

*Cynhaeaf:*  
**Customs, Practices and Folklore  
associated with  
the Traditional Harvest in Wales**

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## **Abstract**

*This thesis aims to explore a wide variety of customs and practices associated with the traditional harvest in Wales, principally during the nineteenth century; with a particular focus on south-west Wales, where the evidence survives most strongly. This includes an examination of the practice of harvest migration to destinations both within and outside Wales, the traditions associated with it, and the social stresses which it engendered; with particular attention to the practice of cyflog y groes, or cross wages, in the Vale of Clwyd. The customs and symbolism surrounding the last sheaf, or caseg fedd, are scrutinised in some detail, together with their long-standing Frazerian interpretation, and an alternative approach is proposed. An exploration of a range of harvest folklore demonstrates in particular the constant personification of sheaves as animals or people. The essay concludes by tracing the traditional supper at the end of harvest, the merrymaking associated with it, and the reasons for its eventual replacement by the Christian harvest festival. Throughout the study attention will be drawn to the social and ritual tensions accompanying these customs, including tensions in the harvest field, and the contrast between co-operation among farms on the one hand and aggressive competitiveness on the other; as well as the prevailing context of subsistence or borderline deprivation in which they take place.*

## **Acknowledgements**

First and foremost I should like to warmly thank my tutor Dr Rhiannon Ifans for encouraging me to believe that I could tackle this topic, for her guidance throughout, and for her assistance with references and background information. My grateful thanks are also due to Dr Robin Gwyndaf for introducing me to the Library at *Amgueddfa Werin Cymru* at St Fagans and providing some of the lesser-known Welsh references; also to Eleri and Robin for their hospitality on my most recent visit to my native Cardiff. I am particularly grateful to Fflur Gwynn and Meinwen Ruddock-Jones at *AWC* for their help with printed and archival sources. Roy Saer also kindly supplied some crucial references. Not least, I am extremely grateful to Howard Williams of Caernarfon for providing some superb translations of several of the Welsh texts.

## Introduction

Despite the increasing drift to the towns in the middle of the nineteenth century, the percentage of the rural population in Wales and England involved in agriculture, and especially harvesting, between 1840 and 1900 was greater than ever before or since, so much so that it has often been referred to as 'The Golden Age', lying between the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 and the agricultural slump of the 1880s.<sup>1</sup> The requirement for sufficient manpower at harvest time had always exceeded the local supply of workers and was a perennial problem, but it was underscored in the mid-nineteenth century by the great increase in corn production.<sup>2</sup> During this period the gap widened between the farmers' wealth and the continuing poverty of farm labourers, and the social discontent that often erupted across Britain as a whole<sup>3</sup> is reflected in Wales in terms of the Rebecca Riots from 1839 to 1843.

The success or failure of the harvest would once have meant the difference between life and death; and even a good harvest might mean only living at subsistence level for the typical farm labourer. Before farms became mechanised, the corn harvest represented the high point of the farming year,<sup>4</sup> and given the uncertainties always attendant upon its success, the sense of relief felt by all concerned once it had been gathered in was palpable, and great merrymaking would inevitably follow.

## Objectives

The aim of the thesis is to explore a wide range of customs, practices and folklore connected with the traditional harvest in Wales, especially during the nineteenth century, taking a broadly chronological approach. The study will predominantly be addressing the corn harvest (*cynhaeaf yd*), which traditionally began on or around the first of August (*Gŵyl Galan Awst*), and continued until the threshing was finished, usually in late September, but often much later in north Wales or when the threshing was done manually with flails. The predominant crop was wheat, but others were harvested in the course of the year, such as hay, rye or potatoes, and examples of each of these will be referred to where necessary in their appropriate context.

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<sup>1</sup> David Hoseason Morgan, *Harvesters and Harvesting 1840–1900: A Study of the Rural Proletariat* (London: Croom Helm, 1982), p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 122–50.

<sup>4</sup> Christina Hole, *British Folk Customs* (London: Book Club Associates / Hutchinson Publishing Ltd, 1976), p. 92.

Initially, therefore, consideration will be given to as diverse a selection of customs and folklore across as many areas of Wales as the evidence permits; however, a disproportionately large number of sources are based in the south-west of the country and therefore an inaugural focus on the traditions of Carmarthenshire and Cardiganshire is inevitable, leading on to a discussion of specific harvesting practices, for which we again possess most evidence from this same area. This is followed by a compilation of some richly varied harvest customs and folk beliefs from north Wales; and an equally fascinating set of traditional harvest lore for the areas surrounding Builth and Llanwrtyd.

The study will also examine the phenomenon of Welsh harvest migration which had taken place in some form since the medieval period, though the main perspective will again be the nineteenth century for which there is most evidence, and comprising three primary destinations for the migrant workers: the Vale of Clwyd, the Vale of Glamorgan, and over the border to the counties of Shropshire and Herefordshire.

The thesis will next investigate in some detail the rituals surrounding the *caseg fedi*, or last sheaf, the custom which dominates nearly all folkloristic accounts of harvest traditions, in Wales as elsewhere, being the most eye-catching, as well as the most ubiquitous, in all its various forms. But the intense focus on this one custom has to a large extent obscured the fact that it occupied only a short period of time at the end of harvest. The theories proposed to explain the tradition, centring on the work of Sir James Frazer which has long held sway in the popular imagination, will be scrutinised, and an alternative interpretation proposed.

The essay will conclude with a consideration of the traditional harvest supper and the festivities surrounding it, noting its virtual replacement in the nineteenth century by the Christian harvest festival.

A key aim of the study will be to highlight how, given the subsistence lifestyle of the average farm labourer, some of the 'celebratory' customs offered cultural compensations for the often gruelling nature of harvest work; whilst other traditions such as gleaning arose from the very experience of deprivation itself. Also foregrounded will be the strict social hierarchy always required for marshalling a harvest workforce at rapid speed.

A central theme which constantly emerges from the study is the range of social and ritual tensions involved in harvesting over this period: between farmers and farm labourers; in terms of co-operation versus competition between the various farms in a locality; within the whole phenomenon of harvest migration; and ultimately within the customs attached to a traditional economy and their increasing anachronism in a developing wage economy.

## **Key Sources**

A crucial text for the study of the traditional harvest in Wales is the Reverend D. G. Williams'

short essay written in 1895, which furnishes an eyewitness account for Carmarthenshire of both the *medel wenith*, or 'wheat reaping-party', and the last sheaf tradition;<sup>5</sup> this is added to much later by Daniel Parry-Jones' memories of growing up on a Carmarthenshire farm.<sup>6</sup> David Jenkins' in-depth study of the agricultural community in south-west Wales also gathers together much invaluable material, particularly regarding the feudal-like system which still operated in Cardiganshire up to relatively modern times.<sup>7</sup>

The collected writings of Evan Jones of Llanwrtyd, though only quite recently edited and published, constitute a rich source for the folklore and traditions of Builth and its surrounding area reaching back to the early nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup> Hugh Evans' 1931 volume *Cwm Eithin* is a key source for harvest traditions in Denbighshire,<sup>9</sup> while Twm Elias' more recent almanac of festivals contributes some vital information on the harvest season in north Wales not easily available elsewhere.<sup>10</sup> Trefor Owen's *Welsh Folk Customs* provides an important scholarly review of harvest traditions up to the time he was writing, in 1959.<sup>11</sup>

On the important topic of Welsh harvest migrant workers, John Williams-Davies' comprehensive MA thesis from 1985 leads the field,<sup>12</sup> since supplemented by Trefor Owen's study of accounts from a Denbighshire farm.<sup>13</sup> An important primary source is Ifor Jones' 1916 paper on *Cyflog y Groes*, or the system of 'Cross Wages'.<sup>14</sup>

As previously mentioned, the tradition which has consistently attracted most scholarly attention is that surrounding the last sheaf, commonly known as the *caseg feddi* or 'harvest mare'. Of particular note here are Iorwerth Peate's two papers on 'corn customs', separated from each other by forty-one years.<sup>15</sup> More recently, Jan Grendall's comparative review of *cesyg medi*<sup>16</sup> and T. Llew Jones' long

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<sup>5</sup> D. G. Williams, 'Casgliad o Len-gwerin Sir Gaerfyrddin', *Transactions of the National Eisteddfod of Wales, Llanelly, [sic] 1895* (1898), translated by Howard Williams, pp. 299–302.

<sup>6</sup> D. Parry-Jones, *Welsh Country Upbringing* (Batsford, 1948; Wirral: Ffynnon Press, 1974).

<sup>7</sup> David Jenkins, *The Agricultural Community in South-West Wales at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1971).

<sup>8</sup> *Cymru Evan Jones: Detholiad o Bapurau Evan Jones, Ty'n-y-pant, Llanwrtyd*, edited by Herbert Hughes (Llandysul: Gwasg Gomer, 2009).

<sup>9</sup> Hugh Evans, *The Gorse Glen: A Translation by E. Morgan Humphreys of the Welsh 'Cwm Eithin' [1931]* (Liverpool: Brython Press, 1948).

<sup>10</sup> Twm Elias, *Tro drwy'r Tymhorau: Almanac o Wyliau a Dathliadau'r Flwyddyn* (Llanrwst: Gwasg Carreg Gwalch, 2007).

<sup>11</sup> Trefor M. Owen, *Welsh Folk Customs* (Cardiff: National Museum of Wales: Welsh Folk Museum, 1959, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition 1974).

<sup>12</sup> John Williams-Davies, 'The Seasonal Migration of Agricultural Labour in Nineteenth Century Wales' (unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Wales, 1985), National Museum of Wales MS 3358 (photostat copy).

<sup>13</sup> Trefor M. Owen, 'The Social Organization of Harvesting: A Welsh Case Study', in Hugh Cheape, ed., *Tools and Traditions: Studies in European Ethnology presented to Alexander Fenton* (Edinburgh: National Museums of Scotland, 1993), pp. 85–92.

<sup>14</sup> D. Ifor Jones, 'Cyflog y Groes', *Cymru* 51 (1916), pp. 81–2.

<sup>15</sup> Iorwerth C. Peate, 'Corn-Customs in Wales', *Man* 30 (1930), pp. 151–5. [Online]. Available:

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2789748> <accessed: 21/07/2014>; Iorwerth C. Peate, 'Corn Ornaments', *Folklore* 82 (1971), pp. 177–84.

<sup>16</sup> Jan Grendall, 'Cesyg Medi y Celtiaid', in *Ar Lafar ei Wlad: Cyfrol Deyrnged John Owen Huws* (Llanrwst: Gwasg Carreg Gwalch, 2002), pp. 143–62.

search through ancient 'prototypes'<sup>17</sup> take forward the interpretation first proposed by Sir James Frazer in his monumental work *The Golden Bough*.<sup>18</sup> This interpretation has been challenged, however, by Professor Ronald Hutton's scholarly survey of the British ritual year,<sup>19</sup> as well as by a more recent paper on the symbolism of harvest by social historian Michael Roberts.<sup>20</sup>

A range of comparative perspectives is also afforded by, among others, David H. Morgan's study *Harvesters and Harvesting*, which, whilst focussing predominantly on southern England, provides some probing insights.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> T. Llew Jones, 'Y Gaseg yn yr ŷd', in *Llên Gwerin T. Llew Jones*, ed. Myrddin ap Dafydd (Llanrwst: Gwasg Carreg Gwalch, 2010), pp. 151–62.

<sup>18</sup> James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Comparative Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1894), vol. I, pp. 330–409. [Online]. Available: <https://archive.org/details/goldenboughstudy01fraz> <accessed: 29/06/2016>; also 'The Corn-Mother and the Corn-Maiden in Northern Europe', in *The Golden Bough: Spirits of the Corn and of the Wild* (London: Macmillan, 1912), vol. I, pp. 131–70. [Online]. Available: <https://archive.org/details/goldenboughstudy07fraz> <accessed: 29/06/2016>.

<sup>19</sup> Ronald Hutton, *The Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

<sup>20</sup> Michael Roberts, 'Sickles and scythes revisited: harvest work, wages and symbolic meanings', in P. Lane, N. Raven, and K. D. M. Snell (eds.), *Women, Work, and Wages in England, 1600–1850* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2004), pp. 68–101.

<sup>21</sup> David Hoseason Morgan, *Harvesters and Harvesting 1840–1900: A Study of the Rural Proletariat* (London: Croom Helm, 1982).



## Chapter 1: Welsh Harvest Customs in their Context

### *Y Fedel Wenith: Carmarthenshire*

In traditional farming communities it was necessary to have to rely on one's neighbours for occasional help but the precise manner in which this principle operated seems to have differed from one Welsh county to the next and even from area to area. The Reverend D. G. Williams' 1895 account for Carmarthenshire shows how the medieval practice of *cymhorta*, or 'assistance', extended to the co-operative work groups which were still extant up to the spread of mechanised agriculture.<sup>22</sup> The practice was certainly not unique to this county but it is here that its best rendition is encountered. This concept of mutual assistance was most prominent during the corn harvest, whereby groups of farmers in Carmarthenshire would agree to cut their wheat on different days so as to be able to help each other by forming *y fedel wenith*, or 'the wheat reaping-party'.<sup>23</sup> On a specific day, each farm would send a small number of workers to one particular farm to finish reaping and binding its wheat harvest within a single day.<sup>24</sup>

A good supper was prepared for the evening of the wheat harvest as for the evening following the reaping of the corn. A special dish of *whipod* was served, consisting of rice, white bread, currants, raisins, and treacle; while beer would be provided for the harvesters, at intervals, throughout the day.<sup>25</sup>

Following supper everyone would join in games and amusements, the most popular of which were *dai shon goch* and *rhibo*. The first involved two young men or women dressed in old tattered clothes performing a curious dance with walking-sticks in the barn, to the amusement of the onlookers.<sup>26</sup> The game of *rhibo*<sup>27</sup> by contrast involved six boys facing each other in two rows of three, each grasping the hands of the one standing opposite. A boy and girl were laid lengthways across their arms and would be thrown quite high into the air, several times over. Should a girl be unwilling to take part and run away to hide, she would be thrown even higher. As Jonathan Ceredig Davies describes it, it 'appeared to be rather a rough game'.<sup>28</sup> The sexual overtones implied here are quite obvious, though whether one would wish to go as far as Trefor Owen in claiming a fertility origin for

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<sup>22</sup> Trefor M. Owen, *Welsh Folk Customs* (Cardiff: National Museum of Wales: Welsh Folk Museum, 1959, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition 1974), p. 113.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114; D. G. Williams, 'Casgliad o Len-gwerin Sir Gaerfyrddin', *Transactions of the National Eisteddfod of Wales, Llanelly*, [sic] 1895 (1898), translated by Howard Williams, pp. 299–302, 302.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 301–2; Jonathan Ceredig Davies, *Folk-Lore of West and Mid-Wales* (Aberystwyth, 1911; facsimile reprint, Burnham-on-Sea: Llanerch Publishers, 1992), p. 78.

