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DR. THOMAS PRICE AND THE ELECTION OF 1868 IN MERTHYR TYDFIL

A STUDY IN NONCONFORMIST POLITICS

PART II

In the first part of this study, it was shown that in certain crucial aspects of local affairs Dr. Thomas Price had come to personify many of the basic tensions and opposing forces which existed in, and were shaping, the political life of the borough.

Similar tensions existed in parliamentary politics, but until 1868 they never became explicit. The reason for this is two-fold. In the first place, the Aberdare side of the great Merthyr constituency was very much the weaker in terms of population, voters, and industrial strength. In 1831 the population of Merthyr was 22,083, that of Aberdare 3,691.⁹³ But by 1871 the difference was much less considerable, Aberdare having grown to 40,305, while Merthyr stood at 54,741. The most spectacular increase in population had, therefore, been in the Aberdare area, the period of greatest increase being between 1851 and 1871, when 26,000 had been added, Merthyr increasing by only 8,000 in the same two decades. The same applies to the numbers of voters—or, until 1867, of potential voters. In 1831 there had been an estimated 569 £10-householders in Merthyr parish, and only fifty-six in Aberdare.⁹⁴ But by 1868 Aberdare was providing almost a half of the registered voters in the constituency.⁹⁵ Industrially, also, Aberdare was growing at a higher speed than Merthyr, but with this difference, that the growth was most spectacular in the independent coal industry. After the closure of the Aberaman Iron Works in 1858, Fothergill was the most substantial ironmaster in the town and precincts of Aberdare, although, of course, by comparison with the two giant concerns at Merthyr (and the two lesser ones) his works at Llwydcoed and Abernant were small.

It follows, therefore, that until the 1860s and the Second Reform Act the growing communities of the Aberdare valleys were obliged to accept the political dominance of the richer and more populous Merthyr valleys. Thus, we find that in the early years of the history

⁹³ See Boundary Commissioners' Reports, 1832.

⁹⁴ See *Census Reports and Abstract of Merthyr Tydfil Union*. See also Boundary Commissioners' Reports, 1867.

⁹⁵ In what was by then a double-member constituency, Merthyr polled 13,329 and Aberdare 11,446 voters. See *Merthyr Express*, 21 November 1868.

of the newly-enfranchised borough—from 1832 to 1852—there scarcely existed any regular party caucus in Aberdare independent of that of Merthyr, and that its role in parliamentary politics during those years when Sir J. J. Guest occupied the seat was insignificant. This is not to say that it was a negligible role, since the one occasion on which an opposition candidate actually forced a poll was in 1837 when Guest was opposed by John Bruce (Pryce) of Duffryn, Mountain Ash, landowner and first stipendiary magistrate for the borough. In the event Bruce polled 135 out of a total of 444 cast, of which 67 were polled in Merthyr, and 68 in Aberdare. He polled none in Dowlais. Guest, on the other hand, polled 87 in Bruce's territory alone. Bruce was clearly the forlorn hope of the anti-Guest caucus, the choice of Merthyr rather than Aberdare, and invited to run only after the more obvious candidates, Meyrick and the two ironmasters, Alderman Thompson and Thomas Forman, had declined.⁹⁶

The first indication of the growth of a regular caucus in Aberdare came immediately after the general election of 1852 and, characteristically, Price was in the van of this movement. J. J. Guest had been returned unopposed, being, in fact, seriously ill at the time of the election, and nearly 700 voters of all parties, led by D. W. James and Robert Jones⁹⁷ (both of whom had consistently opposed Guest in the past) had agreed to an address to the member 'begging him not to expose himself to the fatigue of canvassing or even of appearing on the hustings, and assuring him that he should be returned without any trouble.'⁹⁸ But immediately after the election formalities were over, serious preparations for a by-election, which all anticipated in the near future, were begun, and these included a public dinner at Aberdare, in the course of which D. W. James toasted the town and trade of Aberdare, stating that there was a party of independent men forming in that town, who would be able to render valuable assistance in the event of a contested election. Thomas Price responded on behalf of the town.⁹⁹

Clearly, the 'James Party' in Merthyr, who had managed the opposition to Guest both in local and in parliamentary affairs since the enfranchisement of the borough,¹⁰⁰ anticipated an early election.

⁹⁶ The 1837 election is described in Islwyn W. R. David, 'Political and Electioneering Activity in South-east Wales, 1820-1852' (M.A. thesis, University of Wales, 1959), pp. 140-1. C. Wilkins, *History of Merthyr Tydfil* (1908), p. 215, gives details of the polling in Dowlais, Merthyr, and Aberdare.

⁹⁷ For D. W. James see *Bywgraffiadur*, C. Wilkins, op. cit., and Gwyn A. Williams, 'The Making of Radical Merthyr', *ante*, I, 161-92.

⁹⁸ See *C.M.G.*, 3 July 1852, for the *Address* dated 29 June.

⁹⁹ See *C.M.G.*, 17 July 1852.

¹⁰⁰ See Gwyn A. Williams, op. cit.

They were not disappointed, for Guest, who had recovered sufficiently to give a public dinner to his supporters in Dowlais in August, suffered a relapse in November, and on 26 November he died.¹⁰¹ Before the corpse was cold, as some cynics gladly recorded, the James machine went into action while a decent gloom descended on Dowlais House. William Milbourne James, first cousin to J. W. James, and a barrister, issued his *Address* on the 27th, announcing that his political principles were identical with those of the late member, that he was in favour of free trade, parliamentary reform, a considerable extension of the franchise, and the protection of the ballot. In the meantime, handbills with a mourning border were circulated by the other side, condemning this indelicate and premature electioneering, and promising that a worthy successor to Guest was about to come forward. On 6 December, after the funeral, the *Address* of H. A. Bruce appeared, and on the same day a second *Address* by James withdrawing from the contest.¹⁰² On 14 December, Bruce was returned unopposed.¹⁰³

