

HYWEL FRANCIS

**"DO MINERS READ DICKENS?"  
COMMUNITIES, UNIVERSITIES AND  
A NEW BEGINNING.**



**University of Wales Swansea**

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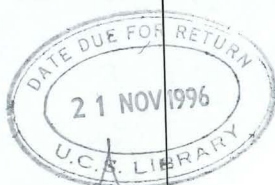
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**"DO MINERS READ DICKENS?"  
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A NEW BEGINNING.**

**Inaugural Lecture**

**Delivered at the College  
on 17 October 1994**

by

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Professor and Director of  
Adult Continuing Education**

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## "Do Miners Read Dickens?"

### Communities, Universities and a New Beginning

#### A People's University?

Prifysgol y Werin - the People's University - that is an idea which has both inspired and confused us. Raymond Williams once wrote sceptically of the word "community" because its definition was elusive.<sup>1</sup> And so it is with "Prifysgol Y Werin" so long the description of the organic relationship between the University of Wales, its Colleges and the people of Wales. It is time for us to look again at its true origins, how it has influenced us and now to re-define it more clearly for the twenty-first century : a place of excellence that is not elitist, a place of higher learning serving more diverse needs and diverse expectations and most critically of all in a democratic partnership with the wider community. Jan Hulley, one of our adult students on the Community University of the Valleys recently described it challengingly as "a community of learning." Hywel Ceri Jones of the European Commission, again recently spoke of "anchoring the University...in the communities of the valleys." Both images are good starting points.<sup>2</sup>

The idea that Universities have that wider community role grew out of the Enlightenment and this gathered pace in the latter part of the nineteenth century. University Extension, as it became known, took many forms in different times and in different countries. In Britain, for the most part, it became known as the "liberal" tradition - "y gwaith traddodiadol" (the traditional work) with the creation of Extra-Mural Departments in virtually every University by the 1920s.

Elsewhere this liberal ethos took the form of the Landgrant and Seagrant Universities of the Mid and Far West of the United States in the nineteenth century and the Popular University of Italy in the early twentieth century which was much criticised by the

Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci for its inferior curriculum and its condescension. This interface of "community" and "higher education", especially in times of crisis, has never been straightforward, and none more so than today.

The neighbourhood universities of Nicaragua of the 1990s have little to do with liberal, missionary, civilising ideas. They are more to do with radical, indeed revolutionary, ideas of South America's liberation theology. The purpose here is to empower the poor, the dispossessed, those without a voice, an idea to which we shall return later.

As an aside, to confuse matters a little further, I am reminded of my own experience : two young lecturers, Peter Stead and Neil Harding, speaking, during a students' occupation at Swansea in 1969, on "Socialism" and "Syndicalism" respectively. And later, in 1974, I addressed a students' occupation in the Registry on the "Origins of Workmen's Institutes". This is to hint at a more complex world where education's social role can be questioning, indeed subversive of received wisdom. By contrast, the "liberal tradition" could have a darker side to it which was more to do with crude "social engineering" and social control. Let us look at the Welsh experience to explore that complexity.

### **The Welsh Experience**

The first historians of the University of Wales wrote of it as "the creation not of sovereigns and statesmen, but of the people themselves," that enduring belief in its popular origins.<sup>3</sup> This has also been explored by the most recent official history in which Professor J Gwynn Williams puts everyone in their place. Whilst the University was not strictly speaking built with "the pennies of the poor", they did however give "a great deal more than might reasonably have been expected of them, industrialists and landowners a great deal less in proportion to their resources."<sup>4</sup>

But that wider role has never been a simple one. As Wales expanded in population at the beginning of the century, it became more cosmopolitan, more secular, more anglicised, more proletarianised, and as a consequence more awkward. The liberal, "missionary", idea of a community of interests began to break down. The newly emerging ruling élites of Welsh society began to worry particularly about these awkward coalfield communities in the South Wales valleys, and elsewhere, particularly as they had their own ideas about education as an emancipating force. They were creating their own organic intellectuals.

