

A Radical in Wales

Alfred A. Walton and Mid-Victorian Welsh Popular Radicalism¹

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In recent decades, historians of Victorian radicalism have turned their attention to the local and regional dimensions of popular political movements. This approach is entirely justified since the city was 'an independent political unit with its own internal consistency and primary political drive'.² With some modification, the same holds true for the region as a unit of political activity.³ Yet despite the importance of specific local circumstances, the major reforming agitations of the Victorian era cannot be understood without reference to their Britain-wide dimension. It was the identity of being a collective actor on the national stage that gave coherence and stimulation to radical initiatives all over the country. As John Belchem pointed out, 'the image and identity of the national whole was always more important than the sum of the local parts'.⁴

As most participants in the scholarly debate acknowledge, it would amount to stale academism to force a decision for one side of the argument or the other. In practical politics, both levels of activity were closely intertwined and mutually enforcing. However, the extent and the success of the interaction of the different levels varied considerably. If small places in the 'provinces' were to be connected to radical movements of national importance, high individual commitment and mere chance played an important part. Not many small towns in the country could muster the personnel necessary to maintain and expand contacts to political movements on the national stage. One of the places favoured in this respect was Brecon in South Wales. It was here that Alfred Armstrong Walton settled in the 1860s.

Walton (1816-1883) is hardly known today but among popular radicals of the 1860s and 1870s he enjoyed a certain reputation as a prolific writer and a tireless organiser. He was one of the ubiquitous radical propagandists whose activities bridged the gap between the end of Chartism in the late 1840s and the advent of socialism in the 1880s. Never one of the 'big names' in popular radicalism, his was a secure place among the so-called 'middle-rank or second-

¹ For valuable comments on this article I am very much indebted to Ute Schneider, Ian Bryan, Scott T. Cairns and John M. Dunlop. I also owe thanks to Tony Mason for guiding my first steps of research into the life and political career of Alfred A. Walton.

² Derek Fraser, *Urban Politics in Victorian England: The Structure of Politics in Victorian Cities* (Leicester, 1976), p. 284.

³ For Wales, see Ryland Wallace, *Organise! Organise! Organise! A Study of Reform Agitations in Wales, 1840-1886* (Cardiff, 1991).

⁴ John C. Belchem, *Popular Radicalism in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London, 1996), p. 5.

line leaders and activists⁵ who formed the indispensable bed-rock of all sorts of reforming movements. Readers of Karl Marx may still encounter his name today: Walton's book on the *Landed Tenures of Great Britain & Ireland* (1865)⁶ became one of the numerous sources for the description of the British land system in vol. 3 of *Capital*.⁷

Walton was not Welsh - he was an Englishman who only came to Wales in 1861 when he was a clerk to the famous architect, George Gilbert Scott, in the restoration of Brecon Priory Church. After also assisting Scott in the erection of the new Christ's College in Brecon, Walton decided to stay, married and set up his own business in the building trade. The 1871 census mentions him living with his wife, his brother-in-law, his sister-in-law and his niece (all born in Brecon) on Priory Hill.⁸ Here, then, was a political activist who came from 'outside' and already had established a reputation and personal contacts in the radical movement. Although his organisational skills were to have a notable impact on Welsh political radicalism, Walton always remained closely integrated into the wider British reforming context, both its network of popular radical organisations and the nation-wide exchange of political and social ideas. His career shows that despite the importance of local concerns, radical issues transcended the borders of town, region and, in the last resort, even country.

1. Who was Alfred Armstrong Walton?

Walton was born the son of a builder near Hexham (Northumberland) in 1816.⁹ His early years are relatively obscure. His father died when he was still young, and Alfred worked in building and farming before he went to Newcastle to become a stonemason's apprentice. He left Newcastle in 1837 for Leeds and London where he found employment with large building firms. His rise to a higher social position could serve as a case-study of the typical self-improving artisan in Victorian Britain; in 1844, Walton used his savings to become articled in an architect's office. If we are to believe a later newspaper account of his life, he went on to become 'connected with many of the principal public buildings of the metropolis', such as the Houses of Parliament, the British Museum and the Lincoln's Inn Law Courts.¹⁰ The last of his London engagements, with George Gilbert Scott, prompted his move to Brecon.

⁵ Owen R. Ashton, *W. E. Adams: Chartist, Radical and Journalist (1832-1906)*. 'An Honour to the Fourth Estate' (Whitley Bay, 1991), pp. 1-2.

⁶ Alfred A. Walton, *History of the Landed Tenures of Great Britain & Ireland from the Norman Conquest to the Present Time, dedicated to the People of the United Kingdom* (London, 1865).

⁷ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 3 (London, 1984), pp. 620-621.

⁸ For this information I am grateful to C. Price of Powys County Library.

⁹ A brief biography with Walton's portrait can be found in *The Bee-Hive*, 30 January 1875, pp. 1-2. See also Joyce M. Bellamy and John Saville (eds.), *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, vol. 10 (London, Basingstoke, 2000), pp. 213-18. Unless indicated otherwise, biographical details are taken from these accounts.

¹⁰ *Bee-Hive*, 30 January 1875, p. 2.

