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*Publication date:*  
2013

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Singer, R. (2013). *Rebellious Children of Wales: Amy Dillwyn and the Sons and Daughters of Rebecca*.

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## **Rebellious Children of Wales: Amy Dillwyn and the Sons and Daughters of Rebecca**

Rita Singer

Between the years 1839 and 1843, South Wales witnessed a number of curious nocturnal events as Welshmen with blackened faces and clad in women's clothes, calling themselves the Daughters of Rebecca, frequently set fire to the toll-gates that littered the roads in the countryside. Although the Rebecca Riots did not immediately return improved conditions for the local farmers, they were, nevertheless, a strong attack on a system of unfair taxation and absentee landlordism by a politically unrepresented peasant class. Amy Dillwyn's novel *The Rebecca Rioter: A Story of Killay Life* (1880) approaches this critical moment in Victorian history by illustrating the origin of domestic insurgencies. Inspired by her father's detailed eyewitness account of an attack on the Pontarddulais turnpike on 10 September 1843, Dillwyn presents her readers with a re-examination of recent history from below since the protagonist is a participant in the riots. Thereby, Dillwyn challenges contemporary historiography that repeatedly presents the Welsh as a hoard of Celts on the verge of anarchy without glossing over the criminal nature of Rebecca. The historical novel portrays impoverished Welsh village life not as the result of racial degeneration but, instead, from Anglocentric economic policies that threaten to destabilize the coherence of Britain as a Union of Nations. I argue that the social criticism of the novel serves as a contemporary warning about the fragility of the British Empire because the mechanism between disinterested politics and domestic insurrections are easily transferred to a global level.

**Keywords:** Crisis, Dillwyn, Elizabeth Amy (1845-1935), Historical Novel, Nineteenth-Century Wales, Rebecca, Riots, South Wales, Victorian Literature, Welsh Writing in English.

On the 7<sup>th</sup> of September 1843, during a game of cricket, the magistrate Lewis Llewelyn

Dillwyn (1814-1892) received intelligence that an attack on the Pontarddulais toll gate was planned for the night. Alongside ten other representatives of the state, he set out that night armed with guns, pistols, and stakes in order to face a crowd of farmers dressed in women's clothes. The company of defenders found themselves outnumbered by ten to one but were quickly involved in the ensuing mayhem. Three days later Dillwyn wrote in his diary: 'I drew out a flint pistol [...] & pulled the trigger it flashed in the pan but did not go off – in the mean time I heard a number of shots close around me, and saw a number of flashes.'<sup>1</sup> Dillwyn further describes cudgelling a rioter over the head, the dispersal of the crowd, the taking of prisoners and, eventually, the arrival of the dragoons. At the bottom of the final page his daughter Elizabeth Amy Dillwyn (1845-1935), adds:

The prisoners were tried at Cardiff by special Commission & according to the evidence then given [...] numbered from 150 to 200. The trial took place at the end of October, 1843 [...]. The Solicitor General, who prosecuted, said that my father & uncle (W. Llewelyn) “were deserving of the thanks of the community for manfully coming forward & risking their lives in the attempt to restore tranquillity”.<sup>2</sup>

The attack on the Pontarddulais turnpike, as recorded by Lewis Dillwyn, took place during the second wave of the Rebecca Riots that swept across South West and South Wales between 1839 and 1843. Historian D. Gareth Evans identifies the ‘cleavage between those who worked the land and those who owned it’<sup>3</sup> as a large contributing element to the growing

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis Llewelyn Dillwyn, ‘Handwritten account of encounter by L.L. Dillwyn with Rebecca rioters, 1843’ *Casglu'r Tlysau: Gathering the Jewels. The website for Welsh heritage and culture*. (Aberystwyth: Culturenet Cymru, [n.d.]) <<http://www.gtj.org.uk/en/small/item/GTJ62214/>> [accessed 25 May 2011] (pp. 7-8).

