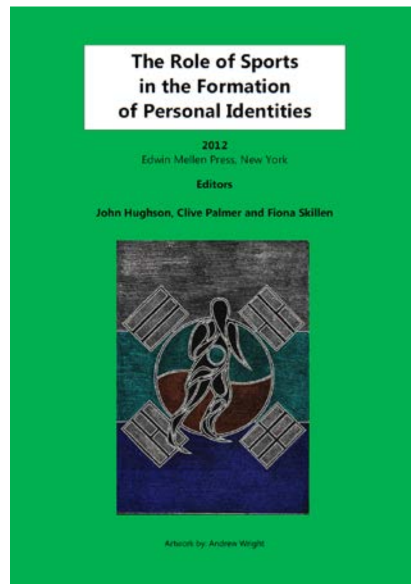

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Workers' Fields: Sport, Politics, and Landscape in Inter-War South Wales[1]

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'Wales is a singular noun but a plural experience'
– Dai Smith, 1984.[2]

Introduction

The inter-war economic crisis was a major fissure in the history of the Welsh nation and has embedded itself in the historical folk memory of twentieth century Wales. Historians, often measured in their responses, seethe with anger when narrating the history of the 1920s and 1930s; none more so than the doyen of modern Welsh history Kenneth O. Morgan. Wales, and particularly South Wales, he writes, 'plunged unprepared into a depression and despair which crushed its society for almost twenty years and left ineradicable scars upon its consciousness'.[3] Just as forcefully, Gwyn Alf Williams likened the effects of the Great Depression on South Wales to the potato famine in Ireland a century before.[4]

[1] The author wishes to thank Martin Johnes and Dai Smith for helpful guidance on an earlier draft; the AHRC and the Royal Commission for Ancient and Historic Monuments Wales for providing funding for the PhD from where this article is drawn and finally to the many record offices and public libraries where the evidence was found.
[2] Dai Smith, *Wales! Wales?* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1984), 1.
[3] Kenneth O. Morgan, *Rebirth of a Nation: A History of Modern Wales* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 231. For a recent re-assessment of the severity of the Depression in South Wales: Steven Thompson, *Unemployment, Poverty and Health in Interwar South Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2006).
[4] Gwyn A. Williams, *The Welsh in their History* (London: Croom Helm, 1982), 178. Perhaps the most significant impact of the Depression was out-migration from the coalfield. See: Andy Chandler, 'The Black Death on Wheels: Unemployment and Migration - the Experience of Inter-War South Wales', in Tim Williams (ed.), *Papers in Modern Welsh History* (Cardiff: Modern Wales Unit, 1982), 1 – 15; Andrew Chandler, 'The Re-Making of a Working Class: Migration from the South Wales Coalfield to the New Industry Areas of the Midlands, c. 1920 – 40' (PhD Thesis: University of Wales, Cardiff, 1988).

Set against this backdrop, historians of the South Wales coalfield have, understandably, focused on the heroism of those who struggled, gallantly and valiantly, against the ravages of economic, social, and political hardship.[5] More recently, as the presence of the coal industry that sustained the marching miners has receded to a handful of open-cast pits, historians have turned to the life and times of those who were left behind on the days when there was no march against the means test or strike for better pay. This has had a two-fold impact on the historiography notably on our understanding of the role of women in South Walian society but also of the role of sport in the construction and manifestation of community, regional, and national-level identities.[6] As Chris Williams has written, 'Only by seeing history as full of individuals with their own stories is it possible to defy stereotypes and to bring a sense of proportion to studies of politics and trade unions'.[7]

And yet, the history of sporting landscape in the South Wales of the 1920s and 1930s is one that is bound up not with individual actions but collective ones and it is the exploration of those collective actions in the provision of recreation grounds and other forms of sporting space that occupies our attention in the present

[5] Hywel Francis and David Smith, *The Fed: A History of the South Wales Miners in the Twentieth Century* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1980); Chris Williams, *Democratic Rhondda: Politics and Society, 1881 – 1951* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1996); Sue Bruley, *The Women and Men of 1926: A Gender and Social History of the General Strike and Miners' Lockout in South Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2010); Stephanie Ward, 'Sit Down to Starve or Stand up to Live': Community, protest and the means Test in the Rhondda Valleys, 1931-1939', *Llafur*, 9: 2 (2005), 27 – 44; Gwenno Ffrancon, 'Documenting the Depression in South Wales: Today We Live and Eastern Valley', *Welsh History Review*, 22: 1 (2004), 104 – 125.

[6] In particular: Deirdre Beddoe, Out of the Shadows: A History of Women in Twentieth-Century Wales (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000); C. White & S. R. Williams (eds.), Struggle or Starve: Women's Lives in the South Wales Valleys Between the Wars (Dinas Powys: Honno, 1997); Angela V. John (ed.), Our Mother's Land: Chapters in Welsh Women's History, 1830 – 1939 (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1991); Martin Johnes, Soccer & Society: South Wales, 1900 – 1939 (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2002); Martin Johnes, *A History of Sport in Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2005); Dai Smith & Gareth Williams, *Fields of Praise: The Official History of the Welsh Rugby Union 1881-1981* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1980); Gareth Williams, *1905 and all that: Essays on Rugby Football, Sport and Welsh Society* (Llandysul: Gomer, 1991).

[7] Chris Williams,' "Going Underground"? The Future of Coalfield History Revisited', *Morgannwg*, 42
(1998), 54.

chapter. What prompted the explosion in the numbers of playing fields and recreational spaces in the valleys communities at a time economic hardship and does it go beyond simply finding ‘something to do’? Who were in involved in financing, coordinating, and constructing these sites and what does this tell us about the strengths of collective action beyond the world of strikes and protest marches? And finally, how far did the general repetition of ‘workers’ fields’ across South Wales help to foster a sub-regional identity alongside more fully explored facets such as Labour politics and a widespread love of rugby union football?[8]

It will be argued in this chapter that not only does sporting space matter a great deal to the history of communities and regions but that it is an effective way of bringing together a social history of grassroots politics and sport. The sporting landscape in South Wales has a varied lineage but two key features are in evidence in the inter-war years: voluntarism and organised welfarism. Both forms of self-help bring into sharp focus the international context of South Wales between the wars and provide wider social reasons for the willing connection between the majority of the people of South Wales and the Labour movement.

