

# Inspecting the ‘extraordinary drain’: emigration and the urban experience in Merthyr Tydfil in the 1860s

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**ABSTRACT:** In the 1860s mass emigration from Merthyr Tydfil made a major impact on the town’s fortunes and developing public sphere. The ‘extraordinary drain’ occasioned much concern and comment and reconfigured ongoing debates about Merthyr’s contemporary condition and future survival. In turn, local power struggles, notions of the town’s interests and emerging civic consciousness influenced interpretations of the nature, causes and meanings of the outflow. Emigration and the ‘urban’ thus interacted tellingly to help shape contemporary mentalities.

By the early 1860s, it was apparent that the fortunes of the largest urban settlement in Wales, Merthyr Tydfil, were changing. As many contemporaries feared and as historians have well established, it was now facing a troubled future or even no future at all.<sup>1</sup> In the first half of the nineteenth century there had been tremendous industrial advance, based around major ironworks at Cyfarthfa, Dowlais, Penydarren and Plymouth, and rapid population growth, to which in-migration from other parts of Wales, mainland Britain, Ireland and further afield had contributed significantly.<sup>2</sup> But from the middle of the century onwards, ‘the survival

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<sup>1</sup> A.J. Croll, *Civilizing the Urban: Popular Culture and Public Space in Merthyr, c. 1870–1914* (Cardiff, 2000), 24–30; I.G. Jones, ‘Merthyr Tydfil – the politics of survival’, in *idem*, *Communities: Essays in the Social History of Victorian Wales* (Llandysul, 1987); *idem*, ‘Merthyr Tydfil in 1850’, in Stewart Williams (ed.), *Glamorgan Historian*, vol. IV (Barry, 1967).

<sup>2</sup> Harold Carter and Sandra Wheatley, *Merthyr Tydfil in 1851: A Study of the Spatial Structure of a Welsh Industrial Town* (Cardiff, 1982); Chris Evans, *The Labyrinth of Flames: Work and Social Conflict in Early Industrial Merthyr Tydfil* (Cardiff, 1993); Gareth Hopkins, ‘Population’, in Merthyr Teachers Centre Group, *Merthyr Tydfil: A Valley Community* (Cowbridge, 1981), 382–4; K. Strange, ‘The condition of the working classes in Merthyr Tydfil, 1840–1850’ (unpublished University of Wales Swansea Ph.D. thesis, 1982), forthcoming as *Merthyr Tydfil: Iron Metropolis – Life in a Welsh Industrial Town*.

of [Merthyr's] industrial base was a recurrent threat to the existence of the town'.<sup>3</sup> For three decades from the end of the 1840s onwards, periods of economic slump, punctuated by severe wage cuts, were the norm. In the same period, protracted negotiations over the renewal of the leases of the Dowlais and Cyfarthfa ironworks raised fears that these mighty works might cease production.<sup>4</sup> In 1859 the Penydarren ironworks closed, followed by Cyfarthfa (temporarily) in the 1870s and Plymouth (permanently) in 1880. The town's population had increased from 7,705 in 1801 to 46,378 in 1851 (and doubled between 1831 and 1851) but thereafter the rate of growth slowed down, the population rising to 49,794 in 1861 and 51,949 in 1871. Between 1871 and 1881 it fell to 48,861 although it increased again to 58,080 in 1891.<sup>5</sup> As a result of its faltering demographic growth, Merthyr's domination of what Andy Croll has termed the 'urban hierarchy of the region' was compromised and lost.<sup>6</sup> Since the early 1850s Merthyr was losing its numerical superiority and influence over its neighbour, Aberdare. By 1871 Cardiff was the largest town in Wales, and Swansea had virtually caught up with Merthyr. Alongside its economic difficulties, as Ieuan Gwynedd Jones has demonstrated, the lack of major public sanitary undertakings threatened the continued existence of life itself in Merthyr.<sup>7</sup> Some contemporaries and recent historians have doubted whether the Merthyr of the first half of the nineteenth century could be called a town because of its lack of judicial and administrative functions and urban facilities and services, its small professional and retail sectors and the fact that Merthyr ironmasters 'were reluctant, evasive civic leaders'.<sup>8</sup> Yet as the work of Croll and Jones shows, the middle decades of the century were formative ones in the long process which saw Merthyr change from a frontier settlement to a self-conscious town.<sup>9</sup> Civic institutions and amenities were established and a civic pride began to emerge, evident in, among other things, the publishing of histories of Merthyr.<sup>10</sup> Crucially, a public sphere also began to develop, aided by the appearance of newspapers which professed to speak in the town's interests.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Jones, 'Merthyr Tydfil – the politics of survival', 240.

<sup>4</sup> *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian*, 24 Jan. 1863; *Merthyr Telegraph*, 7 Apr. 1860, 11 Apr. 1863.

<sup>5</sup> J. Williams, *Digest of Welsh Historical Statistics*, 2 vols. (Cardiff, 1985), vol. I, 63.

<sup>6</sup> Croll, *Civilizing the Urban*, 26–8.