Little is known about Walton's building operations in the Welsh town. In his own description, Walton appears as 'architect', 'surveyor' or simply as 'Gentleman'.¹¹ In any case, he seems to have taken a keen interest in the public works carried out in Brecon, perhaps occasionally acting as a surveyor for the town council.¹² Better documented than Walton's professional career are his political activities and his social ideas. He first rose to some prominence in London during the later stages of Chartism as one of the leading spirits in the National Association of Organised Trades (NAOT), founded in October 1848. This association tried to induce trade unionists into political activism, hoping to revive the ailing Chartist campaign. If any single concern can be marked out as the centre-piece of Walton's life-long political commitment, it is already apparent in this early activism - his interest in the land question. Like many agitators on the Chartist left, Walton wanted to complement the political demands of the Charter with a comprehensive measure of social reform. But he showed hardly any interest in the ideal of a social republic, so dear to many left-wing Chartists. Instead, he concentrated on the traditional radical panacea of redistribution of the soil, a measure supposed to break the influence of the landowning classes and to provide employment and food to the poor.¹³ He not only pressed a scheme for 'home colonisation' in the NAOT but went on to write a thoroughly researched indictment of the British landholding system, the *History of the Landed Tenures of Great Britain & Ireland*. By the time he had completed this book in 1865, he had developed his land-reform schemes. In a personal blend of Owenite and O'Brienite ideas, he advocated the nationalisation of the soil, calling for the State to acquire the land by paying a compensation to the present owners. This compensation was a concession supposed to ensure a smooth transition to the new land system;¹⁴ in fact, Walton was convinced that the land had been stolen from the people from Norman times onwards, and might be returned to the rightful owners by the simple device of a parliamentary Act.¹⁵ After completion of land nationalisation, the present 'labyrinth of taxation' was to be abolished and to be replaced by a single tax to be derived from the land, restoring the alleged practice of Anglo-Saxon times, when 'the entire revenue [was] raised from the land'.¹⁶ Thus, Walton envisaged a complete transformation of the economic and social foundations of British political life, since land nationalisation - besides alleviating poverty - would break the hold of the landowning classes on political power. With these far-reaching schemes, Walton might have become an ardent revolutionist but in politics, he always remained a sober pragmatist. Significantly, when two land reform organisations were set up in London in 1869, he did not join the Land and Labour League, which advocated the immediate nationalisation of the land, but the more moderate Land Tenure

¹¹ PRO BT 31/1413/4075 (United London and Provincial Co-operative Building Company Ltd., 1868: 'surveyor'); PRO BT 31/1161/2475c (Industrial Newspaper Company Ltd., 1865: 'Gentleman').

¹² *Brecon Journal and County Advertiser*, 30 March 1867 and 30 November 1867.

¹³ John C. Belchem, 'Chartism and the Trades, 1848-1850', *English Historical Review*, 98 (1983), 558-87. For a statement of his ideas at this time, Walton, *An Appeal to All Trade Societies on the Necessity for a National Organisation of Trades for the Industrial, Social, and Political Emancipation of Labour* (London, 1848).

¹⁴ *The Friend of the People*, 17 May 1851, p. 198 (Walton, 'The Land National Property').

¹⁵ Walton, *History*, p. 116.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 25 and 4.

Reform Association (LTRA). It was founded by John Stuart Mill to unite working-class and middle-class reformers behind a platform calling for 'Free Trade in Land'.¹⁷ This fell far short of Walton's aims, but he explained that 'we who remain steadfast to the principle of collective property in land, should at the same time show ourselves practical men by uniting with and in every way aiding those who may not yet have advanced so far as us in this direction'. He therefore welcomed the LTRA as a 'step in the right direction'; but since he did not accept its objectives as 'a final settlement of the land question', he continued to see land nationalisation as the only true remedy for all social and political problems.¹⁸

In order to propagate his ideas, Walton produced a ceaseless flow of newspaper contributions, writing for trade journals as well as local papers and the radical press. In 1869 he admitted that he had 'been "pegging away" for more than a quarter of a century in any paper or periodical I could get into'.¹⁹ Moreover, he seems to have become an early member of the O'Brienite National Reform League (NRL) when it was founded in 1849 to advocate Bronterre O'Brien's ideas of social and land reform.²⁰ But this was not the end to his commitments. Although almost complete darkness surrounds Walton's activities in the 1850s - the politically quiet decade after the decline of the Chartist movement - there seems to have been no reining in of his energies when he had settled in Brecon. During the 1860s, we find his name in connection with almost every major radical or working-class enterprise in the country. Apart from the LTRA, he joined the Reform League, the International Working Men's Association and several co-operative schemes, spoke at the 1869 Trades' Union Congress, became involved in parliamentary contests, and was constantly writing, posting a letter to some paper almost every week. This close integration into the wider British reforming context was bound to shape Walton's activities in Wales.

II. National Politics in a Local Context

Walton seems to have adapted to the local political scene easily. By 1865 he was in a position to decline an invitation 'from several of the burgesses of Brecon' to stand for the town council.²¹ A year later, on 1 November 1866, he was finally elected, serving on the town council until his regular turn for leaving came in October 1869.²² For an artisan who had 'risen from the ranks', the town council offered a welcome opportunity to prove himself a practical man. Making good use of his professional experience, Walton showed particular interest in any issue connected to building works, be it the paving of roads, the erection of public buildings, the improvement of the drainage system or the question of

¹⁷ Margot Finn, *After Chartism. Class and nation in English radical politics, 1848-1874* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 267-271.

¹⁸ *Bee-Hive*, 30 October 1869, p. 7 (Walton, 'The Land Question').

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Alfred Plummer, *Bronterre: A Political Biography of Bronterre O'Brien 1804-1864* (London, 1971).

²¹ *Brecon Journal and County Advertiser*, 28 October 1865, p. 1 (letter to the editor by Walton).

