

An Investigation into the Aberystwyth Women's Liberal Association.

I'd like to open this presentation by making some acknowledgements to those who proved invaluable in the writing of this paper. Firstly, my dissertation supervisor, Steve Thompson, who guided this project from start to finish, and helped me turn a small idea for a postgraduate essay into a fully researched project. Secondly, I'd like to thank Ryland Wallace, who very graciously shared his notes with me, and as a result enabled me to develop this study beyond what I thought would have been capable. Thirdly, I'd like to mention Ursula Masson, whose very idea alone brings us all together here today, and whose works inspired my own studies. Ursula's work on Welsh women's history, and the Liberal history of women in Wales, contributed to a widely under-examined aspect of historiography, and laid a foundation for which my own study could be built upon, here.

Our perceptions of Welsh women's history have been increasingly changing in recent decades, with more and more publications highlighting the extent of the lives of women in Wales throughout a variety of historical eras. This presentation will focus on the late-nineteenth century, a period which had previously been undermined as a time of 'separate spheres', and women as the archetypal 'angel in the house', although largely that is a stereotype often applied to English women during this period. In Wales, we see discussion of the matriarchal 'Welsh Mam', and although this demonstrates a much more anti-patriarchal view of women's lives in Wales, nevertheless it limits our perceptions of women to only having influence within the sphere of the home.

Until recent years, when women's history came under discussion, we would often consider the campaigns for Women's Suffrage, and the ongoing struggle for women's rights to be addressed on the same terms as men's. More recently, research has been undertaken that highlights women's political movements prior to the suffrage campaigns. In some cases, such political movements had no involvement with suffrage, and others proved to shape women's political activity to such an extent, that we can argue they laid the foundations for the suffrage campaigns.

However, a lack of historicization of women's experiences, particularly prior to the suffrage campaigns, significantly limits our knowledge, and ability to study women's political participation. Nora Philipps, one of the leading Liberal women in Wales, intended for all her letters, papers, notebooks and political memoranda to be kept and preserved, and despite what Masson described as her 'historicizing instincts', the fact that such memoranda cannot be located is a demonstration of the 'marginalization of women's political history'.

Throughout the late nineteenth century, thousands of women came together in hundreds of Women's Liberal Associations (WLAs), bodies which facilitated Liberal women's participation in the political sphere. Unfortunately, very little material survives that comes directly from Welsh WLAs, and so we are limited as to the studies we can produce. To my knowledge, Ursula Masson provided the first, and only study of its kind of Welsh Women's Liberalism, which highlight the activities the Aberdare and Cardiff Women's Liberal Associations. Both were two of the largest WLAs throughout Wales, and indeed Cardiff was one of the largest throughout the UK. The studies of both contribute to our perceptions of Women's Liberal

history, and enable us to examine women's Liberalism in an increasingly industrialised, and anglicized, south-Wales during this period.

Kept from 1894 until 1898, the minute book of the Aberystwyth Women's Liberal Association (AWLA) is the only surviving source produced by the Association itself, and it is one of very few sources with primary evidence about the Women's Liberal Associations, both in Wales and in wider Britain. It contains valuable information about the Executive Committee, the dates and details of their regularly held meetings, as well as occasional details of membership numbers, including turnout for meetings, which were often reported by the *Cambrian News*. Correspondence from other Associations was often discussed, and the names of prominent members of the Liberal movement were often mentioned for varying purposes- for example, if they were attending one of their meetings.

Furthermore, the position, or views of the group were frequently noted in the minute book, often including resolutions that were proposed, rejected or passed. On more than one occasion, there is record of discussion of Irish Home Rule and Welsh Disestablishment, as well as Women's Suffrage and Temperance. In fact, these topics became frequent points of discussion, so much so that they were discussed consistently throughout the duration of the AWLA, as well as the Welsh Union of Women's Liberal Associations and the Women's Liberal Federation.

Although the minute book covers the period 1894-1898, the AWLA itself ran from 1892 until early 1894. Whilst it is unlikely that any other primary source material from the AWLA has survived, we are able to examine newspaper publications to discern information about the Association in the years prior to, and after the minute book. The *Cambrian News*, which has been digitized by the National Library of Wales, reported the meetings of the Association on a predominantly monthly basis, and always published to the wider-public what work the members were doing in Aberystwyth. As the AWLA was an affiliate of both the WUWLA and the WLF, the papers of both bodies provide additional information to place the Association in a wider, more national context.

The AWLA was formed in January 1892, which proved to be a hugely significant year for Welsh Women's Liberalism. In 1891, only 5 Welsh WLAs had affiliated to the Britain-wide body, the Women's Liberal Federation (WLF). However, by 1892, this number had increased dramatically, with over 30 Welsh WLAs affiliating.