<sup>7</sup> Jones, 'Merthyr Tydfil – the politics of survival'.

<sup>8</sup> Evans, *Labyrinth of Flames*, 145; Jones, 'Merthyr Tydfil in 1850', 32–4.

<sup>9</sup> Croll, *Civilizing the Urban, passim*; Ieuan Gwynedd Jones, 'The Merthyr of Henry Richard', in Glanmor Williams (ed.), *Merthyr Politics: The Making of a Working-Class Tradition* (Cardiff, 1966); *idem*, 'Merthyr Tydfil – the politics of survival'.

<sup>10</sup> W. Edmunds, *Traethawd ar Hanes Plwyf Merthyr* (Aberdare, 1864); C. Wilkins, *The History of Merthyr Tydfil*, 1st edn (Merthyr, 1867).

<sup>11</sup> Croll, *Civilizing the Urban*, 42–3. These include *Telegraph* (1855–81), *Merthyr and Aberdare Times* (1858–59), *Merthyr Star* (1859–72), *Merthyr Express* (commenced 1864), *Y Fellten* (Lightning Bolt) (1868–76) and *Amddiffynydd y Gweithiwr/Workman's Advocate* (1873–75). Newspapers such as the *Aberdare Times*, *Baner ac Amserau Cymru* (The Banner and Times

The ‘facts [that] trace the presages of decline’, as the *Merthyr Telegraph* described it in 1859,<sup>12</sup> and the town’s social and urban conditions were widely discussed in Merthyr’s public sphere in the mid- to late nineteenth century. This article argues that there was another issue that concerned contemporaries in this period, and which has not hitherto attracted the attention of the town’s historians.<sup>13</sup> When in the context of Merthyr *The Times* referred to ‘this extraordinary drain’ in 1863 and the *Merthyr Express* to an ‘immense drain’ eight years later, they had in mind emigration, not water supply or sewage disposal.<sup>14</sup> The *Telegraph* believed that Merthyr’s population growth between 1851 and 1861 was a ‘decided and favourable increase... considering the great drains upon the population by the stoppages at Penydarren, and the inducements of Utah, America and Australia’.<sup>15</sup> In a similarly brave-faced reflection on the 1871 census’ revelation that Merthyr had only grown modestly since 1861, the *Express* declared: ‘Considering that the emigration of the last few years has assumed such proportions as to cause the railway companies to run special emigrant trains from this district it is not surprising that our increase is so small, but that we have any increase at all.’<sup>16</sup>

Mass out-migration was endemic in Merthyr in the mid- and late nineteenth century. Keith Strange has shown that the actual number of migrants and public interest in the subject were high during the 1840s and 1850s, a period which includes, it may be noted, a decade that witnessed rapid population growth.<sup>17</sup> In the 1860s it is likely that even greater numbers left Merthyr and the scale of coverage of the phenomenon grew as its public sphere developed. Many other parts of Britain experienced high rates of emigration at this time whilst for much of the nineteenth century emigration was a much-debated and controversial national issue. Settlement overseas was seen by many, and, not least, by workers themselves, as a solution to economic slumps in industry as it was believed it reduced the labour surplus (which was seen as the basic problem) and thereby caused wages to rise. Emigration was advocated and promoted by a variety of public bodies, civic leaders and trade unionists.<sup>18</sup> In the iron and coal districts of south Wales generally in the 1850s and 1860s, the rhythms of interest in emigration were sharpened by gold rushes

of Wales), the *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian*, the *Cardiff Times*, *Y Gwladgarwr* (The Patriot) and *Seren Cymru* (The Star of Wales) also carried Merthyr news and comment.

<sup>12</sup> *Telegraph*, 23 Feb. 1859.

<sup>13</sup> Exceptions are Bill Jones, ‘“We will give you wings to fly”: emigration societies in Merthyr Tydfil in 1868’, in T.F. Holley (ed.), *Merthyr Historian*, vol. XIII (Merthyr, 2001); Strange, ‘Condition of the working classes’, 950–72.

<sup>14</sup> *Times*, 16 Jun. 1863, reprinted in *Aberdare Times*, 20 Jun. 1863; *Express*, 29 Apr. 1871.

<sup>15</sup> *Telegraph*, 27 Apr. 1861.

<sup>16</sup> *Express*, 29 Apr. 1871.

<sup>17</sup> Strange, ‘Condition of the working classes’, 950–72.

<sup>18</sup> C. Erickson, *American Industry and the European Immigrant, 1860–1885* (Cambridge, MA, 1957); *idem*, ‘The encouragement of emigration by British trade unions’, *Population Studies*, 3 (1949), 248–73; O. Macdonagh, *Emigration in the Victorian Age* (Farnborough, 1973).

in California, Australia and British Columbia; the organized emigration of Church of the Latter Day Saints (Mormon) converts to America; the establishment of the Welsh colony in Patagonia in 1865; and, to the surprise of many contemporaries, the American Civil War.<sup>19</sup> In Merthyr in this period, emigration was a highly public, visible and publicized phenomenon, and the focus of much interest, concern and comment.<sup>20</sup> It generated editorials, reports and letters in most Welsh newspapers of the period, in both Welsh and English. Indeed one of the striking features of contemporary newspaper columns in south Wales in the 1850s and 1860s is the frequency and significant volume of material relating to emigration from the area.