<sup>25</sup> Williams, 'Casgliad', p. 302.

<sup>26</sup> Davies, *Folk-Lore*, p. 80. Dances subsequently incurred puritanical wrath and the tradition eventually disappeared. (D. Roy Saer, *Canu at Iws' ac Ysgrifau Eraill* (Aberystwyth: Cymdeithas Alawon Gwerin Cymru, 2013), pp. 298–9).

<sup>27</sup> Possibly derived from *rheibo*, 'bewitching' (Williams, 'Casgliad', p. 302).

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 302; Davies, *Folk-Lore*, p. 81.

the tradition is a moot point and will be examined in more detail later.<sup>29</sup>

The wheat reaping-party appears to have survived longer in the eastern and northern parts of Carmarthenshire than in the western parts. In some areas the tradition still survived in respect of the hay harvest when Williams was writing in the final years of the nineteenth century. Farmers would try to come to an understanding not to mow their hay (*gwair*) on the same day, so that they could all help each other to achieve one complete mowing within one day.<sup>30</sup>

The picture presented seems a fairly rosy one, but behind it lay the reality of a basic subsistence level for most farm labourers, with farmers relying heavily on them at this season to harvest the crop, and with workers thereby achieving a degree of parity which did not apply at any other time of year. As David Morgan expresses it: 'the amount of harvest work controlled not the extent of the labourer's affluence but the degree of his poverty... each year the ripening corn grew into profit; [but] only a vast army of harvesters could make that profit secure'.<sup>31</sup>

### 'Harvest Debt': Cardiganshire

A much more complex picture emerges of harvest co-operation in Cardiganshire in David Jenkins' comprehensive historical study of the agricultural community in south-west Wales.<sup>32</sup> Here co-operation between groups of neighbouring farms extended only to the hay harvest, which began in June but could last intermittently for months; it did not extend to the corn harvest. Each farm would send a scythesman to mow the relevant field from first light to midday, and on the final day of a farm's hay harvest women and children would join the work parties and there could be a total of fifty or more people, with much teasing and banter. In fact, the final days of the hay harvests were a rare opportunity for the young men and women of a number of farms to meet up, and more liberties than usual were taken, such as a man tussling with a maid during the tea-break in full view of the others, throwing her on the hay and kissing her: this was known as 'foxing' (*ffocso*).<sup>33</sup>

However, whilst stressing that seasonal labour requirements meant that farms could not be run as separate, self-contained units, Jenkins nevertheless shows how in Cardiganshire, as far back as his informants' memories and written diaries would stretch, i.e. to 1870, farms most definitely did *not* co-operate with each other during the corn harvest. The extra labour needed was provided through the feudal-like practice of 'setting out potatoes' (*gosod tato mâs*), by which local cottagers were permitted to plant rows of potatoes in farmers' fields in return for offering their labour at the corn

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<sup>29</sup> Owen, *Welsh Folk Customs*, p. 114; see also pages 37–9 below.

<sup>30</sup> Williams, 'Casgliad', pp. 301–2.

<sup>31</sup> Morgan, *Harvesters*, pp. 183, 185.

<sup>32</sup> David Jenkins, *The Agricultural Community in South-West Wales at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1971).

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 51, 88–9, 90–1.

harvest. This was variously known as the 'harvest debt' (*dyled cynhaeaf*) or 'work debt' (*dyled gwaith*) in south Cardiganshire, the 'potato debt' (*dyled tato*) in mid Cardiganshire, and the 'potato duty' (*duty tatw*) in north Cardiganshire. The debt amounted to a single day's work per row of potatoes, to be repaid by the cottager or his wife. This custom also extended to north Pembrokeshire and the western and upland parts of Carmarthenshire.<sup>34</sup>

The practice connected individual cottagers with a specific farm and constituted that farm's individual *medel* or 'work group', deepening the social bonds between its members and the particular farm.<sup>35</sup> This sense of companionship is well illustrated by a poem written by David Jones 'Isfoel' (1888–1968), a former member of a *medel*, in which he asserts that if he should ever reach heaven he hopes to meet with his group members once more, and closes with the lines:

*Y darlun eto'n gyfan*      The picture again complete  
*A'r fedel yno i gyd.*      And the members of the *medel* present one and all.<sup>36</sup>

In the harvest field the scythesmen would be led by the head servant (*gwas mawr*), followed by the other servants in order of priority, and then the labourers.<sup>37</sup> The head servant would set the pace and rhythm for the rest to follow; he would also decide the time for sharpening the scythes (*codi i hogi*), and then again when to recommence work. It was the job of the second servant (*ail was*) to supply the drinks, consisting of home-brewed beer and '*whigin*', a mixture of oatmeal and water.<sup>38</sup> There was therefore a large measure of co-operation in the harvest field but seniority was still observed – and the head servant who normally led the reapers would need to prove that he was also the most skilled reaper, otherwise he would often find the others snapping at his heels.

During both the hay and corn harvests the wives of cottagers and their children would receive food at the farm, as well as 'home supper' (*swper adre*), usually an amount of flour or a loaf, with some cheese to take home.<sup>39</sup> Whether in addition or perhaps as an alternative, each of the women was presented with a candle to take home every evening, while the menfolk received a quantity of tobacco.<sup>40</sup>

The first horse-drawn threshing machine came to south Cardiganshire *circa* 1875, and its

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., pp. 48, 51–2, 67. Harvest debt was also repaid by the cottagers in return for haulage work performed by the farmer on their behalf (Ibid., p. 58; D. Parry-Jones, *Welsh Country Upbringing* (Batsford, 1948; Wirral: Ffynnon Press, 1974), p. 63).

<sup>35</sup> Jenkins, *Agricultural Community*, pp. 54–5.

<sup>36</sup> David Jones (Isfoel), *Cerddi Isfoel* (Aberystwyth, 1958), p. 15, cited in Jenkins, *Agricultural Community*, p. 56.

<sup>37</sup> A farm servant (*gwas*) was a young unmarried man who lived at the farm and worked with the horses, including the all-important job of ploughing. By contrast, a farm labourer (*gweithwr*) was occupied with hedging, ditching, drainage, and the like; he was usually a married man who lived in his own house (Jenkins, *Agricultural Community*, p. 77).

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 84; H. Jones-Davies, 'Memories of farming in the Vale of Towy', *Wales* III, 3 (Jan–Mar 1944), pp. 85–92, 88. [Online.] Available: <http://welshjournals.llgc.org.uk/browse/viewpage/llgc-id:1214989/llgc-id:1215546/llgc-id:1215633/get650> <accessed 05/04/2016>.

<sup>39</sup> Jenkins, *Agricultural Community*, p. 57.

<sup>40</sup> Davies, *Folk-Lore*, p. 78.

introduction initially had the effect of actually *extending* co-operation between farms rather than reducing it. But the advent of the self-binder finally severed this knot between farmers and cottagers, with both now becoming independent of each other.<sup>41</sup>

Despite the fairly harmonious picture presented above, it should be seen in the context of the strict hierarchy of rural society, for it was only during the harvest period that there could be a move towards some semblance of equality – to put it no more strongly – between farmers and labourers, as the farmer became dependent on the mutual co-operation of his workers to handle all the uncertainties associated with the harvest.<sup>42</sup> It would be encouraging to believe that David Morgan's assessment for southern England did not apply so acutely to Wales, but it is not clear that this can be avoided: 'The landowner, the squire, the vicar and the tenant farmer... gathered to themselves the wealth from the years of good harvests and extended little help to those who suffered most from the years of the bad ones'.<sup>43</sup>

During the nineteenth century farming turned from a community activity into a commercial enterprise, and those who remained in agricultural employment were rarely in a position to bargain for their wages, and were subject to the law of supply and demand; which effectively meant that their wages remained at a subsistence level.<sup>44</sup>

### **Sickles, Scythes and Sheaves: Harvesting Practices**

This is an appropriate point to consider more closely the procedures associated with the harvest when the whole operation was accomplished with hand-tools. The harvest tools employed were substantially the same in 1850 as they had been in 1750: the sickle (*cryman*), the reaping hook, and the bagging hook, all of which reaped the corn; and then more latterly the scythe (*pladur*), which mowed it.<sup>45</sup> The scythe began to be used from the first two decades of the nineteenth century, but did not become widespread across Britain until after 1835; by the late nineteenth century corn was generally cut with scythes in Wales, using sickles only if it was very wet or flat.<sup>46</sup>

After cutting, the corn was tied into sheaves (*ysgubau*), which in turn were heaped into stooks and allowed to finish ripening. Next, the stooks were carted and gathered into stacks or ricks in the rickyard, and often thatched to shelter them from the effects of the weather. The grain would then require separating from the straw and chaff by threshing (*dyrnu*) with flails and winnowing (*nithio*)

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<sup>41</sup> Jenkins, *Agricultural Community*, pp. 255–6, 258.

<sup>42</sup> Morgan, *Harvesters*, p. 110.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 188.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 181, 187.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15. The bagging hook was a heavier, more rounded tool (p. 9). See also page 25.

<sup>46</sup> Michael Roberts, 'Sickles and scythes revisited: harvest work, wages and symbolic meanings', in P. Lane, N. Raven, and K. D. M. Snell (eds.), *Women, Work, and Wages in England, 1600–1850* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2004), pp. 68–101, 83, 90.

with sieves or shovels, a task that was so long drawn-out that it could take up much of the winter period.<sup>47</sup>

Daniel Parry-Jones provides an account of reaping when scythes had come into use. A cradle, or *cadair*, comprising four light wood arrows, was placed over the scythe in order to gather and hold the cut stalks together, thereby enabling them to be placed tidily in a swathe; though useful, it could prove rather cumbersome to use. The scythes would be sharpened up to three times a day with a 'rip', or whetstone, which each reaper would carry with them; the rip was treated with fine sand (*cerrig swnd*) brought from the Black Mountains, and pig fat. The reapers themselves looked back to a time spanning the mid-nineteenth century when farming, as they saw it, was at its height and fields long since abandoned had once been full of waist-high corn.<sup>48</sup> 'Reaping with a scythe was a very highly skilled work... A fine sight it was to see eight to a dozen reapers swinging in a row, six feet behind each other.'<sup>49</sup> The scythe came to be regarded as close to sacred, and no-one was permitted to even touch one other than its proper owner.<sup>50</sup>

After being left to mature for a few days, the swathes of corn were rolled up and tied in sheaves. Three men would then build these up into mows or stacks (*das*), popularly known as 'Cardiganshire Cocks'; there may by evening-time be thirty of these standing in the field. Methodically constructed, they could stand a huge amount of rain and consequently could be hauled in at the farmer's leisure.<sup>51</sup>

In the rickyard each seven or eight loads would in turn be built into a '*helem*' or round stack, an extremely skilled operation requiring the sheaves to be 'locked in' precisely, otherwise they would begin to slide, thereby spelling disaster for the whole stack. Oat stacks were always built in the shape of an acorn, barley stacks in the shape of an earthenware crock: the average-sized farm might after a good harvest have ten or a dozen such stacks in its yard. All of this was subsequently made redundant by the threshing machine.<sup>52</sup>

Parry-Jones concluded that: 'The grain harvest, like the hay harvest, was a very happy time and if the crowd was smaller there was much talk, leg-pulling and laughter, with the usual stock of stories of the countryside'.<sup>53</sup> This positive view needs to be balanced, however, by the sheer strain and exhaustion this work must have exerted on the harvesters, not least in the pressure to keep pace with the pace-setter as well as with each other.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Charles Kightly, *The Customs and Ceremonies of Britain: An Encyclopaedia of Living Traditions* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1986), p. 132.

<sup>48</sup> Parry-Jones, *Welsh Country Upbringing*, pp. 63, 64. Parry-Jones thought that the cradle scythe might have been unique to west Wales, but in fact its use was widespread, outside Wales as well as within.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>50</sup> J. Geraint Jenkins, *Life & Tradition in Rural Wales* (Stroud: Amberley, 1973, 2009 edition), pp. 49, 51.

<sup>51</sup> Parry-Jones, *Welsh Country Upbringing*, p. 64.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

<sup>53</sup> *loc. cit.*

<sup>54</sup> E. Estyn Evans, *Irish Folkways* (London: Routledge, 1957, 1989), p. 160.

Furthermore, it could be said that cutting the crop had the effect of 'tearing nature into culture', as Michael Roberts aptly phrases it: harvest symbolism bestowed an *illusion* of mastery, of a certain control over those elements which were often uncontrollable; thereby providing some kind of reassurance to the farmers and those working in the fields that they were on top of the situation when in fact much of the time they were not.<sup>55</sup> Harvesting required the marshalling of labour quickly and efficiently, almost like a military operation, in response to the immediacy of fine weather conditions; and with this need to tend the corn-crop over a long period and then quickly assemble a strong labour force, went a rigid social hierarchy.<sup>56</sup> The rivalry between neighbouring farms and their respective gangs of reapers, which we shall encounter later especially in the traditions surrounding the last sheaf, were no doubt encouraged by farmers as a way of speeding up the whole harvest process.<sup>57</sup>

### North Wales Harvest Traditions

Harvest traditions in north Wales, as one would expect, possessed their own cultural character. In his almanac of Welsh festivals throughout the year, *Tro drwy'r Tymhorau*, Twm Elias cites an *englyn*, or short alliterative poem, by Gwilym Richard Tilsley, 'Tilslï' (1911–1997), which refers to September as the month of '*gwair rhos*', or moorland hay – the upland hay which would be mown much later in the season than lowland hay. The crop was of poor quality: short and rough, with little nutritional value, and requiring a very sharp-bladed scythe to cut it. But the *hen bobl*, or 'old people', as he refers to them, sought out every blade, believing it to be of great value: it is certainly true that animals then were a lot tougher and could survive on much poorer feed than today.<sup>58</sup>

The moorland hay should all have been cut by *Gŵyl y Grog*, or Holy Cross Day, that is, the fourteenth of September, and as this meant hanging (*crogi*) the scythes up in the barn, some were led into misinterpreting the *crog* element in the festival name. At the beginning of the end-of-harvest celebrations the cry would go up: '*Crogi'r pladuriau a boddi'r cynhaeaf* – 'Hang up the scythes and drown the harvest' – the harvest being 'drowned', of course, in the local hostelry. However, the original meaning of the festival name was nothing to do with 'hanging' the scythes, as '*y grog*' here was simply another name for the Cross and thereby refers to the church festival called Holy Cross or Holyrood Day.<sup>59</sup>

The Harvest or September Moon (*Lleuad Fedi*), rising at the same time as the sun set, often provided enough light to assist the harvest workers in carrying the stooks of corn from the field to the

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<sup>55</sup> Roberts, 'Sickles and scythes', p. 74.