Furthermore, a few short months after the AWLA was formed, Welsh WLAs throughout the Principality came together to form the Welsh Union of Women's Liberal Associations (WUWLA), which also served as a Union within the WLF. Furthermore, the WUWLA was formed in Aberystwyth, highlighting the importance of the AWLA to Welsh women's Liberalism in a national sense.

The AWLA affiliated itself to the WUWLA and the WLF in 1892, and brought itself onto the national stage. The dramatic increase of Welsh affiliates to the WLF, and by extension of the number of new WLAs in Wales, is arguably a symptom of the struggle to campaign for women's suffrage in the WLF. Since the formation of the WLF, there had been an issue

surrounding the Suffrage question, in that the body could not decide what its official stance should be.

In the earlier years of the Federation, the suffragists were in the minority. It was the view of the founders that the campaigns for female enfranchisement were not to be an issue of the WLF, insisting that their focus would be on furthering Liberalism and the aims and policies that came from the Party itself. The WLF grew to have their membership divided between moderates and progressives; the former felt that Suffrage was not a party issue, and that there were already groups with sufficient 'energy and influence' that could bring the suffrage question to the political forefront. The latter, the progressives, felt that the WLF should fight for female enfranchisement alongside Liberal principles, and believed that they could not have one without the other.

The objects of both the WUWLA and the AWLA indicate that both groups had a firm pro-suffrage stance, and that both groups were very much in favour of campaigning for female enfranchisement. That both were formed in 1892, and that they both demonstrated such a progressive Liberal position, is indicative of their alignment with the views of the Women's Liberal Federation, as well as the increasing number of WLAs in Wales overall.

The WUWLA had formed prior to the splintering of the WLF, and Masson argues that the formation of the group, alongside the formation of a considerable number of new WLAs, worked as a combined effort to push the agenda for women's suffrage to the WLF. 'Some were very short lived, and perhaps inherently weak, but served their immediate purpose... to boost the progressive faction in the WLF'. In 1891, Mrs Wynford Philipps said to the delegates at the annual council meeting of the WLF: 'It was impossible for them to be Liberals first and suffragists afterwards. They must be Suffragists before they could be good Liberals'. Ultimately, the WLF split in 1892, and the moderates of the Federation chose to leave, and pursue Liberalism without Suffragism.

Evidence suggests that the AWLA was pro-suffrage from the beginning, with reports from the *Cambrian News* detailing pro-suffrage stances, and information from the minute book itself indicating support for female enfranchisement, it is clear that the AWLA's views were in line with the WUWLA and the WLF, which given the connections the Association had to prominent, pro-suffrage Liberals, is unsurprising. From the lack of remaining evidence, we can only assume that the rank-and-file members of the AWLA were also pro-suffrage, as the pre-, and inauguration meetings presented a support of suffrage, anyone who chose to join would have been aware of this stance. This is not to say that there was a definite absence of anti-suffrage views in the AWLA, and some may have attempted to put this view forward, but it is unlikely that this potential will ever be confirmed by primary evidence. The AWLA minute book describes the resolutions that had been decided upon, but does not provide the discussions that led to such decisions.

The AWLA ran from 1892 until 1903/1904, and throughout its duration experienced periods of rise and decline, quite in line with the general Liberal trends in Wales. In the years between 1892 and 1896, the AWLA went from strength to strength, gaining a consistent and steady membership, which peaked at 156, and remained over 100 until 1897, at which point

the membership dropped below 50. The papers of the WUWLA describe the AWLA as being in a 'flourishing condition' in 1895, highlighting the ongoing success of the Association in its aims to spread Liberal politics throughout Aberystwyth. Their membership was strong, they were holding regular meetings, and their influence as a significant WLA, arguably the most prominent in mid-Wales, was undoubtable.

The AWLA, similar to other WLAs, benefitted from a well-connected President, and an experienced, often middle- to upper-class Executive Committee. Mrs Mary Vaughan Davies, who presided over the Association until 1900, was married to Mr Vaughan Davies, the Liberal MP for Cardiganshire. Mrs Vaughan Davies also worked as Treasurer for the WUWLA, and exerted considerable influence, owing to her political experience, that shaped the Aberystwyth Association into a hard-working, active group. It was often the case in a number of WLAs that the wife of the local Liberal MP would preside over the Women's Liberal Association in the area, emphasising the middle- and upper-class nature of WLA Executive Committees. The AWLA also had prominent Liberal connections, in that Mrs Eva McLaren, one of the leading women in the Women's Liberal Federation, participated in the inauguration of the Association, and served as a vice president in its earlier years. Furthermore, Nora Philipps, who presided over the WUWLA, and frequently addressed the concerns of Welsh women at the WLF Annual meetings, was also a vice president of the AWLA.