²² *Brecon County Times*, 16 October 1869, p. 4.

better rail-links between Brecon and London.²³ He remained interested in local issues after leaving the town council; during the small-pox epidemic in 1871 he pioneered the introduction of dry ash closets which were supposed to improve household economy and sanitation.²⁴

But significantly, given an opportunity, Walton would show that he viewed local concerns in a wider context. When the wealthy Nottingham hosiery manufacturer and future Liberal M.P. for Bristol, Samuel Morley, contributed £1,000 to the erection of the Congregational Memorial College in Brecon, Walton praised Morley's liberality. At the same time he linked the project to the national debate on education by pointing out that 'the whole subject of national education would shortly have to be taken up and settled both by the country and the legislature', since individual initiatives were insufficient to achieve 'the proper education and training of the youth of the country'.²⁵ To Walton, the lack of education was an issue that could not be solved in a local context. In his view, the establishment of a comprehensive system of education required the co-ordinating hand of national government.

Within Brecon politics, Walton joined forces with the liberal-radical elements. Although we do not know the names of the 'burgesses' who urged him to stand for the town council, we may assume that they were his political friends from the Brecon branch of the Reform League. Walton's involvement with this association offers the most striking demonstration of the close interaction between national and local reform politics, and of the extent of Walton's personal commitment. The Reform League was founded in London in 1865 in order to organise a campaign for the extension of the suffrage throughout Britain. Originally, it called for a universal franchise, which was to give the vote to every adult person, but due to internal differences and strategic considerations, the demand was scaled down to a manhood suffrage for every man who fulfilled certain criteria of respectability and political responsibility.²⁶ Although the impact of the Reform League on the passing of the 1867 Reform Act is disputed among historians,²⁷ the big reform demonstrations of 1866 and 1867, one of them resulting in the breaking of the Hyde Park railings, exerted an important hold on the political imagination of succeeding generations of radicals, symbolizing the political power of the people. The wider influence and success of the Reform League depended on the willingness of individual reformers in local political arenas to establish branches which would support the central organisation in London. When a Brecon branch was founded in the autumn of 1865, it certainly met with favourable circumstances. Two by-elections coming up in the borough in 1866 excited a

²³ E. g. *Brecon Journal and County Advertiser*, 30 March 1867 and 6 July 1867.

²⁴ *Brecon County Times*, 23 September 1871, p. 3.

²⁵ *Brecon Journal and County Advertiser*, 8 June 1867, p. 1. Cf. Edwin Hodder, *Life of Samuel Morley* (London, 1888), p. 227. Forster's Education Act of 1870 did not satisfy Walton's call for a comprehensive scheme of national education; see his contribution to the *Bee-Hive*, 23 December 1871, pp. 2-3.

²⁶ Aldon D. Bell, *The Reform League, from its origins to the passing into law of the Reform Act of 1867* (DPhil Oxford, 1960).

²⁷ Contrasting accounts can be found in Royden Harrison, *Before the Socialists. Studies in Labour and Politics 1861-1881* (London and Toronto, 1965), and Maurice Cowling, *1867. Disraeli, Gladstone, and Revolution. The Passing of the Second Reform Bill* (Cambridge, 1967).

general interest in politics, which could not be but supportive to reforming initiatives. Nevertheless, the establishment and longevity of the branch (it only dissolved in the latter months of 1868, more than a year after suffrage extension had been granted by parliament) can be fundamentally attributed to the commitment of Alfred Walton. Most branches in Wales benefitted from a close connection between industrial communities and local reforming impulses.²⁸ The same was not the case in Brecon; no trade societies existed,²⁹ and it was Walton's ceaseless energy which kept the branch in existence. He chaired most of its meetings, corresponded with the national body in London and sent reports on branch-meetings to the press.³⁰ He also represented the branch outside Brecon; he took part in a big reform demonstration in Newport on 24 September 1866,³¹ and he supported the activities of the Merthyr branch.³² He even broached the idea of a district organisation of the Reform League for Southern Wales,³³ but this suggestion did not bear fruit. Walton himself deplored the difficulties of uniting reformers of different opinions behind the platform of manhood suffrage,³⁴ but disagreements over the extent of branch autonomy from the London body may also have played their part in the failure of the district initiative.³⁵

Unfortunately, no membership list of the Brecon branch of the Reform League has survived. Calculating from repeated reports in the press about new members joining, about 40-70 people may have enrolled. But such numbers are notoriously unreliable, involve a large amount of guess-work, and in any case they tell next to nothing about the *active* membership of the association. The only names we know are those of the leading figures. They confirm a well-known feature of Welsh radicalism: the high degree of political activism among nonconformist ministers and professional people.³⁶ In connection with the branch, we find the Revd. H. Williams and the Revd. H. Griffiths, as well as Professors John Morris and Roberts of Brecon Independent College, the former its principal. Moreover, Dr. C. H. James from Merthyr occasionally assisted the Brecon branch as a guest lecturer.³⁷

During his travels to Welsh reform gatherings, Walton also established links with further radicals inside and outside Wales. It is most likely that the anonymous Merthyr 'Pastor of a Christian congregation' who in 1873 named Walton as a possible candidate for Parliament, was the well-known Welsh

²⁸ For the organisation of the Reform League in Wales see Wallace, *Organise!*, pp. 107-8.

²⁹ Report of Brecon (1868), Reform League Papers, Howell Collection, Bishopsgate Institute, London.