<sup>2</sup> E[lizabeth] A[my] Dillwyn, ‘\*’ in Lewis Llewelyn Dillwyn, ‘Handwritten account of encounter by L.L. Dillwyn with Rebecca rioters, 1843’ *Casglu'r Tlysau: Gathering the Jewels. The website for Welsh heritage and culture*. (Aberystwyth: Culturenet Cymru, [n.d.]) <<http://www.gtj.org.uk/en/small/item/GTJ62214/>> [accessed 25 May 2011] (p. 12).

<sup>3</sup> D. Gareth Evans, *A History of Wales 1815 – 1906* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1989; repr. 2011), p. 139.

dissatisfaction that had arisen after 1815 from a severe drop in corn prices which increased the already precarious situation for farmers throughout Wales. The sharp rise in unemployment resulting from the agricultural depression was compounded by the cultural division between peasantry and squirearchy revealing, ‘The gentry was by now Anglicized and Anglican, while the remainder of the population was poor, increasingly Nonconformist and Welsh-speaking.’<sup>4</sup> A conglomeration of financial burdens on local communities led to the eruption of the first riots in South West Wales in 1839.<sup>5</sup> Firstly, the Poor Law Amendment Act (1834) now had to be provided by the parishes themselves and so put an additional economic burden on already struggling communities. Secondly, the Tithe Act (1836) made commutation of tithes compulsory in a largely Nonconformist community. And thirdly, the increasingly rigorous collection of road charges by turnpike trusts at each one of their numerous toll-gates severely decreased the profit margin of local farmers who brought their produce for sale to the neighbouring market towns. The subsequent outbreaks of organized violence were headed by Pembrokeshire farmers against what they perceived to be an unfair system of taxation, although in their district the toll rates ‘were relatively cheaper than those in other parts of the country, and the turnpike trusts only controlled about 20 per cent of the roads in the west’.<sup>6</sup>

Two elements primarily determined the curious name of the Rebecca Riots. Firstly, the participants took inspiration from a verse in the Bible: ‘And they blessed Rebekah, and said unto her, Thou art our sister, be thou the mother of thousands of millions, and let thy seed possess the gate of those which hate them.’ (I Moses 24.60) Secondly, the rioters dressed in women’s clothes and blackened their faces in order to protect themselves from identification, mostly by representatives of the law. Nearly forty years after the riots, Amy Dillwyn published her first novel, *The Rebecca Rioter: A Story of Killay Life* (1889), whose

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 139-40.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pp. 11, 141-2.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p.142.

main plot hinges on her father's notes. Owing to her own familial background, Dillwyn's father later became a prominent radical MP, her story describes 'an act of defiance and rebellion' against the dominant Anglocentric historiography in which the Celtic fringe commonly features as a locality of racial degeneration, religious dissent, and political insurrections. In the same line, the author presents her implied English readership with 'an alternative viewpoint of the riots to the other Rebecca novels'<sup>7</sup> of the 1870s and 1880s. Instead of relating the events from the perspective of state representatives, Dillwyn's novel opposes the dominant middle-class and Anglo-centric discourse of her times because her first-person narrator is an eloquent Welsh peasant. Besides the geographical setting, the story remains true to the historical events in the sense that the author does not gloss over the inordinate amount of violence that was the prominent feature of these riots. However, the violence in Dillwyn's story does not originate from a degenerate Celtic peasantry, but is the result of Anglocentric politics and a general disinterest in the social fate of the impoverished, disenfranchised classes.

'Do not people's natures, more or less, take after the places where they are born and pass their lives?'<sup>8</sup> Evan Williams demands of his listeners by way of introducing himself. Evan's story is a cautionary tale that relates where, how and why insurrections begin, and which shape they may take. By virtue of his attending doctor to whom he dictates the story of his life, he speaks as a dying transported prisoner from the bottom of the Victorian social register as can be gleaned from the fictional editor's epilogue:

I was a physician to one of our convict establishments when I made acquaintance with

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. David Painting, *Amy Dillwyn* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1987), p. 21; Tomos Owen, "'Never Again Stop the Way of a Welshman": Rioting and Rebellion in Amy Dillwyn's *The Rebecca Rioter*", in *Riots in Literature*, ed. by David Bell and Gerald Porter (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), pp. 51-73 (p. 54).