It should be noted, however, that although the Executive Committee of the AWLA was made up of middle- and upper-class women, this does not necessarily represent the wider membership. The AWLA discussed the working classes on more than one occasion, and discussed ideas as to how to increase the proportion of working class women in the overall membership. Whilst there is no evidence to determine the social composition of the rank-and-file membership, from the ongoing discussion referencing working-class membership, we can assume that the AWLA was unsuccessful in their endeavours to increase their working-class membership. Therefore, despite the Association being opposed to blocking others from politics based on class or gender, it is clear that class-divisions throughout society were transparent in women's political associations.

Liberalism throughout Wales experienced a rise and decline throughout the 1890s which considerably affected the AWLA, and indeed hundreds of other WLAs throughout Wales. At the height of Liberalism, the number of Associations was increasing, and membership numbers and subscriptions grew considerably. It was during this period that the greatest amount of work was done by the WLAs, as they sought to educate women and men of all classes about politics, and to show them why they should engage in political activity. At the AWLA meetings, papers were presented by the membership on a regular basis, covering a variety of topics that all sought to educate and to provoke discussion and debate, all with the intention of heightening the political skills of their members.

After 1895, this height of Liberalism began to decline, and the AWLA, for the first time since its inauguration, was beginning to struggle. Meetings were becoming much less frequently attended, membership numbers were declining, and the subscriptions to the AWLA were

decreasing, too. At what point did the national Liberal situation change so drastically that it permeated the success of the AWLA?

In April 1895, the Association called a committee meeting to discuss and appoint members to represent them at the upcoming Cymru Fydd Convention. Masson argued that by the mid-1880s, 'Nonconformist anti-Catholicism in Wales had given way, amongst leading figures, to support for Irish nationalism and an emphasis on similarities in the questions of religious freedom and land reform'. The movement quickly spread throughout Wales, so much so that by 1894, a meeting was held at Llandrindod Wells to amalgamate all the different Cymru Fydd branches. Furthermore, the North Wales Liberal Federation also amalgamated itself with Cymru Fydd, however, the south Wales federation refused to do so. By now, it was becoming clear that there was a divide between north and south, with the President, D.A. Thomas, urging for 'welsh separatism'.

The Convention in Aberystwyth was held on April 18th, as an attempt to form a unified Welsh National Federation, however the South Wales Liberals did not attend. Although this indicated the soon-to-be failings of the movement, for the time being the convention was significant for Women Liberals, and the attendance of the AWLA was important here. Masson argues that 'the convention was the beginning of the end of Liberal national organisation in Wales'. Whilst the WUWLA did secure a commitment to both women's suffrage and 'separate representation for itself' in the Welsh National Federation, these 'hopeful developments' were hindered by the 'boycott of the conference' by the South Wales Liberal Federation.

Kenneth O. Morgan argues that the cause of the collapse of Cymru Fydd grew from the 'divergence of outlook between the rural areas and the industrial coalfield', and Masson also notes that the divisions within Welsh Liberalism became 'too much for Cymru Fydd'. As a result, it 'became clear that the Welsh Union had hitched its wagon to a dying star'.

The end of Cymru Fydd, Masson argues, was a turning point for Welsh women's Liberalism. From here, we see the decline of WLAs throughout the Principality, and the struggle of the WUWLA to keep itself afloat. Between 1896 and 1897, the membership of the AWLA more than halved, and the Executive formed a sub-committee dedicated entirely to canvassing for new members and subscriptions.

Largely, canvassing was successful. By 1898, the AWLA had 50 extra members back on its books, however the collection of subscriptions had been much more unsuccessful. Although meetings continued to be held, and papers continued to be read, the AWLA was experiencing the decline of its success. Monthly meetings were no longer monthly, as due to such frequent low levels of attendance, many were simply not held.

The report for the year 1900 is most indicative of the decline of the AWLA, as the Committee reported that they were sorry 'not to be able to report any distinct progress', and the report continued by seeking to explain this:

This may be partly owing to the deadness of Liberalism generally and the apathy of individual Liberals... The meetings have, all through the year, been only sparsely attended, and those members who did attend were mostly the same individuals. Everybody must feel this to be monotonous; at the same time, the object for which the Association was formed cannot be attained.

The AWLA is a part of Welsh women's history and the history of Welsh Liberal women, too. The Association, which ran for just over 10 years, upon examination, enables us to look into the activities of political women in a small seaside town. As previously mentioned, the only other comprehensive studies of Welsh women's Liberal Associations were produced by Ursula Masson, who examined the Aberdare and Cardiff WLAs. In her own conclusion, however, she notes that such an examination limits the historiography, as it focuses on the ever-growing industrial areas of South Wales, which were becoming increasingly anglicized through the period. As a result, the perception of WLAs in south Wales may be different to those we may examine in mid-, and north Wales.