<sup>56</sup> George Ewart Evans, *The Pattern Under the Plough: Aspects of the Folk-Life of East Anglia* (London: Faber & Faber, 1966), pp. 152–3.

<sup>57</sup> *Folklore, Myths and Legends of Britain* (London: Reader's Digest, 1973), p. 69.

<sup>58</sup> Twm Elias, *Tro drwy'r Tymhorau: Almanac o Wyliau a Dathliadau'r Flwyddyn* (Llanrwst: Gwasg Carreg Gwalch, 2007), translated by Howard Williams, pp. 106–7.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.

stackyard well into the night. Often called in north Wales '*lleuad naw nos olau*', or 'moon of the nine light nights', it enabled harvesting for the four nights before and after the full moon itself; while in south Wales this was often reduced to three nights either side, becoming '*lleuad whech nos ole*', or 'moon of the six light nights'.<sup>60</sup> One is forced to the conclusion that the harvest in north Wales seems to have been considerably later than in the south.

Hugh Evans (1854–1934), who started work as a waggoner on various farms around Llangwm, Denbighshire, from 1871,<sup>61</sup> confirms in his celebrated volume *Cwm Eithin, or The Gorse Glen*, that the wheat reaping parties were as common in Denbighshire as they were in Carmarthenshire.<sup>62</sup>

One method of harvesting once in general use here was known as *sbaeno*, whereby the reaper would grasp a handful of corn with one hand and cut with reaping hook or sickle with the other.<sup>63</sup> The grain would eventually be taken to the mill to be ground, but some of the shelled oats were often taken home again without being ground to make what was known as *uwd rhyinion*, or 'shelled oats porridge', as this was considered to make a better porridge than the kind made with oatmeal.<sup>64</sup>

However, any romanticised notion which may persist that harvesting was always a pleasing occupation is dispelled by the cleric Robert Roberts' (1834–1885) recollection of his youth spent on his parents' farm at Hafod Bach, Llangernyw, in Denbighshire:

One cold bleak Saturday afternoon towards the end of harvest 1847, I was wearily binding sheaves after the reapers in an exposed *ffrith* [pasture], my hands benumbed with handling the wet corn, and bewailing the hard fate that condemned my poor, ill-clad body to such labour, when I was greatly surprised by a message from my mother that I was wanted at home immediately.<sup>65</sup>

The Reverend Elias Owen writing in 1886 states that in the early nineteenth century parish clerks in a number of Denbighshire and Flintshire villages were often paid for their services by a dole of wheat, barley or oats; in Tremeirchion parish, Flintshire, this went by the name of *Ysgub y gloch*, 'bell sheaf', or *Yd y gloch*, 'bell corn', all of which implies that the corn was in payment of the clerk's duties of ringing the bell, whether church bell or perhaps even funeral handbell. All farmers would contribute corn liberally for this purpose; and one informant in Derwen parish, south Denbighshire, described to Owen how he would once have accompanied his father when collecting the corn in a sledge, carts being unused at this earlier period. The custom ceased after the passing of the Tithe Commutation Act of 1836, which replaced the ancient system of payment of tithes in kind with cash payments, and

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109.

<sup>61</sup> Meic Stephens, *The New Companion to the Literature of Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1998), p. 234.

<sup>62</sup> Hugh Evans, *The Gorse Glen: A Translation by E. Morgan Humphreys of the Welsh 'Cwm Eithin'* [1931] (Liverpool: Brythton Press, 1948), pp. 113–14.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.

<sup>65</sup> Robert Roberts, 'The life and opinions of Robert Roberts: a wandering scholar, as told by himself', *The Welsh Outlook* 1, 12 (Dec 1914), pp. 509–15, 510. [Online]. Available: <http://welshjournals.llgc.org.uk/browse/viewpage/llgc-id:1311205/llgc-id:1311759/llgc-id:1311780/get650> <accessed: 14/04/2016>.

following which arrangements were made for the clerks to receive an annual payment equal to the value of the corn previously received as *Yd y gloch*.<sup>66</sup>

The standard form for 'sheaf' in Welsh is *ysgub*, but in south Denbighshire and north Merioneth (mainly), a sheaf is often referred to colloquially as a *gafren* – from *gafir*, the standard word in Welsh for 'goat'. Likewise, the colloquial plural in this area for 'goats' is *gifyr*, which is also used to mean 'sheaves'. Furthermore, the standard Welsh phrase for putting the sheaves together in bundles of four or six is '*codi'r ysgubau yn bedwaroedd*', which correspondingly becomes in south Denbighshire and north Merioneth '*codi gifyr*', 'raising the goats'.<sup>67</sup>

A further point of interest lies in the contrast between the general term used for a heap or bundle of sheaves throughout Wales – *sypyn* or *hulog* – with the term used in this particular area for the same heap or bundle: *bwch* or *bychod*, the singular and plural terms in standard Welsh for a billy goat.<sup>68</sup> Quite why this consistently goat-like terminology should have applied in these parts of Denbighshire and Merioneth for identifying sheaves and bundling them together into a heap, is not immediately clear, but it seems to have been part of the general propensity to personalise features of the harvest as animals or people, such as 'mare', 'neck', 'witch', and so forth, which we shall encounter later when considering the *caseg feddi* tradition.

One intriguing but unlikely custom which survived until the turn of the twentieth century in Trawsfynydd, Gwynedd, was that of 'making love in the bed', whereby in order to 'drown the harvest' (*boddi'r cynhaeaf*) the manservant would be allowed to sleep with the maidservant for one night. The girl retained her modesty by placing both legs in a 'sock': a large woollen bag or sack specially made for her by the mistress of the house. A taped interview in 1975 recalled an amusing and locally well-known story in connection with the tradition, dating to around the turn of the century:

*'Wn im paint o wir sy'n y stori, cofiwch. Fydde gynnyn-nhw hosan fawr – yr eneth – i roid 'i dwy goes yn(dd)i. Hen hosan fawr, 'ndê. A cortyn am 'i chanol. (W)edyn o'en nhw'n cario syniad bod hi'n saff, doedden? Dech-weld? Ystalwm, yndê! Ond dene fo. A (we)dyn dene'r... "Ma'n ddigon diofol ichi", be'r hen wraig, "dwi 'di rhoid yr hosan iddi." Dene'r hen – rw hen ddyn yn deud wrthi: "Peidiwch â mynd yn wirion", bedde fo. "Be 'di ede wlân (y)n dda o flaen cŷn caled!"'*<sup>69</sup>

Mind you, I don't know how much truth is in the story. They had this large sock and a cord around the waist, which made them believe it was safe, didn't they? In days gone by, that is! "It's safe enough," said the old woman, "I've given her the sock." And the old man replied: "Don't be silly, what use is

<sup>66</sup> Elias Owen, *Old Stone Crosses of the Vale of Clwyd* (London: Quaritch, 1886), pp. 189–90. [Online]. Available: <http://ia600406.us.archive.org/23/items/cu31924028087108/cu31924028087108.pdf> <accessed 13/11/2015>.

<sup>67</sup> personal communication Dr Robin Gwyndaf, 18 Nov 2015.

<sup>68</sup> idem., 18 Nov 2015.

<sup>69</sup> St Fagans: National History Museum, Tape AWC 4611: Owen Hughes, Cerrigydrudion, Denbighshire, recorded by Robin Gwyndaf 4.6.1975.



woollen thread against such a hard chisel!”<sup>70</sup>

## Evan Jones of Llanwrtyd

Evan Jones, 'Ieuan Builth' (1850–1928), of Ty'n y Pant, Llanwrtyd, within the historic boundary of Brecknockshire (modern Powys), provides a fascinating and unique insight into the local customs of his area, often recording the memories of the older 'tradition bearers', thereby placing many of them in the first half of the nineteenth century.<sup>71</sup> He wrote in a local mid-Wales dialect, and it is not always easy to interpret exactly every phrase he used. The area Jones describes, which includes Builth, certainly appears to have 'stood apart', with its own unique character, and this reveals itself in its harvest traditions. Most importantly, Jones does not avoid addressing the issue of deprivation in which many lived their lives, though he seems to have taken a somewhat rose-tinted view of the benevolence of farmers from a previous age towards the poor.

Jones asserts that it was not often that farmers in a bygone era would sow wheat without first liming the seed. An amount of seed would be poured out on the floor of the barn, just enough to plant that day, then was mixed well with some stale urine<sup>72</sup> and quicklime. This was done on a daily basis before going out into the field: the aim in so doing was to prevent the wheat developing 'smut', and the belief was firmly held by older inhabitants that this would be achieved by virtue of the liquid and the lime.<sup>73</sup>

If in a particular year a large crop of hay lay on the ground, the harvest was gathered outright that year, fearing a long, hard winter following on from a prolific summer. '*Cynhaeaf llawn, crynhoi'n llwyr*' – 'Full harvest, gather completely' – was an old saying. Through detailed observation the farming community had come to the knowledge that when there were heavy crops of hay and corn, the following winter was likely to be hard and damp; but following a dry summer and light crops, a gentle winter and early spring could be expected.<sup>74</sup> Another custom formerly observed was that if a complete supply of fodder was to hand, then a pole, or '*buddel*',<sup>75</sup> would be taken from the cowshed and one of the cows sold; but if the fodder was small, the pole was put back and the full complement

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<sup>70</sup> Translation by Howard Williams 1.2016.

<sup>71</sup> *Cymru Evan Jones: Detholiad o Bapurau Evan Jones, Ty'n-y-pant, Llanwrtyd*, edited by Herbert Hughes (Llandysul: Gwasg Gomer, 2009).

<sup>72</sup> It is not absolutely clear what '*sug sur*' – literally, 'sour juice / liquid / bodily fluid' – refers to in this case, but 'stale urine' seems the most likely meaning (personal communication Howard Williams).

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54. The whole process is confirmed in the following account from the same county: 'A gentleman in Brecknockshire having all his wheat smutted, purchased recommended seed from a distance, and had it pickled in the usual way with urine and lime'. (Walter Davies, *General View of the Agriculture and Domestic Economy of South Wales* (London: Sherwood, Neely & Jones, 1815), p. 404. [Online.] Available: [https://books.google.co.uk/booksid=R\\_pKAAAAYAAJ&pg=PA1&source=gbs\\_toc\\_r&cad=4#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.co.uk/booksid=R_pKAAAAYAAJ&pg=PA1&source=gbs_toc_r&cad=4#v=onepage&q&f=false) <accessed 13/08/2016>.)

<sup>74</sup> *Cymru Evan Jones*, p. 54.

<sup>75</sup> *buddel* = a post to which cattle were tied in the cow-house (*Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru*. [Online]. Available: <http://geiriadur.ac.uk/gpc/gpc.html?buddelw> <accessed 03/05/2016>.)

kept in the cowshed.

Up to the early years of the nineteenth century, it was common practice by Welsh farmers when the first load of the corn harvest had been carried to the barn, to thresh it immediately and then take the grain to the mill to grind, and it was these first fruits of the season that the family ate at harvest time. Jones heard frequent reports about an old man called John Morgan, who lived at Nant-yr-hwch, Abergwesyn, in the first quarter of the century, who observed this custom every year. One morning, when Jack was coming back from Abergwesyn Mill on horseback and carrying a load of flour, he saw the boys cutting corn in the field on the opposite side of the valley. Whereupon he shouted at the top of his voice: '*Fe gewch frecwast nawr, fechgyn!*' 'You shall have breakfast now, lads!' Jones states that it is more than likely that 'Jack of Nant-yr-hwch' was the last in the Hundred of Builth to keep up this old custom of eating the fruits of the first load during the corn harvest.<sup>76</sup>

After the farmers had finished threshing the contents of their barns and rickyards and had sown their land, there would be a lot of grain to be taken to the mill for grinding to make it edible. At this season elderly menfolk would be seen traversing a wide area of the country on their walking sticks, with sacks on their backs, to beg corn from the farmers, then would take the proceeds straight to the mill for grinding, before finally carrying it home as cereal for the family.<sup>77</sup> In Evan Jones' eyes the fact that some would receive as much as four or six bushels of corn was certain proof that farmers in former times were kind to the poor and needy living near them.

Likewise, when seed was scarce and expensive in consequence of a wet summer or bad harvest, some smallholders of limited means would often walk some distance begging for seed-corn in order to sow small patches on their holdings. Jones quotes the sixteenth-century Glamorgan poet Thomas ab Ieuan ap Rhys (1510–1560), who in his poem *Can Cymhortha*, 'Assisting Song', complains that his wife will not give him any peace until he goes out to collect or beg for corn seed to sow on the unploughed land near their house, to which he responds:

*Ny chai lonydd, na nos na dydd,*      I don't get any peace day or night,  
*Genti onid a i'r vro i ytta.*<sup>78</sup>      From you unless I go and collect or beg the corn.

Jones identifies gleaning as another process by which the poor of the area had in former times once scratched out a subsistence living. Poor widows and their orphan children would often be given permission by the farmer to glean the ears of corn left on the stubble after the crop had been harvested. The method would be to take a '*grwn*', or strip of land between two furrows, and move forwards and then back again, collecting every ear of corn with the greatest precision until the whole field had been completely gleaned from one end to the other. Jones once heard one elderly lady say that bread made

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 222.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., pp. 222-3.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 223.

from wheat gleanings was the only white bread she received throughout the year when she was being brought up.<sup>79</sup>

Gleaning was in fact a contentious issue in Britain as a whole during the nineteenth century. Whilst it had long been seen as a common rural right for the poor to enter the fields at the end of harvest and garner any grain left lying, it was a practice often contested by farmers, who in fact were repeatedly shown to have the law on their side.<sup>80</sup> Evan Jones goes out of his way to applaud the landowners in his area who showed great generosity towards the poor, but one wonders whether this was necessarily the case in all of Wales, or whether some areas were more like the rest of Britain in experiencing resentment by the farmer about this long-standing tradition. What we can say with some certainty is that behind this relatively charitable picture so often presented by Victorian and later writers who viewed the high farmers as the fathers of their people, there lay much deprivation and exploitation.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> *Cymru* Evan Jones, p. 223.

<sup>80</sup> Morgan, *Harvesters*, p. 151.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 188.

## Chapter 2: Seasonal Migrations

So far we have looked at a range of harvest customs and practices in various parts of the country. It is now necessary to turn to that other great phenomenon connected with the traditional harvest: that of migration.