The James party retired for the simple reason that the two previous contests had shown that Dowlais and their Merthyr supporters together could carry the representation against the united opposition of all the other ironmasters in the constituency. This had been the lesson of 1835 when the Cyfarthfa lawyer, William Meyrick, standing as a Tory, had enjoyed the enthusiastic support of W. Crawshay, backed by Thompson and Hill.¹⁰⁴ Now, in December 1852, all the Merthyr ironmasters supported Bruce, and W. M. James claimed in his second *Address* to have been told by William Crawshay that 'there would be determined opposition to me on the part of the four Iron Works, on the grounds that my return as a Member for Merthyr would give greater strength to that Independent Party, which had in parochial matters successfully opposed the Iron Masters'. James ended his *Address* by proclaiming that it would be the duty of the independent party so to increase and organize their strength 'that they will use it to teach even Merthyr Iron Masters that property has its duties as well as its rights'.¹⁰⁵

Whether justifiably or not, Bruce would henceforward be regarded as the nominee and, therefore, the tool of the reactionary iron interest, and a party already existed in the borough, with its centre

¹⁰¹ *C.M.G.*, 3 December 1852.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 11 December.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ The election is discussed by Gwyn A. Williams, *op. cit.*, pp. 184–6, and in Islwyn W. R. David, *op. cit.*, pp. 129–31. And see the interesting analysis in the memoir of Guest in *C.M.G.*, 3 December 1852.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 11 December 1852.

in Merthyr, which would never cease to make political capital of that fact. But, however vociferous it might become, as a party it was well-nigh helpless in the Merthyr side of the constituency while the ironmasters remained united. But in Aberdare circumstances were somewhat different. There the sole ironmaster was opposed to Bruce, and Fothergill gave the James party his immediate and consistent support.¹⁰⁶ Fothergill's opposition may have been personal: only a few months previously Bruce had condemned him for introducing Truck to Aberdare. It was given an ideological appearance by Price, who claimed then and later that he and Fothergill had opposed Bruce because they did not consider him to be sufficiently liberal. At any rate, Price was among those who organized a deputation to Fothergill after the election to thank him for opposing Bruce.¹⁰⁷ It is clear, therefore, that by 1852 Aberdare Liberals were beginning to organize themselves and to be active in constituency affairs. At that time, and until 1867, Richard Fothergill, as the leading ironmaster, was their unofficial candidate being 'presented' to the electorate as an advanced Liberal with a good record in constituency affairs, and Thomas Price was the acknowledged spokesman for the caucus.

It is equally clear, however, and by no means contradictory to assert, that Price and the Liberal group, except in the early stages of Bruce's tenure of the seat, never once presented Fothergill as an *alternative* member to Bruce. There was no question of this. They were realists enough to accept the fact that even the James family in Merthyr would be unable to unseat Bruce while he retained the confidence of Dowlais or a majority of the Merthyr ironmasters. Moreover, except on the question of the ballot, Bruce soon proved himself by his votes in Parliament and activities within the constituency, to be perfectly acceptable as the representative of the borough. Like his predecessor, he tended to become more liberal as time went on, reflecting more accurately, and responding more sensitively to, the majority opinion and political complexion of the valleys. At no time did any movement to displace him originate in Aberdare. Thomas Price, in particular, soon came to be an enthusiastic, though discriminating, supporter.

These arguments can be briefly illustrated by the course of events during the general election of 1857, which followed the dissolution

¹⁰⁶ One newspaper reported 'on tolerably good authority' that Fothergill had privately communicated his regret to Bruce for having given his support to W. M. James. See *C.M.G.*, 11 December 1852. There is no direct evidence for this, and Fothergill's subsequent attitudes to Bruce throw doubt on its validity.

¹⁰⁷ See Price's claims that he and Fothergill had supported James in 1852 in *Seren Cymru*, 28 February 1867, and compare *ibid.*, 13 December 1867.

consequent upon the failure of Palmerston to carry the House of Commons with him on the China question. This was the first opportunity the opposition to Bruce had had of testing its strength. It was also a highly favourable opportunity, for the prerequisite conditions for the defeat of Bruce seemed to be present, namely, the fact that three of the four ironmasters—Crawshay, Hill, and Forman—were highly critical of Bruce for opposing Palmerston. James and the opposition party in Merthyr since 1852 had been consistently justifying their opposition to Bruce on the ground that the electoral history of the borough proved it to be a pocket borough and that Bruce was a nominee of the ironmasters. Here was an opportunity for the townsmen to put up their own candidate. Finding a candidate who should please both Crawshay and James was another matter. There was a certain sad realism (and perhaps some sound history) in their choice of William Crawshay, senior, who had retired to Caversham Park. But he declined. So did William Thomas, the Court, a prominent businessman and property owner. In the event, the most the opposition could do, since they applauded Bruce's vote on the China question, was to attack him in his public meetings on the only issue on which they could honestly attack him, namely, his views on the ballot.¹⁰⁸

Price had no part in these meetings. By now he would do nothing to endanger the sitting member even though he also remained highly critical of Bruce on the question of the ballot. His energies, and those of Fothergill, were devoted to assisting in the return of the two Liberal candidates for the Glamorgan county seats, C. R. M. Talbot of Margam and H. H. Vivian of Swansea, who were running in harness. Committees 'for the return of two Liberals for the County' were set up at all the important polling centres, including one at Aberdare, and others at Merthyr and Dowlais.¹⁰⁹ Fothergill was chairman of the Aberdare committee, and Price was a member along with a majority of the men we have seen to have been associated with him in the past. But not all. The Tory candidate, Nash Vaughan Edwards—Vaughan of Rheola, also had his committee for the county, and included on it were some of the more prominent names in Aberdare and Merthyr. In fact, when the county election results are analysed it is surprising to discover that Vaughan received

¹⁰⁸ The election is well covered in the local papers, e.g. *C.M.G.*, 14 March 1857 onwards.

¹⁰⁹ The Merthyr and Caerphilly Committee was chaired by R. T. Crawshay, that of Dowlais by G. T. Clark, with H. A. Bruce a prominent member. *C.M.G.*, 27 March 1857.