Miners and Students

In the summer of 1931, the iron and coal town of Brynmawr, situated in the eastern valley of the coalfield near Ebbw Vale, became home to a remarkable group of volunteers determined to provide the people of Brynmawr with a long-sought recreation ground and swimming pool. It had begun as part of the Brynmawr Experiment – a Quaker initiative that had been set up in the town in 1928 to provide training opportunities for the local unemployed in an effort to diversify the district’s economy and bring down the numbers of people out of

[8] Dai Smith, *Aneurin Bevan and the World of South Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1993); Dai Smith, *Wales: A Question for History* (Bridgend: Seren, 1999). For a similar sense of sub-regional identity in the North of England see Dave Russell, *Looking North: Northern England and the National Imagination* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004).

work – but with relatively few men able to work on the scheme progress had been slow before 1931. [9] It was soon to become a pioneering project not just in Wales but in Britain and Europe as well.

In that year a group of students and volunteers from across Britain, continental Europe, and the United States arrived in Brynmawr to build a swimming pool and aid with the general refurbishment of the community (painting houses, relaying roads and so on). They were organised by two groups: the Welsh Student Self-Help Council and the International Voluntary Service. The latter, formed in 1920 in the aftermath of the Great War, was a Swiss organisation that had initially sought to reconcile French and German citizens through reconstruction projects in war-torn areas of Northern France such as Verdun but had grown by the mid-1920s into a voluntary group that helped in the reconstruction of communities following natural as well as man-made disasters. Its founder, Pierre Cérésole, a Swiss pacifist, had been inspired by British Quakers and their peace work during the war and sought to turn the efficacy and organisation of the military into the foundations of an "army of peace".[10]

The Welsh Student Self-Help Council formed in the mid-1920s was very much an organisation dominated by one individual: Kitty Lewis. The daughter of a prominent Liberal MP, Sir John Herbert Lewis, Lewis was instrumental in organising the Brynmawr work camps of 1931 and 1932 as well as a second scheme in Rhosllanerchrugog in North Wales in 1932 and it is through her papers that we are able to observe the genesis of the Brynmawr scheme in the course of 1931.

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[9] Hilda Jennings, *Brynmawr: A Study of a Distressed Area* (London: Allenson & Co, 1934).
[10] Hélène Monastier, *Paix, Pelle et Pioche: Histoire du Service Civil International de 1919 à 1954* (Lausanne: La Concorde, 1955); Ethelwyn Best & Bernard Pike, *International Voluntary Service for Peace, 1920 – 1946* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1948).

'At Brynmawr', she wrote to her parents in January 1931, '[I] may have a most interesting experiment'.[11] Lewis was there to discuss with Peter Scott, the leading Quaker involved in the Brynmawr Experiment, plans for a student work colony that summer. 'Peter Scott', she reported to the Self-Help Council, 'believes that the support of students and especially the help of an international organisation … would help bring new hope and encouragement into the district'.[12] This was very much the tone in which the coming together of the Quakers, Welsh students, and the International Voluntary Service was conducted: expressions of hope. Students from a wide variety of British Universities such as Bristol, Oxford, Cambridge, Birmingham, and Manchester as well as the four Welsh university colleges joined a continental contingent numbering 37 from countries as diverse as Belgium, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, France, Germany, Norway, Switzerland, and the United States. Those travelling from Europe went to great effort to reach Brynmawr: one of the Swiss bicycled from Lausanne in five days and one of the Norwegians came on a tramp ship from the arctic north![13]

As might be expected, this soon attracted the attention of the national press who had any case taken an increased interest in South Wales as a result of the economic depression in. Special correspondents were despatched to the Valleys to report on the voluntary efforts at Brynmawr and at other sites such as the Maes-yr-Haf settlement in the Rhondda.[14] Correspondents, particularly for the *Manchester Guardian*, tend to reflect on the international element noting that though they are building a swimming pool in a blighted Welsh town, the symbolism of their work goes beyond national boundaries.[15] But even the right-

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[11] National Library of Wales: Kitty Idwal Jones Papers [1990/048/21- 30], 23/5. Letter from Kitty Lewis to Parents, January 1931.
[12] National Library of Wales: University of Wales Aberystwyth, Student Representatives' Council Correspondence, 1929 – 1933. Welsh Student Self-Help Council Minutes, 27 January 1931.
[13] *Report of the International Service Camp at Brynmawr, June 30 – September 22, 1931*, p. 3 [International Voluntary Service Archives, La Chaux-de-Fonds, Switzerland: SCIIA 20311, Brynmawr 1931 Document 6].
[14] *The Times*, 18 August 1931.
[15] *Manchester Guardian*, 2 July 1931.

wing press could find a worthy example in the work colony. *The Spectator*, for example, remarked in December 1931 that ‘the keynote of the Brynmawr Experiment is that the unit of organisation should be the neighbourhood rather than the state’.[16] In other words, something so mundane as swimming pool could cross political- and national boundaries in an era of hardship.

Indeed, this spirit of international fellowship was fostered during the summer through meetings of the League of Nations association where international volunteers were invited to give presentations about their native lands and speak in their native tongues and through the enrolment of some of the volunteers into the local branch of the Labour Party.[17] This detail brings into question the existing historiography which posits that relations between the Labour movement in the area and the voluntary scheme was much less cordial. Alun Burge, for example, has argued that ‘the voluntary organisations did not overcome the opposition to them in the Labour movement before the Second World War’.[18] Peter Stead, who writes that ‘voluntary effort went on in a context of continual sniping from the Left’, echoes this point.[19] This is a narrative established by Hilda Jennings in her history of the Brynmawr Experiment published in 1934 who writes that ‘the weight of the official local Labour Party was thrown against the scheme’.[20] Ramsay MacDonald’s radio broadcast of 18 December 1932, which praised the voluntary efforts, did bring scorn from the Labour-controlled council and a very public letter was presented in the press.