Seasonal weather patterns always created an annual manpower crisis and occasional references to migration to the corn harvest in Wales (as in England) can be found from the thirteenth century onwards, when landlords, especially in the eastern Marches, began to specialise in corn-growing and Welsh farm labourers were most likely already migrating to England at harvest-time, following the drover routes and attracted by the higher wages on offer there. By 1372 we know that Welsh migrant labourers reaped much of the harvest at the manors of Brecon, Bronllys and Hay. An Act passed in 1562 both obliged labourers to make a priority of assisting with their local harvest, whilst making provision for them to seek work on harvests elsewhere when none was forthcoming in their own locality.<sup>82</sup> The practice was evident in Anglesey in the early seventeenth century, where it is noted that: 'The husband generally made his way to other Welsh shires or across the border to solicit grain, and seed during the harvest season, and to gather 'honkes' and thraves of corn all over the county'.<sup>83</sup>

However, as John Williams-Davies points out in his extensive study of Welsh seasonal migrant labour, the whole scale of these migration patterns changed from the late eighteenth century with the introduction of new labour-intensive systems of farming.<sup>84</sup> From the early nineteenth century there were three major migrant flows to the corn harvest, especially from the poorer, upland areas of Wales, to the more fertile areas of the Vale of Clwyd, the Vale of Glamorgan, and the English border counties of Herefordshire and Shropshire. The migrants were mainly smallholders and agricultural labourers and they usually travelled to the harvest under a leader who organised the group and negotiated the harvest contract with the farmers. Working conditions were tough and onerous and lifestyles were generally sparse, yet overall relations with the farmers who employed them seemed to have been positive.<sup>85</sup>

Most seasonal migration in north Wales was to the Vale of Clwyd, some coming from as far afield as Anglesey and the Llŷn Peninsula; while farmers in the Vale of Glamorgan looked to labourers from Cardiganshire, Pembrokeshire and Carmarthenshire for help with the harvest as more men left

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<sup>82</sup> John Williams-Davies, 'The Seasonal Migration of Agricultural Labour in Nineteenth Century Wales' (unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Wales, 1985), National Museum of Wales MS 3358 (photostat copy), pp. 35–6, 38, 44.

<sup>83</sup> J. A. Halliwell, *A Minute Account of the Social Condition of the People of Anglesey (1612-13)* (London, 1860), quoted in G. D. Owen, *Elizabethan Wales* (Cardiff, 1962), p. 189, cited in Williams-Davies, 'Seasonal Migration', p. 44. A 'thrive' consists of 'two shocks or stooks of corn, generally containing twelve sheaves each, but varying in different localities; hence used as a measure of straw', *Shorter Oxford Dictionary*, 1983.

<sup>84</sup> Williams-Davies, 'Seasonal Migration', p. 48.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, abstract.

the land for the newly industrialised valleys in the nineteenth century. There were also smaller, more localised migrations such as that from the uplands of Cardiganshire to the more fertile coastal belt in the north of the country: this was known as '*y cynhaeaf bach*', 'the small harvest', and consisted mainly of female labourers. But by far the largest number of seasonal migrants went to the English border counties, especially Shropshire and Herefordshire, which generally attracted labourers from north and south Wales, respectively. However, the harvest labour catchment areas were not mutually exclusive and constantly overlapped, with migrants' paths often crossing one another. Rhayader formed a focal point for migrant routes into England from mid-Wales, and was recorded as such in poetry and song.<sup>86</sup>

Seasonal migration was not so much a pursuit of a higher standard of living as of a basic means of subsistence.<sup>87</sup> One writer observed: '*Nid peth bach mewn hanes llawer teulu oedd y dair i bum punt o arian cynhaeaf Henffordd*' / 'The three to five pounds obtained at the Herefordshire harvest were no small things in the life of many families'.<sup>88</sup>

Migrants' attitudes towards harvest were somewhat ambivalent. They worked hard from dawn to dusk but often enjoyed a higher standard of living and a more abundant supply of food and drink than at any other time of the year. Strong drink flowed freely in the harvest fields: beer in the Vales of Clwyd and Glamorgan, and copious quantities of cider in Herefordshire. This behaviour may have been at variance with the Welsh nonconformist stress on temperance but was tolerated in the harvest fields: it was an old adage that the 'harvest men' left their religion somewhere on the road to England, and then picked it up again on their return; in the case of the Cardiganshire labourers, or 'Cardis' as they were called, this was said to be in Brecknockshire on their way to and from England.<sup>89</sup>

It was a widespread tradition for Welsh itinerant workers to begin their long march to harvest on a Sunday night, but strictly speaking not before midnight for fear of breaking the Sabbath. We are led to believe that the harvest gangs would recite stories, banter and gossip along the route, but whether this matched the reality of a journey by foot of up to three days on poor roads is a matter of speculation. Harvesters would carry their belongings in a white sack or bag slung over their shoulders, as well as a reaping hook and a sharpening stone. Their reaping hooks or sickles would typically be slung over their backs, and each blade would either be carefully covered with a rod or stick, or bound with a thick straw rope, to protect both bearer and tool.<sup>90</sup> At the end of the harvest reaping hooks are reported as often having been sold rather than carried homewards. A few harvesters also carried a scythe with them, for which it was necessary to take the tool apart and then tie the blade along the

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., pp. 53–5, 57, 59–62, 70.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p. 98.

<sup>88</sup> Jenkin Lloyd, 'Cynhaeaf Sir Henffordd', *Cymru* 49 (1915), pp. 169–71, 170, cited in Williams-Davies, 'Seasonal Migration', p. 99; [also online]. Available: <http://welshjournals.llgc.org.uk/browse/viewpage/llgc-id:1356250/llgc-id:1366351/llgc-id:1366528/get650> <accessed: 10/05/2016>.

<sup>89</sup> Williams-Davies, 'Seasonal Migration', pp. 108–9; *Cymru* Evan Jones, p. 80.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 80; Williams-Davies, 'Seasonal Migration', pp. 127–30.

side to ease carrying it. They took enough food with them for the journey, and would sleep in barns or outhouses rather than pay for overnight accommodation. The homeward journey could be a hazardous experience, and there were several accounts of returning labourers being either robbed or fleeced out of their hard-won earnings.<sup>91</sup>

Harvest labourers organised themselves into gangs, with each '*medel*' or reaping-party totalling up to a hundred strong before the nineteenth century, but during that century reducing markedly to between three and twelve men. Most reaping-parties appointed a more experienced member as a leader; in Cardiganshire he was often known as *y Sais*, or 'the Englishman', if he was the only one who could converse in English. It was his responsibility to organise the migration, especially the best time to set out, and for this he needed to maintain contact with the relevant corn-growing area. It fell to the leader to negotiate the most advantageous contract he could for his men, and then to supervise the work in the harvest field and maintain general consensus within the group.<sup>92</sup>

Migrants generally undertook only the heaviest, and therefore the most well paid, harvest jobs, such as cutting, binding and stooking the corn, before moving on to the next farm and leaving the less urgent chores of carrying and stacking to local workers. Most moved together as a company from farm to farm. The leader would bargain with the farmer on behalf of the group regarding the working conditions, most importantly rates of pay, and this could sometimes continue for half a day before agreement was finally reached. Pay differentials between an 'easy' and a 'difficult' crop could be quite substantial. The drink ration varied from place to place and could range from two quarts to two gallons daily; and drunkenness was not an uncommon feature in the harvest fields, presenting a challenge for many farmers.<sup>93</sup>

Hugh Evans presents us with a typical case-study for 'Cwm Eithin': the Uwchaled district of Denbighshire, comprising the set of parishes including Llangwm, Cerrigydrudion and Pentrefoelas among others; and shows how, as soon as the hay was in, most farm workers left to join the corn harvest in Shropshire or the Vale of Clwyd. The men would start out from Corwen (*Dyffryn Edeyrnion*) at nightfall, walk over the Berwyn mountains through the night, arrive in the Oswestry area at daybreak, then immediately commence harvesting and work through until ten o'clock the following evening. This was in the mid- to late-nineteenth century. Harvest wages in the Vale of Clwyd might be ten to twelve shillings per acre for cutting, binding and stacking corn. A 'butty gang' would often enter into a harvest contract with one or two farms and then form a 'butty mess' to share out the wages equally. The rate was subsequently increased to sixteen shillings per acre, and working from dawn to dusk a labourer could cut, bind and stack roughly two and a half acres of corn in a week, earning

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., pp. 130–2, 135.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., pp. 119, 121, 123, 124–6.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., pp. 136–9.

forty-five shillings.<sup>94</sup>

### **The Vale of Clwyd and 'Cyflog y Groes'**

The practice of 'Cyflog y Groes', or 'Cross Wages', which flourished in Denbighshire and Flintshire during the mid-nineteenth century, and in particular in the Vale of Clwyd, arose from the abundant fertility of the Vale, which created a constant need for an additional supply of labour over the harvest period, especially when the work was still being done mainly by sickle. Sometimes known as 'Rhuddlan Wages', referring to the wages of the Cross in that market town, its main function was to determine the daily wage to be paid to the reapers.<sup>95</sup>

During the harvest season the labourers would arrive in Denbigh or Ruthin very early in the morning from the surrounding areas, sickles in hand or over the shoulder, and assemble in a circle at *Y Groes* – the Cross or square. In due course the farmers would arrive on horseback, and the first one usually settled the pay for the group of workers he selected, whereupon he would depart with them. Other farmers would then follow suit, each adhering to the specified wage, so that the first farmer had in effect determined the wage for that day throughout the whole surrounding area.<sup>96</sup> A person known as the *cofrestrydd*, or registrar, who might be a local shopkeeper, would be on hand to record the wage agreed each morning throughout the harvest month, and it was to this figure that all the farmers of the district turned for an accurate record so as to pay the correct wages to their labourers for the month.<sup>97</sup> For some harvests, during seasons of unsettled weather, wages were very high owing to the great demand for workers.<sup>98</sup>

A substantial degree of bargaining might have taken place on these occasions, and Elias Owen cites a case where a farm servant sent by his master to Ruthin to offer good wages to the men, outwitted a more well-to-do but miserly farmer by hiring labourers and effectively setting good wages for the day.<sup>99</sup>

The practice of seasonal hiring for the harvest is recorded for the following towns and villages: Denbigh, Ruthin, Wrexham, Abergele, Eglwys Bach, Mochdre, Llaneurgain (Northop), and Llangernyw. But the best known was undoubtedly Rhuddlan, where hiring took place on a Sunday for the whole of the following week rather than for just a single day as elsewhere, and Sunday being a rest day a fair or wake grew up around the hiring.<sup>100</sup> A market atmosphere prevailed with the trading

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<sup>94</sup> Evans, *Gorse Glen*, pp. 110–12.

<sup>95</sup> Trefor M. Owen, 'The Social Organization of Harvesting: A Welsh Case Study', in Hugh Cheape, ed., *Tools and Traditions: Studies in European Ethnology presented to Alexander Fenton* (Edinburgh: National Museums of Scotland, 1993), pp. 85–92, 85.

<sup>96</sup> D. Ifor Jones, 'Cyflog y Groes', *Cymru* 51 (1916), translated by Howard Williams, pp. 81–2, 81.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81; Williams-Davies, 'Seasonal Migration', p. 146.

<sup>98</sup> Jones, 'Cyflog', p. 81.

<sup>99</sup> Owen, *Old Stone Crosses*, p. 159; Owen, 'Social Organization', pp. 87–8.

<sup>100</sup> Owen, 'Social Organization', p. 88; Owen, *Old Stone Crosses*, p. 156.

of sickles and other items; following which the men visited the local hostelrys for song and dance, often all night long, during which drunken brawls were common.<sup>101</sup> This Sunday hiring tradition was the 'ungodly practice and evil disorder' which the Reverend John Elias (1774–1841) saw as his mission to combat, a task he successfully accomplished with one powerful sermon in 1802, though the practice did not disappear entirely but was driven from the open public arena and into the taverns.<sup>102</sup>

The fact that these hiring practices each took place at the Cross – that is, the High Cross or the Market Cross – may well have had a particular significance.<sup>103</sup> All important announcements were made there, whilst agreements struck at the Cross took on a binding, quasi-religious importance. The phrase '*torri y groes*', or breaking the labour agreement made at the cross, was used to refer to the failure to honour bargains struck at the cross at harvest time; but it was considered to be very serious, and consequently hardly ever happened.<sup>104</sup> An old Welsh couplet refers to the cross wage as: '*Coron a bwyd, Cyflog y Groes*' / 'A crown and food, The wage of the Cross'.<sup>105</sup>

The precarious nature of the whole system is, however, only too apparent. Even in 1810, when the custom was at its height, Walter Davies in the first of his two-part survey of agriculture in Wales described it as 'an absurd custom': 'The farmer is every morning parading the market towns when he ought to be busily employed in his fields at home'.<sup>106</sup> A bad harvest brought about by adverse weather could mean hundreds of labourers standing idly by on the streets.<sup>107</sup> In addition, an individual farmer who had finished harvesting and who harboured a personal grudge against his neighbour could rush early to the Cross and employ a single worker on a high wage, thereby forcing his neighbour to pay the same large sum perhaps to a dozen or more men he required for that day.<sup>108</sup> Ifor Jones, writing in 1916, states that the Cross Wages system had ceased over half a century previously, i.e. by 1865, largely through its abuse,<sup>109</sup> whereas Trefor Owen suggests that it hung on towards the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>110</sup> Whatever the case, while the custom's misuse had certainly weakened the

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<sup>101</sup> Robert Jones, *Drych yr Amseroedd*, ed. G. M. Ashton (Trefriw, 1820; Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1958), p. 63, cited in Owen, 'Social Organization', p. 88.

<sup>102</sup> J. Roberts and J. Jones, *Cofiant y Parchedig John Elias* (Liverpool: M. A. Jones, 1850), pp. 40–4, cited in Owen, 'Social Organization', pp. 88–9; Owen, *Old Stone Crosses*, pp. 159–61.

<sup>103</sup> Owen, 'Social Organization', p. 89.

<sup>104</sup> Owen, *Old Stone Crosses*, pp. 154–5; Williams-Davies, 'Seasonal Migration', p. 143.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158.

<sup>106</sup> Walter Davies, *General View of the Agriculture and Domestic Economy of North Wales* (London: Board of Agriculture, 1810) pp. 354–5. [Online]. Available: <https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=KxUAAAAAQAAJ&printsec=frontcover&output=reader&hl=en&pg=GBS.PA355> <accessed 13/05/2016>; Owen, 'Social Organization', p. 89.

<sup>107</sup> *Commission on Employment of Children, Young Persons, and Women in Agriculture*. Third Report of Commissioners (London, 1870), p. 94, cited in Owen, 'Social Organization', p. 88.