The 'extraordinary drain' from Merthyr begs inspection from many perspectives. Like all migrations, it poses central questions about the patterns and processes involved, including the size, timing and impact of the outflow and the age, occupational and sex profiles, motives and destinations of the migrants. Migration historians have also been keen to assess the influence on the nature of the emigration of the information available.<sup>21</sup> Many features of the nature and impact of emigration from Merthyr in this period are rather vague, although in the context of south Wales generally, a number of scholars have stressed the diverse motives, origins and destinations of the emigrants and the important role the press, emigration agents and other promoters played in encouraging people to move overseas.<sup>22</sup> Migration historians such as Dudley Baines, Colin Pooley and Jean Turnbull, and Brinley Thomas have with differing conclusions explored the relationship between migration and urban growth and decline in Britain in the nineteenth century.<sup>23</sup> It appears that contemporaries were right in believing that the scale of the outflow significantly inhibited Merthyr's demographic growth in the second half of the nineteenth century but discrete studies adopting different approaches

<sup>19</sup> See, for instance, *Baner ac Amserau Cymru*, 25 Jun. 1862.

<sup>20</sup> For a fuller discussion, see B. Jones, 'Raising the Wind': *Emigrating from Wales to the USA in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries* (Cardiff, 2004); A. Conway, 'Welsh emigration to the United States', in D. Fleming and B. Bailyn (eds.), *Dislocation and Emigration: The Social Background of American Immigration*, Perspectives in American History 7 (Cambridge, MA, 1974).

<sup>21</sup> D. Baines, *Emigration from Europe, 1815–1930*, 2nd edn (Cambridge, 1995); C. Pooley and J. Turnbull, *Migration and Mobility in Britain since the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1998); Eric Richards, *Britannia's Children: Emigration from England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland since 1600* (London, 2004).

<sup>22</sup> Conway, 'Welsh emigration to the United States', 244–59; W.R. Johnston, 'The Welsh diaspora: emigrating around the world in the late nineteenth century', *Llafur*, 6, 2 (1993), 50–74; Jones, 'Raising the Wind'; Strange, 'Condition of the working classes'; L. Walker, "'Two jobs for every man": the emigration decision from Wales to New South Wales, 1850–1900', *Australian Studies*, 13, 2 (1998), 99–118.

<sup>23</sup> D. Baines, *Migration in a Mature Economy: Emigration and Internal Migration in England and Wales, 1861–1900* (Cambridge, 1985); Pooley and Turnbull, *Migration and Mobility*; B. Thomas, *Migration and Urban Development* (London, 1972).

to the one taken in this article will be needed to establish the validity of this assumption and the extent to which, if at all, labour supply and wage levels in the town were affected. One tangible effect was that the number of people who left Merthyr eased the chronic housing shortages that had characterized the town in its frontier years whilst vacated unfit dwellings were removed.<sup>24</sup> It is also likely that out-migration had an impact on Welsh-language activity in the town. Mari Williams has suggested that since the 1850s a significant proportion of Dowlais' Welsh-speaking population were leaving.<sup>25</sup>

The scale of the outflow and equally the extent of the comment it aroused also raise questions about how emigration from the town was perceived and understood by contemporaries. This article seeks to increase our understanding of the relationship between 'wholesale emigration'<sup>26</sup> and the urban experience in Merthyr by focusing on the impact of mass emigration on the town's public sphere in the 1860s, a decade of high emigration and changing perceptions of Merthyr. By analysing surviving commentaries in contemporary Welsh- and English-language newspapers it seeks to reveal the public profile of, and discourses on, emigration, and how Merthyr's opinion makers – newspaper editors and reporters, labour leaders and dignitaries – responded to the out-migration and interpreted it. It will be argued that the existence of mass emigration and fears of an even greater outward movement were central influences in debates about the town's contemporary condition, future and possible decline. At the same time the town played an active part in the formation of understandings of emigration.

On Easter Monday 1863 a public procession was held in Merthyr to celebrate the renewal of the lease of the Cyfarthfa ironworks. As in 1860, renewal ensured the works' survival and alleviated the profound fears that had prevailed in the town as negotiations proceeded.<sup>27</sup> However, the *Telegraph* felt compelled to suggest the presence of a ghost at this celebratory feast. In an editorial it commented that it must have been gratifying to the Crawshay family (the owners of Cyfarthfa) to have seen such an orderly and respectable spectacle, but also drew attention to:

other signs more under the surface of things to be seen . . . which also told a tale, and that a different one . . . At the Taff Vale Railway station, just before the procession came around, there was to be seen another procession, not so orderly nor so joyful; a

<sup>24</sup> Evans, *Labyrinth of Flames*, 156–7; *Express*, 30 Apr. 1881.