The focus in the letter was on the rejuvenation of Brynmawr’s economic and employment prospects. As the clerk put it: ‘No voluntary effort, however well

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[16] *The Spectator*, 12 December 1931.
[17] *Report*, 5.
[18] Alun Burge, ‘A “Subtle Danger”? The Voluntary Sector and Coalfield Society in South Wales, 1926 – 1939’, *Llafur*, 7: 3 & 4 (1997 – 1998), 140.
[19] Peter Stead, ‘The Voluntary Response to Mass Unemployment in South Wales’, in Walter Minchinton (ed.), *Reactions to Social and Economic Change, 1750 – 1939* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1979), 106.
[20] Jennings, *Brynmawr*, 207.

intentioned can solve Brynmawr's unemployment problem'.[21] Yet, there was an acceptance of the idealism that motivated the volunteers and the hostility lay not with voluntary action per se but with a fear that Brynmawr's true economic plight would be overlooked by the coalition National Government because of the baths scheme. This is certainly the impression to be gained from Kitty Lewis's papers. 'There has been a good deal of prejudice in the district against voluntary labour as such', she writes, 'but this is being gradually overcome and the plans at Brynmawr have the support of leading Trade Unionists'.[22] Moreover, the children's paddling pool was opened by the Duke of Beaufort (who owned the land) at the request of the Labour leader of Brynmawr Urban District Council.[23]

The Labour movement was not, then, divorced from this kind of voluntary welfare scheme and this was even more the case in the follow-on camp held in Rhosllanerchrugog, near Wrexham, in 1932. The impetus for the Rhos scheme came from the local Miners' Institute: they purchased the ground upon which the Ponciau Banks Park was to be laid out as part of their overall contribution to the project.[24] But it was a scheme that transcended the Labour movement. As Kitty Lewis recalled in 1935, 'I remember a whole village rising to this idea of making a pleasant place for its people'.[25] For the local children this was very much the case: they helped to make their own playground under the helpful guidance of a Swiss watchmaker.[26] The local newspaper, the *Rhos Herald*, was extremely enthusiastic about the voluntary service camp and provided space in its columns not only for a day-by-day commentary on what was happening but also for the international volunteers to contribute.[27] As with the 1931 Brynmawr camp,

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[21] *South Wales Echo*, 28 December 1932.
[22] Welsh Student Self-Help Council Minutes, 27 January 1931.
[23] *The Times*, 14 August 1931.
[24] *Wrexham Leader*, 20 April 1932. For a general sense of the Rhos scheme see: André Berry, 'Wrexham's Urban Parks, II: Ponciau Banks', *Transactions of the Denbighshire Historical Society*, 48 (1998), 142 - 167.
[25] Kitty Lewis, 'To the Unemployed' [National Library of Wales: Kitty Idwal Jones Papers, 21/4], 2.
[26] Kitty Lewis, 'An Adventure at Rhosllanerchrugog', *The Welsh Outlook*, September 1932.
[27] *Rhos Herald*, 2 July, 9 July, 30 July, 13 August 1932.

volunteers came from all over Europe including countries such as Lithuania, Poland, Austria, Italy, Spain, and the Netherlands.[28]

The Rhos project offers a fascinating insight into Welsh-language Labour politics, which is under-researched by historians.[29] Rhos, unlike Brynmawr, had retained its Welsh-language culture and it is notable that the students who arrived in Rhos were schooled both in English and in Welsh-language culture.[30] One of the Lithuanian students was taken along to Welsh-language chapel in his first weekend and quickly picked up Welsh delivering chapel notices in Welsh soon enough.[31] That he spoke eight languages probably aided him there![32] Most obviously, the Rhos scheme emphasises similarities in mining communities – particularly given that Wrexham was Labour's strongest base in North Wales - regardless of their linguistic composition but we ought to be careful in over-stating the similarities. As Duncan Tanner has pointed out, specific grievances arose from conducting one's Labourism in a language other than English –given the minority status of Welsh within the overwhelmingly English-speaking Labour movement even within Wales itself - and this tended towards regional specificity.[33]

Either way, the building of a swimming pool – as at Brynmawr – or the Ponciau Banks Park in Rhos was a formidable sign of a self-help effort that took place in an international context bringing together unemployed workers from the locality,

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[28] List of Volunteers for Brynmawr and Rhos, 1932 [International Voluntary Service Archives: SCIIA 20321, Rhos 1932, document 3].

[29] The North Wales coalfield is under-researched compared to its, admittedly much larger, South Wales cousin. For insights into the Wrexham coalfield in this period see: David Lee Williams, 'A Healthy Place to Be? The Wrexham Coalfield in the Interwar Period', Llafur, 7: 1 (1996), 87 – 95; for an excellent analysis of the North Wales coalfield more broadly see: Keith Gildart, *North Wales Miners: A Fragile Unity, 1945 – 1996* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2001).

[30] *Rhos Herald*, 9 July 1932. On the Welsh-language culture of Rhos see Gwenfair Parry, 'Rhosllanerchrugog', in Gwenfair Parry and Mari A. Williams (eds.), *The Welsh Language and the 1891 Census* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999), 359 – 382.

[31] *Manchester Guardian*, 20 August 1932.

[32] *Rhos Herald*, 9 July 1932.