<sup>108</sup> Jones, 'Cyflog', p. 82; Owen, *Old Stone Crosses*, p. 158; A note by Canon T. Jesse Jones in J. R. Ellis, *A History of Abergele*, quoted by E. Wynne Williams, 'Brynffanigl Harvest Accounts 1855–75', *Transactions of the Denbighshire Historical Society* 10 (1960), pp. 231–5, cited in Owen, 'Social Organization', p. 94.

<sup>109</sup> Jones, 'Cyflog', p. 82.

<sup>110</sup> Owen, 'Social Organization', p. 89.



tradition, the introduction of mechanisation on the harvest fields subsequently dealt the final death blow.<sup>111</sup>

### **The Vale of Glamorgan**

Another key destination for seasonal migration within Wales in the early nineteenth century was the fertile Vale of Glamorgan, traditionally known for its wheat, to which large numbers of Cardiganshire farmworkers, mainly smallholders, journeyed in early August to participate in harvest work; they were not the only ones who migrated there – others came from Pembrokeshire and Carmarthenshire – but the 'Cardis' as they were called certainly predominated.<sup>112</sup> By the third quarter of the nineteenth century harvest migrants from Cardiganshire expected to bring home around five pounds, which was an appreciable addition to an annual income of between twelve and thirteen pounds.<sup>113</sup>

A long-established tradition in the Vale and unique to the area was the practice of 'leasing', by which the farmer would 'let' his wheat be reaped by the acre, with food and beer supplied. Local reapers had come to regard it as a 'right' for their wives or next-of-kin to glean in the fields while they were at work reaping; and if they had no family members to glean the corn, they could 'lease' the area out for an agreed sum per acre. This practice brought in a considerable income for each reaper, and a family might glean fifteen or sixteen bushels of corn. But the practice was very much to the farmers' loss and therefore they preferred itinerant workers, who did not claim the same rights. In any case, by 1835 some of the leading farmers in the Vale saw to it that the practice was abolished.<sup>114</sup>

The Cardis' lifestyle in the Vale was very frugal; they would sleep in barns and granaries, and their evenings were spent in singing old Welsh hymns, as these men were exceptionally devout. They employed a particular method of cutting wheat known as 'bagging' (*llaw daro*), for which they used 'bagging' hooks – a curved hook similar in appearance to a sickle but with a smooth edge: these left a cleaner stubble and a greater quantity of straw for the farmer.<sup>115</sup> In the fields they were provided with generous quantities of beer to drink.<sup>116</sup> At the chapel services on Sundays one of the Cardis' habits which grated intensely on the Vale inhabitants was that of chewing tobacco and spitting it out, which was perfectly acceptable behaviour in their home area.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Jones, 'Cyflog', p. 81.

<sup>112</sup> Moelwyn I. Williams, 'Seasonal migrations of Cardiganshire harvest gangs to the Vale of Glamorgan in the nineteenth century', *Ceredigion: Journal of the Cardiganshire Antiquarian Society* 3, 1–4 (1956–59), pp. 156–60, 156. [Online]. Available: <http://welshjournals.llgc.org.uk/browse/viewpage/llgc-id:1093205/llgcid:1093764/llgc-id:1093934/get650> <accessed 05/04/2016>; Williams-Davies, 'Seasonal Migration', p. 56.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 209.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142; Williams, 'Seasonal migrations', pp. 157–8.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158.

<sup>116</sup> Williams-Davies, 'Seasonal Migration', p. 189.

<sup>117</sup> Williams, 'Seasonal migrations', pp. 158–9; Williams-Davies, 'Seasonal Migration', p. 254.

A story was told in the Bronnant district of mid-Cardiganshire of a reaper returning from harvest who left his gang to cross Esgair Maen Common; but he was chased by a bull and running to take refuge up a tree fell on his sickle, causing a severe wound to his leg. He eventually made his escape when the bull lost interest and went away, but he was forever lame thereafter.<sup>118</sup>

## Herefordshire and Shropshire

Welsh farm labourers were most likely already migrating to England at harvest-time by the middle of the thirteenth century, following the drover routes and attracted by the higher wages on offer there.<sup>119</sup> In 1797 the Reverend Richard Warner of Bath records seeing 'two or three hundred' Welsh reapers on their way to Herefordshire and Gloucestershire for harvest;<sup>120</sup> whilst Walter Davies in his diary for 1813 comments that the three thousand or so workers who migrated annually from Cardiganshire to the productive corn-growing areas of Shropshire and Herefordshire 'go at a time when their presence is most wanted at home... Better living tempts them to this expedition more than gain'; in fact, according to Davies they returned with at most one pound apiece.<sup>121</sup> Three thousand migrants is almost certainly an underestimate, nor does it take into account the migration areas of the Vale of Clwyd or Vale of Glamorgan already examined.<sup>122</sup>

It is again Evan Jones of Llanwrtyd who provides a local perspective on the migration to the Herefordshire and Shropshire harvest fields. He describes how in mid August each year many Welshmen could be seen marching in a row like troops towards the corn harvest in England. They reached their different destinations within these two English counties within two days, a distance of approximately twenty-six miles from the county of Cardigan. Many reapers would agree not only to reap but also to bind the corn, for which they would take boys or elderly men with them to do the binding, who would be paid by the day.<sup>123</sup> A good binder could follow two reapers cutting with sickles throughout the day.<sup>124</sup> Rising early in the morning, they worked diligently and hard during all the hours of daylight. There would be as much cider in the fields as the harvesters could drink; and it was an old custom for most reapers to carry small drinking-cups made of horn with them.<sup>125</sup>

Several gangs were likely to have banded together to work on individual farms once reaching

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<sup>118</sup> St Fagans: National History Museum, Tape AWC 4580: Daniel Jones, Bron Fynwent, Bronnant, Ceredigion, recorded by J. Williams-Davies 24.6.1975, cited in Williams-Davies, 'Seasonal Migration', pp. 239–40; full citation kindly provided by Fflur Gwynn.

<sup>119</sup> Williams-Davies, 'Seasonal Migration', pp. 35–6.

<sup>120</sup> R. Warner, *A Walk Through Wales in August 1797* (London, 1799), p. 32, cited in Williams-Davies, 'Seasonal Migration', p. 83.

<sup>121</sup> National Library of Wales MS 1758, cited in Owen, 'Social Organization of Harvesting', p. 86.

<sup>122</sup> Williams-Davies, 'Seasonal Migration', pp. 83–4.

<sup>123</sup> Williams, 'Seasonal migrations', pp. 158–9; Williams-Davies, 'Seasonal Migration', p. 254.

<sup>124</sup> Perhaps the most likely rendering of '*Yr oedd rhwymwr da yn rhwymo ar ôl dau gryman drwy gydol y dydd*' (personal communication Howard Williams).

<sup>125</sup> *Cymru Evan Jones*, p. 80.

Herefordshire, though some Welsh itinerant labourers preferred to opt out of this system altogether and seek employment at hiring fairs in market towns such as Shrewsbury or Oswestry.<sup>126</sup>

Despite the old adage about leaving their religion on the road as they journeyed to England as well as the strong drink which flowed freely in the harvest fields, many Welsh harvesters were nevertheless deeply religious men and the vast majority seem to have been sober and respectable.<sup>127</sup>

There appears to have been mostly a strong bond of trust and mutual appreciation between the farmers and the harvest migrants, but relations with the wider local communities where they worked seem to have been much more ambiguous, with migrants often complaining that they were viewed with mistrust, especially by the authorities.<sup>128</sup> An immensely popular ballad, '*Hanes Medelwyr*' ('The Reaper's Story'), which appeared in 1759, relates the hardships of three Welshmen who travelled to the English border counties for harvest work:

*Ni aethon i fedd fel tri o ynfydion  
Heb ddeall yn union mor sosi oedd Saeson.*<sup>129</sup>

We went reaping like three simpletons  
Without realising exactly how saucy the English could be.<sup>130</sup>

Initially promised food and drink and lodging, later at night the housewife would give them nothing but wheat straw for bedding; whereupon the resolve of the three reapers to start out for home brought the English to their senses and they were provided with all that had been promised, including comfortable beds in the house.<sup>131</sup>

In fact, the poor treatment that Welsh harvesters received in England is a common theme running through various songs relating to the migrant tradition which have been collected. '*Ffarwel y Medelwr*' ('The Reaper's Farewell'), collected from mid-Cardiganshire, conveys the labourer's resolve never to return to the English harvest:

<i>Ffarwel i wlad estron!</i>	Farewell to a foreign country!
<i>Ffarwel i Dref Clawdd!</i>	Farewell to Knighton!
<i>'Does neb at y Saeson</i>	There is no-one who to the English
<i>A'm gyrr eto'n hawdd;</i>	Will send me easily again;
<i>Ni welir drachefn</i>	You will not again
<i>Fi'n myned byth mwy</i>	See me go
<i>A'm pac ar fy nghefen</i>	With my pack on my back

<sup>126</sup> Williams-Davies, 'Seasonal Migration', pp. 120, 141.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., pp. 192–3.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., pp. 194–5, 197, 200–1.

<sup>129</sup> David Jones (Dewi Fardd), *Blodeu-gerdd Cymry*, 3rd edition (Holywell, 1823), p. 500, cited in Williams-Davies, 'Seasonal Migration', p. 49. [Online]. Text also available:

[https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=jVtiAAAACAAJ&pg=PA500&dq=Hanes+Medelwyr&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUK EwjAutvY9M\\_MAhUkKsAKHadtCxQQ6AEIHTAA#v=onepage&q=Hanes%20Medelwyr&f=false](https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=jVtiAAAACAAJ&pg=PA500&dq=Hanes+Medelwyr&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUK EwjAutvY9M_MAhUkKsAKHadtCxQQ6AEIHTAA#v=onepage&q=Hanes%20Medelwyr&f=false) <accessed 10 May 2016>.

<sup>130</sup> Williams-Davies, 'Seasonal Migration', p. 201.

<sup>131</sup> Jones, *Blodeu-gerdd Cymry*, p. 500, cited in Williams-Davies, 'Seasonal Migration', pp. 261–2.

At the end of the harvest with all the reaping done the men turned their faces homewards once more, walking all the way again. Evan Jones' account indicates that the return journey was more desultory, with individual workers much more scattered, one here and one there, some well ahead of the others, and many looking exhausted. Some would, surprisingly, sell their sickles on their way home for a small amount of money to anyone who would buy them. Jones refers to many carrying a 'hundredweight' (*cant*) or more of apples home to their families on their backs, though this might have been intended in a figurative rather than a literal sense, considering the weight involved.<sup>134</sup>

According to Jones there were older accounts of workers living in the areas of Llanddewibrefi and Llangeitho who journeyed to the corn harvest for thirty consecutive years or more. And as the corn harvest was later in Wales than in England, they aimed to return by the time of the harvest at home.<sup>135</sup>

Seasonal migration remained an important feature of rural Wales throughout most of the nineteenth century and although there were cyclical swings in numbers there was no permanent decline until the 1870s at the earliest.<sup>136</sup> But during the 1880s over 100,000 people left Welsh farms, overwhelmingly farm labourers; by this time Wales had become an industrial society and, in the words of Gwyn Williams, 'the terrible dominion of the harvest and seasonal cycle had been broken'.<sup>137</sup> The practice of migration eventually faded away owing to the reduction of supply and demand for seasonal labour, and Williams-Davies concludes that: 'It is unlikely that many mourned its passing'.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> D. R. Cledlyn Davies and Z. S. Cledlyn Davies, *Hanes Plwyf Llanwenog* (Aberystwyth: Welsh Gazette, 1939), p. 110, cited in Williams-Davies, 'Seasonal Migration', pp. 260–1.

<sup>133</sup> Translation by J. Williams-Davies, p. 261.

<sup>134</sup> *Cymru Evan Jones*, p. 80; personal communication Howard Williams.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>136</sup> Williams-Davies, 'Seasonal Migration', p. 278.

<sup>137</sup> Gwyn A. Williams, *When Was Wales? A History of the Welsh* (London: Black Raven Press, 1985), pp.175–6.

<sup>138</sup> Williams-Davies, 'Seasonal Migration', p. 305.

### Chapter 3: The Last Sheaf

#### *Y Gaseg Fedi*

At the harvest end we reach the custom that has been most recorded, dissected and analysed, that of the last sheaf: indeed, in many harvest accounts it is the *only* custom to be so recorded. The distribution of 'last sheaf' traditions is documented for all the 'Celtic' areas of the British Isles, i.e. all arable districts of Wales as well as Scotland, the Isle of Man, Ireland, and Cornwall. They are, with a few notable exceptions, absent from most of England.<sup>139</sup> In fact, it is Wales which possesses the two oldest references to the naming of the last sheaf. The first is by Lewis Morris in Anglesey in the early eighteenth century;<sup>140</sup> the second being the letter written on the 22<sup>nd</sup> August 1736 by John Wright, the bailiff of the Stackpole Estate in south Pembrokeshire, to his master in London that the 'neck' had been cut at the end of harvest.<sup>141</sup>

We know that variations of the custom were once widespread during the nineteenth century and almost certainly before in the productive corn-growing regions of Wales, such as the Vale of Clwyd, Caernarfonshire, Anglesey, the Tanat Valley in Powys, Monmouthshire, and Breconshire together with its border with Radnorshire.<sup>142</sup> But the tradition seems to have been particularly strong in south-west Wales, where it was known by three names within the counties of Pembrokeshire, south Cardiganshire and west Carmarthenshire: *y gaseg fedi* 'the harvest mare', or *y gaseg ben fedi* 'end-of-the-reaping mare'; *y wrach* 'the hag or witch'; and in anglicised south Pembrokeshire as 'the neck',<sup>143</sup> as seen in the example above. In fact, the early Anglesey version mentioned by Lewis Morris refers to it as '*torri pen y wrach*', or 'cutting the head of the witch'. In addition to the literal translation, the *caseg fedi* was also the corn maiden – or what today we refer to as the corn dolly – made from the very last sheaf of corn to be harvested in the field.<sup>144</sup>

One of the best eyewitness accounts we have of the *caseg fedi* – that for Carmarthenshire – was written in 1895 by the clergyman D. G. Williams.<sup>145</sup> The custom was carried out in an atmosphere of

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<sup>139</sup> Ronald Hutton, *The Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 337. In England the tradition of returning with the 'last load' on the harvest wagon was predominant.

<sup>140</sup> Owen, *Welsh Folk Customs*, p. 115; Hutton, *Stations*, p. 337.

<sup>141</sup> E. Laws, and D. Jenkyn Evans, 'The Harvest Customs of Pembrokeshire', in Owen Rhys et al., *Pembrokeshire Antiquities* (Solva and Fishguard: H. W. Williams, 1897), pp. 19–21, 19; D. Roy Saer, '*Canu at Iws' ac Ysgrifau Eraill*' (Aberystwyth: Cymdeithas Alawon Gwerin Cymru, 2013), p. 297.