Principal Burrows of Cardiff in a moment of clarity for which historians are eternally grateful spoke of the real purpose of the "missionary type work" of the University Settlements. His speech was reported in The Welsh Outlook, what could be described as the internal bulletin of the emerging Welsh Establishment, a kind of fore-runner of today's St. David's Forum:

"The vast majority of working men, whatever their political and industrial views, have the national characteristics of moderation and common-sense, love of order and piety .... They fully recognise the priceless contribution which the richer classes can and shall bring towards the remoulding of that new and greater Britain. Apart from all snobbery, they genuinely admire the qualities of the "gentleman" in the sense in which you would like your sons to understand the word ..... It is in this spirit that we ask Cardiff and South Wales to approach the Settlement Movement. That way lies Evolution. Is it to be that or Revolution? Which will you have?" (January, 1914)

Two years later, in the midst of the Great War in which the miners of South Wales defeated the Liberal Government in an industrial battle, The Welsh Outlook grappled with the problem:

"To the average Britisher, the Welsh miner is an enigma ..... South Wales is the industrial storm centre of Great Britain. The Welsh miner is always in the van of Trade Union progress; what he suggests today, his comrades in other coalfields adopt tomorrow. It must however surely be obvious in view of the important results which may accrue from wrong systems of education both to the mining community and the nation at large, that the subject of civil, economic and political education should be carefully considered with a view to the provision of some State-aided system on unbiased lines, which will appeal to the largest possible number of young men residing in our teeming mining valleys" (July 1916)

And then proposed a solution, a month later entitled: "the University's opportunity":-

"Here lies ample scope for a real live University, or University College. Hitherto, university education in South Wales has been for the few; what is wanted is a University with a missionary spirit that will spread its teaching to the Valleys of the coalfield and will equip minds, now immature, to deal with the great problems that vitally affect the social life of the nation." (August 1916)

Such concerns were constantly expressed, not always publicly, down to the 1930s, and certainly informed public policy throughout Britain, most noticeably the famous 1919 Report of the Adult Education Committee of the Ministry of Reconstruction, out of which grew University extension movements throughout Britain.

Our own University College in its early years was created in an atmosphere of "underlying anxiety to counter the militant influence of the Central Labour College and the growth of 'syndicalism' in industrial South Wales." The rise of what became known as Marxist independent working class education particularly out of such trade unions as the South Wales Miners' Federation was a major feature of politics and adult

education in this period.<sup>5</sup> It was with some relief that the Carnegie funded Joint Committee for the promotion of educational facilities in the South Wales and Monmouthshire Coalfield could at last report in 1929:

"It seemed at one time that the miner in South Wales was going to replace the old native culture with another - a culture based on his needs as worker and fostered by means of the classes of the National Council of Labour Colleges. This period has definitely passed.... He is now groping back towards his old anchorages and is taking a new interest in Music, in Literature, in Psychology, and in particular in Religion - not necessarily the orthodox religion in creeds, but his religion as expressing the philosophy of life." <sup>6</sup>

Thankfully, that essentially patriarchal and hierarchical view and essentially from outside, was never dominant: it was not the full story nor the end of the story. On the contrary, the Colleges of the University of Wales have always acknowledged that they have grown out of a democratic tradition and very much rooted in that tradition, even if sometimes, as with Iolo Morgannwg, we have helped to invent the tradition. Whilst it is important to acknowledge that our Continuing Education Departments emerged as a consequence of the very real social and political tensions in our society, they were also influenced in a positive way by them.

As if to emphasise the complementary nature of two traditions it is no accident that Professor Glanmor Williams could truthfully say on the occasion of the opening of the South Wales Miners' Library in October 1973 that in bringing together the University and the Miners' Union it was a modern version of that democratic partnership between the University and the people, Y Brifysgol y Werin, the People's University.