23 per cent. of the votes cast in the Aberdare district, and 17 per cent. in the Merthyr districts.¹¹⁰ This unexpected strength of the conservative county vote in Aberdare parish may have been a principal reason why Price showed no desire to disturb the sitting member, and why he should have placed so much emphasis constantly on keeping the register up-to-date, and encouraging registration societies.¹¹¹ Shortly after the election, one of the most important in the electoral history of Glamorgan, the importance of Price was officially and publicly recognized when he attended, as a vice-chairman, a dinner given in honour of the successful Liberal candidates at which Fothergill presided.

Two years later the election of 1859, fought on the question of parliamentary reform, was to demonstrate that the organization of the Aberdare Liberals had reached the stage of maturity, and that Thomas Price was now in a position of some authority. It also demonstrated that, although Aberdare Liberals were somewhat to the left of Bruce on some aspects of reform, they were not disposed to abandon him at the behest of Merthyr radicals in favour of a virtual 'carpet-bagger'. Whether they would remain loyal to him should the town produce its own rival candidate, was a question which did not arise. Fothergill had retired from politics, and there was no one else of comparable stature to whom they could have appealed had they been so minded.

The election had been preceded by the formation in the constituency of a Reform Association for the purpose of supporting John Bright's proposals for parliamentary reform which he had been advocating in a series of speeches during the autumn of 1858, and which he and his associates placed before the House of Commons in the form of a Bill in November of that year.¹¹² The Association had been formed at a meeting, very thinly attended, at Merthyr presided over by J. W. James, at which resolutions calling for the ballot, triennial parliaments, the redistribution of seats, and household franchise had been passed.¹¹³ A similar, but larger, meeting at

¹¹⁰			Vaughan	Talbot	Vivian	Total
	Aberdare	..	162	262	285	709
	Merthyr	..	174	400	431	1,005

C.M.G., 4 April 1857.

¹¹¹ E.g. *Y Gwron*, 17 October 1857. This election is notable as being the first occasion on which the Calvinistic Methodists as a distinct denomination called upon their members 'to support by their votes *no other* candidates but those who consistently advocate and practise the principles of religious liberty'. *Cambrian*, 25 April 1857.

¹¹² For these speeches see J. Thorold Rogers (ed.), *Speeches of John Bright, M.P.* (1868), II, and for his reform Bill see W. N. Molesworth, *History of England* (1874), III, 132.

¹¹³ *C.M.G.*, 1 January 1859. Merthyr would have got two additional members by the terms of Bright's Bill.

Aberdare on 19 January passed the same resolutions and led to the setting up of a committee to co-operate with the Merthyr Association. It consisted of all the town's leading Liberals, including Price. These were all moderate men, and not disposed to accept the extreme demands of the non-electors who, in any case, held their own meeting shortly afterwards.¹¹⁴ Apart from the ballot, they all saw eye to eye with Bruce.

The consequence of these meetings was that when a candidate for Bruce's seat appeared he could not be certain of much support except from the extreme radical wing, or from those whose hatred of Bruce was stronger than their principles. The candidate who offered himself was E. M. Elderton, a London solicitor, with vague local connections, in his political aims unimpeachable on the ballot but less radical than Bright on the suffrage question. Obviously not a formidable rival to Bruce and not particularly attractive to either the malcontents or the radicals, his adoption meeting almost turned into one in support of Mr. Overton, the local coroner.¹¹⁵ At Aberdare there was scarcely any support for him at all, as Price had foretold would be the case when Elderton consulted him before commencing his canvass.¹¹⁶ Here, the feeling of the constituency was put by Price at Bruce's election meeting, to the effect that while approving generally of Bruce's conduct and votes in Parliament, and particularly of his vote against the second reading of Derby's Reform Bill, 'no gentleman can fully and fairly represent this borough in the next parliament without being fully prepared to support a £10 rental as a voting qualification in counties and a large extension of the suffrage in boroughs, a considerable amount of redistribution of parliamentary seats, and protection to the voter in the exercise of his rights by means of ballot'.¹¹⁷ At the election in May, Bruce polled 798 to Elderton's 106. And of those votes for Elderton only seven had been polled in Aberdare.¹¹⁸

* * *

It was from this time forward that the political stature of Price began to expand beyond the confines of his own constituency. We

¹¹⁴ The secretary of the non-electors was William Davies, a puddler. See *C.M.G.*, 23 April 1859.

¹¹⁵ At this meeting, Gould, the Chartist, proposed the nomination of Overton, which was carried. It was J. W. James who objected to this unusual procedure. See report in *ibid.*, 23 April 1859. But see *Merthyr Star*, 29 April 1859, which came out strongly in Elderton's favour, and for reports of rumours that Fothergill and Crawshay would support him, *ibid.*, 24 April 1859.

¹¹⁶ *Seren Cymru*, 30 April 1859.

¹¹⁷ *C.M.G.*, 23 April 1859.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 7 May 1859.

have already seen that he was becoming well known in Wales, and, indeed in England as well,¹¹⁹ as a leading Baptist minister, as a prominent supporter of friendly societies, as an editor and publicist, and popular lecturer on current affairs. His political fame, however, grew as a result of his dedication to the cause of Welsh nonconformist politics as defined by the Liberation Society. The essence of this Liberationist view was simply that the Welsh people being predominantly a nonconformist people, their political energies should henceforth be concentrated on the return to parliament of men of their own convictions, who would 'represent' them on the main nonconformist grievances.¹²⁰ The Society had had supporters in the constituency since the year of its foundation in 1844,¹²¹ and from 1848 Aberdare names begin to appear in the annual transactions of the Society.¹²² Thomas Price seems to have joined in 1850 when, characteristically enough, his name, with that of the Rev. William Edwards, appears in the list of council members appointed at the Second Triennial Conference.¹²³ Thereafter he remained a constant member of the Society, faithfully publicizing its views and activities in his magazines, and in other ways disseminating its principles. From time to time he took part in the meetings and demonstrations of the Society in Aberdare having, no doubt, helped to arrange them.¹²⁴

The year 1862 saw an intensification of the work of the Society in Wales as part of the more general policy of attempting to change the complexion of Parliament itself by the return of members pledged to further and support Liberationist policies at Westminster.¹²⁵ This new phase in the relationship of the Society to Wales was inaugurated at a two-day conference in Swansea, attended by Edward Miall, the Society's founder, Henry Richard, its expert on Welsh affairs, and Carvell-Williams, its secretary and expert political analyst. Dr. Price was present, and on the second day spoke to a resolution proposed

¹¹⁹ See B. Evans, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

¹²⁰ For an analysis of the relations of the Liberation Society and Welsh politics at this time see my article, *ante*, I, 193-224.