<sup>8</sup> E[lizabeth] A[my] Dillwyn, *The Rebecca Rioter: A Story of Killay Life*, Vol. 1 (London: Macmillan and Co., 1880), p. 1; cf. Paxman, Jeremy, *The English: A Portrait of a People* (London: Michael Joseph, 1998), p. 3.

the hero of this story; he was attacked by an incurable disease, and died not long after he had finished dictating to me the foregoing pages.<sup>9</sup>

Evan begins with his youth in Killay, South Wales, and finishes with his death on the other side of the world.<sup>10</sup> These two principal stations of his life are connected via his participation in the Rebecca Riots of 1843, in which he shoots the father of his love interest Gwenllian Tudor. Dillwyn twice removes the voice of her protagonist, who only speaks through the written notes of his attending doctor, in order to put forth her own convictions regarding the rejection of violence.<sup>11</sup> Tomos Owen stresses the authorial ventriloquism that defines the ‘narrative mode of the novel’ and concludes that, ‘Evan’s voice becomes that of the subaltern who cannot speak, whose voice in its original, unmediated condition is, as Gayatri Spivak suggests, unrecoverable’.<sup>12</sup> The following discussion therefore assumes congruence between the three voices, i.e. between Evan, Morganwg and Dillwyn, regarding a shared ideology in which the Welsh feature as equal partners in the union state, regardless of their biographical backgrounds. Jane Aaron argues that the violence depicted in the novel conforms to an imagination that constructs ways of life in analogy to their surroundings: the untamed wilderness of Upper Killay can only produce ‘barbaric human emotions’.<sup>13</sup> On the surface, Evan’s ironic narrative conforms to the nineteenth-century English estimation of wild Wales. However, he relates how violence derives from a whole social, economic, and political system that has dis-empowered an entire class. Resulting from this complete disenfranchisement, the violence that Evan witnesses, and to which he contributes, is the

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<sup>9</sup> Dillwyn, Vol. 2, p. 229.

<sup>10</sup> Dillwyn, Vol. 1, p. 1.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Katie Gramich, ‘Introduction’ in *The Rebecca Rioter: A Story of Killay Life*, by [Elizabeth] Amy Dillwyn (Dinas Powys: Honno Classics, 2004), p. x; cf. Owen, p. 59.

<sup>12</sup> Owen, “‘Never Again Stop the Way of a Welshman’”: Rioting and Rebellion in Amy Dillwyn’s *The Rebecca Rioter*, p. 67.

<sup>13</sup> Jane Aaron, ‘Hoydens of Wild Wales: Representations of Welsh Women in Victorian and Edwardian Fiction’, *Welsh Writing in English: A Yearbook of Critical Essays*, 1, ed. by Tony Brown, Jane Aaron and M. Wynn Thomas (Cardiff: New Welsh Review Ltd., 1995), pp. 23-39 (p. 29).

peasant and working class's sole remaining weapon to make themselves heard by the state. '[O]ne person cannot make up for the evils of a whole system, and it is the system that is to blame'<sup>14</sup> he concludes at last.

In order to close the social, spatial, historical and, consequently, emotional distance between the protagonist and the implied English or Anglicized Welsh reader, Amy Dillwyn relies on two main strategies in the construction of narrative voice. Firstly, the reader becomes familiarized with Evan's world because the story is consistently told from his highly subjective point of view: 'By the time Beynon had finished we were all wildly excited, and were ready to rush to the nearest turnpike and pull it down there and then.'<sup>15</sup> The reader thus comprehends Evan's general state of suspicion against the unknown and the representatives of the state, because both are potentially harmful for the marginalized individual. Secondly, the Rebecca Rioters are portrayed as a Welsh-language speech community standing in marked opposition to the Anglicized Welsh gentry and the Anglo-centric nation state.<sup>16</sup> Their direct speech is presented by an idiosyncratic English diction that retains particularities of Welsh grammar and syntax:

Tom Davies [...] whispered to me when Beynon stopped: "I was not know for sure what be the Queen, Evan; was you?"

"Well – no – not to be quite certain sure," answered I – also in a whisper. "But you can see for yourself what a wicked one she must be for to have with such goings-on."<sup>17</sup>

Held together by his ironic tone, these two narrative strategies endear Evan to the English-speaking and predominantly middle-class reader despite his rash compliance with the

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<sup>14</sup> Dillwyn, Vol. 2, p. 218.

