

## DESTITUTION IN WALES<sup>1</sup>

BY F. YEATS-BROWN

MAERDY, or 'Little Moscow,' is a straggling township of seven thousand inhabitants at the head of one fork of the Rhondda Valley. Almost everyone is a Communist here, to-day. But it was not always so. Seven or eight hundred of the miners of Maerdy went to the World War, and there are more than a hundred names on its Roll of Honor, preserved in the Working Men's Hall, which is now adorned with large framed portraits of Stalin and the Soviet tsars.

Maerdy is twenty-one miles from Cardiff, in a bleak little ravine, lined with long rows of stone cottages. Below them bubbles the Taff River; above them ugly coal piles rear their heads into the mist. It is a most depressing place. Men have been unemployed here for years. Boys are growing up with no idea of living except 'on the dole,' youths who have never done a day's work in their lives are marrying and begetting children, and men in their prime, able to work, — some of them hungry for it, — can find no work to do, and therefore spend their time discussing politics and deploring the injustice of our social order that will not provide for them. They were decent men, the miners of Maerdy that I spoke with; angry and disheartened no doubt, but not yet disillusioned with their leaders. I will recount what they told me: —

'There are four men and one boy working in the colliery here. The rest

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of us — several thousands — have nothing to do, except thirty or forty who can sometimes pick up a job elsewhere. Some of us get unemployment relief, some parish relief, some pensions. The few who work half-time are rather worse off than those who do nothing. The "dole" is eighteen shillings for the man, five shillings for wife or mother, and two shillings for each child. Rents are seven to twelve shillings a week. A family with three children has therefore twenty-nine shillings a week; allowing for rent, there is a quid a week left over for food, clothing, and all incidentals. Do you wonder we are fed up?'

I did not know what to answer. Quite obviously these men were very sick and sorry for themselves, sitting there idle in an evil-smelling room under those Russian lithographs. But what could one say? I had already explained that we probably should n't agree on politics, and that my desire was to obtain an objective view of the situation as it affected their wives and families.

'Take coal,' the spokesman continued. 'A family uses about two hundredweight a week. That's the least you can do with in this weather. It costs one and three a hundredweight: that's half a dollar out of the quid. And if they catch us working any coal for ourselves in this valley, they fine us or put us in quod — the damned Jews! How would you like to feed a wife and three children on seventeen and six a week? How much do you

think is left over to buy boots and bedding? By the time we have got the kids their bread and margarine, and some tenpenny bacon perhaps, and meat for the Sunday dinner, there is n't much over. Yes, we go to the movies. I know your papers say we blow our cash on pleasure. Ask the pubs how much we spend! They're all going broke. But never mind, one of these days — quicker and more suddenly than you think — the mines will be nationalized and the workers will own their own means of production. There will be work for everybody in the Workers' Government. Russia and China will trade with us.'

Heaven will come to earth when we begin to do business with Russia. My Communist friends are startlingly sure of it. I have seen Christ displaced amid so many communities of men, with nothing but cynicism to take His place, that it is noteworthy — not surprising — that here, in the heart of a religious people, a new savior is being born — Stalin. That is the present twist of Second Adventism in Wales. A light comes into their eyes when they speak of Russia. To argue against a man's sacred beliefs is foolish. I listened, feeling sad and hopeless, for these men represent thousands of their fellows. Over a conference table, years ago, the hysteria might have been scotched. Now I see little hope of a change of heart until the miners have learned their economic lesson.

More they told me here at Maerdy, but it was all about the breakdown of the capitalistic system. I wasted hours, here and elsewhere, listening to the same old story with its two angles of approach — the story of human greed and ineptitude. The coal-owners have mismanaged their men and material in the past, and show little signs of doing better now. The men have blundered just as badly (the strike of 1915,

for instance, determined the Admiralty to substitute oil for Welsh coal), and are still loyal to leaders who will ruin us all if they have their way. There is a bad and bitter spirit throughout the industry; it would be wrong to slur the point. Yet we need not exaggerate its importance. The Welsh miner is no fool. True, he is intensely parochial. His valley bounds his horizon. He cannot see beyond this strange, smoky world into which he has been born. That is the present difficulty, but it cannot last. Hundreds of thousands of human beings came here a century ago to win coal for our industrial age. Now coal is slumping, there is less work. What does it matter whose fault it is?