<sup>25</sup> M. Williams, 'Dowlais', in G. Parry and M.A. Williams (eds.), *The Welsh Language and the 1891 Census* (Cardiff, 1999), 195. For comparison, see S.R. Williams, *Oes y Byd i'r Iaith Gymraeg: Y Gymraeg yn Ardal Ddiwydiannol Sir Fynwy yn y Bedwaredd Ganrif ar Bymtheg* (Cardiff, 1992), 23–4, 26–9. Dowlais is located two miles to the north-east of Merthyr. Although in many respects it developed as a distinct urban settlement during the nineteenth century, it was also regarded as a part of Merthyr.

<sup>26</sup> *Cardiff Times*, 20 Mar. 1869.

<sup>27</sup> *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian*, 17 Jan. 1863, 27 Mar. 1863; *Telegraph*, 7 Apr. 1860, 11 Apr. 1863.

procession of well-built working men, and of poorly dressed women, with children in their arms: and of old men and old women who had come to see for the last time this side of the grave, sons and daughters who had broken the link that bound them to Merthyr, and were about to make another home on the other side of the Atlantic. Congregated before the railway station, were no less than *forty emigrants* bound for America! And these emigrants were not the lees of humanity, the worthless samples, improvident, drunken men and women who might have been spared to advantage; but the cream of the working classes.<sup>28</sup>

The paper continued by maintaining that 'with the Welshman love of country is proverbial, and here he would stay if he saw any reasonable prospect before him'. However, 'he does not, and he acts prudently in leaving while his wherewith... are unimpaired'. It confessed that 'we do not like to see these emigrations... [as] their departure speaks ill for the employers of labour'. Those leaving the town were acting correctly, however, because capital was currently too powerful and labour too weak. The paper acknowledged that emigration was one 'corrective of the evil... as it lessens the number of the workmen, and has a tendency to make employers pay a better wage to those who remain'. But it was not a just corrective because in large industrial undertakings, the 'true principle that should be followed ought to be that each class employed deserves a fair day's wage for a fair day's work'. At that time, the paper insisted that employers were too interested in driving down wages as low as possible.<sup>29</sup>

This editorial encapsulates many of the central tenets of understandings of emigration in mid- to late nineteenth-century Merthyr and some of the major themes of the press coverage of the phenomenon. It also illustrates some of the problems and limitations of the surviving evidence. To begin with, Keith Strange's correct conclusion that it is impossible to calculate the exact scale of the out-migration of the 1840s and 1850s because of the 'total lack of statistical data' applies equally to that of the 1860s.<sup>30</sup> It is also impossible to determine precisely the destinations of the migrants, and the specific size of the outflow to each of those destinations. Consequently there remains a central ambiguity about the 'extraordinary drain' from Merthyr. It is not known how many of those who left were actually emigrants, who went overseas, and how many were internal migrants who headed for the contemporaneously booming colliery towns of the Cynon, Rhondda and Taff Valleys, and for England, especially the iron and steel centres of the north-east. Almost universally, however, contemporaries assumed and implied that those leaving the town were emigrants, the overwhelming majority going to the United States.<sup>31</sup>

Since the total number of out-migrants cannot be ascertained, it is important to bear in mind that contemporaries may have exaggerated

<sup>28</sup> *Telegraph*, 11 Apr. 1863. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>29</sup> *Telegraph*, 11 Apr. 1863. See editorial on 29 Aug. 1863 for a similar exposition.

<sup>30</sup> Strange, 'Condition of the working classes', 950.

<sup>31</sup> *Star*, 17 May 1862, 28 Mar. 1865, 16 May 1868.

the scale of the outflow. But it can be safely concluded that they regarded the numbers involved as being large. The *Telegraph's* italicized emphasis on 'nearly forty' followed by the insertion of an exclamation mark in the editorial quoted above is revealing. Whereas some correspondents used imprecise phrases such as 'a large crowd' or 'a number of', others provided actual numbers, though they hardly form a systematic and reliable record that would allow firm quantitative conclusions about the size of the emigration. Even so, they have indicative value. The *Express* believed that 4,000 people had left Merthyr parish between 1861 and 1871.<sup>32</sup> It was estimated in April 1869 that nearly 200 people had already left Dowlais for America since the beginning of the year, and reported that 160 had left Merthyr for the same place on one Monday the previous month. It is therefore hardly surprising that there were fears that Dowlais would 'become depopulated' and that Merthyr was in 'quite a commotion' because so many families had left.<sup>33</sup> Nor is there little wonder that in March 1868 the *Merthyr Star* advised everyone to see Edward's Panorama, a show that featured songs, anecdotes and views from the United States then playing to packed houses in the Temperance Hall, because 'it would be very interesting to a place like Merthyr, where so many people look forward to the States as their future home'.<sup>34</sup>