<sup>15</sup> Dillwyn, Vol. 1, p. 158.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Aaron, pg. 24.

<sup>17</sup> Dillwyn, Vol. 1, p. 152.



organisers of the riots and ready participation in the night-time raids.<sup>18</sup> The act of story-telling then creates the ‘contact zone’<sup>19</sup> between the narrator and his readers, for whom the Rebecca Rioters are no longer seen as a horde of dangerous Welsh country ruffians but as individuals with a justified political agenda. Consequently, Evan turns into a translator not just for the Welsh language, but also of his social class.

As mentioned previously, *The Rebecca Rioter* functions as a cautionary tale because it depicts how easily one form of violence transforms into others, neither of which Dillwyn estimates as a desired element in British society. In the case of the Rebecca Riots, the transformative power directly attaches to the subversive power of language. The example of Thomas Beynon, fictional speaker for the cause of Rebecca, gives ample evidence of how easily the precarious lower classes are manipulated for their lack of direct access to alternative sources of information:

“If it is wicked to be greedy, idle, and to live upon the earnings of other people, and give them nothing in return, then, I say, the Queen is wicked, for that is just what she does. [...] What does she know of you and me? Nothing. Does she ever come among us [...] No, never. We pay her taxes. What does she do with that money? She doesn't give it to the poor. With whom does she share it then? [...]”<sup>20</sup>

Beynon addresses the local people in their own language and effectively pushes the representatives of the state from a potential contact zone between government and governed thus infringing on his listeners’ communicative space. It follows that the farmers’ distrust towards any state official, derives from a combination of their own political helplessness, limited access to information, and lack of communicative exchange between the competing

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 158.

<sup>19</sup> Marie Louise Pratt, ‘Arts of the Contact Zone’, *Profession*. (1991), pp. 33-40 (p. 34).

<sup>20</sup> Dillwyn, Vol. 1, pp.152-3.

classes. Beynon easily excites the villagers because they are unable to identify the ideological distortion of his speech. Through the first person narrative, the reader is privy to Evan's thoughts and can therefore comprehend how such a misconception of economic and state affairs develops across a wider section of society. Evan and the other prospective rioters are unable to separate form from content; they find that anything Beynon says must be true because he speaks so beautifully.<sup>21</sup> In other words, Beynon resonates with the rioters because he substitutes the incomprehensible, dispassionate language of power, i.e. English, for another, more easily accessible and beautiful one, namely Welsh. By literally rejecting the language of the 'Other' in favour of the language of the 'Self', the formerly uniting act of translation is employed as a weapon of division and, thus, fuels the transformation of economic exploitation and social injustice into actual physical violence.

Step by step, Dillwyn lays bare the criminal nature of Rebecca, but she also challenges popular English racialised views of the Celtic fringe within contemporary anthropology that repeatedly presented the Welsh as a horde of Celts on the verge of anarchy.<sup>22</sup> Evan Williams' involvement with Rebecca serves as a case study of disenfranchisement and so becomes exemplary of a much wider problem. Since the story is told retrospectively and with the added benefit of historical hindsight, the social criticism locates the source of violence outside ethnic antagonism and ties it strictly to class. Although the English Queen and her Anglicized magistrates are repeatedly identified by Rebecca as the main oppressors of the Welsh peasant, Evan takes much greater umbrage with the extant Welsh classism as can be seen in his criticism of Lady Elizabeth Tudor:

The old lady filled in the time by asking me, in a very superior, condescending sort of

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 154.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. John Beddoe, *The Races of Britain: A contribution to the Anthropology of Western Europe*, ed. by David Elliston Allen. (London: Hutchinson, [1885] 1971), p. 104; Cf. Kirsti Bohata *Postcolonialism Revisited: Writing Wales in English* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2004), p. 46; cf. Robert J. C. Young, *The Idea of English Ethnicity* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), pp.100-1.

way, how old I was, whether I went to school, what work I did, whether I was a good boy, and all kinds of other personal questions, such as most gentlefolks seem to think they have a right to ask when they go into a poor man's house.<sup>23</sup>

