LETTERS FROM CAMBRIA COUNTY
1800-1823

EDITED BY A. H. DODD*

THE story of Morgan John Rhees’s scheme for a Welsh settlement in the present Cambria County in 1796 has been told too often to need more than the barest recapitulation here. East of the Alleghenies the Welsh Tract, founded by Quaker immigrants in 1682, had attracted a continuous flow of Welsh settlers till well on in the next century; but Penn’s refusal to give it autonomous status had led to rapid dilution of its Welsh character, and by the middle of the century the language had virtually died out. Nevertheless when social distress and political discontent combined to reawaken the spirit of emigration in Wales during the later years of the century, it was to Pennsylvania that Welshmen instinctively looked as their land of promise.

Morgan John Rhees (to use the spelling which he invariably adopted in later life) was a South Wales Baptist minister who adopted the Radical views common in his denomination ever since the Puritan Revolution and intensified by the political crises of George III’s reign. As soon as America became a republic he booked his passage to South Carolina, but for some reason he never made the voyage. A visit to Paris as a Protestant missionary during the French Revolution redoubled his enthusiasm, and in 1794,

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when the war with France was making it increasingly dangerous to sympathize with the Revolution, he set sail for Pennsylvania to make one more bid for a Welsh settlement there. For this purpose the Cambria Company was founded under his presidency through the goodwill of Dr. Benjamin Rush, the friend of Franklin and father of Richard Rush the ambassador. Shares were offered at $100 each, and two officials of the company (one of whom had just come out from Llanbrynmair and eventually settled in Ohio) were appointed to “see the country and give information.” Rhees himself joined in the search, and eventually the newly-opened Allegheny tract of Pennsylvania, still known as Cambria County, was chosen for the settlement. Not content with founding a colony, he promoted all sorts of educational, journalistic, and philanthropic ventures; and the foundation of an undenominational church and an undenominational missionary society for work among the Indians shows that the evangelistic motive was as strong with him as the political or the economic—if he ever found it possible to separate the strands.¹

The letters printed below afford some glimpses of early conditions in Cambria County. They are preserved in the National Library of Wales at Aberystwyth among the papers of Samuel Roberts (better known as “S.R.”) of Llanbrynmair, Montgomeryshire, who was responsible for yet another Welsh “colonizing” project in North America—this time in Tennessee—nearly sixty years later. The letters are of particular interest because most of them were written by his uncle, the Rev. George Roberts (1769-1853), one of the twelve children of Evan Roberts, Dolgadfan Mills, Llanbrynmair. He went out in July, 1795 (six weeks after marrying Jane Edwards of Cwmderwen, Llanerful), and became an Independent minister in the new settlement, and translator into English of the Welsh classic, *Drych y Prif Oesoedd*, published at Ebensburg, 1834, as *A View of the Primitive Ages*. His correspondents were his brother and sister-in-law (the Rev. John Roberts, Independent

¹ J. J. Evans, *M. J. Rhys a'i Amserau* (1935); J. T. Griffith, *M. J. Rhys* (Lansford, Pa., 1899, Carmarthen, 1910)—references herein are to second edition; *Ohio Arch. and Hist. Soc. Publications*, XVI, 197, and sources cited there; *Nat. Lib. of Wales Journ.*, II, 131-139; A. H. Dodd, *The Character of Early Welsh Emigration to the United States* (Cardiff, 1953), pp. 13-16, 22-23, 30-32 (from which some sentences in the above paragraph are taken. In South Carolina Rhees would have found an old-established settlement of Welsh Baptists on the Pee Pee River.
minister, schoolmaster, and small farmer at Llanbrynmair, and his wife, Mary, née Breese—the parents of “S.R.”); his father and mother; and on one occasion his nephew, “S.R.” himself. To his parents he always wrote in Welsh, and usually to his brother, too; John, on the other hand, generally wrote back to him in English. Much of the correspondence is naturally taken up with family and religious matters; such passages have only been summarized below, but those which add to our information on the development of the new settlement have been transcribed in full or translated as literally as possible (with punctuation added where it is lacking), and placed within quotation marks.

1. N.L.W. MS. 13189D: George Roberts to John and Mary Roberts, June, 1800 (Welsh for one page, then English).

An account (mainly quoted from a friend’s letter) of the religious revival in progress for the last two years in “New England state.”