³⁰ For the Brecon branch of the Reform League and Walton's 'unusual significance' in its affairs Wallace, *Organise!*, pp. 107-9.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 110; George Howell to Walton, 15 September 1866, Howell Collection, Bishopsgate Institute, London.

³² *Brecon County Times*, 12 September 1868, p. 4.

³³ *Brecon Journal and County Advertiser*, 12 January 1867, p. 1.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 1 December 1866, p. 1 (letter to the editor by Walton).

³⁵ Wallace, *Organise!*, p. 112.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 115-6; Kenneth O. Morgan, *Wales in British politics, 1868-1922* (Cardiff, 3rd ed. 1980), pp. 14-5.

³⁷ *Brecon County Times*, 12 September 1868, p. 4; *Brecon Journal and County Advertiser*, 9 March 1867, 6 April 1867 and 24 November 1866; Wallace, *Organise!*, p. 116.

radical T. D. Matthias (1823-1904), who had moved to Merthyr Tydfil in 1868.³⁸ In addition, Walton became acquainted with officials of the Reform League in London, frequently corresponding with the general secretary of the central body, George Howell.³⁹ Another link to the metropolitan movement was provided by George Mantle, an itinerant lecturer dispatched by the Reform League to support and encourage reforming impulses in Wales.⁴⁰

In fact, Walton himself linked Welsh and metropolitan radicalism. He attended some of the most important reform demonstrations in London and reported back to the branch.⁴¹ But he also travelled to the metropolis on other concerns. For example, a scheme to which he was particularly committed was the establishment of a co-operative building society run solely by working men. In order to get support for this enterprise, he went to London several times, spoke to the leaders of the great amalgamated unions and propagated the idea in their trade journals.⁴² George Howell was supportive, as was the leading co-operator, George Jacob Holyoake, who advocated the idea in his *Social Economist*.⁴³ Walton's initiative resulted in the establishment of the United London and Provincial Co-operative Building Company - the very name an indication of the will to link metropolitan and 'provincial' co-operators.⁴⁴ Both, the veteran co-operator, Thomas Hughes, and the young labour politician, Henry Broadhurst, became involved in the company, while Walton visited Bristol, Liverpool, Birmingham and Manchester to rouse up support.⁴⁵ Middle-class radicals and politicians attended or supported public meetings in the formation period of the company, most notably Walter Morrison, Sir Henry Hoare, John Baxter Langley, Auberon Herbert and John Stuart Mill.⁴⁶ Yet despite a promising start the company never managed to gather enough capital to carry out the intended building operations profitably and had to be wound up after only three years in existence. Still, the attempt provided Walton with an even wider range of personal acquaintances in London who might become useful partners for further political collaboration. The building society scheme certainly made Walton well-known in co-operative circles, securing him an invitation to the Arrangements Committee of the first Co-operative Congress, which he attended in 1869 and where he supported the resolution to establish a co-operative bank to be funded by trade and benefit societies.⁴⁷ In the long run, however, Walton envisaged a much more ambitious scheme: In order to finance co-operative enterprises, he

³⁸ *Bee-Hive*, 10 May 1873, p. 3 (letter to the editor); Bellamy and Saville (eds.), *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, vol. 7, pp. 178-182.

³⁹ Fred M. Leventhal, *Respectable Radical: George Howell and Victorian Working Class Politics* (London, 1971).

⁴⁰ *Brecon Journal and County Advertiser*, 24 November 1866; Wallace, *Organise!*, pp. 111, 114-5.

⁴¹ *Brecon Journal and County Advertiser*, 9 March 1867, p. 1.

⁴² *Bee-Hive*, 30 November 1867, p. 5; *Carpenters and Joiners Monthly Report*, January 1868, pp. 56-8; *Bricklayers' Trade Circular*, 1 February 1868, pp. 751-2.

⁴³ George Howell, Diary, entry of 1 January 1868, Howell Collection, Bishopsgate Institute, London; *The Social Economist*, 1 March 1868, p. 3.

⁴⁴ PRO BT 13/1413/4075 (registration files of the company).

⁴⁵ Henry Broadhurst, *The Story of his Life from a Stonemason's Bench to the Treasury Bench told by Himself* (London, 1901), pp. 48, 50-1; *Bee-Hive*, 2 January 1869, p. 7.

⁴⁶ *Bee-Hive*, 6 June 1868, p. 1.

⁴⁷ J. M. Ludlow (ed.), *Proceedings of the Co-operative Congress held in London, at the Theatre of the Society of Arts, May 31st, and June 1st, 2nd, & 3rd, 1869* [London, 1869], pp. 33 and 62.

called for a credit system 'guaranteed by the State, based upon a wealth or property security' and operated by issuing labour notes.⁴⁸

These suggestions were clearly modelled on Robert Owen's idea of labour notes, but they also recalled Bronterre O'Brien's demands for a system of national credit.⁴⁹ Indeed, the O'Brienite National Reform League (NRL) which Walton had joined in the late 1840s was still in existence. It had never managed to become more than a fringe interest in popular radicalism, but its members were very active in the metropolis, sending regular reports of their meetings to the radical press and taking part in most major reform initiatives during the 1860s and 1870s.⁵⁰ Despite his residency in Brecon, Walton had remained a member and was even appointed the NRL's president for 1867. In that position he acquired connections of a very different kind; in August 1867, he made the NRL the first political association to join the International Working Men's Association (IWMA).⁵¹