¹²¹ See the list of council members in *Proceedings of the First Anti-State-Church Conference* (1844), and *Report of the first Triennial Conference* (1847). See *Secretary's Cash Book*, L.C.C. MS. A/Lib/89, for subscriptions from Hirwaun and Aberdare in 1848.

¹²² The first name to appear is that of Mr. D. E. Williams of Hirwaun in 1848.

¹²³ See *Report of the Second Triennial Conference* (1850).

¹²⁴ E.g. in November 1859 when he was chief speaker with C. J. Foster, LL.D., chairman of the Society's parliamentary committee.

¹²⁵ For details of this policy shift see my article, *ante*, pp. 193-224.

by Dr. Evan Davies of Haverfordwest.¹²⁶ His speech, considered within the context of the whole conference, was remarkable for its quality of political realism, distinguished in this respect from most of the other speeches, and, by implication, critical of that of Carvell-Williams who had analysed the shortcomings of Welsh members of Parliament. Price began by agreeing that the bulk of the Welsh people were nonconformist. He wished also to state another fact, namely, 'that three out of every four of the electors of the Principality are under the thumbscrew of one or other of two parties, either the ground landlords, or the iron and coal proprietor so that they can screw three out of every four of the electors from Cardiff to Holyhead'. Moreover, he wished Miall, Richard, and Williams to bear in mind the fact, also, that 'the bulk of the Welsh churches are made up of the poor classes; a very different state of things from what it is in England'. Both landowners and ironmasters were Church of England men, and their employees and dependants pledged to vote according to their behest, or suffer the consequences. The question was, would the bulk of the Welsh people defy them and vote according to their consciences? The solution lay in a steady and unspectacular purging of the registers, as had been done in Glamorgan county where both seats were now Liberal. 'It is impossible for us to get members to vote aright upon our questions while the thumbscrews of the landowners and employers are exerted in the opposite direction. Let us work for a few years, and the result will be different from what it is now'. He was realistic likewise on the question of the supply of candidates. They had been told that Welsh nonconformists could return 32 members: where were they to find them? 'We have but very few men that can spare the time, the money, and the status to contest our boroughs and counties, and therefore we must take the best we can. But I very much question whether we could find two better men than Mr. Dillwyn and Mr. Bruce. I would not exchange these two men for any other two men I know in Wales'.¹²⁷

¹²⁶ The resolution is worth recording *in extenso*. 'That this conference is of opinion that Welsh Nonconformity has never been adequately represented in the House of Commons—that while the population of Wales contains a much larger proportion of Dissenters than is to be found in England, Ireland, or Scotland, the relative number of their parliamentary representatives is much less than in either of those countries; and that, even of those members who attach themselves to the Liberal party, the majority are in the habit of treating questions deeply interesting to the friends of religious liberty with culpable remissness; that this Conference is constrained to admit that, for these reasons, the Dissenting influence exerted by Wales for the advancement of these voluntary principles has been comparatively small, and, having such a conviction, the Conference is earnestly solicitous that practical steps should be taken for so improving the Welsh representation as to bring it into harmony with the views and feelings of the population'. *Nonconformist*, I (1862), 830.

¹²⁷ For the speech see the *Nonconformist*, pp. 831–2, or *Cambrian*, 26 September 1862.

In thus drawing attention to the lack of a ready supply of suitable candidates, and the need to hold fast to those few who were true to their constituents despite differences of creed, Price was drawing attention in a realistic fashion to a neglected but vital aspect of mid-century Welsh politics. It was politically unrealistic, and morally and socially dangerous, to whip up enthusiasm for political causes or to advocate philosophies and courses of action which could not be personified in actual candidates at the hustings. And it is to his credit that when an opportunity offered itself in a suitable constituency to present the nonconformist voters with an alternative to that of the official caucus, he accepted an invitation to stand. This was at Brecon in January 1866, on the occasion of the by-election caused by the death of Colonel Watkins of Pennoyre.¹²⁸ Neither of the two candidates to offer themselves for the seat was considered by some of the nonconformists to be even remotely suitable. Hywel Gwyn of Duffryn, Neath, was a Tory, while John Charles (Pratt), eldest son of the marquis of Camden, though professedly a Liberal, was so lukewarm and equivocal or noncommittal on the leading questions of parliamentary reform and religious liberty as to be indistinguishable from his rival. Nevertheless, Dr. Price hesitated to accept the Brecon nonconformists' invitation on the grounds that it would be more appropriate to invite someone with stronger local connections, or failing such a one, a radical politician of some eminence—as, for instance, Henry Richard. Alternatively, he was quite prepared to see the young earl returned provided he gave satisfactory pledges on parliamentary reform, franchise extension, and religious equality. Neither of these alternatives being realized, by early December Dr. Price had determined to intervene, standing as a Welsh nonconformist Liberal. The *Address* he issued and the speeches he made to the electors received, and indeed deserved, wide publicity, for as he explained, he determined to stand in order to test the high claims which had been made in recent years regarding the necessity of returning at least one Welsh nonconformist to one of the 32 seats. And he wished to discover what help a practical man could hope to receive without employing half the lawyers and publicans of the constituency. Brecon seemed a good test case, since the town contained eight congregations of nonconformists and a dissenting college, and it was estimated that a half of the 200 registered electors were of that religious persuasion. His *Address* and

¹²⁸ See W. R. Williams, *The Parliamentary History of the Principality of Wales* (1895), for details of the representation of Brecon. The election is described in outline in B. Evans, *op. cit.*, pp. 169–71, and is well covered in *Seren Cymru*, *Merthyr Telegraph*, *Merthyr Express*, *Aberdare Times*, and *Baner*.