2. N.L.W. MS. 14094D: George Roberts (Ebensburg) to his father and mother, 13 October, 1801 (Welsh).

He has received news from home through Richard Lewis, who arrived after a disastrous voyage in which eight children and forty adults died, some while in harbor at Baltimore. The dead included Abraham Tibbot, William Davies the mason, “Ann o’r Allt,” David Price’s and David Harry’s children, William Davies’s son, and Evans’s wife of Llanidloes. He repeats what he has told in a previous letter (which may not have arrived) about the even worse passage suffered by his sisters, in which 53 out of 102 passengers died at sea. John Evans and his children, Morgan Owen, Idris Thomas and his children, and James Mills and his daughter were among the casualties, and the four widows, with “Twm bach” and Margaret, have come to Cambria. The writer’s sisters and Grace Thomas are living with him. The sisters have been very ill, but are now recovering; Grace Thomas is still suffering. As soon as they are well he must look around for a means of livelihood for them. “I expect the extraordinary happenings at sea this summer will have made many who meant to come to America turn faint-hearted.” The chief causes of sickness are bad water, too long

*Richard Williams, History of the Parish of Llanbrynmair (London, 1889), pp. 119-129; Glannmor Williams, Samuel Roberts Llanbrynmair (Cardiff, 1950), pp. 21-25; David Williams, Cymru ac America (Cardiff, 1946), pp. 57-61; Cofiadur, xxii, 1952 (autobiography of G. Roberts).
a time at sea, and excessive heat. Emigrants should take special
care before starting to see that some means are found of keeping
the water casks at the right temperature. He himself has been un-
well and unable to work for nearly ten weeks. The latest news
from Wales was a shock: "I think Montgomeryshire people have
been more unfortunate than any others."3

He then answers questions sent by his brother about the settle-
ment. "The number of acres here originally belonging to Rush4
and Rhees was 20,000, but I can't say how many have been bought
up by settlers nor how many have been worked. . . . The road
from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh forks two or three times, and one
branch goes through Beulah; this is reckoned as near as any, and
more level; but since this road is newer and not as well finished
as the others only a few wagons for Philadelphia go through
Beulah.5 Yet in some weeks nearly a hundred travellers by wagon,
living to the north of Philadelphia, go through Beulah on their way
to Pittsburgh and other places between Pittsburgh and Lake Erie.
The Beulah road passes for about seven miles across Rush's land.
. . . Our house stands about two or three miles east of Beulah.
Only a small part of our land has been worked—about eight to
ten acres. . . .

"I have hardly a trace of the fear of poverty that dogged me for
some years in Wales to a sinful extent. I don't feel the need for
riches, but many a time I have felt a craving for them. We bought
a hundred acres of land at the outset and sold half for the same
price. A mill was built on it nine years ago, and our land is better
than the other half, except that the mill race runs through the latter.
Last summer some of the owners of the land round here, in order
to attract settlers, agreed to give 50 acres out of every 400-acre
holding to any settler who cleared two acres in the year and in
six years built a house and a log barn and planted a hundred apple

3On the increase of pauperism in Roberts's home district during the late
eighteenth century, see my Industrial Revolution in N. Wales (Cardiff,

4Benjamin Rush, Rhees's patron and partner, after whom he named
his eldest son, Dr. Benjamin Rush Rhees (1798-1831) (Griffith, op. cit.,
ch. IV).

5J. T. Griffith (op. cit., p. 260) states that it was its inferior situation
that forced Beulah to cede to Ebensburg as capital of Cambria County
after 1805, and ultimately to disappear from the map; but a correspondent
informs me that the decisive factor was "the gift of land for public purposes
by the Lloyds who settled at Ebensburg."
Beula

Plan of Beula

Pennsylvania

Plan of Beula, about 1798

Courtesy Erie Book Store
trees, and made it a place of common habitation within the period. There is one fifty-acre allotment to be had on these conditions, of which part comes within fifty yards of our door—fairly good land, except that (as with most of the lands here) it’s heavy to clear; and on this I’m thinking of making an effort to fulfill the conditions if Providence allows. At present I have four cows, one of which I intend to slaughter soon, two bullocks (three-year old next May-day) for ploughing, two yearling bullocks and four calves, four pigs... Richard Lewis stayed only a few days at the plough because his master wouldn’t accept the terms he offered; he is now earning $34\frac{1}{2}$ dollars a year in Beulah, with his food and washing. He is employed by professing Christians at a tavern, with the job of cutting firewood, working on the farm, etc. ... There is not much call for women’s labour in Cambria at present because only a little flax and wool is raised here yet."