Much has been written about this so-called 'First International' which was founded after meetings between English and French workmen in 1864. Thanks to the increasing dominance on its General Council of Karl Marx, many commentators have seen the IWMA as the first successful example of organised socialist internationalism. However, for most of its British members, it mainly served as a welcome international support agency to foster the activities of the trade unions, especially during strikes and lock-outs.⁵² Walton certainly used it as an instrument to propagate his pet schemes of co-operation, credit and land reform. Apart from the Executive Committee of the Reform League, he used the IWMA as a distribution channel for his *History of the Landed Tenures*.⁵³ At the association's Lausanne Congress (2-8 September 1867) which Walton attended as a delegate of the NRL, he became a member on the commission on co-operation and mutual credit, taking a leading part in drawing up its report. Its compromise of Proudhonite and O'Brienite positions on public credit was very satisfying to Walton, as he reported to the Finsbury Association of the National Reform League on his return.⁵⁴

Nevertheless, living in Brecon set limits to Walton's activities on the wider British political stage. Although a member of the IWMA's General Council, he attended hardly any of the regular meetings held in the association's headquarters in High Holborn. Nonetheless, his contacts to the IWMA kept Walton involved in

⁴⁸ *The Social Economist*, 1 June 1868, p. 55 (article by Walton on 'Credit and Co-operation'); Walton, *Co-operative Production and Industrial Partnerships* (Birmingham, 1869), p. 7.

⁴⁹ Plummer, *Bronterre*, p. 200.

⁵⁰ Stan Shiple, *Club Life and Socialism in Mid-Victorian London* (Oxford, 1971); Mark Bevir, 'The British Social Democratic Federation 1880-1885. From O'Brienism to Marxism', *International Review of Social History*, 37 (1992), 207-29.

⁵¹ *General Council of the First International - Minutes (1864-1872)*, edited by the Institute of Marxism-Leninism of the C.C., C.P.S.U. (Moscow, 1963-1968), vol. II, pp. 122, 124, 125, 145, 154, 158.

⁵² Henry Collins and Chimen Abramsky, *Karl Marx and the British Labour Movement: Years of the First International* (London, 1965); Detlev Mares, 'Die englischen Publikationsorgane der IAA. Zum Kontext der politischen Tätigkeit von Karl Marx', *MEGA-Studien* (1998), pp. 24-48.

⁵³ Minute Book of the Reform League, Executive Committee, 28 July 1865, Howell Collection, Bishopsgate Institute, London; *General Council of the First International*, vol. 1, p. 119.

⁵⁴ Jacques Freymond (ed.), *La Première Internationale: Recueil de documents* (Geneva, 1962), vol. 1, pp. 135-6, 190-3; *Bee-Hive*, 21 September 1867, pp. 1 and 8.

the national radical scene. In the IWMA, he met well-known metropolitan leaders such as George Odger and William Randal Cremer who were instrumental in shaping the kind of moderate popular radicalism which Walton also favoured. In 1867, he joined both men in attending the Geneva Congress of the International League of Peace and Liberty, held at the same time as the Lausanne Congress of the IWMA.⁵⁵

Reviewing this - far from complete - list of Walton's activities on the 'national' political stage, it is obvious that his commitment did much to bridge the geographical divide between metropolis and 'provinces'. Given the difficulties of preserving a nation-wide presence from a small town in Wales, Walton's success is all the more impressive. From this perspective, his continuous flow of contributions to the radical press appears as an important instrument for maintaining a radical discourse beyond local and regional boundaries. Yet by no means were 'national' concerns only acted out on a wider British (or at least London) stage; general elections proved one occasion where national and local issues were indissolubly linked.

III. Walton and Labour Representation

For reformers of the 1860s, the call for manhood suffrage was at the centre of their agitation throughout the United Kingdom. Unlike most middle-class radicals, though, working-class reformers such as Walton were not content with increasing the number of voters. They also expected franchise extension to facilitate the election of labour candidates to Parliament. The Second Reform Act of 1867 finally created the opening that working-class reformers needed. Although they severely criticised the restrictions of the borough household franchise - Walton called it 'a cheat, a sham, and a delusion'⁵⁶ -, the new Act had enlarged the electorate significantly.⁵⁷ For the first time, working-class candidates could be expected to become serious contenders in parliamentary races. As yet unsettled was the question whether they should run as independent candidates or in collaboration with the Liberal Party. Walton's experiences during the election contests after 1867 revealed the strategic dilemmata of working-class radicals during the late 1860s and 1870s.⁵⁸

During the last local by-election before reform, in 1866, Walton's name had appeared among the Liberal electors of Brecon.⁵⁹ As long as there was no promising chance to establish an independent working men's party, the Liberals seemed to offer the only chance for popular radicals to influence the selection and election of candidates to Parliament. But Walton never was an obliging supporter of the Liberal Party. It is a sign of his pragmatism that he always tried to secure the support of middle-class liberals for the political and social

⁵⁵ Eric Sager, 'The working-class peace movement in Victorian England', *Histoire Sociale - Social History* 12 (1979) 122-44.

⁵⁶ *Brecon Journal and County Advertiser*, 6 April 1867, p. 1.

⁵⁷ For the effect of the 1867 Reform Act on the Welsh electorate see Morgan, *Wales*, pp. 21-2; John Davies, *A History of Wales* (London, 1993), pp. 430-433.

⁵⁸ Detlev Mares, *Auf der Suche nach dem wahren Liberalismus. Demokratische Bewegung und liberale Politik im viktorianischen England* (Bodenheim, 2001), ch. 8.