[33] Duncan Tanner, 'The Pattern of Labour Politics, 1918 – 1939', in Tanner, Chris Williams, and Deian Hopkin (eds.), *The Labour Party in Wales*, p. 127.

politically-minded students, volunteers from abroad and pushed the horizons of those communities far beyond their regional or national limits. This must have been all the more true of those living in Rhos with the arrival of a group of black volunteers from the West Indies.[34] This, no doubt, would have fuelled Alfred Zimmern's belief that industrial Wales could be likened to America: a cosmopolitan melting pot even if it was cosmopolitan only for a summer.[35]

For the Welfare of All

Relatively spontaneous voluntary schemes such as at Brynmawr were a small part of the overall bottom-up response to the need for recreative open spaces in the coalfield. Most schemes were operated as part of a turn to properly funded miners' welfare following the Mining Industry Act of 1920.[36] Miners' Welfare schemes were part of a vast array of self-help organisations in the coalfield ranging from medical aid societies to the Miners' Institutes and their great libraries and cinemas which existed because of working-class initiative and willingness to pay a levy to participate.[37] Michael Foot, for example, considered the Tredegar Medical Aid Society, – at least in part – 'as an embryonic National Health Service'.[38] And similar points might be made about Recreational Associations. In general, a sense of how small sums of money from each working person could contribute to a greater pot with which genuine community transformation could be effected is certainly in evidence.

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[34] *Manchester Guardian*, 20 August 1932.

[35] Alfred Zimmern, *My Impressions of Wales* (London: Mills & Boon, 1921); Dai Smith, *Aneurin Bevan*, 11 – 14.

[36] W. John Morgan, 'The Miners' Welfare Fund in Britain, 1920 – 1952', *Social Policy & Administration*, 24: 3 (1990), 199 – 211; Colin Morgan, 'Not Just a Case of Baths, Canteens and Rehabilitation Centres: The Second World War and the Recreational Provision of the Miners' Welfare Commission in Coalmining Communities', in Jeff Hill & Nick Hayes (eds.), *'Millions Like Us'? British Culture in the Second World War* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), 261 – 294.

[37] Steven Thompson, ' "Brodyr Trwyadl Mewn Tywydd Garw": Welfare Provision and the Social Centrality of the South Wales Miners' Federation', *Welsh History Review*, 24: 4 (2009), 141 – 167.

[38] Michael Foot, *Aneurin Bevan: A Biography, Volume I, 1897 – 1945* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1962), p. 63.

The Fund was quickly constituted into a two-tier governance structure with a national committee with overall responsibility for administering the fund and 25 local committees to oversee and coordinate coalfield specific schemes. There was a great deal of difference in the priorities of the districts with recreation being seen as the principal priority in some areas and a luxury in others. Ayrshire and Lancashire in particular spent next-to-nothing on recreation from their allocations whereas in districts such as the Cumberland and the Lothians or Warwickshire almost all of the money available had been spent on recreational schemes.[39] The dominance of recreation schemes in the South Wales coalfield allocations of the Miners' Welfare Fund can be seen in table 1. Compared to spending on a national level (table 2), the South Wales coalfield expended three times as much of its welfare funding on recreation schemes but this did not always meet with approval from local commentators. The *Ocean & National Magazine* – the company magazine of the Ocean Coal Company of South Wales – carried an article in April 1929 examining the details of the recently published annual report of the Miners' Welfare Fund for 1928. It found that spending on Education and Pit Welfare had garnered no support during the year compared to nearly £100,000 being spent on recreation. 'From which we assume', concluded the author, 'that the welfare of the miner at work is not yet considered as of supreme importance in our own coalfield'.[40]

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[39] Miners' Welfare Fund, *10th* Annual *Report* (London: HMSO, 1932); Griffin, 'Not Just a Case of Baths', 263.
[40] *Ocean & National Magazine*, II:4 (April 1929), 111.

Table 1.1: Allocations of Miners' Welfare Fund, South Wales District, 1939.

Purpose of Grant	Amount in £	% of Total
Recreation	1,274,831	66.0
Health	527,316	27.3
Pithead Baths	19,388	1.0
Other Pithead Welfare	5,711	0.3
Education	3,024	0.2
Administration	56,671	2.9
Unallocated	44,004	2.3
Total	**1,930,945**	**100.0**

Source: Miners' Welfare 1939: Annual Report of the Miners' Welfare Commission, 102.

Table 1.2: Total National Allocations of Miners' Welfare Fund, 1921 – 1952.

Purpose of Grant	Amount in £	% of Total
Recreation	6,856,403	22.8
Health	10,510,983	34.9
Pithead Baths	3,095,834	10.3
Colliery Canteens	401,067	1.3
Other Pithead Welfare	5,590,991	18.6
Education	1,227,836	4.1
Mines Research	1,273,364	4.2
Miscellaneous	402,312	1.3
Administration	744,608	2.5
Total	**30,103,398**	**100.0**

Source: National Miners' Welfare Joint Council, Fourth Report, 1952, 35.

Understanding why these differences emerged requires an examination of the schemes at a local level. Miners' Welfare schemes were organised around community need as identified by the organisation submitting the grant application. This was most often a body linked to either the Miners' Institute or the Miners' Lodge. Unfortunately, we have relatively little documentary evidence that

provides an insight into the workings of welfare associations at the local level.[41] However, that which has survived is broadly similar; and, given the dominance of recreation schemes, it seems reasonable to accept it as typical.[42]

The Ynysybwl Recreation Association was founded in 1922 and was the brainchild of several of the leading members of the local miners' lodge including its then chairman Will R. John and one of the Labour district councillors, Abel Morgan.[43] It was not greeted with universal favour at first with many members being uncomfortable with a levy on wages to sustain it.[44] A ballot conducted in December 1922 of affiliated unions reveals the extent of uncertainty. Despite unanimous support from the Municipal Workers and Teachers unions and just 1 vote against from the small Mynachdy Colliery at the northern edge of Ynysybwl, the principal union – the Lady Windsor Lodge – had substantial numbers voting against: 289 members compared to 469 in favour or almost 40%.[45] It was eventually agreed that 1d per member be paid weekly to cover the annual running costs of £225.[46]

Recreation associations were run much the same way as a Lodge or Labour Party branch and certainly the organisational structure shares many of the same features. This is understandable given the close relationship between the two but is indicative of the efforts at forging internal democracy and to represent a broad range of views within the mining communities. Inevitably, though, men from the