Indeed to use the language of today, it has always been acknowledged that a "learning society" is dependent on "wealth creation". The most successful period for these twin aspirations in recent Welsh history was the half century from 1870 to 1920, precisely

the time of the emergence of University of Wales and the growth in adult learning expectations beyond the University, most notably the miners' institutes and their libraries throughout the valleys. These institutes and libraries were but one aspect of modern Welsh popular formal and informal learning within which university adult education has been located, not separate and apart but integral to it : in many ways they were part of that growing literate society upon which the University could build its early foundations.<sup>7</sup>

### Voices of Learning

Time and time again historians have been struck by the diversity of that collective life-long learning of the coalfield. Josiah Jones (Joe Brickman), a founder of the Cwmllynfell Miners' Welfare Association, a member of Saunders Lewis' and Hywel Teifi Edwards' Welsh literature classes began his own self-education in the Sunday School, where children and adults learnt together: he ended his days attending my classes in the late 1970s:

"...Oedd dylanwad y capel yn gryf yr amser 'na (1900), pan oe'n ni'n blant ... a oedd y Cymraeg e'n fantais fawr. Na le oedd pobol a plant ... yn dod i ddarllen Cymraeg." <sup>8</sup>

[...The influence of the chapel was very great at this time (1900) when I was a child...and its Welsh was of great advantage. It was here that adults and children learnt to read Welsh.]

This growing learning environment also became a reason for in-migration. John Williams left rural Merionethshire in 1906 for the expanding cosmopolitan "American Wales" of the South Wales coalfield because of the educational opportunities. The contrast was striking:

"School...was three miles from home...I attended...for five years nominally but within that time it didn't amount to more than two years because of the gaps. Bad weather, long distance, and the demands for child labour on the small farms in our district.....

...my imagination I suppose had been fired more or less by some of the advantages of going to South Wales...and I thought there would be an opportunity for more self-education in mining villages and that proved to be true." <sup>9</sup>

What I have been describing is very much a nineteenth century collective working class 'self help' phenomenon, an early form of autonomous and often collective life-long learning, the extent of which is still difficult to conceive for the 'outsider' looking back to another time and another world. Take for example the two Professors looking upwards at a shelf-full of the collected works of Charles Dickens and one asked the question "Do miners read Dickens?" I was eavesdropping on the conversation: it was 1983. As an oral historian and an adult education tutor, I thought it was an interesting piece of historical evidence to be stored up for future use.

We were standing in the South Wales Miners' Library at University College Swansea: the library had been created as a result of a major SSRC Research Project which rescued the collections of remarkable books from workmen's institutes - what one historian frequently called "the brains of the coalfield."

The question however was a serious one for it did raise some important further cultural questions about the history and nature of adult education in Wales and the complex relationship of the University to the wider community. Have we seen ourselves as missionaries or as visionaries? How has our mission or our vision changed over time,

for Wales inhabits a very different material world now in 1994 compared with the turn of the century. The miners and their industry have largely gone, but the people and the communities remain and their collectivist vision remains strong as evidenced by the successful Tower Colliery buy-out last week. How has the idea of life-long learning changed in this century? Can we legitimately talk of what I have called already "collective life-long learning" - the way in which we learn from one another individually and collectively, in communities, in the work place, in social movements and in universities, throughout the whole of our lives, as citizens rather than as customers.

The corner-stone of these adult learning initiatives were the institutes and libraries. Tredegar had by 1951, over 23,000 books, two branch libraries, a reading machine for the blind, a picture library, film club, cinema, a brass band, operatic society, drama groups, evening classes, snooker tables, lectures by poets such as Masefield and politicians of the standing of Macdonald and Snowden. It was for good reason that Tredegar's most famous son Aneurin Bevan would say that his education began the day he left school with the acquiring of a borrower's ticket for the institute library.

Even in the depths of the Depression, Cwmaman's Institute in the Cynon Valley could boast two halls, a library, gymnasium, billiard hall, band room and twenty local societies from rifle clubs to study circles.