⁵⁹ *Brecon Journal and County Advertiser*, 20 October 1866.

schemes he advocated. However, he did not share the mistaken view of many popular radicals who credited the Liberal Party with being the driving force behind the passing of the Reform Act. Always much more skeptical about the chances for a true collaboration of working-class radicals and the Liberal Party, Walton saw his suspicions confirmed during the 1868 election contest in Brecon.

The Welsh town was among the smallest parliamentary boroughs in Britain. A parliamentary investigation into each constituency in 1873, initiated by Charles Dilke to prove the necessity of a redistribution of seats, showed that of 6,308 inhabitants, only 822 were registered as electors. Even this figure marked a considerable increase if compared to the period before the Second Reform Act, when not even 300 people had been on the register in Brecon.⁶⁰ Despite the small electorate, the Reform League (acting as an agency for organising the working-class vote during the 1868 elections) chose Brecon as one of the promising places where to run a labour candidate, a decision prompted by a favourable report from their man on the spot - Walton. In keeping with the Reform League's policy of running working-class candidates in collaboration with the Liberals, George Howell suggested the well-known reformer Passmore Edwards as a candidate who might be acceptable to both the local Liberals and the members of the Reform League branch.⁶¹ However, when the local Liberals failed to nominate a candidate for the borough, Walton himself stepped in and started canvassing the borough on a predominantly Gladstonian platform: He stood for Irish Church disestablishment, the reduction of national expenditure and - moving beyond Gladstone - for improvements to the 1867 Reform Act.

Walton quickly found that his initiative was doomed. The Liberals of Brecon would not support him and produced a local gentleman, Hugh Powel Price, as their candidate. Walton was prevailed upon to withdraw from the contest. A report by the Reform League on the situation in Brecon claimed that 'the wire-pulling Lawyers of the Borough' had been dissatisfied with Walton's intention 'to employ no paid agents, and to Canvas [sic] the Electors personally'. In contrast to Walton, Price had the means to pay for election agents. However, the report's authors, W. C. Worley and the ex-Chartist John Bedford Leno, maintained that Walton rather than Price would have been a promising Liberal candidate. Although expecting Price to be returned, they considered his position 'less secure' than Walton's since several of the latter's supporters refused to vote for Price.⁶²

When Walton retired in September 1868, he gave one reason only: like many working-class candidates all over the country, he did not want to risk a Tory success in his borough by splitting the Liberal vote.⁶³ The wider implication of local splits in the Liberal vote might have been a defeat for Gladstone, in whom most popular radicals had invested high hopes. Walton's position therefore

⁶⁰ F. W. S. Craig (ed.), *British Parliamentary Election Results 1832-1885* (London, 1977), p. 498; *Bee-Hive*, 4 October 1873, p. 9.

⁶¹ Howell to Walton, 7 August 1868, Howell Collection, Bishopsgate Institute, London. For a general picture of the 1868 elections in Wales see Morgan, *Wales*, pp. 22-7.

⁶² Report of Brecon (1868), Reform League Papers, Howell Collection, Bishopsgate Institute, London.

⁶³ *Brecon County Times*, 12 September 1868, pp. 4-5.

reflected the general dilemma of working-men candidates: If they did not get the support of the Liberals in their boroughs, but wanted Gladstone to succeed, they had to retire from the elections.

In Walton's case this sacrifice proved to be particularly severe because it turned out to be futile: Despite Walton's withdrawal from the race, the Conservative candidate, Howel Gwyn, was returned by a margin of 15 votes over Price - a confirmation of the Reform League report's claim that Walton might have been better placed to win than Price. However, the Liberals in the borough did not give in easily. Immediately after the election, they organized a petition against Gwyn, charging him with 'bribery, treating, corruption, and undue influence'.⁶⁴ Their move was well-prepared. When Gwyn was unseated on 9 April 1869 and a by-election became necessary, they swiftly presented, as their candidate, Edward Hyde Villiers (Lord Hyde).⁶⁵

Walton who had been involved in the process of unseating Gwyn was bypassed once more when it came to selecting the Liberal candidate for the borough. Walton suggested well-known reformers such as Milner Gibson, Passmore Edwards or Frederic Harrison but he had to discover that with the deferential Brecon middle classes 'nothing would go down but a lord'.⁶⁶ Angrily Walton described the selection process to his 'national' audience, the readers of the *Bee-Hive* newspaper. To him, the Brecon election seemed

simply a repetition of what I have witnessed in other parts of the country in small boroughs, in the midst of the agricultural districts where landlord influence and interest is supreme. The custom is that the moment it is known that an election is to take place the great landlord writes cautiously but significantly to his estate agent, and the candidate retains as many of the lawyers in the town as possible. These men, together with the squirearchy, parsons, and other local satraps, sally forth to operate upon the shopkeepers and tradesmen, who, in their turn, with becoming obsequiousness, operate upon the working men, and every means which money, trickery, and chicanery can devise is put in requisition on both sides to carry the election.

With this verdict, Walton echoed the Reform League report on Brecon from 1868. It had described the town as a 'nomination Borough' that was 'alternately provided for by Lord Camden, Liberal, and Lord Tredegar, Tory'. A Mr Hall, chief agent of Lord Camden, the Mayor of Brecon and 'the Leading Nonconformists or Dissenters' acted as the 'Liberal wire-pullers', while the same position was held for the Tories by D. Thomas, agent to Lord Tredegar, and a local solicitor, Mr Cobb.⁶⁷ Seen in this context, Walton's appearance on the local political scene marked a first and serious challenge to the established practices of

⁶⁴ Ibid., 10 April 1869, p. 4.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 17 April 1869, p. 4.