Twenty thousand men, with their families, will have to find employment elsewhere. That is a grave and pressing problem. Even more serious is the immediate question of providing for the wives and families who are in dire distress. Whoever is to blame, they are not. Even if they were, would anyone outside a lunatic asylum suggest that their punishment of semistarvation fits their crime of wanting more of this world's goods than the world can give them? It is such a common crime, and such a grim penalty — your wife and children without shoes and proper clothes in this weather, and a pound a week (if you are lucky) to feed the whole family for months, even years, on end.

Immediate relief of distress, then, is of paramount importance, with energetic measures for reëducation and resettlement of a proportion of the workers to follow. The latter is, obviously, a matter of great delicacy. How to carry it out is a political question I will not now discuss. There is too much politics in South Wales. If one asks a miner whether his children get jam with their tea, one has to listen

to the tale of iniquitous child-labor in 1841 or the truck system of 1860; if one asks an owner's agent his idea of relieving the present distress, he will begin about silk stockings and gramophones, continue on the subject of Messrs. Horner and Cook, and lead on to foreign tariffs, Admiralty policy, railway rates, for as long as one likes to listen. Neither of these instances is imaginary. As a result of my inquiries I have amassed a pile of statistics, but only a few simple ideas.

It is very hard to imagine or describe how the unemployed pass their day. The women, of course, are busy—many of them overworked in trying to make two ends meet on a quarter of what they used to have, and with a large and growing family. The men go out to work outcrops, they mend the house, they nurse the baby, or they stand silently in the streets. The emptiness, the utter inanity of life, in these bleak valleys is such that it is difficult to conceive why anyone stays. Yet where could they go? They know so little of the world.

They are a clean and self-respecting people, compared to many I have known, and live in good houses of brick or stone, with good curtains (not often of the dingy lace of London, but neat whole colors—cream, primrose, green), white doorsteps, polished windows. The cupboards are bare. Although they do not beg, most of them, some wives write to friends whom they know to be distributing relief. Here are some typical letters, all dated January of this year:—

I hearing that you helping large family that in great need and I thought I would apley. I got a bit family of 10 off us to keep that is 8 children me and my husband, and the children in great need of boots and clothes. The age of the children is 16, 14, 12, 10, 8, 3, 2, 1. Rent 14s. Hoping if you can do anything it would be very kind.

More literate but not less pathetic is this letter from a woman whose husband has been too long out of work to receive now unemployment relief. The 'dole' to which she refers is from the parish:—

Having my husband idle the last three years from the Cambrian Collieries, I have only the dole to depend on, which last week amounted to twelve shillings and sixpence to maintain my husband and myself and one child, and am also expecting to become a mother shortly. I shall esteem it a great favour if you will assist me in this time of need.

Again:—

I am writing to you on behalf of the expectant mothers of this district. Have you some baby clothes you could send us? The nurse took her underskirt off last week to wrap round a baby, as there was n't a rag to put on the child when it was born.

Seventy-five per cent of the applications are from ex-service men who fought for their country. One of these, whom I saw, was found recently practically naked in his house. He and his wife and four children were entirely destitute; he had no clothes, and was therefore ashamed to come out. Now this particular man is well cared for, acting as the unpaid but untiring secretary of a noble woman, whose life has been passed among the people of the Rhondda. Untold good she has done, and will yet do if the means are given her.

Anyone with two eyes can see that the women of the Rhondda look drawn and harassed, and that their children have insufficient clothes and that their boots leak. Yet I would not say there was actual hunger. Hardship, yes, especially among many who are too proud to tell of their misery; but the children seem to thrive on their scanty diet, and romp about those forlorn streets with a zest that the overfed and

overtended infants of Kensington Gardens do not know. My impression is confirmed by many experienced people whom I questioned; but I believe the Medical Officer of Health has reported that some thousands of children are suffering from malnutrition. Whether starving or not, the children in South Wales badly need our help.

