane” as well as a “true friend of his Cambrian countrymen”, having recently, at “considerable inconvenience to himself”, travelled to Gympie by steamer and rail to preside over a Welsh Eisteddfod. Morgan, in turn, informed W. L. Daniel, Merthyr’s High Constable that “the most able statesman in Australia” and a son of the town was heading for Great Britain. Within a fortnight of Griffith’s London arrival, the High Constable had written to “the most brilliant politician in Queensland”, inviting him down.

“Will the Metropolis of Wales give him a welcome?”, wrote Morien, somewhat breathlessly: “Will Merthyr, his native town, the old town of the Iron Kings, accord him a welcome worthy of him and itself? He is a worthy son of the Sparta of Western Europe – Cymru!”

Well, of course, Merthyr said ‘Yes’ and Sir Samuel said ‘Yes’. Indeed, so eager was he now to visit, that he ultimately left behind him in London his wife, Lady Julia, suffering from pneumonia. So, in the late afternoon of Wednesday, 13 April 1887, he alighted once more from the Taff Vale train and into the town, after stopping briefly at nearby Pontypridd to tell a cheering crowd he was sorry “he was unable to address them in their native tongue”. At Merthyr itself, pomp and ceremony moved up a notch. As his train arrived, there was “a continuous discharge of detonators” and, as he appeared on the platform, ‘MASSED CHOIRS” of six hundred voices broke into an ode specially written for the occasion. A military brass band, once praised by Charles Dickens, then ushered him out to a waiting carriage to the tune of *Men of Harlech*.

Griffith appeared delighted. He “took off his hat and bowed courteously, with a genial smile upon his face”. His carriage, drawn in procession by “a pair of fine horses” then proceeded past much bunting, people calling from upstairs windows and school children waving Welsh flags and sporting their bright Jubilee medals, to the faux-Gothic-cum-Tudor Cyfarthfa Castle, home of one of Merthyr’s “great Iron Kings”, William Crawshay. William, like all the male Crawshays, was an implacable enemy of encroaching trade unionism, but his mother, Rose Mary, was inquisitive and progressive – an advocate of cremation, euthanasia and feminism. At the Castle, she had already entertained such luminaries as Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer, T.H. Huxley, Robert Owen and the poets, Robert Browning and Ralph Waldo Emerson.

The following evening, the Queensland Premier was feted at a grand banquet at a venue strangely named the Bush Hotel, sitting beneath a “beautiful banner of red silk”, inscribed “Welcome Sir Samuel Griffith”. All of the region’s leading lights were present, including the American Consul and someone called Christmas Evans. There were, however, no working class representatives there. All the expected statements of mutual hubris and praise were delivered in many speeches wherein Griffith, who, said the Chief Constable, “a few weeks ago was comparatively unknown to them”, was continually referred to, once more, as “Prime Minister of the Colony of Queensland.” Griffith, speaking in reply to “rounds and rounds of applause” reinforced the ideal of Imperial Union, reassuring everyone that Queenslanders were “not trammled by any old prejudices” and were “never afraid of anything because it was new”. To loud cheering, he concluded that “he should never forget Merthyr Tydfil and would in the future endeavor to bring no disgrace upon its name”.

Perhaps the most enduring legacy of this lofty, fleeting visit, apart from the illuminated scroll Griffith received to hang in his study back home at Merthyr House, is contained in a couple of letters that Owen Morgan wrote to him a few days later. Morien had also spoken at the Merthyr banquet, reminding all that he had been “the first to introduce Sir Samuel’s name to his native country”. Now he informed the Premier: “Your features remind one of the Pritchard and Gibbon families who ... are descendants of the Cardigan and Glamorgan royal tribes of which so-called Wales contained fifteen”. He advised Griffith on how to obtain “the collected pedigrees of Morganwg and Glamorgan”, setting him off on what his biographer, Roger Joyce calls “a genealogical search that was to prove time-consuming, costly and eventually futile” – in short, an expensive wild goose chase.

Research reveals that ‘Morien’ himself was something of a journalistic fantasist. At the time of meeting Griffith, he was compiling a volume on Druidism, written in the Welsh language. Several years later, he published *The Light of Britannia*, containing chapters on King Arthur in Wales, St Paul’s supposed journey to South Wales and phallic worship. But he, more than anyone, had touched upon a rich vein of romance and vanity in Griffith and planted the vain hope there that this new Knight might well be a descendent of Kings rather than simply born in some dirty old town “without form or order” and “disgraceful to those who are responsible for it.”

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