And then there was Gregorio Esteban conducting informal Spanish classes through the medium of Welsh on a Saturday night at Abercrave Miners' Welfare Hall.

What we have been exploring is the role of adult education, even in the most difficult and abject times, being seen as a resource for enlightenment and for changing circumstances, individually and collectively, creating social spaces for working people. Take the example of the future miners' leader Will Paynter who retreated into reading

after the defeat of 1926 and Mavis Llewelyn who believed that 1926 led to families deciding education should be seen as a ladder outwards.<sup>10</sup>

And as that process of "learning" is at the heart of the personal journey from surviving to living we see three generations of self-taught men and women, organic intellectuals, hundreds indeed thousands of them, who had a universal vision. The writer Gwyn Thomas talks about one of them in The Colliers' Crusade; which traced the political education of those men who went off to fight fascism in the Spanish Civil War :

"Lewis Jones, a man of rare ability, novelist, orator...one of the great interpreters of the modern spirit...In the concentration of his passionate devotion to the idea of change through thought he was saintly." <sup>11</sup>

#### **Learning from our inheritance**

What relevance does all this have for us in the University of the 1990s. Edward Said has written recently of the way in which the past invades the present: "Appeals to the past are among the commonest of strategies in interpretations of the present". In the contest over cultural territory the discussions about what is taught, how it is taught, where it is taught and who is taught is fundamental. Said again, quoting Basil Davidson, gives us some clues as to how we should respond to rapid and devastating social change:

"...there comes the period...when efforts are made to reconstitute a 'shattered' community, to save or restore the sense and fact of community..." <sup>12</sup>

That recognition of shared collective values cannot be under-estimated. There is no doubt that giving "historical depth" to educational strategies of the present (that is what I have been doing tonight and I would like to think I have been doing in recent



years) is both valid and vital. The rootedness of our University in our communities, in our region, in our country Wales, increasingly in the wider European context, and its responsiveness and accessibility to all, is imperative.

That rootedness is exemplified in the small town of Briton Ferry, radical, dissenting, socialist. Its extra-mural classes nurtured by such illustrious adult tutors as the one-time barber, the late Bill Gregory and my friend and formerly my colleague Tom Thomas. That town boasted the largest Independent Labour Party (ILP) branch in Britain and the greatest concentration of conscientious objectors in the First World War. It attracted, as a matter of course, the Russian/American Anarchist Emma Goldman and the Trinidadian Trotskyist writer C.L.R. James. Classes in such places were inevitably woven into the local popular political culture. James indeed completed his masterpiece Black Jacobins in 1938 while staying in Crynant in the Dulais Valley because of the quality of Brinley Griffiths' library, a local headmaster and part-time adult educator who appears in the Menna Gallie's novels as the genial bald-headed head-master whose "gods are Marx and Engels".

The University extra-mural class at Briton Ferry was very much part of that local culture: as rooted as the Co-operative Society, the Workers' Educational Association and the ILP Library which allegedly had the only copy of Karl Marx's pamphlet (outside London) on Palmerston and the Eastern Question. We can also trace such connections through chapels, "The White House" and the "Pick and Shovel" Social Club into the WEA and our classes in the Ammanford of the 1980s.<sup>13</sup>

#### **The University into the Community: a new beginning?**

This "connectedness" with communities has been our inheritance. Recent innovative developments have merely built on these community based foundations of learning. One such initiative is the Community University of the Valleys: the idea of student negotiated, locally based, student centred self-contained Higher Education learning

opportunities. The fact that the Community University of the Valleys owes its existence to a coalition of diverse social partners - a Women's group (DOVE), local authorities, the University, the European Commission, Higher Education Funding Council (Wales) - converging during and after the Miners' Strike of 1984-85 is also not a new phenomenon. That the University can and did make an intervention at a time of community crisis is nevertheless important.