speech were, indeed, very remarkable performances, and were received with so much enthusiasm that the young earl had to step into line and issue a second, more liberal and specific *Address*. Price regarded this as a victory for himself and the radical cause, and thereupon retired having, as it was later said, rescued Brecon from an honest Tory and a dishonest Whig.¹²⁹

Certainly, Price emerged from this contest with his reputation greatly enhanced, not only in Aberdare, where he was shortly afterwards presented with an inkstand suitably inscribed, but elsewhere in radical and dissenting circles.¹³⁰ He himself, however, had no illusions either of personal grandeur or of the nature of the victory, which later events proved to have been pyrrhic anyway. He had probably withdrawn not, as he had publicly stated, because he had achieved a main objective, but because he had realized that however enthusiastic his audiences may have been the non-conformists would lack the power of their convictions even where they were not already pledged to Lord Camden, and that more than the sound of trumpets was needed to cause the entrenched walls of privilege which encompassed Brecon to fall to the ground. The opportunity to make these misgivings public occurred in the August following the election when the young lord was called to the upper house on the death of his father and the Liberal nomination passed to his brother-in-law, Lord Alfred Spencer Churchill, and not, as Price imagined it would, to Henry Richard, E. M. Richards, J.P., of Swansea, or Edward Miall. In a series of leading articles in *Seren Cymru* in August and September he castigated with bitterness the nonconformist leaders of the town, and gave vent to his disillusionment. He still believed that Liberationist aims could be achieved, but where in Wales was there a constituency where the voluntaryists were sufficiently courageous to practise their principles and return a Welsh nonconformist?¹³¹ In the August number he analysed the contest in which he had taken part. Of the 200 registered voters, a half were professedly nonconformists, though, astonishingly enough, not one of the college tutors—men devoted to teaching ministerial students the principles of dissent—had the vote. Many of the 100 nonconformist voters were eloquent on

¹²⁹ See *Aberdare Times*, 13 April 1867. The original manuscript of the speech, corrected for the press, is in N.L.W. MS. 3317B.

¹³⁰ B. Evans, *op. cit.*, p. 171.

¹³¹ The following is an example of his language: 'The fact is, Wales is very pleased and surprisingly ready to throw her principles to the moles and bats, in order to have the opportunity of raising the hat, or bending a knee, to some petty lordling (or, indeed, to the lordling's steward or hound); verily, they would be as ready, at the word of command, to abase themselves to the hound as to the lord—to obey is their lot'. *Seren Cymru*, August 1866 (translated).

Liberationist platforms, but when the testing time came they gave exhibitions of political flunkeyism as debasing as the profoundest Tory in Europe could desire. As against the eminent and gifted men who were ready to stand, they had 'hastened, grovelling, to lick the dust and seek out the brother of the previous Judas'¹³²—young, inexperienced, without a religious or political credo, who could not even write his own *Address*, whose only qualification was family connection. Price was forced to account for this servility by alleging that Lord Camden had bribed the Independents with grants of land, and the Methodists with money to build their chapel on the Watton. 'The conduct of these men is a betrayal of all principles. They should be held to ridicule throughout Wales.' 'Now, the men like the Nonconformists of this small town are the curse of Wales.'¹³³ Dr. Price's anger had been forgotten by 1867, and his excessive language moderated; but his disillusionment became a permanent element in his political philosophy, and played a notable part in the creation of those attitudes which determined his actions in the Merthyr Tydfil election of 1868.

Dr. Price was too intelligent a man and too well-informed to allow anger to obscure, or disillusionment to undermine, his faith in the essential rightness of his political doctrines and objectives. His disappointment did not extend to all nonconformists, and he evidently came to hope that even apostate Brecon could retrieve its reputation.¹³⁴ It was the middle-class nonconformists, the tradition-bound, commercially dependent dissenter, who calculated interest against principle, who had disappointed him. Henceforward, he concentrated his energies on working for parliamentary reform and a wide extension of the franchise to include all householders, for this was the essential preliminary to the achievement of all his other aims, and it was to this and the more efficient organization of the Liberals in the borough and county that he now devoted himself.

Parliamentary reform was, anyway, the topic of the hour, particularly after the preliminary moves towards a comprehensive measure of reform had been taken by the House of Commons in February 1867. By April, meetings were being held in the constituency by various bodies sympathetic to the views expressed by either the National Reform League or the National Reform Union, and Dr. Price played an important role in this agitation. His

¹³² *Ibid.*, 14 September 1866.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 24 August and 14 September 1866.

¹³⁴ In 1867 he hoped that at the next election it would be possible for Brecon nonconformists to be in a position to share the seats with the Anglican landed interest, Camden or Somerset the county, and the nonconformists the borough. *Aberdare Times*, 11 May 1867.

sympathies were with the Union: he was one of its five Welsh vice-presidents,¹³⁵ and he would have nothing to do with the rival organization's meeting despite the prominence of the Liberationist plank in their programme.¹³⁶ Instead, Dr. Price concentrated his energies on the more ambitious and 'national' scheme for a Welsh Representative Society, the need for which he had suggested at an earlier meeting called for the purpose of honouring him for his services at Brecon.¹³⁷ What was needed was 'a Society to sow the seeds of political nonconformity and labour to improve the political representation of Wales in the House of Commons',¹³⁸ and most of the official speakers, including the chief speaker, Price, kept to this theme. But it was clear, from some of the speeches from the floor and from the final resolution proposed by one of the conveners, that Aberdare nonconformists had the representation of their own constituency very much in mind, and that this 'national' society now in process of formation was admirably adapted to act as a constituency political organization in Merthyr should the need arise.¹³⁹ More significantly, perhaps, this reform meeting, called shortly before the exact terms of the Second Reform Act had been agreed, but when it was already certain that Merthyr would benefit from any redistribution of seats, had taken place in Aberdare under the guidance of the constituency's most distinguished nonconformist leader. In the event of an election the nonconformists had been provided with an organization, and its leader would be in a very powerful position to determine the attitudes of its members.