While these questions are harmless in themselves, Evan revolts against the classist motivation behind them. As Katie Gramich points out, Amy Dillwyn proves her sense of humour and self-irony by allowing Evan to voice his indignation because it carries across to her own real-life charity work as a part-time teacher in Killay, desperately trying to civilize the village children.<sup>24</sup> In this light, Evan's indignation turns from the comical into the genuine representation of Killay voices as they had been experienced by the author. For the greater part, however, Evan's outrage sits uneasily with the readers' sympathies, because it is inseparable from his crimes, such as poaching, obstructing the law and manslaughter.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, Evan fancies himself a reluctant criminal with a moral conscience and argues that it is class antagonism that forces him into illegality.

In the first instance, Evan is caught poaching one of Squire Tudor's rabbits, the power division between the classes is evident in the landlord's reaction:

“You impudent young rascal! [...] So this is how you spend your Sunday afternoon? *Sauntering up my drive like a gentleman coming to call, and poaching my rabbits under my very nose!* But I'll teach you to play such tricks here.”

With that he began trying to get the stick out of my hands to beat me with it, which I resisted vigorously [...].<sup>26</sup> (emphasis added)

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<sup>23</sup> E. A. Dillwyn, *The Rebecca Rioter*, Vol. 1, pp.26-7.

<sup>24</sup> Gramich, p. vii.

<sup>25</sup> E. A. Dillwyn, *The Rebecca Rioter*, Vol. 1, pp. 43-50, pp. 115-5; E. A. Dillwyn, *The Rebecca Rioter*, Vol. 2, pp. 25-32.

<sup>26</sup> Dillwyn, Vol. 1, p. 50.

The fact that Evan has stolen from Tudor's property is of lesser importance for the squire who is more outraged by a peasant's alleged impudence directed towards his social betters. If Tudor was truly interested in pursuing his right, he would call for a representative of the law; but at no point is legal retribution mentioned, not even in passing. Evan had been on the grounds because he had been invited by Gwenvllian, the daughter of the house.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, the supposedly injured party unmask himself because the offence that the squire sees in Evan's behaviour, namely a visit to a friend, is not punishable by law.

Conspicuous by their absence in the poaching incident, the police later make their actual appearance in the investigation of a murder which Evan had witnessed. Without condoning the crime, he opts out instead of collaborating with the representatives of the law.<sup>28</sup> His detestation of the police overrides any moral duty to the victim and is an exemplar for the entire village who view the police as a workforce employed by the rich to protect their claims:

Then the constable – *the very sight of such a person was hated by everyone in the place* – went into most of the cottages asking various questions. But he did not get any good by it, for none of the people to whom he spoke knew anything about the murder, and if they had, *it was not likely that they should have been willing to tell such a one as him* about it.<sup>29</sup> (emphasis added)

The constable also interviews Evan, but he evades the policeman's questions until the constable gives up and leaves without any result.<sup>30</sup> The logic behind Evan's behaviour is striking: he actively protects the two murderers, whom he knows personally, from a certain

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Ibid., pp. 91-9.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., pp. 114-7.

death sentence because, first, it would not bring the victim back to life, and second, he is afraid to share the dead man's fate.<sup>31</sup> It is particularly the latter element that reveals the ineffective work of the police when it involves the protection of the poor. Consequently, instead of solving or preventing crime and helping to serve punishment, the police would become accessory to further crime.

Finally, the cycle of violence culminates in the second Rebecca attack during which Evan shoots Squire Tudor.<sup>32</sup> In the chain of events, formerly isolated moments of violence are channelled into one direction until they culminate in the squire's death. I have already mentioned before that Amy Dillwyn rejected the vigilante nature and violence of the Rebecca Riots, which may well be related to her upbringing in a prominent family of (lapsed) Quakers.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, the novel does not gloss over the fact that the rioters were armed with the intention to cause considerable damage; but the same holds true for the likewise armed state representatives protecting the tollgates against their destruction – a fact which Dillwyn does not censor either. A clash between two armed parties simply had to escalate. Evan reasons thus:

I do not deny that it was plucky of our enemies to ride at us as they did – they being only eleven in number, while there were probably more than a hundred of us – but then they had three things which were immensely in their favour, and which more than made up for their small number. First – they were expecting to fight [...]. Secondly – they were well armed [...]. Thirdly – they were well trained and under command, whereas we were wholly undisciplined.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p.117.