Its intervention in providing community guidance for redundant miners and in taking the lead in the creation of the Valleys' Initiative for Adult Education was a notion of solidarity that was also critical.<sup>14</sup> But the emphasis was always on a social and democratic partnership rather than missionary work. The real lead was taken not by the University but by women who identified their own autonomous needs and saw the importance of building democratic networks as they had in 1984-85. A video made of the women's experiences of the time was produced by one of our extra-mural classes. It emphasised the collective learning of women which led to the creation of the DOVE Workshop, a women's educational and training initiative in 1986 and which ultimately led to the Community University of the Valleys in 1993. Kay Brown and Wendy Headon, both active during 1984-85, and both now students at the Community University are living testimony of the organic link between informal and formal learning and the essential social movements of the wider community.<sup>15</sup>

Our experience with the Community University gives us some clues for the future. It raises questions about the nature and role of a University. It should not necessarily however be seen as a new beginning but more the past invading the present and there are many reasons for saying this. Firstly the modernising of the idea of a "People's University" means the development of democratic and strategic partnerships which will result in the University becoming more of an integral part of the local community. A clearer and more coherent regional strategy by the University taking account of the changing local educational and industrial scene is the kind of model recognised by the



European Union, relying more on co-operation than on competition, as with such Motor Regions as Catalonia. The extent to which the University takes account of the pivotal role of Further Education and the way it assists regional industrial and social regeneration through research and graduate studies particularly with small and medium sized private and public enterprises will be a measure of that integration.

Secondly, the idea of such a "People's University" means greater and wider accessibility for sections of local society which have hitherto been under-represented in higher education. Barriers of social class, gender, ethnic origin, disability and age are gradually being removed here at Swansea as elsewhere. Equal opportunities strategies will be accelerated through the growth of part-time, flexible study and student centred learning which recognise the diversity of students needs and aspirations. Already over half the students in British Higher Education are mature age and part-time. This change also extends to location: students may be campus based, work based or community based. Accrediting chunks of learning throughout life as and when needed with guidance, creche, open and distance learning support should be the key ingredients for all further and higher education. But again this would not be a new beginning: as we have seen, our communities have always striven for such life-long educational opportunities but have only glimpsed them in the past. The shift towards credit-based funding should accelerate this process in the direction of a celebration of this diversity, increasing opportunities for part-time students of all kinds.<sup>16</sup>

Thirdly, the inter-relationship between the popular culture of our communities, economic regeneration, the concept of life-long learning and university research is complex and constantly changing. The fact that 80% of our current workforce will still be in place early in the next century and paradoxically 80% of our technology will be outdated by the same period means we are facing a major socio-economic challenge. Population is ageing, the nature of employment is changing, communities are changing and the role of the State is changing.<sup>17</sup> If we could focus on just two aspects of these inter-related issues: local and global perspectives. Recent research

projects in my own Department, on community based learning in former mining communities, on the future of the Welsh language amongst young adults and women's training networks in Europe all indicate the rapidity and challenge of change. The collapse of male full-time employment has had paradoxical consequences with poor male adult education participation rates unless there is a recognition of locally based learning opportunities which take account of received cultural patterns. Similarly research into survival strategies for the Welsh language can best be developed by comparison with and linking to the experience of other so called "minoritised" cultures such as the Basque Country. Finally, research into alternative educational and training choices for women in former coalmining areas reveals that social and economic regeneration can be successfully achieved through small locally based and locally negotiated partnerships which are also simultaneously trans-national. This wider-ranging continuing education research led here at Swansea by my new colleague, Professor Gareth Rees will grow apace as we recognise the essential interface between university research and regional economic regeneration in a European context.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, and perhaps most important of all, Universities have a vital role to play in the development of a sense of active citizenship in a European and global context. One key factor in the creation of a democratic society is the extent to which people are socially included rather than socially excluded from knowledge, information, the dignity of work and life-long educational opportunities.<sup>19</sup> The European Union is increasingly concerned about the de-stabilisation of society through unemployment with the rise of drug-abuse, racism and xenophobia as a result of such social exclusion: it is therefore imperative that University Continuing Education takes the lead in promoting the progressive social and employment policies of the European Union and in supporting equal opportunities initiatives in Wales such as Chwarae Teg which acknowledge the diversity of people's needs.<sup>20</sup>