<sup>142</sup> Iorwerth C. Peate, 'Corn-Customs in Wales', *Man* 30 (1930), pp. 151–5, 152–3. [Online]. Available: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2789748> <accessed: 21/07/2014>; Owen, *Welsh Folk Customs*, pp. 115, 120; Roy Palmer, *The Folklore of (Old) Monmouthshire* (Little Logaston, Herefordshire: Logaston Press, 1998), p. 221.

<sup>143</sup> Peate, 'Corn-Customs', p. 153.

<sup>144</sup> Owen, *Welsh Folk Customs*, pp. 115–16.

<sup>145</sup> D. G. Williams, 'Casgliad o Len-gwerin Sir Gaerfyrddin', *Transactions of National Eisteddfod of Wales, Llanelly, [sic] 1895* (1898), translated by Howard Williams, pp. 299–302.

mutual celebration and merriment on the last day of harvest on the larger farms, which saw increased numbers of helpers, some of them smallholders – the '*pobl fach*' – who provided help in return for favours granted.<sup>146</sup> Some will have had the loan of a horse and cart to fetch coal and turf, or perhaps a horse or ox to help with some work or other; others will have been allocated space in the farmer's fields to grow potatoes: so many days of harvest labour for so many loads of manure provided by the farmer.<sup>147</sup>

Contrary to the image sometimes portrayed that this was a men-only event, Williams quite clearly states that the reaping-party comprised a long row consisting of both men and women (*rhes fawr o wŷr a gwagedd*), and that the team would be led by the head servant (*gwas mawr*)<sup>148</sup> or sometimes even the head female servant (*howsen*), especially if she was a good reaper.<sup>149</sup> The active presence of women is also supported by contemporary photographic evidence: one photograph in particular portrays a party of sixteen, eight of whom are women and seven of those are clearly brandishing sickles.<sup>150</sup>

As the reaping-party reached the '*pen medi*', or very last tuft of straw in the furthest corner of the last field, there would be a good deal of boisterous fun, such as hiding the whetstone during the final sharpening, or a lot of 'neighing' as a sign that they were about to catch the 'harvest mare'.<sup>151</sup> Occasionally this last sheaf of corn was left uncut in the centre of the field.<sup>152</sup>

It fell to the head servant to kneel and divide the sheaf into three parts, deftly interweaving them 'in the same way that he would plait a mare's tail', fastening them with straw below the ears, whereupon the tuft should be able to stand erect.<sup>153</sup> It was this which became the *caseg fedi*. Occasionally the plaited stalks would be supported by a twig or branch from the bank if they were too weak to stand.<sup>154</sup>

Six or eight reapers next took it in turn to throw their sickles at the sheaf, horizontally just above the ground, from a distance of ten yards or more, with the aim of cutting the sheaf off.<sup>155</sup> There would usually be some debate over the distance from the mare that competitors needed to stand, and a figure

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<sup>146</sup> Owen, *Welsh Folk Customs*, p. 115; Williams, 'Casgliad', p. 300.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 300.

<sup>148</sup> See note 37, page 11.

<sup>149</sup> Williams, 'Casgliad', p. 300.

<sup>150</sup> Michael Roberts, 'Sickles and scythes revisited: harvest work, wages and symbolic meanings', in P. Lane, N. Raven, and K. D. M. Snell (eds.), *Women, Work, and Wages in England, 1600–1850* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2004), pp. 68–101, p. 91. Despite the title of the edition, Roberts focuses on Welsh material in his paper and is here referring specifically to a Welsh example. He points out, however, (p. 91) that it is equally possible that women's roles varied and some may have augmented the reaping parties on the final day.

<sup>151</sup> W. J. Davies, *Hanes Plwyf Llandysul* (Llandysul, 1896), p. 233, trans. H. Williams.

<sup>152</sup> Peate, 'Corn-Customs', p. 152.

<sup>153</sup> Iorwerth C. Peate, 'Corn Ornaments', *Folklore* 82 (1971), pp. 177–84, p. 178; Peate, 'Corn-Customs', p. 152; Owen, *Welsh Folk Customs*, p. 116.

<sup>154</sup> Williams, 'Casgliad', p. 300.

<sup>155</sup> Peate, 'Corn-Customs', p. 152; Peate, 'Corn Ornaments', p. 178. Though corn had been mown with a scythe from the mid-nineteenth century, the sickle continued in use for cutting the last sheaf (Roberts, 'Sickles and scythes', p. 91).

of fifteen to twenty yards was generally agreed upon. They would also agree a rule to determine the throwing order. Williams asserts that the most unskilled throwers were given the first opportunity; elsewhere it is suggested that the head servant would lead. The atmosphere would be one of jollity, laughter and shouting.<sup>156</sup> Should none be successful in demolishing the sheaf, it would again fall to the head servant to proceed to cut it himself.<sup>157</sup>

When the mare was finally cut, a rhyme would be recited, or chanted, with great fervour:

*Bore codes, hwyr dilynes,  
'Nawr mi ces.*

Early I raised, late I followed,  
Now I have it.

The last line according to some was:

*Pen medi bach mi ces.*

The last tuft I've had.

And there would be a chorus of sorts:

*Ar 'i Gwar Hi!*

On Top of Her! (literally, On Her Neck!)<sup>158</sup>

In Pembrokeshire a variant of this rhyme was shouted by the successful reaper:

*Bore y codais hi,  
Hwyr y dilynais hi,  
Mi ces hi, mi ces hi!*

Early in the morning I got on her track,  
Late in the evening I followed her,  
I've got her, I've got her!

Whereupon he was questioned:

*Beth gest ti?*

What have you got?

To which the reaper would reply:

*Gwrach, gwrach, gwrach!*

A witch, a witch, a witch!

And the others would join in the refrain.<sup>159</sup>

The role of successful reaper was a much prized one and he would become master for the day. It was an important part of the tradition for the 'mare' to be carried into the farmhouse, but not in triumph as one might expect; rather the women and maidservants preparing the harvest feast saw to it to make the mare's entry as difficult as possible. The reaper's aim was to keep the plaited sheaf dry and hang it from a kitchen beam or lay it on the living-room table, where the servants ate their meals; the women's counter-aim was to try and wet the mare, and to this end they would be ready with jugs, pans and buckets of water to throw at anyone suspected of carrying it in.<sup>160</sup> Much tomfoolery ensued, with attempts by the reaping team to deceive the women as to the identity of the successful reaper, while the man himself would try to smuggle the sheaf in hidden under his clothes, but he would often be manhandled and drenched with water or beer in the process.<sup>161</sup>

In eastern Carmarthenshire a successful sheaf bearer who had brought the mare home dry would

<sup>156</sup> Williams, 'Casgliad', p. 300.

<sup>157</sup> Peate, 'Corn-Customs', p. 152; Peate, 'Corn Ornaments', p. 178; Owen, *Welsh Folk Customs*, p. 116.

<sup>158</sup> Williams, 'Casgliad', p. 300, trans. H. Williams.

<sup>159</sup> Peate, 'Corn-Customs', p. 153; Peate, 'Corn Ornaments', p. 179; Owen, *Welsh Folk Customs*, pp. 116–17.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117; Williams, 'Casgliad', pp. 300–1.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 301; Owen, *Welsh Folk Customs*, p. 117; Peate, 'Corn-Customs', p. 152; Peate, 'Corn Ornaments', p. 178.

be rewarded with liberal quantities of beer, whereas in the west of the county it would be a shilling or two – no small sum in the nineteenth century.<sup>162</sup> But most importantly, success signified a place of honour at the subsequent harvest feast; conversely, failure meant paying a penalty to the women, and a place at the foot of the table whilst being made the object of derision for the whole evening.<sup>163</sup>

From then on the *caseg fedd* would remain in the house for the following year, both as a decoration and a reminder that the harvest had been successful, often being replaced by a new one at the following year's harvest. At Llansilin, Denbighshire, some grain from the sheaf would frequently be mixed with next year's seed corn 'so as to teach it to grow'.<sup>164</sup>

The ritual reluctance by the indoor party to allow the mare access within the house, together with the necessity by the reaping party of outwitting the indoor gathering, bears a marked resemblance to the efforts by the indoor party to prevent the entrance of the 'Mari' in the Mari Lwyd tradition, alongside the necessity of the Mari party to outwit the indoor group through a singing competition. It is quite possible, though unprovable, that one tradition may have influenced the other; and likewise the parallel between the Mari 'horse' theme and the '*caseg fedd*' designation is beguiling, though more will be said about the latter in the third section.

### **Pitching the Mare**

A darker turn could occur, however, when the 'mare', concealed about the winning reaper's person, was instead taken to a neighbouring farm where the harvest still had to be completed. This was a very skilful, delicate and even dangerous operation, as it was considered to be supremely insulting by the neighbouring team. A farmer who learnt that an adjoining farm had almost finished reaping would tell the women to be on their guard against an intruder, but an adroit *caseg*-bearer would pretend to be passing on some innocent message and thereby gain access to the house without arousing the slightest suspicion. More often, however, the aim would be to pitch the sheaf in front of the principal reaper's sickle in the field, most likely adding to the taunt by shouting '*Gwrach!*' at the same time.<sup>165</sup>

Whichever method was used, having deposited the mare the interloper would then need to run for dear life: such individuals could be assaulted, have sickles hurled after them with potential injury, and in some cases even come close to being killed: for good reason therefore it was often the fastest runner who was given the job. If caught, he would be bound hand and foot with straw and left on the field or, even worse, thrown into the river or into a barrel of pig's feed.<sup>166</sup> Dr Peate cites one instance from

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<sup>162</sup> Williams, 'Casgliad', p. 301; Jonathan Ceredig Davies, *Folk-Lore of West and Mid-Wales* (Aberystwyth, 1911; facsimile reprint, Burnham-on-Sea: Llanerch Publishers, 1992), p. 80.

<sup>163</sup> Peate, 'Corn-Customs', p. 152; Owen, *Welsh Folk Customs*, pp. 117–18.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118; Williams, 'Casgliad', p. 301; Peate, 'Corn-Customs', p. 153.

<sup>166</sup> Owen, *Welsh Folk Customs*, p. 118; Williams, 'Casgliad', p. 301; Peate, 'Corn-Customs' p. 152; Peate, 'Corn Ornaments', pp. 178–9.



Cardiganshire where a reaper who had been caught was bound to the field-gate with straw and simply left there.<sup>167</sup> A variation of the custom developed in east Pembrokeshire in 1871–72 whereby a degenerative version of the *gwrach* was wrapped in a small parcel and conveyed to the neighbouring farmhouse at midnight, with the hope no doubt of avoiding all such rough treatment.<sup>168</sup> And often it was sufficient to shout mockingly over the bank at a neighbour who had not finished reaping.<sup>169</sup>

If the neighbouring farm was outside the parish, however, the *caseg*-bearer was safe from the law and could claim a shilling from the neighbour, as he could from his own master, if he was successful in taking the mare to either house dry. But if caught, he was unceremoniously taken back to the neighbour's farm and made to clean as many old shoes and clogs as could be found.<sup>170</sup>

One cannot help observing that this atmosphere of challenge and competitiveness between adjoining farms, bordering on insulting behaviour with the possibility of personal risk and physical violence, does not sit easily with the practice of *cymhortha* or mutual co-operation, observed in Chapter One.<sup>171</sup> Yet there are equally strong reports of both phenomena in the primary literature, not only of different districts observing different traditions but of the very same farms seemingly observing these contrasting neighbourly and competitive traditions as between the hay and corn harvests.

Peate takes a long view of these harvest customs and points to their weakening by the Welsh Methodist revival of the eighteenth century and then again by the 1859 revival, with many traditions having disappeared in the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>172</sup> However, the custom's more immediate decline during the nineteenth century can be accounted for in terms of the replacement of sickles first with scythes and then with machines.<sup>173</sup> Harvest customs such as the *caseg feddi* were dependent upon a particular kind of farming, and when the parties of reapers disappeared so, inevitably, did the 'last sheaf' tradition.<sup>174</sup>

### **Symbolism: Meanings and Functions**

It is already known from the Welsh examples considered that this last sheaf was often given a name representing a living being.<sup>175</sup> In addition to Wales, the term 'harvest mare' is known in Shropshire and Hertfordshire – in each of which the tradition was very similar to that in Wales – as

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<sup>167</sup> Peate, 'Corn-Customs' p. 155.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., p. 153; Peate, 'Corn Ornaments', p. 179.

<sup>169</sup> Williams, 'Casgliad', p. 301.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., p. 301.

<sup>171</sup> Jan Grendall, 'Cesyg Medi y Celtiaid', in *Ar Lafar ei Wlad: Cyfrol Deyrnged John Owen Huws* (Llanrwst: Gwasg Carreg Gwalch, 2002), translated by Howard Williams, pp. 143–62, 151.

<sup>172</sup> Peate, 'Corn-Customs', p. 155.

<sup>173</sup> Williams, 'Casgliad', p. 299; D. Parry-Jones, *Welsh Country Upbringing* (Batsford, 1948; Wirral: Ffynnon Press, 1974), p. 65; Hutton, *Stations*, p. 339.

<sup>174</sup> Owen, *Welsh Folk Customs*, p. 121.

<sup>175</sup> Hutton, *Stations*, p. 336.

well as Germany. But sheaves could take many other animal forms, one of which we have already encountered in the use of goat terminology for sheaves in south Denbighshire and north Merioneth. In Galloway reaping the last sheaf was referred to as 'cutting the hare', a name which also features in several European countries. To this we can add 'wolf' or 'dog' (France, Germany, and the Slavonic countries); and 'harvest cock' or 'harvest hen' (Austria); while other European names include 'pig', 'corn cat', 'steer', 'bull', and 'corn cow'.<sup>176</sup>

But the last sheaf could also be seen as a person. The use of the Welsh *gwrach* or 'hag' in north Pembrokeshire is paralleled in the Gaelic-speaking areas of Scotland by *cailleach*, also meaning 'hag', while in various other parts of Scotland she became either 'the maiden'<sup>177</sup> or the *carlin*, 'old woman'. In many areas of England she was called the 'corn maiden', 'corn doll', 'harvest doll', 'kern baby', or 'harvest queen'; in Brittany she became the 'mother sheaf'; whilst in Germany we find the 'corn mother', 'harvest mother' and 'grandmother'; all of which serve to illustrate the prevalent idea of the last sheaf as a female person.<sup>178</sup> So it would appear that the female form predominates when a human form is conceived of, but not necessarily when it is in animal form.