The vocabulary and metaphors that local correspondents and newspaper editors writing in both Welsh and English used in their efforts to convey the phenomenon to their readers provide additional evidence that contemporaries perceived they were living in a time of unprecedented interest in emigration as well as one in which large numbers were actually leaving. The use of the word 'drain' has already been noted whilst a characteristic of the written record on emigration from south Wales since at least the early 1850s is the very common usage of English words such as 'mania', 'plague' and 'fever',<sup>35</sup> and the Welsh equivalents of disease-related terms, 'dwymyn', 'haint' and 'clefyd'.<sup>36</sup> Commentators in both languages referred to the 'flood' or the 'tide' of emigration/'y llanw ymfudol' or 'y llifeiriant ymfudiaeth',<sup>37</sup> and insisted that an 'ysbryd ymfudo' had 'wedi meddianu y wlad' (a 'spirit of emigration' was 'possessing' the country).<sup>38</sup> The similarities between the vocabulary often used to interpret the outward flow and that used in reporting cholera visitations are striking. An 1863 editorial referred to people becoming 'infected with the desire to

<sup>32</sup> *Express*, 29 Apr. 1871.

<sup>33</sup> *Baner ac Amserau Cymru*, 27 Mar. 1869; *Telegraph*, 20 Mar. 1869, 17 Apr. 1869; *Cardiff Times*, 20 Mar. 1869.

<sup>34</sup> *Star*, 17 Mar. 1868.

<sup>35</sup> *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian*, 11 Sep. 1852, 22, 29 May 1863; *Express*, 29 Apr. 1871; *Telegraph*, 11 Apr. 1863, 13 May, 17 Jun. 1865.

<sup>36</sup> *Baner ac Amserau Cymru*, 16, 19 Jun. 1869; *Y Fellten*, 1 May 1869; *Seren Cymru*, 1, 8 May 1863.

<sup>37</sup> *Seren Cymru*, 7 Apr. 1865; *Y Fellten*, 18 Sep. 1869.

<sup>38</sup> *Seren Cymru*, 20 Apr. 1866.

emigrate', whilst many believed it 'spread like a contagion, one catching it from another, until the thing has become general'.<sup>39</sup> There is a sense in many of the commentaries that emigration was destined to happen and could not be avoided, and many viewed it as an act of Providence.<sup>40</sup> The reliance on vocabulary derived from the natural world and providential explanations perhaps reinforce the belief then common throughout Britain, that emigration was a 'natural' solution – 'a natural panacea'<sup>41</sup> – to the problems of industrial society.

Evidence of the extraordinary drain that was diminishing Merthyr could be read in the press, and seen and heard on the streets of the town. As Lesley Walker and W. Ross Johnston have shown, like most towns in Britain at the time, Merthyr had its own 'emigration business', which advertised extensively in the local press, whilst numerous local personalities were active promoters of emigration.<sup>42</sup> A number of emigration agents, mainly tradesmen and professionals who doubled up as such, were in business in the town.<sup>43</sup> Public lectures on emigration to various destinations were held frequently.<sup>44</sup> Crowds accompanied emigrants to railway stations, and the public and psychological impact of these processions should not be underestimated. Departure scenes and farewell meetings in Merthyr and Dowlais were extensively reported.<sup>45</sup> As well as consistently carrying reports of mass departures, labour shortages and workmen working out their notice with the intention of emigrating (or sometimes leaving illegally without giving notice), newspapers in the 1860s also continually maintained that even more were contemplating emigration and regularly predicted even greater out-migration. The impression from the coverage is that in the early to mid-1860s the number of people leaving was larger than had been the case in the previous decade and that the outflow in 1868 and 1869 was heavier again.<sup>46</sup> Contemporary commentaries also suggest that an awareness of the cumulative nature of the loss through the decade was sharpening perceptions. In May 1868 an *Express* editorial anticipated departures on an unprecedented scale; even though it might have been thought that enough people had already moved away, 'the yearning to emigrate is as great as ever'.<sup>47</sup> It cannot be ascertained to what extent the press was exaggerating or sensationalizing the scale and impact of the

<sup>39</sup> *Telegraph*, 29 Aug. 1863. See also *Cardiff Times*, 1 May 1869.

<sup>40</sup> *Express*, 16 May 1868.

<sup>41</sup> *Telegraph*, 23 May 1868.

<sup>42</sup> Johnston, 'Welsh diaspora'; Walker, 'Two jobs'.

<sup>43</sup> *Express*, 5 Jun. 1869, 30 Jan. 1875; *Telegraph*, 25 May 1867.

<sup>44</sup> *Y Gwron*, 4 Jun. 1859; *Telegraph*, 19 Nov. 1864; *Express*, 11 Jul. 1868.

<sup>45</sup> *Express*, 26 Aug. 1865; *Y Felften*, 21 Nov. 1868; Jones, 'Raising the Wind', 28–32.

<sup>46</sup> *Baner ac Amserau Cymru*, 25 Jun. 1862, 27 May 1863; *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian*, 17 Apr., 10 Jul., 28 Aug. 1863, 23 May 1868; *Cardiff Times*, 6 Jun. 1868, 20 Mar. 1869; *Express*, 28 Apr. 1865; *Telegraph*, 17 Jul. 1869.