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[41] The papers of the South Wales & Monmouthshire Joint Committee have survived and are now held at Swansea University.
[42] This is almost entirely held at Swansea University Archives as part of the South Wales Coalfield Collection. See in particular: Cambrian Welfare Association Records [SWCC: MNC/NUM/I/2]; Ynysybwl Recreation Association [Abel Morgan Papers, SWCC: MNA/PP/81]; H. W. Currie Papers (Abercynon) [SWCC: MNA/PP/9]; Cwmllynfell Miners' Welfare Association Papers [SWCC: MNA/NUM/I/11]; Forest of Dean Miners' Welfare Association Papers [SWCC: MNA/NUM/I/16]; Maesteg Miners' Welfare Fund Records [SWCC: MNA/NUM/I/23].
[43] Lady Windsor Lodge, *Minute Book, 1921 – 1925*, 28 June 1922 [Swansea University Archives, MNA/NUM/L/47/5].
[44] Ibid, 5 July, 16 August 1922.
[45] Ynysybwl Recreation Association, *Minute Book*, 5 December 1922 [MNA/PP/81/20].
[46] 6 June, 3, 13 August 1923. Ynysybwl Recreation Association, *Minute Book*, 19 November 1922.

executives of the local Miners' Lodge or the Labour Party branch ran these associations. Some, such as Abel Morgan were active in all three.

The Ynysybwl scheme is symptomatic of this. Nevertheless, it took a very broad view of recreation stating that the object of the Association was: 'recreation in its widest and most liberal sense'.[47] Following on from this definition the association rules booklet provides support for the usual sports such as football, cricket, tennis, bowls, and quoits but also areas of recreation such as physical training, the boy scouts and girl guides, billiards, badminton, and draughts.[48] Such a wide purview was inevitably reflected in the grant requests put to the Miners' Welfare Fund and the recreation grounds that were created.

Ynysybwl's first recreation ground was laid out in 1910 on an undulating piece of land not far from the village school. Ostensibly a Lodge scheme, it was not until the Mountain Ash Urban District Council intervened (following a request for assistance from the Lodge) that the landowner – Robert Thompson Crawshay - agreed to lease it for £30 a year.[49] With space enough for an under-sized rugby pitch it was a sufficient start but, with the advent of the Miners' Welfare Fund and the possibilities it offered, was soon to prove out of date. Its replacement - the Ynysybwl Recreation Ground - was opened in stages over the course of the 1920s and was much more in keeping with the scope of the Recreation Association. There was space for cricket, rugby and football, quoits, bowls, tennis, and a children's playground. Latter additions included a grandstand and changing facilities for organised sport.[50]

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[47] Ynysybwl Recreation Association, *Rules of the Association*, 2 [MNA/PP/81/2].
[48] Ibid, 3.
[49] Lady Windsor Lodge, *Minute Book, 1903 – 1907*, 7 November, 5 December 1906, 2 January 1907; Mountain Ash Urban District Council, *Minute Book, April – September 1910*, 12 July 1910 [Glamorgan Record Office: UD/MA/C/4/4].
[50] See the plan of the site in: *After Ten Years: A Report of Miners' Welfare Work in the South Wales Coalfield, 1921 – 1931* (Treorchy: Ocean Area Recreation Union, 1931), p. 81.

The Miners' Welfare Fund operated alongside an altogether different organisation: the National Playing Fields Association (NPFA). Unlike the former, the NPFA was a top-down organisation dominated by the landed. The National Playing Fields Association was formed in 1925 and a local branch in South Wales – the Glamorgan Playing Fields Association (GPFA) was set up two years later and run by the Earl of Plymouth from the confines of St Fagans Castle.[51] With leading members of the South Wales aristocratic and industrialist classes involved this was a wholly contrasting attempt to provide recreational open spaces in the region. It was also successful in bringing onboard sports organisations such as district football leagues.[52] It was not, however, successful in courting trade union support and there seems to have been a degree of animosity shown by the South Wales Miners' Federation in particular – in part no doubt because it competed with the Miners' Welfare schemes.[53] Indeed, by 1933 and following a number of direct appeals to the Trade Union and Labour movement, only two branches out of the 27 TUC members in Glamorgan had signed up (Merthyr Tydfil Labour Party and the Industrial Section of Caerphilly Divisional Labour Party).[54]

The situation in South Wales is contrary to the national picture provided by Stephen Jones in his analysis of the relationship between the NPFA and the Labour movement. For Jones, there was a close relationship between the TUC and the NPFA and he cites the fact that Ben Tillett and H. H. Elvin both sat on the NPFA's governing council.[55] However he overlooks the fact that relatively few constituent parts of the trades union movement had chosen to affiliate to the NPFA and the criticism from some trades unionists that it was 'an organisation

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[51] This and the proceeding paragraphs are based on the archives of the GPFA held at the Glamorgan Record Office as part of the Plymouth Estate records [Glamorgan Record Office: DPL/996].
[52] Letter from Reginald A. Barber, Honorary Secretary of the Port Talbot & District Amateur Football League, 30 September 1927. [DPL/996: General Letters, 1927 – 1928]; Letter from the Welsh Schools Football Association, 5 October 1927 [Ibid].
[53] Letter from W.H.L. Chattin to Captain F. Johnston, 10 October 1930. [DPL/996: General Correspondence, 1930].
[54] Draft Report [DPL/996: General Letters, 1933 – 1934].
[55] Jones, *Sport, Politics and the Working Class*, 113, 147 - 148.

composed mainly of persons whose ancestors took the land from the people, and they seemed to be appealing to the public for funds to buy it back'.[56] There was a thaw in the late 1930s particularly following the appointment of Clement Attlee as Chairman of the King George V Fields Trust in 1936. The yearly statistical evidence provided by Elvin to the TUC about the provision of bats and balls, jerseys and pitches by the NPFA undoubtedly had a cumulative effect as well.[57]

In contrast to the miners' schemes, which were ubiquitous in the coalfield, the NPFA had a wider scope and funded projects which were not subject to specialised funding schemes such as those discussed above. Nevertheless there was a degree of parity and this may, again, explain the hostility of the Miners' Federation. By 1930, for example, forty schemes had been helped in Wales by grants or gifted to the community through the NPFA. Of that total, 18 were in Glamorgan and 10 in Monmouthshire and included sites such as the Troedyrhiw recreation ground near Merthyr Tydfil donated by the Earl of Plymouth or grants to local authorities such as for the provision of equipment on the Castle Fields at Caerphilly.[58] In sum, then, whereas top-down schemes as organised by the NPFA had a presence in South Wales, these were far less important than those run by miners' welfare committees and the momentum driving the expansion of recreational open spaces in this period was very much created by the Labour movement.