This meeting took place at Aberdare on 7 May 1867, and the committee which had been set up consisted of the leading dissenters of the parish, a group, one would have thought, admirably adapted for the task of putting their principles into practice in their own

¹³⁵ The other four were all North Walians—from Ruabon (two), Wrexham, and Brymbo. See pamphlet in the George Howell Collection, 324.42/53a-68b in the Bishopsgate Institute. The Brymbo member was Rev. J. Jones, author of the highly interesting *Llyfr Etholiadol Cymru* (1867).

¹³⁶ League sympathizers organized a reform demonstration at Merthyr, at which the Chartists, Gould and Dr. Jones and the very radical Baptist Rev. Charles White, were prominent, and which was addressed by C. M. Elderton, evidently nursing the constituency. See *Aberdare Times*, 27 April 1867.

¹³⁷ See *ibid.*, 13 April 1867.

¹³⁸ Quoted from the requisition convening the meeting which was held on 7 May 1867. See *Aberdare Times*, 11 May 1867, for a full report.

¹³⁹ The final resolution, moved by the Unitarian Rev. J. J. George, expressed guarded confidence in Gladstone but was more critical of Bruce: 'From education, habits, and natural prejudices, it was difficult for a man in his position of life to thoroughly understand the wants of the working man', *ibid.* For a list of the committee members, which included most of the old political associates of Price, see *Cardiff Times*, 11 May 1867.

constituency.¹⁴⁰ Yet, exactly a fortnight later, on 21 May, its acknowledged leader, Thomas Price, was one of a small group of men who approached Richard Fothergill with a view to inviting him to stand for the second seat which would be given to Merthyr under the terms of the Reform Bill then in its final stages. On the same day, Price published a leading article in *Seren Cymru* strongly advocating the offer of the seat to Fothergill in the first place, and only then, in the event of his refusal, inviting a Welsh nonconformist Liberal to stand.¹⁴¹ Fothergill's reaction being satisfactory, on the following day a committee was formed to draw up a formal requisition which should be presented, along with a similar one from Merthyr, as soon as possible. By the time this Merthyr committee had been formed, and Fothergill approached on 20 June, the terms of the Bill had been published. Two days later, a joint deputation had visited Fothergill, and finding his political views satisfactory, and receiving from him an assurance that the last vestiges of Truck would be abolished in his works, drew up the final requisitions.¹⁴² These were presented on 31 June, the Aberdare one by Dr. Price, the Merthyr one by William Simmons. According to Price, the Aberdare one had been signed by 2,320 voters, including most of the tradesmen from Hirwaun to Mountain Ash, a large number of registered voters, and a few who would be exercising the vote for the first time. Merthyr's requisition had been signed by 1,200,¹⁴³ a clear indication of the amount of support he could expect in that part of the constituency.

The shock of these developments in the constituency, and particularly in Aberdare, was considerable. The nonconformists had been placed in an extremely awkward situation. Despite his alleged 'political immaturity', his lack of practical politics beyond the confines of his own parish, that he was a churchman and an Englishman, Fothergill was nevertheless bound to be a powerful candidate. He was a local man, his influence as an industrialist in Aberdare was almost irresistible, and by no means negligible in Merthyr. It was known that the Cyfarthfa interest supported him even to the extent of being represented on his committee by none other than W. T. Crawshay.¹⁴⁴ In the early stages, too, it was open to

¹⁴⁰ A preliminary meeting, chaired by C. H. James, had been held in Merthyr on 25 June (*Cardiff Times*, 29 June 1867); for the July meeting see *ibid.*, 27 July 1867, and for the Aberdare meeting *ibid.*, 3 August, where it is reported that Dr. Price dissented from the proposition to invite Henry Richard 'believing (that it) would be rather to jeopardise the seat of Bruce than prevent the election of Fothergill'.

¹⁴¹ *Seren Cymru*, 21 May 1867.

¹⁴² *Aberdare Times*, 29 June and 6 July 1867. Price gave a retrospective and not wholly accurate account of these transactions in *Seren Cymru*, 11 September 1868.

¹⁴³ *Aberdare Times*, 6 July 1867.

¹⁴⁴ *Y Gwladgarwr*, 22 August 1868, and *Merthyr Express*, 21 November 1868.

speculation that the Dowlais interest, while luke-warm, would not be exerted against him. The Wayne family, of the Gadlys Iron Works and collieries, supported him from the beginning, and the other Aberdare coal owners, while for the most part not actively engaged, were known not to be opposed to him.¹⁴⁵ Fothergill's *Address*, also, was in some respects even more Liberal than H. A. Bruce's: it was categorically in favour of relieving the major dissenting grievances, supported the disestablishment of the Irish Church, and was unequivocally in favour of the ballot.¹⁴⁶ In Aberdare, at least, it would be politically unrealistic, and possibly socially dangerous, to oppose such a candidate. Hence the hesitations with which the non-conformists reacted initially. Not until the middle of July was there a move in Merthyr to invite Henry Richard to contest the seat, and the form which that meeting took was determined by the situation created by the candidature of Fothergill, for a considerable part of the proceedings was taken up with declarations of fidelity to Bruce whose seat was now to become very insecure.¹⁴⁷ A similar meeting was held shortly afterwards in Aberdare, chaired by David Davis, the son of David Davis, Blaen-gwawr. Price attended this meeting, and argued strongly that the course they were about to adopt could have no other result than to jeopardize the first seat for Bruce. Despite his arguments this stormy meeting proceeded to pass the necessary resolutions, and to set up a committee to co-operate with the Merthyr committee under the chairmanship of J. H. James.¹⁴⁸

Here was a situation without compare in the annals of Welsh politics, and well might the voices of Price's erstwhile associates be raised in indignation at such a spectacle. Nonconformist leaders throughout England and Wales remonstrated and pleaded with him, pointed to the incongruity of his position, even hinting darkly of treachery, particularly since the overwhelming support being given to Henry Richard inevitably meant that his continued support of Fothergill would cause the defeat of Bruce.¹⁴⁹ Yet Price continued

¹⁴⁵ Some of the Welsh coal-owners, such as David Davis, Blaen-gwawr, and his son and partner, David Davis, Maes-y-ffynnon, sat on both the Fothergill and Richard committees.