The instances I have quoted, the distress I have myself seen, are such that I do not wonder at the state of mind of the miners. Never were a people more in need of help, physical, moral, spiritual.

From the wind-swept heights between the two Rhondda valleys one sees a panorama of gray and gloomy roofs, of idle chimneys, of derricks and coal tips hulking against the sky. Untidy, grimy sheep are the only regular sojourners here. There is a golf course, it is true, but no one seems to play on it. The scene below is also one of stagnation. Spread out at one's feet is the history of a hundred years — an ugly, wretched story. Students of political economy need not look in books for their facts; from any hilltop in South Wales they can see a lesson writ large — namely, that in the struggle between class and class everybody grows poorer.

I tried last week to tell something of the circumstances of the unemployed in these mining districts. Let us now tap at the door of Mr. Jones's cottage in Tonypany (needless to say, I disturb no privacy: the facts are true, not the names) and see for ourselves what the family is doing. Mrs. Jones is none too glad to see us, poor woman, for she gave the children their weekly dose of physic last night 'and the bedroom's something awful — you can't go in.' So the bedroom, which we shall never see, is worse than this front room!

It is a small dark place, largely filled by a table on which a litter of white-

enamel breakfast cups and plates still stand at noontide. Part of one wall has peeled off its plaster. There are polished brass ornaments on the mantelpiece, and a large number of hangings and decorations, while the rugs on the floor are filthy and moth-eaten. Pictures and knickknacks are strewn on walls, dresser, mantelpiece. One would sweep all these things away if one could and burn or bury them, and then attack the walls with a pail of sanitary distemper. . . . This is not a typical miner's house, however. Even the friends I have come with are surprised — startled would be more accurate. 'She is such a good, clean woman,' they said to me afterward, 'but she is getting ill from worry and overwork. I don't know what will happen to her.'

Perhaps she will have a rest in hospital. She is ash-gray, with dark rings under her eyes, and complains of a pain in her back. With a tiny baby to nurse and three children and a hungry husband to provide for, she has no leisure or peace.

Mr. Jones has been unemployed for four years, with a few spells of work. His family supports itself on thirty-one shillings a week. Rent is 7s. 6d. a week for two rooms. Last night from nine until seven this morning he was working at an outcrop, and won two sacks of coal as the reward of his labor. That is the only exercise he takes. He never goes out, except to the coal tip or the outcrop. At the moment he is sitting by the fire, dandling the baby, whose already dark hair proclaims his race. Its very brown eyes fix my eyeglass in astonishment, then twinkle with the greatest good-humor as it waves a fat hand in my direction. It is accustomed to bright, clean things. Only in the last day or two has a change come over the home. What will be its life during the next few

weeks, with a sorrow that I sense hanging over the house? What will it grow into? A miner? A millionaire?

Mrs. Jones is scrubbing an older boy's face. John Thomas is about six; he wants to stare at us, and does, although the soap keeps getting in his eyes. Robert and Doreen, aged nine and ten, stand rather shamefacedly at bay; they know we have come at an inopportune moment, and dislike our intrusion. They know how proud their mother is to keep the house clean. And now — now it is different. Something is going to happen; they don't know what, and I don't know. But the Jones ménage cannot long continue in its present disorder. Mr. Jones, however, chats away cheerfully enough. Robert is a husky lad. 'When he goes out and plays, his cheeks are like a rose,' he says; 'but, of course, he'll lose all that color as soon as he goes down the pit regularly. We all get white, but we are n't any the worse for it.' It is to be noted that Mr. Jones, in spite of his plight, and the lesson these long and hideous years must have taught him, can still envisage no future for his son except being a coal-miner. It is amazing how hard tradition dies. Here is a man who is ready to change our whole social order, but not his own trade or that of his son.