Social Democratic Space

The form of sporting space examined in this chapter is one that might readily be called 'social democratic' space. This is a form of space that stands in contrast to

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[56] Trades Union Congress, *Report of the Annual Trades Union Congress: Newcastle, 1932* (London: TUC. 1932), 260.

[57] *King George's Fields Foundation: Final Report* (London: King George V Fields Trust, 1965); Trades Union Congress, *Annual Reports* (1933 – 1939); Jones, *Sport, Politics and the Working Class,* 114.

[58] *The Journal of the National Playing Fields Association*, vol. I: 1 (July 1930), p. 24; vol. II: 2 (January 1933), 98 – 99.

the self-improving spaces of Victorian liberalism.[59] At the heart of Victorian public parks lay a philosophy of freedom, which imposed significant limits on those who existed outside of what some historians have called a 'liberal order framework'.[60] Social democratic spaces were much more inclusive and designed around the needs of the community as a whole. Whereas in Victorian public parks the playing of games was often prohibited or at the very least heavily controlled, social democratic recreation grounds of the kind constructed in Brynmawr or across the Valleys between the wars offered space for all kinds of recreation. As one miner-historian relates of the first park provided by the Miners' Lodge in Ynysybwl, 'hundreds of children of both sexes … have grateful memories of countless delightful hours spent in its bushes and bypaths, playing "Indians" and many harassed and tired mothers also treasure memories of many enjoyable evenings in the sun upon its seats, where they had gone without dressing up, with their toddlers playing round on the grass nearby'.[61] Such statements might be filled with a romantic pride but provide nevertheless a fair contrast between a Victorian park where workers were encouraged to go in their Sunday best to learn the values of rationality and self-improvement from their social betters.

In South Wales, this drive towards social democratic spaces in towns is intimately connected to the rise of the Labour movement to power on the Urban, Rural, Borough, and County Borough Councils after 1918.[62] However, Labour had been campaigning on matters of public parks for years prior to taking overall control of

[59] For a sense of this literature see: Patrick Joyce, *The Rule of Freedom: Liberalism and the Modern City* (London: Verso, 2003); Simon Gunn, *The Public Culture of the Victorian Middle Class: Ritual and Authority in the English Industrial City, 1840 – 1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000); Andy Croll, *Civilizing the Urban: Popular Culture and Public Space in Merthyr c. 1870 – 1914* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000).
[60] Ian McKay, 'The Liberal Order Framework; A Prospectus for a Reconnaissance of Canadian History', *Canadian Historical Review*, 81 (2000), 617 – 645; Fernande Roy, *Progrès, Harmonie, Liberté: Le Libéralisme des Milieux d'Affaires Francophones de Montréal au Tournant du Siècle* (Montréal: Boréal, 1998).
[61] Morgan, *A Village Workers' Council*, 66.
[62] For a guide to Labour's electoral success in inter-war Welsh local government see the table in Chris Williams, 'Labour and the Challenge of Local Government, 1919 – 1939', in Duncan Tanner, Chris Williams, and Deian Hopkin (eds.), *The Labour Party in Wales, 1900 – 2000* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000), 142.

many local authorities between 1919 and 1929. Indeed, in the Labour press published in Cardiff in the mid-1890s, Labour members made several attacks on the ineffectiveness of the Liberal Party which controlled the Parks Committee of Cardiff Corporation. Though, at that stage, they were interested more in industrial relations than on getting to grips with the provision of sporting and recreative open spaces it is clear that a reworking of the place of parks and playing fields in the urban environment was taking place in Labour thinking.[63] Two decades later this process was complete. In a speech to socialists in the Rhondda, the future MP for Pontypridd Thomas Isaac Mardy Jones attacked the Liberals, Conservatives and Independents of Rhondda Urban District Council declaring that:

> The colliery villages could be better planned, better lighted and kept, be made more ornamental with trees; they could have more parks, libraries, gymnasiums, play-grounds, and very much else if the Council so decided. But the Council does not so decide, because the workmen permit the Council to be managed by rate-savers; that is, persons whose concern seems to be the saving of the rates instead of using their powers for the public advantage.[64]

Mardy Jones's municipal vision was enacted over the course of the 1920s and 1930s by the voluntary end of the Labour movement as well as by Labour-controlled local authorities. A sense of the scale of this can be found in a report submitted to Rhondda Urban District Council by its surveyor in 1937. Since the Great War, the surveyor pointed out, seventeen recreation grounds had been provided or municipalised complete with a wide range of facilities such as bowling greens, pitches, and swimming pools.[65] A similar trend is evident, albeit on a smaller scale, right across the coalfield. Of course, the Labour movement was not simply a body which existed in governmental institutions and whilst the desire to get hold of the political levers of power to enact change are obvious it was the extra-governmental self-help schemes enacted through the financial incentives of

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[63] *South Wales Labour Times*, 1 April, 6 May 1893; *The Labour Pioneer* (Cardiff), May 1900, 7.
[64] *Glamorgan Free Press*, 1 March 1912.
[65] Rhondda Urban District Council, Surveyor's Department, *Report Book, 1937*, 9 December 1937. [Treorchy Public Library, Local Studies Collection].

the Miners' Welfare Fund, as we have seen, that really drove the creation of social democratic open spaces in this period. In short this was because greater funding was available to non-governmental organisations but it is also rooted in how council budgets, particularly in areas of high unemployment, were extremely stretched coping with unemployment relief and falling revenues from the rates.