<sup>47</sup> *Express*, 16 May 1868.



emigration. But there is no doubt that in this decade in Merthyr, 'emigration is one of the chief subjects spoken and written about in this age . . . and talk of emigrating and emigration falls on our ears from every direction'.<sup>48</sup>

It is hardly surprising that the scale of the out-migration caused apprehension among Merthyr's employers and public leaders, and there were fears that if the outflow continued there would be insufficient labour left to operate the town's coal mines and ironworks.<sup>49</sup> Emigration forced local commentators to take a position on the matter. It is too simplistic to categorize attitudes as being straightforwardly for or against emigration. Views were nuanced in different ways whilst opinions differed and also changed over time. The *Telegraph* editorial of April 1863 discussed earlier was one of a series of provocative leaders in which the paper since the late 1850s had expressed fears about the town's future. As it told its readers in 1860, 'we are the believers, as many of our readers are aware, in the decline and fall of Merthyr in the scattering, as from Babel's tower, of the men of many tongues, who here have congregated; in the desertion of the place to the primitive aspect it once bore'.<sup>50</sup> The paper's position on this issue is perhaps an example of what Charles Wilkins believed was the paper's 'always vigorous, and often acrimonious action in favour of the town against capitalists and iron and coal owners'.<sup>51</sup> But not everyone believed that in airing its views on this issue the *Telegraph* was acting in the town's best interests. In a rejoinder to an editorial entitled 'The decline of Merthyr' in 1859, a letter from 'A well-wisher to the town of Merthyr' protested that the *Telegraph's* 'professed concern for the prosperity of Merthyr' was in fact 'mischievous meddling' that 'dispirits the men, and its tendency is to greatly injure the trade of Merthyr'.<sup>52</sup> A letter from 'A Cyfarthfa workman' insisted (in either real or feigned semi-literacy) that the paper was 'the gratest enemy we poore pepel have' and that the likely result of its 'flair up leeder, I think they calls it, haboout the downfal o Merthyr' would be that the iron masters would refuse to raise wages and move their works from the town.<sup>53</sup> The *Telegraph's* position contrasts strongly, too, with that of the *Star*, which also professed sympathy with ordinary working people in Merthyr but viewed emigration as an unmixed blessing. It called on the British government to develop Cardiff and Newport as major emigrant ports in order to enable greater numbers to emigrate from the Merthyr area and so that 'if absolutely necessary they can walk there'.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Y Fellten, 6 Mar. 1869. 'Un o'r brif destynmau siarad ac ysgrifenu yr oes hon ydyw ymfudiaeth. Son am ymfudo ac ymfudiaeth a glywir yn disgyn ar ein clustiau o bob cyfeiriad.'

<sup>49</sup> *The Times*, 1 May, 16 Jun. 1863; *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian*, 10 Jul., 28 Aug. 1863.

<sup>50</sup> *Telegraph*, 7 Apr. 1860. See also 23 Feb., 11 Jun. 1859.

<sup>51</sup> C. Wilkins, *The History of Merthyr Tydfil*, 2nd edn (Merthyr, 1908), 448–9.

<sup>52</sup> *Telegraph*, 13 Feb. 1859; *Merthyr and Aberdare Times*, 12 Mar. 1859.

<sup>53</sup> *Merthyr and Aberdare Times*, 5 Mar. 1859.

<sup>54</sup> *Star*, 7 Jan. 1864.

Until the end of the 1860s, most commentators – albeit reluctantly in some cases – saw emigration as necessary and desirable in order to relieve the distress that industrial slumps and wage cuts in the town were creating, and believed that workmen and their families had no choice but to leave. Speeches on the topic in public meetings in the town stressed that emigration was a laudable attempt by workers to seek their own independence and improvement as well as being an instrument for reducing the labour supply and raising the wages of those who remained.<sup>55</sup> Many commentators supported emigration as a solution to economic problems because it was ‘far better than strikes engendering the bitterest and most acrimonious of feelings, and entailing ruin upon those engaged in them’.<sup>56</sup> By the end of the decade, however, more voices, including the *Telegraph* itself, were openly opposing the mass departure of many of the town’s inhabitants. Articles and editorials pointed out that it was hardly in Merthyr’s interests to export skilled labour on a large scale. Skilled workers from the town were helping to develop industrial concerns elsewhere, and these would compete directly with Merthyr enterprises. In April 1869, the *Telegraph* proclaimed that the consequence ‘from a local point of view’ of the ‘excessive course of depletion this district has undergone’ was that ‘we lose our best workmen and our competitors gain their services; and while we suffer they are advantaged’.<sup>57</sup> This argument was being made in the town in the early 1850s but it does not appear to have figured prominently in public life during most of the intervening period. Its vigorous re-emergence undoubtedly reflects growing uneasiness at the size of emigration from Merthyr during the preceding decades, but it also coincided with, and was partly influenced by, workers’ own independent efforts to organize their emigration on an even larger scale. In 1868 two emigration societies (albeit ultimately ineffectual ones) were formed with much publicity within a month of each other, the Cambrian Emigration Society and the Merthyr Tydfil Emigration Society, and there were efforts to establish similar organizations the following year.<sup>58</sup> To several commentators this was an alarming development. As the perhaps significantly named ‘Tydfil’ (in terms of an identification with the town’s interests) declared in August 1868: ‘Emigration is one of the best correctives of a replete condition as regards population . . . but we never have, nor would we, recommend a rash and indiscriminate *stampede*’.<sup>59</sup>

Central to the perceptions of all commentators (and, as we have seen, present in the *Telegraph*’s Cyfarthfa lease editorial in 1863) was the belief

<sup>55</sup> See, for instance, speeches at the foundation meeting of the Merthyr Tydfil Emigration Society. *Express*, 16 May 1868; *Star*, 16 May 1868; *Y Gwladgarwr*, 16 May 1868.