We can say with some certainty that the marked variation in the name chosen for the last sheaf in different areas depended upon whether it was viewed in a positive or negative light. As 'the maiden' she was to be welcomed; by contrast, the use of *y wrach* or 'the witch' in south-west as well as north-west Wales indicates something more to be feared. However, the more common *caseg feddi* fits into a much more neutral pattern, where the sheaf was seen as neither blessing nor curse: and this 'harvest mare' is joined by the use of 'the neck' in anglicised south Pembrokeshire and Cornwall. There is certainly no consistency in attitudes towards the last sheaf.<sup>179</sup>

The question of determining the meaning and symbolism of last sheaf traditions such as the *caseg feddi* has, however, been dominated by the views of the Scottish anthropologist and folklorist Sir James Frazer, ever since the publication of his monumental work *The Golden Bough* in twelve volumes between 1890 and 1915. Frazer argued that these traditions across northern Europe perpetuated the ancient myth of the Corn Mother or Spirit, whose vegetative power remained vigorous in the last sheaf of corn to be cut, and with its cutting she is either caught, driven away, or killed. This corn spirit was symbolised, often anthropomorphically, by this last sheaf and also by the reaper who cuts, binds or threshes it,<sup>180</sup> her symbolic death therefore marks the end of harvest and her fertility lies dormant

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<sup>176</sup> Peate, 'Corn Ornaments', pp. 182–3.

<sup>177</sup> Hutton, *Stations*, pp. 337–8.

<sup>178</sup> Peate, 'Corn Ornaments', p. 183.

<sup>179</sup> Hutton, *Stations*, pp. 337–9.

<sup>180</sup> James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Comparative Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1894), vol. I, pp. 330–409. [Online]. Available: <https://archive.org/details/goldenboughstudy01fraz> <accessed: 29/06/2016>; also 'The Corn-Mother and the Corn-Maiden in Northern Europe', in *The Golden Bough: Spirits of the Corn and of the Wild* (London: Macmillan, 1912), vol. I, pp. 131–70. [Online]. Available: <https://archive.org/details/goldenboughstudy07fraz> <accessed: 29/06/2016>; Owen, *Welsh Folk Customs*, p. 120.

within her during the winter, ready to reawaken the following spring.

According to Frazer, consequent upon being cut, the sheaf continued to be treated as possessing some power, either being plaited into a figurine and given a place of honour in the home or at the harvest feast, or ploughed back in to bring good luck to next year's crop, or conversely deposited with a neighbouring farmer as a harbinger of *bad* luck – the latter as evidenced by the 'pitching' examples we have already seen.<sup>181</sup>

This fertility theme, together with Frazer's view of the ancient origins of most, if not all, 'modern' folk customs, has taken a very deep-rooted hold on the folkloric and popular imaginations, including not least in terms of interpreting the Welsh *caseg fedi* tradition, and consequently requires close examination. Most commentators writing on the *caseg fedi* and parallel customs have tended to follow this approach.

For instance, Trefor Owen, writing in 1959, felt still able to point to Frazer as having accomplished more than any of his descendants in his folkloristic analysis of corn-customs.<sup>182</sup> More recently, the Cornish writer Jan Grendall, in a comparative survey of the 'harvest mares' of the Celts, had no hesitation in describing *cesyg medi* as 'symbols of fertility' (*arwyddluniau o ffrwythlondeb*), a function which persisted throughout their life until the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>183</sup> She asserts that it is beyond any doubt that the harvest mare customs are survivals of pagan rites, and most probably associated with fertility rituals, re-confirming that the 'spirit of the corn' (*ysbryd yr ŷd*) resided in the last sheaf cut at harvest time.<sup>184</sup>

The topic was again addressed in an essay published in 2010 by the late celebrated Welsh children's author T. Llew Jones, who embarked on a long search to determine the significance and origin of all aspects of the *caseg fedi* tradition.<sup>185</sup> Jones' search is characterised by the firm conviction that, if he is diligent enough, the answers are clearly available by trawling through the ancient myths, and in true Frazerian fashion he does not hesitate to assert that the forerunner of the Welsh harvest mare lay in pre-Roman Italy, ancient Greece, Babylon, ancient Egypt, and probably even in prehistory before any of these civilisations: '*Yr oedd y Gaseg, yn hen, hen iawn*' / 'The Mare was very, very old'.<sup>186</sup> For Jones, the significance of the last sheaf was that the corn goddess or her 'spirit' resided in it, and he is 'almost certain' that she was the same goddess as Greek Demeter and Roman Ceres. The *caseg* in the *caseg ben fedi* was the fertility goddess of the earth, in her golden harvest gown when she was most bountiful.<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> Hutton, *Stations*, p. 336.

<sup>182</sup> Owen, *Welsh Folk Customs*, pp. 120–1.

<sup>183</sup> Jan Grendall, 'Cesyg Medi', pp. 146–7.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147.

<sup>185</sup> T. Llew Jones, 'Y Gaseg yn yr ŷd', in *Llên Gwerin T. Llew Jones*, ed. Myrddin ap Dafydd (Llanrwst: Gwasg Carreg Gwalch, 2010), translated by Howard Williams, pp. 151–62.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 155, 157, 159. Jones goes so far as to say that the *caseg lwyd* or *Mari Lwyd* was the same goddess but now

Furthermore, Jones traces the origin of the tradition of the dowsing of the successful reaper with water to the story of the hunter Actaeon being nearly drowned by the goddess Diana's nymphs for the offence of gazing on her naked body – thereby avenging the goddess whose nakedness has been uncovered in the last sheaf of corn.<sup>188</sup>

Jones' interpretation is wonderfully imaginative and creative, and it is a common and understandable trait of our modern secular society to wish to link these old traditions by a thread, whether broken or unbroken, to even more ancient times, to the very dawn of history. But he never feels it necessary to ask the question as to exactly *how* this idea transferred to harvest fields in Wales two thousand years later, with virtually no evidence of transmission during the intervening centuries. It does fall to us, however, to pose the question: is any of this interpretation actually *true*?

Frazer's theory of the corn spirit had first been challenged as early as 1934 by the Swedish scholar Carl von Sydow, who argued that the last sheaf simply represented the end of a period of intensive hard work, ushering in much celebration as well as sober reflection, and a way of letting one's neighbours know about the farm's success; nowhere in Europe did he find any evidence for a belief in a corn spirit.<sup>189</sup> Historian Ronald Hutton, in his panoramic survey of the British ritual year published in 1996, concludes that Von Sydow's study together with two subsequent studies by Calum Maclean and Alan Gailey effectively demolish Frazer's theory of an animating corn spirit, at least as applied to the modern European variants;<sup>190</sup> though of course in popular perception the theory has persisted.

However, one Welsh scholar who consistently rejected the Frazerian interpretation of the corn spirit and the linkage with ancient myth well before this was Dr Iorwerth Peate: 'It is a disease which afflicts folklorists, archaeologists, anthropologists and even literary critics, alike'. Whilst not wishing to deny that the customs must have served some purpose, he argued that the ceremonies enacted over many, especially Christian, centuries must have transformed from their original forms, and had most likely become simply an exuberant expression of relief and merriment that another year's harvest was over. Hurling the sheaf onto a neighbour's farm may likewise have been no more than a comment on a lazy farmer: a kind of rough justice once commonplace in rural communities, and he believed it far-fetched to associate any aspect of the tradition with a cult of the corn-goddess.<sup>191</sup> In holding these views at the period he did – from the date of his first paper in 1930 through to his second in 1971 – Peate was extraordinarily ahead of his time. As his reference to folklorists and other scholars

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in her mourning-dress and full of anger and longing.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 160–2.

<sup>189</sup> C. W. von Sydow, 'The Mannhardtian Theories about the Last Sheaf and the Fertility Demons from a modern critical point of view', *Folk-Lore* 45 (1934) pp. 291–309, cited in Hutton, *Stations*, pp. 336–7.

<sup>190</sup> Hutton, *Stations*, p. 337. Calum I. Maclean, 'The Last Sheaf in the North of Ireland', *Ulster Folklife* 18 (1972), pp. 23–7; and Alan Gailey, 'The Bonfire in Northern Irish Tradition', *Folklore* 88 (1977); both cited in Hutton, *Stations*, pp. 502 and 500, respectively.

<sup>191</sup> Peate, 'Corn Ornaments', pp. 183–4.

demonstrates, Frazer's theories have continued to hold sway in some quarters right up to the present.

By contrast, Trefor Owen was still conjecturing in 1959 that, if Frazer's approach were correct, then a whole set of related traditions attached to the *caseg feddi* could similarly be interpreted as fertility rites. These included the indoor party stripping some clothes off whichever reaper was thought to be hiding the mare, which we know to have been enacted in Pembrokeshire; or the blanket-tossing game of *rhibo*. The Llansilin account of 'rolling the younger maid-servants... in the loose corn on the barn floor with attempts at kissing by the younger swains' would be a fairly obvious qualifier in this respect.<sup>192</sup> As is a similar tradition which formerly took place in Tenby, in this case at haymaking time, when anyone entering a field could be set upon by a group of the opposite sex, 'tossed about on the hay-cocks, and bound with hay-bands', until a forfeit of some sort had been extracted from the victim. When performed on females, the custom was referred to as 'giving them a green gown', and when on males, 'stretching their backs'.<sup>193</sup> The fact that in Brynaman, Carmarthenshire, the custom was referred to as *awr ar y gwair*, 'an hour on the hay', certainly seems to confirm the sexual innuendoes.<sup>194</sup>

But even Owen points out that we should beware that many customs can lend themselves very easily to a fertility interpretation, and that it is equally possible that many so ascribed may well have been performed simply for the sheer fun of it.<sup>195</sup> And this touches on the key point. There are many practices of an even more sexual nature in our modern society – 'sexting' or lap dancing to name but two – but we would not dream of interpreting *these* as 'fertility' rituals, and nor is there any particular reason why we should impose this interpretation on the sexual games and innuendos surrounding the *caseg feddi*: it is simply the habit of received wisdom that we have continued to do so.

We need to take account of the fact that where these myths were predominant in ancient societies, they formed the backcloth of all aspects of those societies, whether implicitly believed in or not; consequently they fed into the daily lives, music, literature, drama and general cultural life of those societies.

Similarly, to try and understand what the *caseg feddi* meant to a traditional Welsh agricultural society, we have to seek clues from that society as a whole, and especially its harvest culture. It is a truism which needs restating that everything we know about that society informs us that they did *not* live their lives in terms of ancient Greek myth! From all the examples we have considered so far, we know the Welsh agricultural community to have had a very practical, down-to-earth attitude to life generally and to the harvest in particular, and where religion was concerned there is no question but

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<sup>192</sup> Owen, *Welsh Folk Customs*, pp. 120–1.

<sup>193</sup> Richard Mason, *Tales and Traditions of Tenby* (Tenby: R. Mason, 1858), pp. 24–5, 137–8; Owen, *Welsh Folk Customs*, p. 121.

<sup>194</sup> Trefor M. Owen, *The Customs and Traditions of Wales: A Pocket Guide* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1991), p. 15.

<sup>195</sup> Owen, *Welsh Folk Customs*, p. 121.

that the overwhelming majority would have been good Christians, many of them very devoutly so. It may have been said of the harvest migrants that they temporarily left their religion on the road to England, but this was in the context of the Welsh nonconformist stress on temperance; it did not mean that towards the end of the harvest they somehow reverted to some kind of 'pagan' mode, with a belief in the corn goddess and the dowsing of the successful reaper because he had discovered her nakedness; this runs contrary to everything we know about them.

In fact, when we examine those writers who were closest to the *caseg fedi*, we find no reference to corn spirit or fertility beliefs whatsoever. Reverend D. G. Williams records the tradition in detail in 1895 as a celebratory event at the end of the harvest: '*Bum i fy hun lawer gwaith yn cymeryd rhan yn y gorchwyl o dorri'r gaseg a'i chymeryd i'r ty*' / 'I have myself taken part many times in the task of cutting the mare and taking it to the house'.<sup>196</sup> If he had believed for one minute that it harked back to real pagan rituals and beliefs, is it likely that as a Victorian clergyman he would have even countenanced it? Henry Jones-Davies, who witnessed the *caseg fedi* first-hand in the Vale of Towy in the 1870s, refers to it as an exciting event, but there is no reference to anything like a corn-spirit,<sup>197</sup> nor is there in Jonathan Ceredig Davies's 1911 account.<sup>198</sup> Though writing much later, Daniel Parry-Jones, born in 1891, recalled the harvest practices of his boyhood in some detail, but had since obviously learnt of the corn spirit claim and specifically refers to the '*gwrach*' name given to the last sheaf in some areas as more likely representing something hostile or to be feared, rather than a belief in a corn spirit or mother.<sup>199</sup> The fact remains that where the corn spirit views are projected onto these customs, it is always by other scholars later on, in the wake of Frazer's theories.

Professor Hutton points out that last sheaves, dolls and shouting all operated in areas where the agriculture tended to be on a smaller scale, and seem to have been especially compatible therefore with the 'Celtic' areas.<sup>200</sup> The competitive ritual of hurling sickles at the sheaf, recorded for most of Wales as well as southern Scotland, seems to have taken place in an atmosphere of joviality, with none of the reverence one might expect if Frazer's interpretation were correct.<sup>201</sup> In Wales and the Border counties, Cornwall and Scotland, the last sheaf was viewed as a valued possession to be joyously carried back to the farmhouse, but as we have already seen, this did not always mean that the process was without its obstacles to overcome.<sup>202</sup> Capturing the mare and transporting her to the house may well have been a 'good luck' ritual, protecting the harvest fields over the winter till the

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<sup>196</sup> Williams, 'Casgliad', trans. H. Williams, p. 299.

<sup>197</sup> H. Jones-Davies, 'Memories of farming in the Vale of Towy', *Wales* III, 3 (Jan–Mar 1944), pp. 85–92, 89.

<sup>198</sup> Davies, *Folk-Lore*, pp. 78–80.

<sup>199</sup> Parry-Jones, *Welsh Country Upbringing*, p. 66.

<sup>200</sup> Hutton, *Stations*, p. 342. Other harvest traditions, especially the embellished wagon carrying the last load homewards, prevailed over large areas of England where the agriculture was on a larger scale and the last sheaf and 'crying customs' were absent.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 339.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 340–1.

following spring, when sowing time again came round: this seems a more reasonable claim on the part of T. Llew Jones.<sup>203</sup>

Social historian Michael Roberts suggests, correctly in my view, that the symbolism of these harvest rituals is not related to some faded memory of ancient beliefs, but instead, by dramatising the power of the cutting process, they help to externalise and release the unruly, competitive tensions on the harvest field,<sup>204</sup> thereby acting as an important safety valve. As we have seen, several of the accompanying rituals focussed on the well-established folk themes of shaming and ridicule, whether directed to a neighbouring farm which trailed behind the others, often by hurling the last sheaf into its harvest fields; or the competition to demolish the last sheaf, often in this case by *avoiding* being the successful reaper;<sup>205</sup> and the subsequent horseplay associated with conveying the *caseg* dry into the house, accompanied by the ridicule of the said individual if he should fail.