<sup>32</sup> Dillwyn, Vol. 2, pp. 25-32.

<sup>33</sup> Painting, pp. 4-12.

<sup>34</sup> Dillwyn, Vol. 2, pp. 26-7.

As in the previous examples, Evan diverts attention from the actual criminal act and thus raises the reader's awareness for different incarnations of violence: whilst the peasant revolt is punishable by law, the magistrates and dragoons *are* the law. Even before the attack, he classifies the magistrates and the police as the enemies of Rebecca.<sup>35</sup> Afterwards, Evan is proud of having shot a man in the face whilst fighting a just war.<sup>36</sup> The subjective narrative of the events relates the attacks from the bottom of the social register in Victorian Britain and illustrates the unequal distribution of legal powers by way of political misrepresentation of the different classes, something that the Reform Acts (1832, 1867, 1884) slowly attempted to rectify. The second riot is described as heavily in favour of the owners of the turnpikes because they are aided by a state that seeks to oppress the very people affected most by the heavy road taxes.<sup>37</sup> The farmers who demand better conditions for themselves outnumber the state representatives who are fighting in favour of the small number of turnpike owners by ten to one. That distribution does not extend to the political sphere; in other words, it only takes a minority to rule against the majority's protestations, especially when the breakdown of communication between the conflicting parties makes peaceful negotiations impossible. Latching onto the unequal distribution of arms and levels of organisation during the attack, Evan thus draws a direct parallel between the violent outbreaks in South Wales and the violence of governance that favours one class over another. As a result, the local riots in Wales turn into a potential threat for the stability of the entire nation state.

Despite his crimes, Evan remains a sympathetic character because he is also victimised by his own people. On occasion he speaks up against those he deems his moral betters and demands explanations for their actions. However, each time he is silenced and, therefore, dispossessed of his genuine voice of caution. It is the sum of these incidences that show he possesses a moral compass which becomes his saving grace. He explicitly admits to

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p.14.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Dillwyn, Vol. 1, pp. 147-8.

the reader he would not have taken part in the first raid, if he had had the opportunity to speak with Gwenllian first, whose better moral judgement he invariably trusts.<sup>38</sup> Further, he objects to the burning of the gatekeeper's house in the second attack because he knows that the man is just as poor as the rioters.<sup>39</sup> The moment he discovers the identity of the man he has shot, he no longer attempts to flee Britain but returns to Killay and faces the consequences; Evan no longer deludes himself with the murder being an act of heroism.<sup>40</sup> Despite such moments of moral clarity, in each case he is immediately silenced and it shows how absolutely without power he is even among his peers.<sup>41</sup> Eventually, he arrives at the conclusion that his life was never his from the start because each collective, be it the Rebecca Rioters or the state, disallows voices of opposition.<sup>42</sup>

With the help of Evan Williams's subjective voice of an unsuspecting bystander turned willing follower, the novel illustrates an impoverished Welsh village life that is not the result of racial degeneration but instead the direct result of Anglocentric policies. The Rebecca Riots then show that this imbalance between core and periphery ultimately threatens to destabilize the political coherence of Britain because the Welsh no longer identify with their union state. Although Gwenllian Tudor, as a representative of the landed gentry, serves as the one positive example of honest interest in the welfare of the impoverished classes, her efforts remain ineffective in front of a disinterested system.<sup>43</sup> The importance of developing a social conscience is not limited to the characterisation of Gwenllian, but forms the basis for the frame narrative at the beginning and the end of the novel. In order to illustrate the amount of social neglect and its consequences for a whole class, Evan employs the language of the colonizer, but turns the imagery back onto his own people:

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., pp. 197-8.

<sup>39</sup> Dillwyn, Vol. 1, p. 203, 206.

<sup>40</sup> Dillwyn, Vol. 2, p. 157.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Dillwyn, Vol. 1, pp. 204-5.