The letter concludes with news of Welsh neighbors. William Breese, Ann and Jane Bebb and Thomas Davies are with Mr. Rhees. The writer had a visit recently from Jane and Ann Tibbot, who are contemplating a journey thirty miles west where they have heard of places which afford the means of grace in English. He has heard from Jeremiah Williams. Howel Jones with his wife and three children died at sea on the same vessel that carried the writer’s sisters. Richard Crowther and his fellow-travellers had a long voyage infected with spotted fever, of which Richard died at Wilmington. Jones and his family came within fifty miles of Beulah, where his wife died; he himself came eight miles further and then died, leaving his four children orphans. Their case is being considered by the Welsh.  

3. N.L.W. MS. 13191D: *The same to the same*, 24 January, 1804 (Welsh; marked “Copied”). They have sent four letters to Wales in the last fortnight: to Jane’s father, George’s mother, and two others. The news that the...
mortgage on the family farm has been paid off gives them great joy. They also rejoice to hear of the progress of the religious revival in Wales, and give news of that in Kentucky, which "continues to gain ground, and has spread through many districts of western Pennsylvania, and latterly come within twenty or thirty miles of us. They fall to the ground in scores at services till many people are afraid of going to worship lest the same happen to them." In the place where the revival is nearest to us, it is most marked among the Presbyterians, but throughout the land it is common among Wesley's Methodists, the Baptists and the Presbyterians. . . . It isn't for me to enlarge [on this], except only to say of the Presbyterians throughout the land that in my opinion (so far as my knowledge of them goes) they are almost as devoid of religious life as . . . the Church of England, and rather lacking in morals too, many of them, but very well up in theology, in the Scriptures, in church history, etc. . . . I think some of the shower has reached the place where our brother Edward Bebb is. Two churches have been formed in the district near them since Peggy went there—one for the Baptists and one for the Independents, and some have joined each of them. Mr. Brown (a homely minister, in Mr. Hughes's judgment) preaches among the Independents three Sundays in every four, but I can't remember whether there is a settled minister among the Baptists.

"The government is in successful and peaceful circumstances. The inhabitants seem very fortunate in the laws now being made by the legislators. The President said in his message to Congress at the beginning of this winter that eight million dollars of public debt had been paid off during the year now past; not entirely out of the year's taxes, however, but the government had improved its resources during the past two-and-a-half years to the extent

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10 Ohio, of which Bebb was a co-pioneer with Ezekiel Hughes and William Gwilym of Cefnamman. Hughes was instrumental in founding an Independent church at Paddy's Run on 3 Sept., 1803, with an English minister and services alternately in English and Welsh. See Ohio A. & H. Soc. Pubs., XVI, 201-202, where a photograph and full particulars are published; but there is no information on the Baptist church mentioned in the letter, the one at Welsh Hills not having been founded till 1808 (loc. cit., pp. 207-208). This probably means it soon petered out.

11 I.e., Ezekiel Hughes; the word he uses is "symil" (literally "simple"); "homely," in its English sense, perhaps best conveys his meaning.
of thirteen million dollars. They have recently bought from the French the state across the river Mississippi for sixteen millions, to be paid in instalments beginning in fifteen years' time. Through this purchase the river is free to them right up to the sea without going through anyone else's territory, which will be a great boon to those living by the waters of the west. The newspapers say that a bed of gold ore has recently been found in North Carolina. If this is true it could be a great benefit to the land; but I'm greatly tempted to ask 'Are you better than distant India and its far-off treasures?'

The rest of the letter is devoted to family news. "Rees Morgan and Grace live forty miles from us. We saw them in November. Since May-day Rees's work has been digging (with other Welshmen) a channel for water to work a forge; I think he is pretty comfortable, and thinking of going in the spring either to farm work or to set up as shoemaker." His daughter Elizabeth is four months old. Rees seems to me quite a nice fellow, kind and hard-working and very tidy. . . . They talk Welsh in his house every Sunday. . . ."

