Rebecca’s Silence: The Rebecca Riots and Why They Vanished for Three Years

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Rebecca’s Silence

The Rebecca Riots and why they vanished for three years

by

Andrew Carl Finch

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculties of the University of North Alabama in Partial

Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts in History

Supervisor of Thesis (Dr. Bibbee)

Second Reader (Dr. Schoenbachler)

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ABSTRACT

Between the years of 1839 and 1843, approximately 500 riots occurred throughout southwest Wales which were aimed predominantly at tollgates and tollbooths. These gates and booths were built on private roads and were used to collect a toll from travelers for the use of the road. Economic issues in south Wales, coupled with the extra tolls, were a strain on the poor workers of the area. The first tollgate was destroyed in May 1839, and three more were destroyed within the next two months. After these events, however, there were no further attacks until December 1842, when the riots began again and spread throughout all of southwest Wales.

The cause of this lull is rarely discussed by authors and scholars of the riots. The unexplained break between the first wave of riots and the second is simply ignored by almost all authors. This thesis will examine the reasons for the three years of inactivity in three sections: the reasons that the first riots ended after only four events, why no riots broke out between June 1839 and December 1842, and why the riots returned when they did, in November 1842. Ultimately, this thesis will show that the main causes of the break involved the outcome of the first riots, economic conditions, and the locations of specific tollgates. Of these factors, economic conditions played the largest role.
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Introduction

The Rebecca Riots, occurring between 1839 and 1843, were an expression of discontent with privately-owned roads, high tolls, and their effect on the poor areas of pastoral Wales. The quality of roads in Wales had long been dreadful, and publicly-funded roads were uncommon at this time. Wealthy landowners often created roads using their own money, then charged tolls on travelers to pay for their upkeep.¹ Even with the tolls, the roads were not always kept well.

This lack of upkeep was often attributed to the greediness and laziness of the Turnpike Trusts. These groups, run by wealthy businessmen, managed the roads, tollbooths, and tollgates. George Ellis, a Welshman who lived through the riots, noted that “[a]ll the roads of the same trust are not always kept in an equally good state of repair. This is a cause of great jealously among the Farmers and personal motives are freely imputed to the Trustees.”² Thus, the building of new toll gates on the privately-owned roads often meant that farmers had to pay more money, but the roads they travelled would not receive any repairs.

It was the existence of tolls in general, the locations of the booths, and the lack of upkeep on many of the roads that caused the first riots in May 1839. At this time, a new tollbooth was built near the village of Efailwen. This location was inconvenient for the farmers, because it severely disrupted the route between Pembrokeshire and Carmarthenshire, causing the transportation of produce and other wares by the farmers from one county to the other to be

rather costly\textsuperscript{3}. This combination of high tolls, greedy trusts, and an inconvenient location was the primary cause for the newly-erected gate in Efailwen to be the first destroyed.

This gate was destroyed twice more, along with a second gate at Maes-gwyn, before the first riots stopped. They did not return for over three years - a silence which most historians simply ignore.\textsuperscript{4} The riots resumed in November 1842, with a vigor that the original riots had not known. While there were only a few more riots that December, they expanded at an alarming rate throughout all of southwest Wales beginning in January 1843 and continuing without hiatus until August of that year.

Rebecca may seem a strange name for a group of men who destroyed toll booths for several reasons. First, it is singular. Rebecca denotes one person, while the group perpetrating these actions consisted of hundreds of people. Second, the name is a feminine given name, yet almost all of the rioters were male. While Rebecca may seem a strange name initially, its origins are quite fitting. The name of the group, “Rebecca,” came from the Bible - Genesis, chapter 24. In this chapter, Rebecca helps Abraham’s servant, who is on a journey, by offering him water and rest. The servant tells Abraham of Rebecca’s kindness, and introduces him to her. This action results in Rebecca’s marriage to Isaac. Rebecca is then blessed by her family before she departs with Isaac, because her actions pleased the Lord. Verse 60 states, “They blessed Rebecca and said to her, ‘Our sister, may you come to be thousands of myriads, and may your seed inherit the gate of its foes.’”\textsuperscript{5} The rioters found this verse significant.

This verse contains several references which the rioters found applicable. First, the protesters believed they were in the right. They believed that they were figuratively “blessed”

\textsuperscript{4} Williams, \textit{The Rebecca Riots}, 185 - 189.
like Rebecca. Second, those involved in the riots felt that they were the “thousands of myriads,” fighting against the wealthy land-owners, English lords, and road-builders. They were a poor multitude rebelling against a handful of wealthy men who were making the lives of the less fortunate increasingly difficult, and depriving them of the minute amount of hard-earned money they had. Finally, the verse says that the children of Rebecca will “inherit the gate of its foes.” The members of Rebecca applied this verse to their actions of destroying tollgates and booths.