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<sup>203</sup> Jones, 'Y Gaseg', p. 156.

<sup>204</sup> Roberts, 'Sickles and scythes', p. 76.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

## Chapter 4: Harvest Supper

At the completion of the harvest, following the ceremonies attached to the last sheaf, came the harvest supper (*swper cynhaeaf*) or harvest home (*cartref cynhaeaf*)<sup>206</sup> provided by the landowner, which is recorded as of importance as far back as the thirteenth century; indeed, it was such an integral part of rural life that little reference needed to be made to it all through the Tudor and Stuart periods.<sup>207</sup> The fieldworkers would be served with a generous supply of *cwrw da*, or good ale; tales would be told by a local storyteller, old Welsh songs would be sung, and the fiddle or the harp would be played.<sup>208</sup>

On the 22<sup>nd</sup> August 1760 farm owner Lewis Morris of Anglesey (1701–65) recorded in his diary the harvest celebrations at Penybryn Farm, Goginan, in Cardiganshire. Forty-five neighbours had helped him harvest his rye. On the harvest 'feast day', the reapers were supplied with a breakfast, a light dinner of 'flummery' (Welsh *llymru*), with bread, butter and milk, and finally a large supper of beef, mutton, carrots, broth, and wheatflour pudding, all washed down with twenty gallons of ale and a further twenty gallons of beer. Then:

*...rhoi tannau yn y ffidil goch bren, a ffidler yn canu iddynt gwedi bwytta lloned eu boliau, a mynd i'r sguor ar y llawr coed, a dawnsio o honynt yno hyd nad oeddynt yn chwys diferol a sten fawr a chwrw wrth eu chuniau, a darn o dybacco I bob un. Dyna fywoliaeth!*<sup>209</sup>

...strings were put in the wooden red fiddle, with a fiddler playing for them after eating their bellies full, and they went to the barn on the wooden floor, and danced there till they were dripping sweat with a large pitcher of beer at their sides, and a piece of tobacco for each one. That was living!<sup>210</sup>

It was in fact the norm in the eighteenth century for a fiddler to be employed by landowners for the harvest celebrations held for all farm hands.<sup>211</sup> Richard Morris, in reply to his brother Lewis, recalls similar celebrations in Anglesey, where the meal included mashed turnips and potatoes, oatcake, and whey.<sup>212</sup>

A common dish in Cardiganshire and Carmarthenshire was *poten ben feddi* – sometimes referred

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<sup>206</sup> Grendall, 'Cesyg Medi', p. 148.

<sup>207</sup> Ronald Hutton, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England: the Ritual Year 1400–1700* (Oxford University Press, 1994; paperback edition 1996), p. 243.

<sup>208</sup> Anne Ross, *Folklore of Wales* (Stroud: The History Press, 2001, 2011), p. 28.

<sup>209</sup> *The Letters of Lewis, Richard, William and John Morris of Anglesey (Morrisiaid Môn) 1728–1765*, ed. J. H. Davies (Aberystwyth, 1909), v. 2, pp. 241–2; Owen, *Customs and Traditions*, p. 16.

<sup>210</sup> D. Roy Saer, '*Canu at Iws' ac Ysgrifau Eraill* (Aberystwyth: Cymdeithas Alawon Gwerin Cymru, 2013), pp. 298–9.

<sup>211</sup> Cass Meurig, 'The fiddler in eighteenth century Wales', *Welsh Music History* 5 (2002), pp. 22–40, 25. [Online].

Available: <http://welshjournals.llgc.org.uk/browse/viewpage/llgc-id:1175725/llgc-id:1176866/llgc-id:1176896/get650> <Accessed: 11/04/2016>.

<sup>212</sup> T. Gwynn Jones, *Welsh Folklore and Folk-Custom* (London: Methuen & Co., 1930; Cambridge and New Jersey: D. S. Brewer and Rowman & Littlefield, 1979), p. 155.



to as *poten wrach*, or witch's pudding<sup>213</sup> – the end-of-harvest pie consisting of potatoes, wheaten flour, chopped bacon, salted beef and onions, all put into a pot and cooked together on a peat fire in the 'old-fashioned way': that is, with the peat fire covering the pot as well as underneath it.<sup>214</sup> Great pride was taken in Pembrokeshire in trying to outdo one's neighbour for quality with the rice pudding, here called *y botten rice* and made in large tin pans.<sup>215</sup> In Radnorshire one or two geese were slaughtered for the supper, which was followed by an impromptu concert.<sup>216</sup>

Perhaps the true nature of this feast at a key juncture of the farming year is evidenced by one of its adopted names, especially but not exclusively in the north: *boddi'r cynhaeaf*, or 'drowning the harvest'.<sup>217</sup> At Llanfyllin in Montgomeryshire the harvest feast was called *cwrw cyfeddach*, or 'beer carousal', for which farmers invited friends and neighbours to their homes, extra-strong beer was brewed for the occasion, the harp was played, and *penillion* verses were sung.<sup>218</sup> Evan Jones refers to it as an old tradition in the Builth area 'in former times', and quotes this verse penned by a bard at the beginning of the nineteenth century:

*Dewch, llenwch inni'r cwpan, ac yfwch bawb ar gylch  
Hen gwrw Mawrth am unwaith, ein gofid ymaith ylch,  
Un noswaith i lawenydd 'nol hir drafferthu a'r byd,  
Ond ffwrdd wrachiaedd chwedlau hygoledd isel fryd.  
Mae'r gromen nawr yn ddiddos, a'n hysguboriau'n llawn,  
A ffrwyth ein llafur caled mewn heddwch a fwynhawn.*<sup>219</sup>

Come, fill us the cup, and drink the circle round,  
The old March beer for once will wash away our hardship,  
One night for joy after long struggling with the world,  
But away with old hags' tales, the superstitions of the lowly.  
The haycock is now covered, and the barns are full,  
And the fruits of our hard labour in peace we enjoy.<sup>220</sup>

Just as the harvest itself had united farmers and labourers in successfully overcoming a huge task, so

<sup>213</sup> *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru/A Dictionary of the Welsh Language* (University of Wales, 2015) [Online]. Available: <http://geiriadur.ac.uk/gpc/gpc.html?poten> <accessed 22 January 2016>.

<sup>214</sup> R. M. Evans, 'Folklore and Customs in Cardiganshire', *Cardiganshire Antiquarian Society Transactions and Archaeological Record* 12 (1937), pp. 52–8, 55. [Online]. Available: <http://welshjournals.llgc.org.uk/browse/viewpage/llgc-id:1177372/llgc-id:1178863/llgc-id:1178920/getText> <Accessed: 19/03/2016>; Williams, 'Casgliad', pp. 299–300.

<sup>215</sup> E. Laws, and D. Jenkyn Evans, 'The Harvest Customs of Pembrokeshire', in Owen Rhys et al., *Pembrokeshire Antiquities* (Solva and Fishguard: H. W. Williams, 1897), pp. 19–21, p. 21.

<sup>216</sup> Roy Palmer, *The Folklore of Radnorshire* (Little Logaston, Herefordshire: Logaston Press, 2001, reprint 2007), pp. 39–40.

<sup>217</sup> Trefor M. Owen, *The Customs and Traditions of Wales: A Pocket Guide* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1991), p. 16; Jones, *Welsh Folklore*, p. 157.

<sup>218</sup> *Geiriadur Cenedlaethol Cymru: Cymru, yn hanesyddol, parthedigol a bywgraffyddol*, ed. Owen Jones (London, 1875) vol. 2, p. 148, cited in Jones, *Welsh Folklore*, p. 156.

<sup>219</sup> *Cymru Evan Jones*, p. 224.

<sup>220</sup> Translation by Anne and Howard Williams, adapted.

now they were eating and drinking from the same table, and for one day at least the roles of 'master and servant' were reversed as the farmer and his wife prepared and served the harvest meal.<sup>221</sup>

Notwithstanding the picturesque image, there were real strains surrounding the harvest supper throughout the nineteenth century. Even by the beginning of Queen Victoria's reign and well before the advent of mechanisation, the strong drink associated with traditional harvest customs and the unruly behaviour that went with it were attracting the censure of temperance reformers and middle-class moralists; at the same time many farmers with social aspirations were beginning to dislike the idea of sharing their table with mere harvesters and labourers.<sup>222</sup> Then with the introduction of the steam-driven thresher in the later part of the century the wheat reaping-party (*y fedel wenith*) declined markedly in importance and therefore with it the harvest supper, both being increasingly replaced by a fresh form of co-operative neighbourliness on the threshing day, followed by an evening meal on that same day.<sup>223</sup>

Moreover, some saw the harvest supper as a relic from an obsequious past in a changing society and a new wage economy, and indeed individual farmers began making cash payments in lieu of the supper. By the end of the century growing antagonism between labourers and farmers regarding wages and conditions no longer accorded with a tradition with a common interest at its heart.<sup>224</sup>

Often viewed as a symbol of old-style harmonious relations, the passing of the harvest supper has frequently been tinged with regret by social historians covering the period, and whilst *some* farm-workers may have been sorry to see the end of the 'levelling' effect as the harvest suppers began to be discontinued,<sup>225</sup> Hutton points out that most appear not to have shared these feelings, rather to have been satisfied with the replacement of the traditional entertainment by cash payments.<sup>226</sup>

The Church, having become increasingly concerned by reports of drunken and lewd behaviour in association with harvest home, had begun seeking a more suitable form of Christian celebration to replace it.<sup>227</sup> In 1843 the celebrated clergyman R. S. Hawker of Morwenstow in Cornwall invited his parishioners to receive communion 'in the bread of the new corn', and the new, Christianised concept of the harvest festival was born, gradually superseding the traditional feasts. Villagers would attend a church service in the morning, partake of a feast, dancing and games, and sometimes follow up with an evening service also; the festival was usually held on a weekday to avoid any possible criticism of

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<sup>221</sup> D. H. Morgan, *Harvesters and Harvesting 1840–1900: A Study of the Rural Proletariat* (London: Croom Helm, 1982), p. 161.

<sup>222</sup> Charles Kightly, *The Customs and Ceremonies of Britain: An Encyclopaedia of Living Traditions* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1986), p. 134.

<sup>223</sup> Owen, *Customs and Traditions*, p. 16.

<sup>224</sup> Morgan, *Harvesters*, p. 173.

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 170–1.

<sup>226</sup> Ronald Hutton, *The Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 345.

<sup>227</sup> Morgan, *Harvesters*, p. 170.

such 'frolics' taking place on a Sunday. The church would be decorated with harvest themes, which might include sheaves, fruit, and (ironically) sometimes a corn dolly. Whilst social historians have often denigrated the new festivals as a form of control by the élite, it is only with substantial support from ordinary people that they could have taken off; and without doubt they filled a gap vacated by the loss of the old social bonds within farming.<sup>228</sup> At the same time, the harvest festival was unable to offer a complete replacement for the harvest supper as it was a public event which stressed the differing social classes of those attending, rather than the near-total relaxation and merriment following the involvement of farmer and labourer in a common endeavour.<sup>229</sup>

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<sup>228</sup> Hutton, *Stations*, pp. 345–6.

<sup>229</sup> Morgan, *Harvesters*, p. 174.

## Conclusion

The nature of arable farming in the past, with its requirements for a prolonged cultivation of the crop and an ability to muster rapidly a powerful labour force, made for a rigorous social hierarchy. But harvest was the one time of year when farm labourers, many of whom lived at a basic subsistence level, achieved a degree of parity with farmers which would not be allowed at any other time of year, as the latter relied on the willingness and co-operation of their workers to bring the harvest in; this was further reflected in the traditional harvest supper provided by the farmer and his wife.

Any frictions between the harvesters working on the same farm which might have become potentially disruptive, could instead be channelled into a celebration at the harvest end, in the form of the *caseg fedi*.<sup>230</sup> This included the 'trials' of transporting the mare indoors in a dry condition, and if unsuccessful the subjection of the *caseg*-bearer to mockery and ridicule at the harvest supper. The boisterous horseplay surrounding the *caseg* needs to be relieved of the weight of ancient myth with which it has long been saddled; its true function was to help release the wayward tensions in the harvest field.

A further focus of ritual tension lay in the contrast between on the one hand the mutual assistance and atmosphere of exuberant high spirits associated with the *medel wenith*; and on the other the often aggressive competitiveness amongst the various farms in a locality in being the first to bring the harvest home, which might lead via mockery and insult to a very real threat of violent retaliation.

Harvest folklore varied significantly round Wales but was conditioned in each region by the practical requirements of growing and harvesting corn;<sup>231</sup> it also reflected the subsistence or borderline deprivation levels at which the average farm worker lived. Sheaves were frequently personified in the Welsh tradition (as with others) as animals or people, predominantly female in the latter case.

There were also numerous social stresses across the whole spectrum of harvest migration. Whilst farmers in each of the migration areas seemed generally to have formed extremely good working relationships with the migrant workers who returned year after year, antagonisms nevertheless regularly arose between an older community identity on a particular farm or estate and the influx of large numbers of migrants. Where wages were competitive this necessarily became the main driving force, at the expense of maintaining community traditions.<sup>232</sup>

The *Cyflog y Groes* system in Denbighshire and Flintshire was fraught with its own internal

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<sup>230</sup> Morgan, *Harvesters*, p. 166.

<sup>231</sup> G. E. Evans, *The Pattern Under the Plough: Aspects of the Folk-Life of East Anglia* (London: Faber & Faber, 1966), pp. 152–3.

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167.

contradictions, and necessitated farmers and labourers presenting themselves at the town crosses early in the morning and setting an arbitrary wage, which in turn was subject to abuse by rival farmers, whilst frequently leaving the labourers in a precarious state of existence from day to day. Frictions over gleaning the fields were universal, but in the Vale of Glamorgan led to the farmers' preference for migrant workers over their own local workforce. There are varying accounts of the treatment of Welsh migrants in Shropshire and Herefordshire: some of them good, though the Welsh songs and ballads tell a different story.

Likewise, stresses developed throughout the nineteenth century regarding the traditional harvest supper as it became increasingly unsuited to the new wage economy, whilst the Church deprecated the wanton behaviour which accompanied it and wasted no time in replacing it with a new harvest festival. In a wage economy many of the harvest traditions such as the last sheaf and harvest supper may have become anachronistic, but while they lasted nevertheless continued to be seen as cultural compensations by the farm labourer to offset his, or her, poor economic lifestyle.<sup>233</sup>

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<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 190–1.

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