4. N.L.W. MS. 13189D: George and Jane Roberts to their brother John Roberts, November, 1809 (Welsh). Postmarked "Ebensburg."

Almost entirely devoted to religious topics. The letter speaks of the good relations existing between Independents and Baptists, and adds, "On the whole something of the goodness of the Almighty seems to follow the Welsh, even in this land, more than any other people I know of, in respect that we have the privileges of the Gospel in our midst. . . ." There is also more news of Welsh neighbours. "William Breese and his wife are as well as usual; Betten and her husband and child have recently left the settlement with the intention of settling among some of the Welsh who are by the river Licking between the Muskingum and the Siota [Scioto] in the state of Ohio."

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23 One of his sisters.
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5. N.L.W. MS. 13191D: George Roberts to his father and mother, 10 December, 1811 (Welsh).

A copy of a letter written (or dictated) by his sister Grace Morgan, with a short postscript from George. She has five children, all well: Bet, aged eight; Mary and Siam [Welsh for James], six next April; Peggy, three; and a baby of seven months. Grace's rheumatism is better. They have tilled twelve acres, two sown with corn, five with hay, and the rest to be sown in spring. They have two cows, two bullocks, one calf, three sheep and two pigs. She has recently paid twenty dollars for a stove "like a cast iron box, which gives enough heat for Rees to do his shoemaking in his shirt sleeves in the coldest weather, although it's so much colder here than yonder." She has had a nice letter from "brother and sister Bebb" dated 18 August. Richard Lewis and his wife are well. She sends remembrances to D. Lewis, John Davies and his wife, and all John Evans's connections, and to the two congregations meeting in the two chapels at Llanbrynmair.

6. N.L.W. MS. 13189D: George and Jane Roberts to John and Mary Roberts, 3 August, 1821 (Welsh, except for two short lapses into English).

They received John's letter a fortnight after it had been posted in Pittsburgh. It had been taken there by people from Pentre Lludw who passed that way. He has also seen a letter from Richard Davies, Dolydan, to Rev. D. Jones, which came unsealed and which he sealed and forwarded after reading it. He is concerned about a bundle of letters sent in March; David Davies of Llanerful promised to take them with him on his way home to Wales, but he never got farther than New York, where he handed the letters in to the post office. Roberts is afraid that they will either be lost at sea or involve the recipients in very heavy postage—especially as they included a book of songs sent to the church by Richard Lewis. News of the children's health and circumstances follows. Mary (now ten) has been coughing ever since she and Edward had croup last spring, and there are fears that Mary's

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16 Cf. letter 4.
17 See letter 2.
18 Afterwards a successful merchant in Ebensburg (Williams, Llanbrynmair, p. 121).
cough may turn to consumption. Tommy¹⁹ is given a very high character, and his father thinks he may have gifts for the ministry; he reads a lot, but not enough in religious books like Bunyan. He takes family prayers when his father is away, and on other occasions when requested. Evan, who is less fit than the others and "wilder" in temper, was bound apprentice for twenty-nine months to a shop in Johnstown, but after a year his master said that "because of the change in the times"²⁰ he couldn't get from his customers the money needed to replenish his stock, and so couldn't do justice by Evan, who (after staying at home through the winter) was set up in business in a small way in Pittsburgh, staying with Richard Lewis, who has been most kind.

"Nowadays I'm finding the little bit of money I get from the office I hold²¹ worth more than I have ever found it before. Money is very scarce in the country; many people with a lot of property find it hard to raise ten dollars, but this sum (thirty guineas a year) comes in as good money every quarter on the day it falls due. We are perhaps affected less by the change in the times than almost any family in the district. Money is worth more than it was four years ago."

Religion is at a low ebb in Cambria, but Mr. Davies made a great impression while he was here, and there is a flourishing Sunday School of sixty to a hundred members "of all sorts."²² Richard Lewis is superintendent, and John Evans of Pandy Rhiwsaesnon (the smith, as he used to be) is a faithful teacher. It has had a good effect on the conduct of the scholars; but the papists' children won't come near it, for fear of the danger of schism. He knows of no one in the neighborhood who wants to return home since he has settled there.