While this is the commonly accepted explanation for the naming of the riots, it is not the only one offered. It is also possible that there was a real connection to a Rebecca in Wales. Many of the rioters dressed in women’s clothing to disguise themselves during the rioting. It is said that the leader of the first riots had trouble finding women’s clothes. As David Williams notes, this leader, Thomas Rees, was “a pugilist who farmed the little homestead of Carnabwth nearby, in the parish of Mynachlog-ddu. It is said that there had been difficulty in finding women’s clothes large enough to fit him until he succeeded in borrowing those of Big Rebecca, who lived in the neighbouring parish of Llangolman.”6 However, this theory is only held by a few, such as David Williams, and lacks the connection to tollgates and “seed” or daughters of Rebecca that the Biblical explanation offers.

The acts of civil disobedience known as the Rebecca Riots were fairly unusual compared to other protests during the mid-19th century because they straddled the line between violent and nonviolent protests. The riots were extremely destructive to property, but they were rarely violent toward other human beings. They were much more violent than the Chartist protests in England, which were also occurring at this time. The Chartists protests usually consisted of large groups of people meeting together to demand democracy from their local Members of

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6 Williams, The Rebecca Riots, 188 - 189.
Parliament. However, almost all of the Chartist protests in England went no further than marching, yelling, and stating demands. There was very little violence against people or property.\(^7\) However, the same cannot be said for the Chartist protests in Wales.

While the Rebecca Riots were much more violent than the Chartist protests in England, they were not nearly as violent as the Chartist protests within Wales itself.\(^8\) The most famous Chartist protest in Wales began with violence from the protesters and resulted in one of the most aggressive displays of force from the local authorities. The Rebecca Riots consisted of protests in between the two extremes of Chartism. Save for one or two occasions, the rioters destroyed the tollgates and booths, while letting the constables and toll-keepers who guarded them flee without being harmed, but merely embarrassed at being overpowered by commoners.\(^9\) The rioters here showed much more restraint than the Chartist protesters.

While the riots themselves are an interesting study, especially in relation to Chartism, they are not the main focus of this paper. The Rebecca Riots ultimately occurred in two parts. The first part began in May 1839, concluding in July of the same year; the second part began in November 1842, concluding in September 1843. For half of 1839, the entirety of 1840 and 1841, and most of 1842, the civil protesters known as “Rebecca and her daughters” were relatively, if not completely, silent.

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\(^8\) The Newport Rising, which occurred in 1839, was the most violent protest of 19\(^{th}\) century Britain. A group of Chartists, believing some of their number to be imprisoned at a hotel, stormed the hotel. Ultimately, the protest led to the injury of the mayor of Newport and a few constables, and the death of about 22 of the Chartists, with another 50 of their number being severely injured.

The years in between the two sets of riots are often overlooked by authors. David Williams, for example, in his comprehensive work concerning the riots, simply states that “There were no further attacks on toll-gates until the winter of 1842.”\textsuperscript{10} In the same manner, Pat Molloy concisely notes that, after the attacks of 1839, “peace reigned in west Wales for the next three and a half years.”\textsuperscript{11} However, did the riots truly end for these three years? If they did, what was the reason for the break, and why did the riots return?

The riots did indeed end for the three years, for several reasons. This thesis will argue that there are two prominent reasons for the hiatus, along with a number of other less prominent ones. The first reason involves events surrounding toll-gates, such as the decision to not rebuild the Efailwen gate. The second prominent reason involves economics. Various economic conditions, including both slight booms and short recessions played significantly in the events of the hiatus and the reasons for the riots’ return in 1842. Other reasons include the ramifications of the first riots and the locations of new gates in the silent years. Just as they were for the ending of the first riots and throughout the break, economic conditions and the building of new gates were absolutely crucial to the return of the riots in 1842. Had these events not occurred, the original riots would not have played out how they did, nor would the return of the riots in 1842 have been the same. Each one of the various factors was necessary for the riots to play out as they did.

