

"LEST WE FORGET": Unfurling the South Wales Coalfield Banner Collection

by Siân Williams

Despite all the modern means of electronic communication, there is still nothing to move the heart and stir the pride like the proud rippling of a painted sail against the wind, borne aloft by the hands of the working people, marching for the great and lasting cause of labour, the hope of the world." —John Gorman in *Banner Bright* (1973)

The Welsh historian Gwyn Alf Williams once said banners are the "memory of a movement." This is certainly the case with the banners of the South Wales miners. With slogans such as "Workers of the World Unite for Peace and Socialism" (Abercrave Lodge banner), "An Injury to One is the Concern of All" (Wernos Lodge banner), "United We Stand, Divided We Fall" (Fernhill Lodge banner), "Eternal Vigilance is the Price of Freedom" (Tower Lodge

banner), and "Lest We Forget" (Newlands Lodge banner), the large, brightly colored fabric panels tell of our parents' and grandparents' past struggles and beliefs and of their aspirations for the future. Carried in rallies, marches, and demonstrations, in processions and meetings all over Wales and beyond, the banners identify groups of workers seeking support in their struggle for work, socialism, internationalism, and world peace.

Other coalfields in the UK have longer banner-carrying traditions, with many of their banners being produced since the mid-nineteenth century by the famous banner-making company, George Tuthill of London. By contrast, in the South Wales Coalfield, there are very few examples of banners before the advent of the South Wales Miners' Gala in 1954.



(Above) Dating from the 1950s, the Seven Sisters Lodge banner displays symbols of South Wales mining, which make connections to international calls for peace and unity. Photo courtesy of South Wales Miners' Library, Swansea University

(Left) The National Union of Mineworkers (South Wales Area) banner is carried during the 2004 Durham (England) Miners' Gala, an annual event that celebrates the heritage of miners and trade unions in the United Kingdom. Photo by Roy Lambeth, courtesy of South Wales Miners' Library, Swansea University

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Nevertheless, there is some evidence of a few banners in South Wales in the 1870s. For example, a banner bearing the name “United Valley of Rhondda Miners” was used in an 1872 demonstration, and an image from 1873 exists of an “Ogmore Valley Miners’ Association” banner. Although makeshift banners were frequently made for demonstrations, such as during the hunger marches of the 1920s and 1930s, sadly very few of these banners have survived.

Of the forty or so South Wales miners’ banners created after 1954, most were professionally produced; others were homemade or painted by a local sign writer. More than half of the banners are preserved in the South Wales Miners’ Library at Swansea University on behalf of the National Union of Mineworkers (South Wales Area). Others are held at the South Wales Area NUM offices in Pontypridd, or are on display in local museums.

The banners are arguably one of the great unrecognized arts of the people; the imagery and the slogans they display add to our understanding and interpretation of the past. Many of the banners are fragile and like any other form of historical document, they need to be preserved. With the support of a number of agencies, the South Wales Miners’ Library has been better able to preserve the banners and make the collection more accessible by improving storage conditions, carrying out conservation work, producing replica banners, and developing an online exhibition at www.agor.org.uk/cwm/themes/banners.

Siân Williams, a native of Swansea, is the librarian at the South Wales Miners’ Library, Swansea University. She has a keen interest in the social history of Wales and is currently secretary of Llafur: The Welsh People’s History Society. In 2005, Williams curated an exhibition of Welsh banners, entitled “Marching Forward!” She later developed an exhibition about the banners of the South Wales miners and in 2008 launched an exhibition to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the death of Robert Owen, widely regarded as the “father” of the co-operative and trade union movements.



Meredydd Evans and his wife Phyllis Kinney live in Cwmystwyth, Wales. Phyllis is originally from the United States. Both are working on books about Welsh folk music. Photo by Siân Thomas

MEREDYDD EVANS ON RECORDING WELSH FOLK SONGS

by Betty J. Belanus

Meredydd Evans recorded *Welsh Folk Songs* for Folkways Records in 1954, when he was a graduate student at Princeton University. He then went on to a long and distinguished career as a professor of philosophy and a radio and television personality. In August 2008, at age eighty-eight in his home in Cwmystwyth, Wales, Evans recalled the process of the recording. To see a video excerpt of the interview, visit www.festival.si.edu.

“Mo Asch [head of Folkways] contacted me in Princeton and asked me if I would sing some Welsh folk songs. I was thrilled; I said yes, I would be delighted!

“I had assumed what he wanted me to do first was to sing him some examples, so I went up to New Hope [Pennsylvania] to a studio there. . . . To my astonishment he just released the record of what we had done that day and I think he was dead right in doing that. Because I think I would have been more aware that it was a more formalized thing, that [I] would go into the studio to do a particular job. There was a crate of beer and [the studio engineer and I] were talking. I had an audience, he was with me, the mike had been set up . . . and that was it.

“I sang a song that my mother sang. . . . A song connected to the anti-slavery movement in the States, written by a Welsh man who went over to work in the slate quarries in Vermont and was a poet. . . . There I was in New Hope singing that song, spanning cultures, spanning the years, and there it is now on record.”

The recording has been reissued as a CD and is available as FW06835 through Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, www.folkways.si.edu.