There is more news of the religious revival. It is strong in New England and from New York to Philadelphia, but the west is "like Mount Gilboa, with little dew or rain." Particulars are given of the united effort of American Presbyterians and Independents²³ to evangelize the heathen, as follows:

*Bombay:* work begun 1814 (5 missionaries and wives).

¹⁹ He became an "able and popular" preacher, but died young (*id.*).
²⁰ The slump of 1819.
²¹ As a county associate judge (Williams, *loc. cit.*).
²² J. M. Rhees was a pioneer of Sunday Schools.
²³ The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions.
Ceylon: 1816 (6 ministers and wives, one doctor and wife, one printer).

Sandwich Islands: [1819] (18, including 2 ministers and wives).

Palestine: 2 ministers in 2 settlements.

Cherokees: 1818 (total of 20, as above).

Cherokees of Arkansas: 1820 (total of 18, as above).

Osages: nearly 60 on their way, including children.

In the last ten years $235,000 have been received by the society, of which $200,000 have been spent on the work, exclusive of gifts of clothes, books, etc.; there are 70 schools under its care, in which 3,000 children have been instructed. Some fifty heathen have "given grounds for hoping they have been brought to the truth."

The rest of the letter consists in news of or messages to relatives and neighbors. The families of Rees Morgan and Richard Lewis (who is "highly respected and useful in both state and church") are well; Rowland Dafydd recently joined the church; the writer saw Jane and Ann Tibbot in June. Edward Davies's children are living with Mr. Forward, attorney at law, Pittsburgh, who is very kind to them; but some think that the uncle ought to be doing something towards the education of Richard, who wants to be a minister. Messages are sent to all the family at home, with Edward and Hugh Thomas, Catherine Harry and others, and satisfaction is expressed that Samuel ("S.R.") has "engaged in the work of the ministry." Finally, there are further references to the hazards of the mails, and it is suggested that important letters should be repeated at a few weeks' interval in case the first should miscarry. He excuses himself for an absent-minded lapse into English for one short paragraph, but writes the last sentence in the same language.

7. N.L.W. MS. 14094E: George Roberts to Samuel Roberts, 12 February, 1823 (English).

An answer to enquiries from some of "S.R.'s" fellow-students at the Independent Academy (Newtown), on the prospects for a minister migrating from Wales to the United States.24 He passes

24 Cf. the advice given thirty years earlier (in a letter of 15 Jan., 1793) by Frederick Morse, Charles Town, Mass., in answer to similar enquiries by Rev. George Lewis, Independent minister of Caernarvon, who contemplated emigration for the same political motives that impelled J. M. Rhees, but was dissuaded and became a leading light of his denomination at home. He was advised that there were many vacant churches in Vermont, "a
on the views of Rev. James Davies, who has travelled much, and of Rev. Evan Roberts of Steuben. In Pennsylvania the outlook for an Independent minister is not as good as for a Presbyterian: few of the Presbyterian ministers here are well versed in Greek; on the other hand from immigrants their church demands a certificate covering their last year's residence in Europe, and even then they are put on two years' trial. The denomination is less strict in its educational standards with ministers received from other denominations, and it looks after its ministers well financially. But New England or Ohio offer better prospects for an Independent minister. A Welsh accent is no handicap, provided one can speak "with any common degree of propriety." On the whole a minister who is respected in Wales would be respected and supported here; but some so-called ministers would not be respected anywhere, and these do better in America than in Wales. The Revs. John Williams of New York, Picton, Davies, or Roberts of Steuben, would give further information; but when the case was put to David Morris (late of Llanfyllin), he burst out angrily, "Tell the students to come here and see, and not bother us any more!" He is exercised with the question whether to send Tommy to be educated in Wales or to keep him "here."

The remaining letters in N.L.W. MSS. 13189D and 14094E are to George Roberts from his father and his uncle (1822-1826), and contain nothing of general interest.

very thriving country of good land" where mechanics such as carpenters, bricklayers, shoemakers, and tailors were also in great demand. If he considered settling in New England he should consult one of the societies recently formed in Boston, Charles Town, and elsewhere, for the information of "foreigners." He should bring his own books, bedstead, bedding, linen, and furniture, except tables and chairs.—(N.L.W. MS. 13713D).

25 In Welsh.
26 See letter 6.