<sup>56</sup> *Express*, 6 Jun. 1868.

<sup>57</sup> *Telegraph*, 24 Apr. 1869. See also ‘Brython’ letter, *Express*, 22 Aug. 1868.

<sup>58</sup> For an account of these societies, see Jones, ‘We will give you wings to fly’.

<sup>59</sup> *Express*, 1 Aug. 1868. See also *Telegraph*, 24 Apr. 1869.

that it was the 'best' workmen who were leaving Merthyr. The town's civic leaders became increasingly afraid that continued extensive emigration would deprive it of their most skilled workers and substitute them with perceived 'inferior' workers who would not benefit the town. Merthyr's 'official' reactions to emigration were thus inextricably linked to perceptions of value, of a hierarchy of inhabitants. This process of classification gains significance in the light of Paul O'Leary's reminder that 'skill' is socially constructed. He shows that in south Wales in this period 'skilled' native workers sought to restrict 'unskilled' Irish migrants' access to knowledge of industrial processes and that 'recruitment policies by management reflected prevailing views about the suitability of certain ethnic groups for specified types of employment'.<sup>60</sup> The majority of commentators expressed delight at the departure of Mormon converts,<sup>61</sup> whilst in April 1863 the *Telegraph* made unequivocally explicit its fears about who would replace 'our best men and our most careful housewives'. Extensive emigration was 'ominous of an Irish flood that shall replace and lower still the tone of the neighbourhood'.<sup>62</sup> In an intriguing case of diverging perceptions, at the very same time that newspapers in south Wales lamented the loss of what it perceived as its 'best' people, some Welsh commentators across the Atlantic complained that new Welsh arrivals were the 'scum of the works of Wales'. Welshmen and Welshwomen from Merthyr, Dowlais and other places in south Wales were accused of making the morals of Scranton, Pennsylvania, 'second to those of Sodom'.<sup>63</sup>

Emigration both influenced, and was shaped by, the wider process by which parties sought to redefine their interests as those of the town. Throughout the 1860s, editorials, letters and speeches put the blame for high emigration from the town squarely on the shoulders of the large employers, effectively the ironmasters, the greater number of whom were, according to the *Telegraph*, 'hard, selfish, tyrannical, and, as a natural result, the men feel no attachment to them'.<sup>64</sup> *The Star* and *Y Fellten*, the papers most sympathetic to labour interests, were particularly condemnatory. The former sought to shame ironmasters in Merthyr by comparing the higher wages that might be secured in America for the same work.<sup>65</sup> Emigration became a critique of the manner in which capital operated in Merthyr. In allegedly not paying workmen a legitimate wage (though the proper

<sup>60</sup> P. O'Leary, 'Skill and workplace in an industrial economy: the Irish in South Wales', in J. Belchem and K. Tenfelde (eds.), *Irish and Polish Migration in Comparative Perspective* (Essen, 2003).

<sup>61</sup> *Telegraph*, 19 Sep. 1863; *Express*, 16 May 1868.

<sup>62</sup> *Telegraph*, 11 Apr. 1863.

<sup>63</sup> *Y Drych*, 28 Jul. 1870: 'scum gweithfeydd Cymru . . . yn ail i Sodom'. See also W.D. Jones, *Wales in America: Scranton and the Welsh, 1860–1920* (Cardiff, 1993), 203–22.

<sup>64</sup> *Telegraph*, 29 Aug. 1863; *Express*, 16 May 1868.

<sup>65</sup> *Star*, 6 Jun., 25 Apr., 4 Aug. 1863, 24 Mar. 1868; *Y Fellten*, 6 Mar., 10 Apr. 1869.

level of that wage was much disputed) and not showing working people the respect and sympathy they deserved, the ironmasters were acting against the town's interests. The perception that the ironmasters were neglecting their responsibilities as civic leaders was a constant theme in Merthyr's history during the first half of the nineteenth century.<sup>66</sup> Understandings of emigration from the town were thus embedded in the efforts of the professional and commercial middle class to grasp control from the hands of the oligarchic ironmasters. Throughout the 1860s there were also growing concerns that emigrants were leaving without paying their debts to tradesmen and shopkeepers and worries about the strains of providing relief to deserted wives and children.<sup>67</sup> Emigrant dishonesty was frequently reported and sharply condemned, and newspapers pleaded with departing emigrants to behave in an honourable, respectable and orderly manner.<sup>68</sup> Elsewhere in this issue Julie Light has noted that position and power in the small town often rested with the commercial middle class. It might well be argued that this moral panic about emigrants defrauding the 'shopocracy' reveals an assumption that it was the commercial and ratepayer sectors in the larger town of Merthyr that truly represented the town's interests.