¹⁴⁶ *Aberdare Times*, 29 June 1867. A revised *Address*, omitting references favourable to Bruce, was issued in July 1868. See *ibid.*, 25 July 1868.

¹⁴⁷ *Cardiff Times*, 29 June 1867, *Aberdare Times*, 27 June 1867. There is a long and detailed account of these transactions in *Baner ac Amserau Cymru*, 4 September and 30 October 1867.

¹⁴⁸ *Cardiff Times*, 3 August 1867.

¹⁴⁹ See, for instance, letters published in *Seren Cymru*, 13 December 1867, with list of correspondents who had written similar letters. Also the article in *Baner ac Amserau Cymru* already cited: 'If it were possible for Wales to have a say in the matter, I do not think I should be wrong in stating that 94 per cent. would be for Bruce. And it is certain . . . that I doubt whether Wales would ever forgive you if you lent your influence to return Fothergill at the expense of sacrificing Bruce'. See also *Seren Cymru*, 8 November 1867, for Price's notice of these articles and of complaints of ill-usage, and *ibid.*, 13 December 1867, for mention of 'a multitude' of letters pleading with him to withdraw from his invidious position, including letters from prominent Englishmen.

steadfast despite this alienation of his friends and his virtual isolation in nonconformist circles. Throughout the contest, although he seems to have avoided the public platform, he continued to argue his case, using the columns of his paper to defend himself. In fact, his case was not a good one, since it involved, or would seem to involve, the partial abandonment of those principles which previously he had held to be basic in the political philosophy of Welsh nonconformity. Thus, when he argued that the contest was between Liberals, and that if Richard were elected not a single vote more would be gained than if Fothergill were elected, he was ignoring what Welsh nonconformist Liberals had been teaching for more than a decade, namely, that it was not merely reliable votes in Parliament that were expected of the Welsh members, but a positive dedication to the cause of nonconformity, and of Welsh nonconformity in particular. He tended to play down the role of religion in politics, too, and this made him cynical of the nature of the support being given to Richard. But this looked as if he were generalizing on the basis of his single experience at Brecon, and including all nonconformists in the condemnation he had pronounced on the dissenters of that borough. Finally, he was reluctant to admit as a general principle that local needs and feelings ought to give way to the general interest. He would prefer a local member with local interests, who would do his best for the constituency while not harming the rest of the country.¹⁵⁰ Dr. Price had certainly grown more realistic in his political attitudes, but it was a realism totally out of harmony with the idealistic stage of Welsh political nonconformity at that time.

There is no direct evidence to show that there was anything personal in this alliance between Price and Fothergill, beyond the fact that they had worked closely together in local and parliamentary politics over a number of years. Nor can any commercial affiliations be detected. As we have seen, Price's commercial interests allied him with the coal owners rather than with the ironmasters, and the interests of these two groups could often be opposed. Despite the fierce contest over Fothergill's Truck shops, indeed, possibly as a result of this contest, Price had come genuinely to admire him. The letter of the agreement they had drawn up together on that occasion had been strictly adhered to, namely, that no workman should be compelled to buy at the company shop. This surely shows the imaginative limitations of both men, but at least it enables us to bracket them together, and to show a certain affinity between them.

¹⁵⁰ *Seren Cymru*, 8 and 15 November 1867, 13 December 1867, and 11 September 1868.

Probably, the main motive determining Price's allegiance was pride in locality. For the first time Aberdare, which seemed to have been doomed in the past to take its politics from its larger neighbour, had taken the initiative and produced its own candidate. It had the additional advantage of placing the blame for the probable displacing of Bruce on the James party at Merthyr who hitherto had dominated constituency dissent. He had obviously calculated that Aberdare dissent would follow his lead, and so break the tradition. In the event, he was proved wrong, for only the Baptists appear to have followed him in any numbers,¹⁵¹ and in that age of denominational virulence it was only to be expected that he should castigate the choice of Henry Richard, and resent his coming as an intrusion.

Nowhere was the shock of his defection greater than among the working-class organizations he had encouraged. One of the sharpest, and at the same time saddest, letters addressed to him was written by D. R. Lewis, a workman, and secretary of the Aberdare Ivorites. 'We believed', he wrote, 'that when we should have the vote and a second member for the borough, we should have a Welshman—a Welshman from Aberdare, and a nonconformist of advanced political views; but to our disappointment, behold the one we regarded as most suitable turning his back, and supporting an Englishman instead of a Welshman, a churchman instead of a nonconformist . . .'.¹⁵² Moreover, this disillusionment on the score of nonconformity breached other buttresses in his popularity among the working classes, and encouraged the creation of attitudes hostile to him on purely working-class issues. It was remembered against him that he had supported Bruce and, by implication, the masters in the strike of 1857, that the Fothergill Truck shop which Price claimed to have closed in 1852 still functioned until its closing became a condition of the candidature of Fothergill in 1867.¹⁵³ More seriously than even these, Price and the workers could not see eye to eye on the question of inspection and the double shift which soon agitated the coalfield.¹⁵⁴ D. R. Lewis, writing in February, summed up the disappointment which was universally felt at the support which Price had consistently given to Nixon and the other masters in their efforts to compel the colliers to adopt the double shift method of working. They had heard with deep regret 'that the *Defender* of the workmen—Dr. Price—the only person whom we

¹⁵¹ *Baner ac Amserau Cymru*, 4 September 1867.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 5 July 1867 (translated). Note that this was written when the candidature of Richard was only rumoured. Later letters are more specific and condemnatory.