The evidence for these claims regarding the reasons for the years of silence will come from a variety of sources, both secondary and primary. The methods for determining the various causes include, first, the study of primary sources of the time. Newspapers, in particular, are excellent sources of information regarding the events of the years in between the riots, especially

\textsuperscript{10} Williams, \textit{The Rebecca Riots}, 189.
\textsuperscript{11} Pat Molloy, \textit{And They Blessed Rebecca: An Account of the Welsh Toll-Gate Riots 1839 - 1844} (Llandysul: Gomer Press, 1983), 35.
in regards to economic conditions and relevant events, such as the imprisoning of rioters. Second, secondary sources will be integrated to provide context for this thesis as part of the larger scholarly discussion. Numerous authors known for their scholarship on the riots will be consulted, such as David Williams, Henry Tobit Evans, Pat Molloy, and David J. V. Jones, along with scholars of generic Welsh history who talk in detail about the riots and the conditions of the years in which they occurred. These authors include John Davies, Gwynfor Evans, and Gareth Elwyn Jones. Through examination of primary source material and consultation with the scholarship of Welsh historians, the various reasons for the three year break, along with their respective importance, will be shown.
Chapter One

Historiography

The primary sources used in this paper consist of letters written by Rebecca’s members, newspaper articles about the Rebecca Riots, and census records about the population of Wales in general, and Carmarthenshire specifically. Most of the secondary sources consists of books either about the Rebecca Riots themselves or the broader history of Wales, with sections devoted to the riots. However, there are also a few secondary internet sources.

Welsh historians can be divided into three separate groups, determined by their writing styles and biases, including their political leanings and unionist views. The first type is known as Traditional. Traditional authors tend to be strongly unionist and lean toward Conservatism in regards to politics. They are Capitalists who believe that Wales as a country is better served by remaining in the United Kingdom. Their writing style often reflects this, especially in regards to the historical relationship between Wales and England. As could be surmised by the name, Traditionalist historians in Wales are not as common today as they were at an earlier time. While still immensely popular in England, the popularity of Conservative politics has decreased significantly in Wales over the past century.

The second group of authors is known as Revisionists. These authors are more left-wing in their views, as is commonly expressed it in their writing. They typically fall in with the Labour Party of the United Kingdom. They share the Unionist sympathies with the Traditionalists; however, this is the extent of their similarities. Even regarding Unionism, the Revisionists, while supporting the Union, often do not defend it as adamantly as the Traditionalists. They will often be more supportive of devolution. The main difference between the Revisionists and the Traditionalists is their support of workers’ rights in general and workers’
uprisings in particular. The Revisionist authors will often show workers’ uprisings in a more positive light, given their sympathies. While there were a number of older historians who were revisionists, the majority of Revisionist historians have come within the last seventy years.

The third and final group of Welsh authors is the Nationalists. Nationalist historians are far less common than Traditionalists and Revisionists. This is reflected both in the number of Nationalist authors as well as the popularity of Nationalist politics in Wales. While nationalism in Wales first gained notice in the 1920s with the formation of Plaid Cymru, Plaid did not attain any seats in the UK Parliament until February of 1966, when, through the death of a politician of another party, Gwynfor Evans gained a seat in Parliament for Carmarthenshire. Coincidentally, this is the same county in which the Rebecca Riots began.¹² Through the slow rise of nationalism and the meager results, even when they finally achieved seats, it can be shown that the popularity of nationalism, and thus the number of nationalist authors, is a relatively recent development.

Nationalist authors naturally portray a Wales that has gained nothing but strife and setback through its involuntary union with England. They often portray England as the great enemy - the subjugators of the Welsh for many years. Thus, nationalist authors, in regards to the Rebecca Riots, are quicker to show the English ties to the rich families in Wales and the erection of the tollbooths and gates. They are not unionists in any sense and are usually Socialists rather than Capitalists; thus they are often considered to be the antithesis of Traditionalist authors.

Apart from the three set types, there are those authors whose loyalties remain unknown from the evidence provided. This is due either to lack of bias in their works or insufficient works to show such a bias. While most Welsh historians fall into a definitive category, two or three remain unknown and elusive, and cannot be placed into such a category.

The first of the Traditionalist authors consulted in this thesis is David Williams. Two of his books will be cited. The first, his magnum opus, is *The Rebecca Riots: A Study in Agrarian Discontent*. This is often considered to be the ultimate source on the Rebecca Riots. Even Professor John Davies notes this, calling Williams the “father” of all future research on the riots. Williams provides an elaborate, detailed account of the riots in his work, including a long chronicle of events leading up to the riots, extending as far back as the previous century, and ending with how the riots shaped the Wales of the future.

While Williams discusses the basics of why the original riots ended and why they started again three years later, he does not go into any detail, spending approximately a paragraph on each topic. Regarding sources, Williams includes countless primary sources, including newspapers, reports, commissions, turnpike trust acts, and letters from Rebecca and the police, among others. Another book by Williams that will be used is *A History of Modern Wales*. This text covers the history of Wales from approximately 1500 until 1939. In this book, Williams offers insights into the possible connections of the Rebecca Riots to the Chartist Movement in Wales, which he does not cover in his book solely about the riots themselves.