<sup>42</sup> Dillwyn, Vol. 2, pp. 183-4.

<sup>43</sup> Dillwyn, Vol. 1, p. 41, 68.

People did not take so much trouble to improve one another in those days [...] If the parents were black, the children would never be white, and if the parents were uncivilised, so would the children be also to the end of their days, and it was no use trying to make them anything else.<sup>44</sup>

It is not the ethnic degeneration that drives the people into savagery, but the conditions they live in. Hence, the Rebecca Rioters only acted savagely as consequence of an institutionally sanctioned system of neglect that allowed for the evolution of those restricting conditions in which they had been socialised throughout their lives. Evan, who had experienced the benefits of a basic, civilising education provided for him by Gwenllian, was then the feeble voice of protest against some of the developments from the riots, such as the burning of the gate-keeper's house.<sup>45</sup>

The question of ethnic degeneration returns in the context of Beynon collecting a band of followers. Just as Evan subverts the image of the colonial savage, Beynon describes the English as a nation of 'miserable, servile, down-trodden'<sup>46</sup> subjects. In other words, he re-imagines the English as a nation of slaves who are shackled to their monarch and subsequently asks of his Welsh listeners, 'Have we degenerated?', in order to build his rebellion.<sup>47</sup> Eventually, he anticipates Karl Marx and arrives at the anachronistic conclusion that it is each rioter's 'task of helping his country to shake off her chains!'<sup>48</sup> Although the *Communist Manifesto* wants to replace national with class identity, Beynon's chain of argument calls for the justified break-up of the British Union and Welsh autonomy under such conditions. Evan, however, proposes an alternative route at the end of the novel. Other than

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Dillwyn, Vol. 1, p.203, 206.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p.156.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p.157.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p.158.



Beynon, he is aware of the impossibility of a revolution from below for he has seen with his own eyes and experienced first-hand that such a course is doomed by violence. It is the fatalism of the dying prisoner that is contained in his closing remarks. As long as those who wield power do not make any concessions, it is futile for those on the bottom of the social ladder to take any action because it will automatically lead to violence which only justifies their submission *post hoc, ergo propter hoc*. Instead, Evan proposes:

If the rich would try to civilise the poor – not merely by giving them money, and blankets, and coals at random, but by going amongst them with a real and unaffected sympathy that forgets differences of rank, and sees in each poor person a fellow-creature with the same faults, virtues, needs, and feelings as a gentleman has – then poor men would not be imbued with that feeling of natural enmity and distrust towards their superiors which had a very great deal to do with the Rebecca riots.<sup>49</sup>

Unlike Beynon's manifesto of purely national antagonism, Evan's vision is based on social compassion which leads the way out of the crisis that has emerged from class enmity and Anglo-centric economy. As long as the classes stand in marked competition and London is the sole centre of all political and economic activity, Victorian Britain will not be able to build a stable union state. It would go too far for the confines of this paper to elaborate on the concept of the *gwerin*, which, in short, envisions an idealized, egalitarian Welsh community, but Evan's speech clearly shows traces of this imagination.<sup>50</sup> It is only logical then that his family emigrate to a supposedly classless America because their home state has failed them entirely.<sup>51</sup> Evan himself, is transported for life, presumably to Van Diemen's Land, the place

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<sup>49</sup> Dillwyn, Vol. 2, pp. 217-8.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Gwyn A. Williams, *When Was Wales?: A History of the Welsh*, 2nd edn. (London: Penguin Books, 1985), p. 237.

<sup>51</sup> Dillwyn, Vol. 2, p. 220.

to which actual convicts related to the Rebecca Riots had been deported.<sup>52</sup> Although he dies speaking of his *hiraeth*, or longing, for his former home and an entirely imaginary state of innocence, Evan is fully aware that Britain holds no place for people like him; people from the social as well as geographical periphery. The example of his life story serves as a reminder for the Victorian reader that as long as the state subscribes to institutionalized neglect of the poor and single-minded occupation with the political and economic centre based around London, there will be no guarantee for the continuation of the project that is the British Empire.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 214; cf. Evans, p. 143.