The concept of a Community University with an emphasis on strategic partnerships with employers, trade unions, local government, social movements, communities and

above all adult learners is one way forward to address the growing democratic deficit in Wales. A strategic partnership with a democratised public broadcasting system, harnessing the new technologies of the information age to the historic and democratic ethos of Prifysgol Y Werin could be Swansea's contribution to the new millennium. The linking of under-graduate studies, graduate studies and research to the social and economic regeneration of the region could be another. In such ways the University will at last belong to the people, a citizens' university.

Hywel Francis

## Notes

1. Raymond Williams, Key-words (London, 1976) p.66
2. "Banwen, Wales and Europe," a speech by Hywel Ceri Jones, 1 August 1994 (copy deposited in the South Wales Miners' Library)
3. W Cadwaladr Davies and W Lewis Jones, The University of Wales (London, 1905) p.xi quoted in Kenneth O. Morgan's "The People's University in Retrospect" in The Welsh Anvil: The University of Wales Review, Summer 1964, pp 7-10.
4. J Gwynn Williams, The University Movement in Wales (1993) p. 182.
5. David Dykes, The University College of Swansea: An Illustrated History, (1992) p. 98. For a comprehensive survey of these developments see R Lewis, Leaders and Teachers: Adult Education and the Challenge of Labour, 1906-1940 (1992)
6. I am grateful to Mr Graham Price, South Wales District Secretary of the WEA for access to these minutes, photocopies of which are now located in the South Wales Miners' Library.
7. For an account of their development, See Hywel Francis, "The Origins of the South Wales Miners' Library," History Workshop Journal, Vol 1 no 2, 1976.
8. South Wales Miners' Library (SWML), Interview with Josiah Jones (Joe Brickman) 23 October 1972.
9. SWML, Interview with JL Williams, 24 April 1973.
10. Evidence in the BBC Wales television programme "Not a Penny off the Pay" (1976) made in co-operation with the South Wales Miners' Library.
11. Evidence in the BBC Wales Television Programme "The Colliers' Crusade" (1979) made in co-operation with the South Wales Miners' Library.
12. Edward Said, Culture and Imperialism (1993) pp 252-253.
13. The Brinley Griffiths library is now part of the South Wales Miners' Library.

14. See Colin Trotman and Tony Lewis, Training and Education: The Experience and Needs of Redundant Miners at Cynheidre and Betws Collieries in South Wales (1990).
15. A copy of the video entitled "Smiling and Splendid Women" is located in the South Wales Miners' Library.
16. The change towards credit based is encouraged by David Robertson's report for the Higher Education Quality Council, entitled Choosing to Change (1994). For a wide-ranging futuristic survey of the changes in Higher Education, see Chris Duke, "Part and parcel of the credit revolution", in Times Higher Education Supplement, 30 September 1994.
17. The inter-relationship between global changes and the world of higher education are surveyed in the National Institute for Adult Continuing Education's An Adult Higher Education: A Vision (A Policy Discussion Paper published in 1993). For a specific discussion of the challenge of an ageing population, see Life, Work and Livelihood in The Third Age: A Carnegie Inquiry (1994).
18. For a survey of one of these projects, see Heather Pudner and Mair Francis, "Women in the Workforce: Alternative Choices for Women in Coal-mining Areas" in Women, Wales and Europe: Equal Opportunities International, vol 13, no 3/4/5, 1994, pp 50-61.
19. At a local level the problem of exclusion has been identified in David Istance, Gareth Rees, Howard Williamson, Young People not in Education, Training or Employment in South Glamorgan (1990).
20. See Teresa Rees et al (eds) Our Sisters' Land (1994) for a comprehensive review of the gender issues.