⁶⁶ *Bee-Hive*, 22 May 1869, p. 7 (letter to the editor by Walton), long quotation *ibid.*

⁶⁷ Report of Brecon (1868), Reform League Papers, Howell Collection, Bishopsgate Institute, London.

Brecon politics and established the claim for labour representation in one of the smallest towns in Britain.

However, in characterising Brecon as a 'little landlord ridden borough'⁶⁸ Walton also tried to explain a fact slightly embarrassing to himself: in the end, after some conversation with the candidate, he himself had supported Lord Hyde for the borough.⁶⁹ To readers of the *Bee-Hive*, who knew Walton from his frequent articles as an outspoken supporter of labour representation, his conduct may have seemed strangely at odds with his usual proclamations. But again Walton had pragmatically given nation-wide concerns priority over a labour candidacy in his locality: For the time being, supporting Gladstone's government seemed more important than running an independent labour candidate against the official Liberal. Nevertheless, Walton pointed out that the middle-class insistence on a lord had 'put the few real liberal men in the awkward position of either dividing the Liberal party, remaining neutral, or voting for Lord Hyde'.⁷⁰ For now, he and his friends had chosen to vote for Hyde, who on 24 April 1869 was returned with a clear majority over the Conservative candidate, Lord Claud Hamilton. Nonetheless, the Brecon disputes indicated that collaboration with the Liberals was quickly turning into a questionable option for many popular radicals.

If Walton lodged any hope at all for Welsh Liberal Associations to open up to working-men candidates in the near future, he must have felt severely disappointed. For decades, the associations - composed mainly of nonconformist ministers, shopkeepers and solicitors - were reluctant to adopt labour candidates.⁷¹ Moreover, the conduct of the first Gladstone government (1868-74) proved disillusioning. After a promising start, it seemed to have moved back to traditional 'class legislation', failing to introduce further extensions to the franchise and criminalising certain activities of trade unions, such as picketing.⁷²

To Walton these experiences meant that 'the old hacknied phrase of not "dividing the liberal party"'⁷³ could not prevail any longer. He now called on labour candidates to force their way into Liberal Associations all over the country. His plan was simple; in boroughs represented by two members, workers were to insist on nominating one of the Liberal candidates. If the local Liberals refused to accept this agreement, Walton argued that the labour candidate was justified to run as an independent against two Liberals even though their electoral prospects might suffer from the resulting split in the Liberal vote.⁷⁴ His contacts on the national political stage provided Walton with the opportunity to act according to this scheme. During the 1869 Trade Union Congress, he spoke on the question of working-class candidates and suggested the founding of a Labour Representation League to assist in the return of

⁶⁸ *Bee-Hive*, 22 May 1869, p. 7 (letter to the editor by Walton).

⁶⁹ *Brecon County Times*, 24 April 1869, p. 4.

⁷⁰ *Bee-Hive*, 22 May 1869, p. 7.

⁷¹ Wallace, *Organise!*, p. 233.

⁷² L. L. Witherell, 'Direct parliamentary representation of labour and the controversy of 1872', *Parliamentary History*, 12 (1993), pp. 143-163.

⁷³ *Bee-Hive*, 22 May 1869, p. 7.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 13 May 1871, p. 14.

working men to Parliament.⁷⁵ His lecture was attended by William Owen, the Staffordshire radical and influential editor of the *Potteries Examiner*. When the Labour Representation League was established in the autumn of 1869, Owen was quick to assist in the founding of a local branch in Stoke-on-Trent in May 1870 and to secure Walton's invitation to become the next labour candidate for the borough.⁷⁶ Obviously Walton did not feel obliged to stay in Brecon when it came to making a point of national importance. In the general elections of 1874 and in a by-election of 1875 he ran as a labour candidate for the two-member constituency of Stoke. However, he lost - in 1874 due to the hostility of the local Liberals who refused to nominate Walton as one of their two candidates. In 1875, Walton had managed to be accepted as the official Liberal candidate, but in the end he did not have a fair chance against his independent opponent, Dr. E. V. Kenealy, who enjoyed great popularity as the solicitor of the so-called Tichborne Claimant.⁷⁷

After these defeats, Walton did not run for Parliament again. However, he had helped to prepare the ground for a new generation of working-class candidates who successfully entered Parliament in cooperation with Liberal Associations. Stoke was an immediate success: In the next general elections of 1880 it returned Henry Broadhurst, one of the leading members of the Labour Representation League and Walton's former colleague in the United London and Provincial Co-operative Building Company.

IV. *Beyond Wales*

Although Walton's attempts at Stoke were supported by Welsh radicals such as T. D. Matthias, his political move to the Potteries indicated his departure from Wales. According to his brief biography which was published in the *Bee-Hive* on occasion of his second Stoke contest, Walton's 'business connections' necessitated his return to London where he took up residence in 1872.⁷⁸ But Walton also seems to have suffered from declining political fortunes in Brecon. In 1871 he failed in the elections both to the newly established School Board and to the town council despite polling 361 and 294 votes respectively.⁷⁹ In any case, the general political climate in Wales - as in many places in Britain - did not favour labour politicians in the 1870s; the scope for independent political

⁷⁵ Walton, *The Necessity for, and the Best Means of Obtaining, a Direct Representation of Labour in Parliament* (Birmingham, 1869).

⁷⁶ Aled Jones, 'Local labour journalism in England and Wales 1843 to 1891, with particular reference to the newspapers of W. Owen and J. T. Morgan' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Warwick, 1981), pp. 233-5.