¹⁵³ For references see my article in *Journal Modern History*, XXXIII (1961), 270–86.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 278–80, recounts the development of this situation in brief.

could look to for support in the present difficult situation, had turned his back, and was supporting a system which is of necessity destructive of the workers' health and creative of a social plague in their midst. The sight of a name so well known among the workers of the country printed on such a black page as Nixon's "Treachery of the Worker" seared into our hearts like balls of molten lead'.¹⁵⁵ This was a bitter attack—the ironic reference to Nixon's pamphlet recalled Dr. Price's defence of the Welsh people against the Treachery of the Blue Books of 1846—and Price was clearly hurt. The colliers were disregarding completely the efforts he was currently making to bring masters and men together in a harmonious relationship reflecting the economic harmony which, theoretically, already and of necessity bound them together. He reminded them, in his reply to these attacks, of his appeal in *Seren Cymru* for a statement of their views on the double shift,¹⁵⁶ and informed them that he had translated the letters he had received and had taken them to London where he had placed them before the country's leading men. Despite all these efforts, despite his past record of service, he was being attacked in a mean, unmanly, and dastardly fashion.¹⁵⁷ Nevertheless, the men persisted in their campaign against the double shift and in favour of their own version of mines inspection without him. They still availed themselves of his expertise,¹⁵⁸ but the aims of the campaign were determined by, and its direction entrusted to, representatives of the workmen. In fact, even as the decisions of the nonconformists were being made independently of their one-time *doyen*, so, too, in the industrial and social affairs of the constituency the newly enfranchised were rejecting their old leader, making their own decisions and creating their own independent organizations. In the general election of 1868, it was not only Price's candidate, Bruce, whom they rejected, but Dr. Price as well.

These conclusions are supported by a comparison of the voting behaviour in the two sides of the constituency on polling day, 11 November 1868. The formal declaration of the poll gave the following figures: Henry Richard 11,683; Richard Fothergill 7,139;

¹⁵⁵ *Seren Cymru*, 28 February 1868. The reference is to the pamphlet published by Nixon consisting of his original letters advocating the double shift in the *Mining Journal* (1867), pp. 787 and 794, his correspondence with Lord Kinnaird (chairman of the last Mines Commission), with letters of support from industrialists, inspectors of mines, engineers, agents, and Dr. Price. See John Nixon, *The Single Shift System the Cause of Double the Loss of Life* (Cardiff, 1867).

¹⁵⁶ *Seren Cymru*, 20 December 1867.

¹⁵⁷ *Seren Cymru*, 6 March 1868.

¹⁵⁸ He revised their pamphlet *Double and Single Shift Working Compared* (Aberdare, 1868) for a second edition. *Seren Cymru*, 27 March 1868.

and H. A. Bruce 5,776.¹⁵⁹ In both valleys Richard headed the poll with substantially the same proportion of votes—in Merthyr 46 per cent, in Aberdare 49 per cent—but with a higher majority over Fothergill in Merthyr than in Aberdare.¹⁶⁰ Clearly, the contest had been for the second seat, and when we study the distribution of the support being given to the two candidates for this seat, several interesting conclusions emerge.¹⁶¹ Thus, we see that Fothergill's majority over Bruce in Merthyr was only 160 in a poll of 13,329, but that in Aberdare it amounted to 1,656 in a poll of 11,446. The explanation for this is two-fold. In the first place it is a reflection of the distribution of the 'interests' of the two men in the constituency. A close analysis of the returns from the individual booths in Merthyr substantiates this. Thus, Bruce polled more than Fothergill in those areas most dependent upon the Dowlais Iron Company, of which he was the senior trustee, that is, in Dowlais and Pen-y-darren, Vaynor, and Georgetown. Fothergill polled most heavily in Abercanaid, Troed-y-rhiw, and the town of Merthyr itself—in the two former places because they were beholden to him, and in Merthyr because he may very well have benefited from an anti-Dowlais vote. In Aberdare the result was determined by more 'political' considerations. Here, Fothergill's power was in any case irresistible, but the margin of his victory over Bruce reflected not merely his industrial power, and almost certainly not his popularity, but rather the determination of the Aberdare colliers to be rid of a member in whom they had no confidence. It is this second reason which is the important one in any assessment of the role of Dr. Price. For although it required no prescience to foresee that once Fothergill was brought forward he could scarcely fail to gain the seat, it could not have been foreseen that this action would make it easier for working-class opinion to crystallize so solidly against Bruce.

¹⁵⁹ *Aberdare Times*, 21 November 1868.

¹⁶⁰ Votes cast for each candidate in Merthyr and Aberdare:

Merthyr	..	Richard	..	6,093	or	46 %
		Fothergill	..	3,698	or	28 %
		Bruce	..	3,538	or	26 %
		Total	..	13,329		
Aberdare	..	Richard	..	5,472	or	49 %
		Fothergill	..	3,815	or	33 %
		Bruce	..	2,159	or	18 %
		Total	..	11,446		

These figures are based on the Nonconformist Committee's hourly reports. See *Merthyr Express*, 21 November 1868.

¹⁶¹ The Bruce Committee returns from individual polling booths in the Merthyr parish are to be found in *Merthyr Express*, 21 November 1868.

The election of 1868 marked clearly the crisis in the political influence and career of Thomas Price both in the constituency and in the country at large. He never quite recovered his old authority in as comprehensive a way as before; indeed, he seems never to have sought thereafter to do so. If he had been in error in refusing to place himself where his past career proclaimed him to belong, at the head of the political nonconformity of the Liberationist type in the constituency, he never admitted his mistake. But this study of his developing career has shown that his decisions in 1868 were less surprising than at the time they had seemed. For there is a basic consistency in his political views and actions up to the election: his failure lay in his inability to adapt them to the new conditions created by the Reform Act of 1867. This is most apparent in his relations with the working classes. Here, he refused to see that in the contingencies of a protracted general election campaign the loyalties of the newly enfranchised would not of necessity be given to those middle-class leaders by whose efforts their enfranchisement had largely been won. It was apparent, too, in his relations with nonconformity. Here, what is significant is that when the time of decision came it was local loyalties and traditions rather than 'national' obligation which determined his course of action. Not only Dr. Price, in fact, but political nonconformity as a whole, had reached a crisis in its development. To succeed in the future it could no longer assume a necessary congruity between its aims and those of the bulk of its working-class adherents, and, above all, it would need to create a new kind of political organization to replace the old.

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