Social democratic open space goes further than simply capturing important folk-memorials such as commercial football grounds;[66] rather it puts into motion facilities designed not for the elites – be they middle-class liberals or incredibly able athletes – but for the general population. In a hilarious but altogether extremely serious speech on precisely this dichotomy as part of the parliamentary debate on the Physical Training and Recreation Bill (1937), Aneurin Bevan remarked that it had now become necessary for the government to provide facilities for recreation: 'Precisely because sport and recreation are now regarded as the special prerogative of exceptional persons, and physical development is not regarded as something which should be the ordinary attribute of the ordinary man'. The issue of having proper sporting spaces was self-evident. 'When I was a boy', Bevan explained, 'those who wanted to learn to swim went to the mountain pools and tarns, which were also a great repository of dead dogs […] we were swimming in a soup of decomposing carcases'.[67] He went on to argue against providing privileged sites for privileged people insisting that democratic participation was far better than sport playing in elite leagues and competitions. 'I wanted the whole population to participate in swimming and sunbathing if they could be persuaded to do so', he explained, 'and […] I knew of nothing which would so much deter a timid would-be swimmer from going into the water as watching the performances of a human seal'.[68]

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[66] On May Day 1923, the Ton Pentre Welfare Association purchased the Ynys Park in the township, it was at that point the most profitable football ground in the Rhondda. *Ocean & National Magazine*, February 1929, 38.
[67] HC Deb. 7 April 1937 vol. 322 c.254.
[68] Ibid, c. 255.

Bevan's points were the latest in a long succession of claims and demands made by the Labour movement about the importance of recreational space for the majority rather than the elite minority. We have noted the role of the early Labour movement in Cardiff in fighting for the rights of older workers in the parks department but there was also a wider intellectual understanding of open space being formulated in those years as well. Many of the early adherents to the Labour cause in Cardiff were either Lib-Lab trades unionists or maverick middle-class Fabians. Chris Waters, in his important study *British Socialists and the Politics of Popular Culture*, noted the pioneering efforts of Fabian socialists in the provision of municipal sporting space.[69] So, by the time Bevan rose to make his speech in the House of Commons, provision of democratic open spaces had been established Labour policy and intellectual property for a very long time.[70]

Putting aside the altogether fair suggestion that building a playing field out of a colliery tip happened simply because that was the cheapest land to buy, the very fact that workers fields tended to be land reclamation projects is an interesting element of the social democratisation of open spaces. The provision of recreation grounds by the Labour movement seems to have been just as much about providing the people of the valleys a view over the horizon into of a better life as offering a place to kick a ball about. This is made emphatically clear in the emphasis – particularly in the South Wales miners' welfare schemes – on children and their future. As one recreation association noted there was:

> A realisation that if we are to expect our children to develop an appreciation for beauty in an area where they see very little of it, we are not going to achieve it by doing everything on the principle that if we provide them with pretty things they will only destroy them. Undoubtedly it is true that, without suitable supervision, the Rhondda child will behave just like its more aristocratic fellow in other parts of the country does.[71]

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[69] Chris Waters, *British Socialists and the Politics of Popular Culture, 1884-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), chapter 5.
[70] Walter H. Ayles, *What a Socialist Town Council Would Do* (London: ILP, 1920), p. 10; Jones, *Sport, Politics and the Working Class*, 146.
[71] *After Ten* Years, 39.

Much might be made of this paragraph for it displays a vigorous defence of the innate goodness of the people of the valley and for the historian searching for a proletarian aristocracy the search ends there. For our purposes it is a clear indication of the utopian nature of the grander public spaces provided by the Labour movement and the broader aims of its policy of rebuilding the region along the contours of social democracy. The landscape is therefore intertwined with a sense of class and a representative political culture; in other words we are able to 'read' vital aspects of those key identities in the rejuvenated and reworked urban fabrics of the interwar coalfield.[72]

Sport and Politics

This brings us to our final point about the relationship between sport, politics, and identity. Welsh historians – particularly those of the Valleys – have tended to have nice things to say about the Labour Party even if, at times, the lines between objective analysis and subjective fervour can be said to have blurred. As Dai Smith reflects, 'it is, in fact, quite difficult to write about without slipping into mysticism and celebratory romance'.[73] Nevertheless there are very real indicators in the literature about the strength of collectivism and collective identities. Ieuan Gwynedd Jones, for example, argues of the Valleys that 'Community for them is not some kind of product of conditions – it is the condition of existence'.[74] Likewise Chris Williams has written of how 'it needs to be remembered that Labour councils were, by popular mandate, the self-image of the communities they represented'.[75]

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[72] David Matless, *Landscape and Englishness* (London: Reaktion, 1998).
[73] Dai Smith, *Out of the People: A Century in Labour* (Aberystwyth: National Library of Wales, 2000), 1.
[74] Ieuan Gwynedd Jones, 'The Valleys' in Ieuan Gwynedd Jones, *Communities* (Llandysul: Gomer, 1987), 156.
[75] Williams, 'Labour and the Challenge', 162.

The relationship between sport and politics is a strong one even if explicit work on the connections between the two has slowed to a trickle in recent years.[76] As sports historians we often justify our work by making reference to being able to tell "bigger stories" *through* sport rather than studying sport in the singular sense.[77] The same is true of politics though the relationship between politics and questions of ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, or age are much more explicit. Thus it is absolutely true that sports history is also a history of politics (of the small-p kind) and yet few historians in either the labour history or sports history fields actively marry the two.[78]

But what can sport tell us about the relationship between the Labour movement and the people of South Wales (or Durham or East London to name but two alternatives) and the identities that derive from that connection? As has been established the matter of sporting space was of clear importance to the Labour movement as a whole and given that these projects were also community projects it seems fair to suggest that social-democratic spaces of this kind exercised a profound influence on the continuing popularity of the Labour movement. Alongside a rigorous defence of local people during the depths of the Depression the ability to rally communities into effective self-help schemes was indicative of a movement that was very much 'of the people'. That Labour councillors sat on recreation association committees and were at the forefront of organising grant applications and negotiating with landowners or the colliery companies similarly made strong the ties between community action and political representation.