Among these people the Society of Friends is doing an excellent work. The Friends take no part in politics (blessed relief to the inquiring journalist in search of facts!) and confine themselves to deeds of Christian helpfulness. Theirs is a life of service and sacrifice, which shall surely yield abundant fruit in an industry where such example is sorely needed. They relieve much distress, in so far as their means allow, but they also engage in an educational work which is notably successful. The miners show a very ready appreciation of good books, and are delighted to

have an opportunity of studying and discussing them, and of attending the lectures which are frequently given at Maes-yr-haf, the 'Quaker' headquarters at Trealaw. Among the books which I noticed on the shelves of their little lending library was Mr. Shaw's *Saint Joan*, which, I was told, is in great demand. Darwin's *Origin of Species*, 'Dick' Sheppard's *The Impatience of a Parson*, and Bruce Barton's *The Man Whom Nobody Knows*, are all popular; so are Laski's *Communism* and Tawney's *Acquisitive Society and Religion and the Rise of Capital*. Sir Josiah Stamp's searching little essay on *The Christian Ethic as an Economic Factor* is extremely popular (and, I might add, an ideal pabulum for the young miner), as are Dr. Jacks's *Challenge of Life* and all the Master of Balliol's books and Canon Streeter's *Reality*.

Mrs. Jones is still scrubbing John Thomas's face, absent-mindedly lathering it over and over again. His clothes are dirty and in rags. One heel is off his boots, and the soles of both are worn thin. His face is already burnished like the brass on the mantel-piece; the rest of him remains unwashed. This morning the family breakfasted on bread and margarine and tea with no milk. There is some very unpleasant-looking bacon for dinner — nothing else. For supper, bread and margarine and tea again. It is a cold, wet day, with terrific wind. I should go mad in a week, cooped in that cold valley, with the house walls crumbling, the children restless and uneasy, my wife wilting before my eyes. But Mr. Jones is inured to hardship and discomfort; he lives in hope of better times. He dare not lose hope. He will not face facts.

Mrs. Jones — there are thousands of them all over South Wales — is losing heart and hope and health. For a time

she will go on scrubbing and cooking, in a dazed way, seeing her once tidy home sink to slumdom. Fresh air, sunlight, the small excitements of life which regular wages can buy, have long been denied. The drabness is crushing her. Good words and small charities may delay the breaking point of her nervous endurance, for when she remembers that someone cares she faces the world again. But month follows month, and still her husband can find no work. Despair has come into that dark room and is at her elbow.

Can we save her? Do we care enough

for our fellows to remedy this long-drawn-out misery of unemployment? Seen close, it is a sight to make one tremble for civilization. Can it be true that

Such a world began  
In some slow devil's heart that hated man?

Here in South Wales one is tempted to turn pessimist. It seems so hopeless to help the Jones family. Wiser heads than mine are engaged on a scheme of relief and removal. I hope they will be quick, or Mrs. Jones will not be there to help.

## A VISIT TO PENANG<sup>1</sup>

BY DR. WOLFGANG VON WEISL

PENANG — a paradise of the Malay Archipelago, Paradise-blessed; Penang, isle of coconut and areca palms; Penang, with its dreamy beauty, the quiet port of the hushed and beautiful islands of the Malay Straits. . . .

On the map it looks British, this tiny island at the entrance to the Malay Straits from the north. It is colored red; its capital city with the English name of Georgetown sounds thoroughly European; and when your ship arrives off Penang on a Sunday it must discreetly drop anchor outside. Here, friend, is British Sabbath observance, and you must unload bag and baggage about a mile from shore — that is where Sunday stops, apparently. On shore a hundred thousand palms, silent watchers, nod their heads in the breeze, saying: 'Ja, ja, mein Herr, that's how

it is here — English, priggish. Incidentally, let us introduce ourselves: Penang is our name — Arekapalme in German. How are you?'

The police boat stops alongside the steamer. Two officials climb up the gangway — the one, an Englishman, very tall and plainly bored; the other, who looks at our passports, a Chinaman with gold-rimmed spectacles, somewhat awkward. Very carefully he examines our British passports and consular visas, then stamps them with permission to land in British Malay — given by a Chinaman. I do not yet know which of the two symbolizes this country.

The European on board is scarcely interested in this at all. For a week, ever since we began to approach the Malay States, he has been interested in the one great question — Where does rubber stand? The police officer aboard

<sup>1</sup>From *Vossische Zeitung* (Berlin Liberal daily), February 5, 12