⁷⁷ Paul Anderton, 'The Liberal Party of Stoke-on-Trent and parliamentary elections 1862-1880. A case study in Liberal-labour relations' (unpublished MA thesis, Keele, 1974); Rohan McWilliam, 'Radicalism and popular culture: The Tichborne case and the politics of "fair play", 1867-1886' in Eugenio Biagini and Alistair Reid (eds.), *Currents of Radicalism. Popular Radicalism, Organised Labour and Party Politics in Britain, 1850-1914* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 44-64.

⁷⁸ *Bee-Hive*, 30 January 1875, pp. 1-2. A scrap book in the Brecon Cathedral Muniments Room mentions Walton as 'late from Brecon' in October 1872. For this information I am indebted to Mr Siân Spink of Comisiwn Brenhinol Henebion yng Nghymru, Aberystwyth.

⁷⁹ *Brecon County Times*, 4 February 1871, p. 4, and 4 November 1871, p. 2.

action alongside the Liberals was even further reduced in a decade of consolidating party organisations, with the Liberals and Conservatives achieving electoral success in many working-class districts even without running labour candidates.⁸⁰

In his London years, Walton remained politically active in a host of associations, being a member on the Council of the Labour Representation League as well as a director in the Artizans', Labourers' and General Dwellings Company. After the Stoke elections, however, he seems to have reduced his overall commitments, and his publications became less frequent. Gradually, he also seems to have lost contact with Brecon. When he died on 7 March 1883, he left money to buy food and clothing for the poor - not in Brecon, but in his native place, Hexham in Northumberland.⁸¹

From the general outline of Walton's political career, it is obvious that he never felt a particular obligation to any distinctly *Welsh* dimension of politics. Brecon and Wales simply became the political base for a committed radical propagandist and organiser when he happened to move there. Despite the wealth of newspaper-articles from Walton's pen, his personality remains clouded behind the surviving reports of his political activism. He emerges as an active, persevering and also ambitious character who spent much time and his own money on reforming schemes and his career in radical politics. His overriding commitment to radical causes meant that Brecon for a while became a noteworthy spot on the map of radical activities. But Walton's political and social ideas had acquired shape early in his life; they did not emanate from any particular local or regional concerns but were directed at the salvation of 'the people', without regard to the place where they were living.

The fact that he was a 'newcomer' certainly helps to account for the lack of a distinctly Welsh outlook in Walton's activities. Significantly, despite his contacts to nonconformist ministers and despite his life-long interest in the education question, he does not seem to have been moved in the least by the Welsh debates over education which had been going on ever since the Blue Book furore of the late 1840s. His concern was the raising of educational standards among the lower layers of the population, not the disputes about the Welsh language. His call for unsectarian national education emerged from the characteristic radical demand for educational equality; this attitude common to most radicals in Victorian Britain does not reveal a particular Welsh influence on Walton's thinking. In fact, it might even be argued that the introduction of a system of national education would prove to be disadvantageous to the survival of the Welsh language as a medium of education. Moreover, although Walton shared the nonconformists' concern for unsectarian education in the new Board Schools established after the 1870 Education Act, he did not become involved in the activities of the Liberation Society which pressed for the disestablishment of the Anglican Church.⁸²

⁸⁰ Wallace, *Organise!*, p. 230; Prys Morgan, 'Early Victorian Wales and its crisis of identity', in Laurence Brockliss and David Eastwood (eds.), *A Union of multiple identities: The British Isles, c. 1750- c. 1850* (Manchester, New York, 1997), pp. 93-109, p. 106.

⁸¹ See the will of A. A. Walton, Principal Registry of the Family Division, London.

⁸² Morgan, *Wales*, pp. 17-8, 29-35.

Nevertheless, the disregard for distinctly Welsh concerns did not diminish Walton's commitment to politics in Wales. During his Brecon years, his encompassing energy made him one of the central figures in any attempt to organize popular political activities on a Welsh basis. With his involvement in the Brecon parliamentary elections, he paved the way for future working-men candidates in Wales, such as Thomas Halliday, who stood for the much more promising constituency of Merthyr Tydfil in 1874. His ideas on land nationalisation prefigured the single-tax scheme of Henry George who was to exert a huge influence on the labour movement of the 1880s and also found followers among Welsh land reformers, such as the Revd. Evan Pan Jones of Mostyn.⁸³

It was no particular problem for this non-Welshman to become accepted as one of the moving spirits of popular radicalism in Wales and to emerge as a strong voice in Brecon and South Wales. The 'emergent new Wales' as 'a land of industrial progress, political involvement and Nonconformist self-awareness'⁸⁴ could absorb an English-born radical much more easily than would have been the case some decades earlier. The period between 1850 and 1870 witnessed a transformation of Welsh political and social culture and the concept of 'Welshness' itself. The new image of Wales as a modern, industrial society dominated by nonconformists opened up the Welsh mind to English influences and invited migrant workers from English towns to the principality. Thus, Walton may have hit on an exceptionally favourable period for political activism in Wales. In any case, his career proves how distinctly Welsh concerns could be transcended and dissolved into a broader, national range of issues.

⁸³ Ibid., pp. 58-9; Peris Jones-Evans, 'Evan Pan Jones - Land Reformer', *Welsh History Review*, 4 (1968), pp. 143-60.

⁸⁴ Morgan, 'Early Victorian Wales', p. 107. For the wider picture see Davies, *History of Wales*, pp. 398-448.