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[76] The most profound work on sport and politics remains that of Stephen Jones. See: Stephen G. Jones, *Sport, Politics and the Working Class: Organised Labour and Sport in Interwar Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988). For a recent attempt to rejuvenate the study of the two see the special issue of the *Journal of Contemporary History* and most especially Jeff Hill's introduction. Jeff Hill, 'Sport and Politics: an Introduction', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 38: 3 (2003), 355 – 361.

[77] See the comments of Mark Dyreson in his 'presidential reflections'. Mark Dyreson, 'Sport History and the History of Sport in North America', *Journal of Sport History*, 34: 3 (2007), 405 – 414.

[78] Except, of course, where there is a direct relationship such as in the work of James Riordan. As an example see: Pierre Arnaud & James Riordan (eds.), *Sport and International Politics: The Impact of Fascism and Communism on Sport* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1998).

Identity these days has become an all-encompassing term but as Tony Judt recently wrote, it is 'a dangerous word'.[79] For academics in particular identity has come to mean that 'they encourage members of [a] minority to study *themselves*—thereby simultaneously negating the goals of a liberal education and reinforcing the sectarian and ghetto mentalities they purport to undermine'.[80] Linda Colley, in her influential book, *Britons*, remarked of identities that 'they are not like hats' since individuals (and collectives presumably) are able to wear many at a time.[81] They can, and do, but as historians of the coalfield have suggested some identities are more important than others in particular a sense of international fellowship.[82] Moreover, recreational space often exemplifies these identities reinforcing not only the class-basis of the Labour movement but its strong sense of community as well (be it local, regional, national, or even international).

The Labour movement offered at that moment in time a vision of something different, which also appeared in actuality to be a great deal better than what had gone before. In a revisionist take on the 'rise of Labour' narrative Jon Lawrence has argued strongly that Labour has thrived on myths that it has created for itself about its origins, rise, and early leadership.[83] Myths, in Lawrence's view, do not simply mean untruths but rather stories that inform a collective identity.[84] This is a useful perspective even though it is important to not lose sight of the broad truths

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[79] Tony Judt, 'Edge People', *New York Review of Books*, 23 February 2010. This is also articulated in his recent book, *Ill Fares the Land* (London: Allen Lane, 2010).
[80] Ibid.
[81] Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707 – 1837* (London: Pimlico, 2003), p. 6.
[82] Hywel Francis, *Miners Against Fascism: Wales and the Spanish Civil War* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1984), 39
[83] Jon Lawrence, *Speaking for the People: Party, Language and Popular Politics in England, 1867-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 257 –263; Jon Lawrence, 'Labour – the Myths it has Lived By', in Duncan Tanner, Pat Thane, and Nick Tiratsoo (eds.), *Labour's First Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 341 – 366.
[84] Lawrence, 'Myths', 342.

of Labour legends: as we have seen, communities really did join together to build a better future.

History – which can itself be a collection of stories (in spite of accusations of theoretical naivety) – is governed by twists and turns in which people – whether they are people of the Valleys or elsewhere – construct and reconstruct their communities and identities according to the circumstances in which they find themselves. Between the wars, a Labour consciousness was built out of self-help action especially when it was combined with other aspects of working-class culture such as sport. Indeed, the foundations for a relatively stable social-democratic society in which community-level rugby and soccer could thrive were very much reliant upon the coming together of the Labour movement and the landscape. Many clubs benefited from welfare grounds where they might else have collapsed under the strain of financial hardship.[85]

Conclusion

Recreation grounds are now a ubiquitous feature in the landscape of South Wales but before the 1920s this had not been the case. A 1921 Ministry of Health report on the South Wales region noted that the 'extent of land available in the way of public parks and recreation grounds outside the seaboard towns is almost negligible'.[86] The making of the sporting landscape between the wars thus provides a fascinating example of social democratic urban design and one of the most significant areas in which the Labour movement, when they finally came to power, were able to impress their own ideas in contrast to the liberal institutions that had emerged in the Victorian period.

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[85] Gareth Williams, 'From Grand Slam to Great Slump: Economy, Society and Rugby Football in Wales during the Depression', in Williams (ed.), *1905 and all that: Essays on Rugby Football, Sport, and Welsh Society* (Llandysul: Gomer, 1991), 189.
[86] Ministry of Health, *Report of the South Wales Regional Survey Committee* (London: HMSO, 1921), 58.

Writing of public parks provision in Worcester, Massachusetts, Roy Rosenzweig argued that a social history of public parks ought to recognise the contested nature of such provision and also that ‘workers might have taken an active part in conceiving or advocating parks’.[87] The present chapter has argued that, in the 1920s and 1930s, there was nothing conditional about workers’ participation in conceiving, advocating, and constructing parks. It has also argued that central to that was the Labour movement, which conceptualised and organised on an institutional-governmental and extra-governmental basis a social-democratic form of public park given over to children and play as much as flowers and beauty. We have also noted that these spaces were indicative of the utopian dreams of grassroots activists and were part of a vigorous defence of working-class respectability and honour.

Playing fields are ordinary, but then so is culture.[88] Such everyday features in the landscape as they are, we tend to not think about the human story of struggle and innovation that infused them; contemporary society tends only to face up to the history of these sites when our ‘precious inheritance’ is being eroded or lost and so we have turned playing fields from sites of hope and renewal into a focus of reaction. The history of inter-war recreational open space in South Wales teaches us, by happy contrast, that it is possible to create a community that we desire rather than simply bumping into it.[89]

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