Yet emigration was not always viewed in wholly negative terms in Merthyr during the 1860s. Contemporaries also believed that its departed could boost the pride and status of the town as much as they could elsewhere lay the foundations of the town's economic competitors and undermine its prosperity. Even though, or more accurately perhaps because, emigrants were perceived to have been forced to leave out of dire necessity, it was assumed by some that they would maintain an attachment or loyalty to Merthyr:

Those who have dwelt amongst the mountains for many years and at length removed to a distance speak with in feigned sorrow of the regret they feel in the exchange. There is a homely character, too, about the place and the working people which adds to the regard for Merthyr Tydfil, and the attachment is so great that, even after thirty years' absence, the old remembrance of the past clings lovingly to their hearts.<sup>69</sup>

In this mindset, the distinction that papers such as the *Telegraph* drew between families feeling regret at leaving the town, but having no regrets about leaving their employers gains further significance. It might be argued that the belief that migrants were reluctant to leave Merthyr is in some respects an expression of civic pride on the *Telegraph's* part,

<sup>66</sup> Evans, *Labyrinth of Flames*, 145–77; Jones, 'Merthyr Tydfil – the politics of survival'.

<sup>67</sup> See, for instance, *Star*, 7 Jan. 1864; *Express*, 23 May 1868, 29 May 1869. For a fuller discussion, see Jones, 'Raising the Wind', 25–7.

<sup>68</sup> *Aberdare Times*, 7 Jun. 1862; *Y Byd Cymreig*, 20 Apr. 1865; *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian*, 6 Jun. 1868, 27 Mar. 1869; *Express*, 16 May 1868.

<sup>69</sup> *Express*, 16 May 1868.

whilst it is undoubtedly true that at least some of its former inhabitants also felt proud of their hometown. Indeed, Merthyr in this period might be better understood if it is acknowledged that it was to some degree a 'transnational' town. The press played an influential role in constructing an international Merthyr and nurturing an awareness of a wider world with the town at its centre. Merthyr newspapers carried news of former Merthyrians, printed letters from them and reprinted extracts from overseas papers, often sent to them by emigrants.<sup>70</sup> In 1860 Merthyr expatriates in Melbourne held a celebration after they read about the renewal of the Cyfarthfa ironworks lease earlier that year in copies of the *Telegraph* they had been sent.<sup>71</sup> The successes of emigrants from Merthyr in their new homes were reported with pride: 'We are always glad to note the advancement of Merthyrians be it at home or at the antipodes', noted the *Telegraph* in 1861 whilst announcing a major gold find and the winning of competitive foot races in the Victoria gold towns by former residents of the town.<sup>72</sup>

This article has argued that in the 1860s the out-migration of a significant section of its population was a major phenomenon in Merthyr. It preoccupied the mouths and pens of the town's inhabitants, and occupied a prominent position in the town's public sphere. The analysis of the commentaries it generated suggests that although certain understandings of emigration were commonly shared, they were also diverse, shifting, sometimes contradictory and contested, and invariably complex and multi-layered. The vital role the press played as a forum for discussion and debate on this topic, and in shaping and constructing meanings of the outflow and responses to it, will be apparent. This supports Croll's conclusions regarding the importance of the press in influencing the public sphere in Merthyr and as a 'technology of rule'.<sup>73</sup> It might reasonably be suggested that emigration expanded Merthyr's public sphere both in terms of topics deemed to be in the public interest and geographically, to include the involvement of former inhabitants of the town who now resided elsewhere but who were still constructed as being a part of a 'greater Merthyr'. It has also been argued that awareness and concern about the loss of population and, especially, 'skilled' labour were sharpened by developing perceptions of the interests of the town and fears regarding its future. The commentaries on emigration in the 1860s suggest that responses to emigration were shaped by the town's power struggles – out-migration was another stick with which to beat the ironmasters – and appear to confirm that at least some sectors in Merthyr were developing

<sup>70</sup> *Express*, 31 Mar. 1866; *Telegraph*, 2 Mar. 1861, 2 May 1863, 30 Apr. 1869; *Star*, 15 Aug. 1863, 4 Feb. 1864.

<sup>71</sup> *Telegraph*, 22 Sep. 1860.

<sup>72</sup> *Telegraph*, 19 Jan. 1861.

<sup>73</sup> Croll, *Civilizing the Urban*, 42–3, 60.

a civic consciousness. The 'extraordinary drain', then, needs to be located much more centrally in the history of Merthyr in the mid-nineteenth century and considered as a key element in the town's 'narrative of decline'.<sup>74</sup> Indeed, we might profitably weave emigration back into the tapestry of urban experience in Wales during historical moments when it was clearly a matter of some importance, and explore more fully the way it shaped the mentalities of stayers as well as movers.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>75</sup> See Jones, 'Raising the Wind', 36–41.