Whilst this project is an attempt to contribute to that gap in the historiography, there is inevitably more work to be done. Where possible, there should be further examination into the WLAs in mid-, and north Wales, so to ascertain a comprehensive study of the activities of women in these areas, and by extension to gain comparative studies that improve our perception of women's Liberal movements in Wales as a whole. Whilst the surviving evidence of WLAs throughout England and Wales is not necessarily in large amount, there is still potential for further examination into this aspect of historiography.

The Aberystwyth Women's Liberal Association was a small group, but by the scale of Aberystwyth demonstrates that there was certainly a large faction of women in the town that chose to come together to celebrate Liberal principles, and to educate women in the political arena. Though its membership peaked in its inauguration year of 1892, the group held a steady, ongoing number of women through till the eventual decline which began in 1896 and culminated in 1903. Throughout its duration, the AWLA remained an affiliate of both the WUWLA and the WLF, and corresponded, by and large, to a Liberal Party programme of political positions. In line with the Welsh Union and the Federation, the AWLA was in favour of temperance, Welsh Disestablishment, Home Rule for Ireland, and the election of women to local governing bodies, having put forward women for candidacy to both the School Board and Board of Guardians on a number of occasions.

Most notably, the AWLA was strongly pro-suffrage, and throughout its duration consistently and frequently sought to educate its membership, and those in the wider community, about the benefits of female enfranchisement. Furthermore, the AWLA was arguably more radical than the WLF, as it was in favour of introducing test questions when choosing which Liberal candidate to offer their support and help to. A divisive policy, the idea of test questions had presented difficulty in WLAs and the WLF for a number of years throughout the late nineteenth, and into the twentieth century.

With regard to measuring any success of the Association, they, themselves argued that they had failed in achieving their objectives. Decided upon at their inauguration, the AWLA objects sought to spread belief and support for Liberal principles, aim for Welsh Disestablishment and female enfranchisement, and to teach women and men alike about the political sphere. The AWLA did demonstrate the potential to achieve these aims, as during the 'flourishing' years of their existence, they held a strong membership, which often discussed the topics they concerned themselves with in their objects, and they also provided help at general elections where needed. However, the failure of the AWLA to achieve their objects, was not their own, but a symptom of a collapsing support for Liberalism in Wales at the time. Masson expressed that after 1896-1897, WLAs in Wales found it increasingly difficult to come together for an annual WUWLA Council.

Furthermore, she argued that there was an 'absolute decline' in the number of Welsh WLAs that were affiliated to the WLF. Potentially, this was due to the decline in what the WLF could offer Welsh Associations, as for several years since 1892, the WLF and the British stage was a strong vocal point for those who wished to press for Welsh Disestablishment, sadly, to no actual benefit of Welsh women campaigners. Further, Masson also attributes the decline in Welsh WLAs to the collapse of Cymru Fydd in 1896, which for the AWLA, does indeed appear to be a factor which facilitated its decline. The AWLA, which throughout its duration, corresponded to a wider Liberal programme, and so as Liberalism in Wales began to decline, it started to take the WLAs with it, and the AWLA was one of those to collapse under the lacking support and energy for Liberalism at that time.

The Aberystwyth Women's Liberal Association was never one of the largest of its kind, however the political developments that occurred in Aberystwyth during this period, highlight the importance of the Association to the rise and decline of Liberalism. The WUWLA was formed in Aberystwyth in the same year, and demonstrates a flourishing period of women's political movements in Wales. Further, the Cymru Fydd convention, which arguably fired the starting pistol on the total decline of Liberalism in Wales, was held in Aberystwyth, too. By and large, we have focussed on the influence of women's political movements in south-Wales, where we see women's Liberalism on a much larger scale, and indeed later we see an increase in campaigns for suffrage, too. This focus is not mis-placed, and there is clearly a wealth of source material which has enabled these studies. However, in order to fully develop our understanding of women's Liberalism in Wales, we need to look elsewhere, wherever possible.

This paper has provided a brief overview of the AWLA, its activities and its place in a wider Liberal context, it is my hope that it serves as a small study of Welsh women's Liberalism outside south-Wales. Ursula Masson and her studies of the Aberdare and Cardiff WLAs provided the foundation for this study, and in the writing of this project I have attempted to close the gap between north and south, and our perceptions of Welsh women's liberalism throughout Wales, particularly mid-Wales. The AWLA was not the only Association of its kind in mid-Wales during this period, and there is therefore potential to develop our knowledge of WLAs here even further. It is my hope that eventually we might be able to examine Welsh women's Liberalism in an entirely national context, with evidence from north, south and

mid-wales enabling us to develop a comprehensive study of this period which was so rich in women's political movements.

Diolch yn fawr, thank you.

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