The second Traditionalist author is A. H. Dodd, who wrote *A Short History of Wales*. This source is somewhat of a less detailed version of Davies’ *A History of Wales*. Although Dodd was a contemporary of David Williams, his work provides a different style of historical discussion. Dodd often writes about Wales in relation to England, and thus, he portrays Wales in a different light than how other historians have portrayed the nation. While his summary of the riots is far less detailed than that of even Davies, he provides a unique connection that many other historians of the riots do not mention - the relation of riots to corn laws as well as tolls.

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Dodd’s Traditionalism is evident in the way he ties the people and history of Wales closely with England and her people. Dodd was a historian before the Revisionists came to prominence, as well as before the Nationalist movement even began in politics, much less in historical authorship. Dodd’s traditionalist tendencies can be seen in his discussion of the Rebecca Riots and Welsh Nationalism. Regarding the riots, Dodd, unlike Davies, does not make statements noting how terrible the quality of life was for those involved in the riots, or noting the sinister ways in which Trusts created deals to establish tollgates. Instead, he takes a callous approach to the rioters, calling them a “guerrilla army”\textsuperscript{14} and not even mentioning any wrongdoing on the part of the Turnpike Trusts.

The third Traditionalist is J. Graham Jones, who discusses the Rebecca Riots in his book \textit{The History of Wales}. Jones’ book is an excellent source for those wishing to understand the basics of Welsh history. Jones provides a concise description of the riots and how they related to the country at the time. However, unlike Dodd, Jones notes the importance of specific events, such as the burning and destruction of a couple of workhouses that accompanied the destruction of toll booths and gates. Jones also discusses the fate of those captured while involved in the riots. His work often portrays the Welsh as “troublesome” and “disobedient” to their English rulers, and he claims that Wales was part of the “realm of England.”\textsuperscript{15} Jones shows no sympathy for the rioters or workers in his book. He treats them only as lawbreakers, never discussing any justification they might have had for their actions.

The fourth and final Traditionalist author is Henry Tobit Evans, who wrote \textit{Rebecca and her Daughters: Being a History of the Agrarian Disturbances in Wales Known as The Rebecca Riots}. This book, written between 1895 and 1905, was considered the ultimate source on the riots.

\textsuperscript{14} A. H. Dodd, \textit{A Short History of Wales}, (London: A.H. Dodd, 1972), 142.
\textsuperscript{15} J. Graham Jones, \textit{The History of Wales} (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1998), 31.
until David Williams published his work. Evans’ work displays the Rebecca Riots from a much more personal perspective than Williams’ scholarly work. It provides a more detailed discussion of how the riots affected the people at the time - details which are often overlooked in other works on the riots. Furthermore, this book is unique in the fact that it includes five appendices that contain nothing but primary sources regarding the riots.

Evans was a member of the Liberal Unionist Party, which was an offshoot of the Conservative Party fighting to keep the Union, at that time including all of Ireland, together. Evans’ writing style is similar to that of Jones. It often reflects his support of the monarchy, the United Kingdom, and shows no great sympathy to the rioters. Evans hardly mentions the depression and hunger the workers endured at that time, focusing solely on the riots and what the rioters did to disturb the peace.

The first Revisionist author is John Davies, who wrote *A History of Wales*, which is often considered the ultimate source on Welsh history. Originally released in Welsh as *Hanes Cymru*, Davies’ *A History of Wales* provides an account of Welsh history from prehistoric times to the modern era. Davies is the epitome of the Revisionist author, being a strong socialist and Labourite. He shared no sympathy with the English, as is the tradition amongst many Labourites and Welsh-speakers, but he remained a Unionist.¹⁶ These views are reflected to some degree in his works, especially in his autobiography. While he shows sympathy for Plaid Cymru and nationalism, he represents their policies as too militaristic and drastic¹⁷, and expresses reservation that the goals they wanted to achieve were best for Wales at the time.


In the part of *A History of Wales* devoted to the Rebecca Riots, Davies gives a general overview of the riots, along with a discussion of their cause. He makes the case, like many other historians, that the riots started due to the high tolls and the terrible conditions of the roads of south Wales. However, Davies provides little information regarding why the first riots ended or why they began again. Davies seeks to provide a generic description of the riots, not to delve into their intricacies. So, while Davies’ discussion of the riots is good for the common reader, it does not provide the depth of information needed to discuss many aspects of the riots. Furthermore, a shortcoming of Davies’ work is the lack of sources. Davies’ description of the riots is based mostly on personal knowledge and includes no sources.

The second Revisionist author is Trefor M. Owen, a specialist in the folk history and traditions of Wales. His work, *The Customs and Traditions of Wales*, offers numerous primary sources regarding the events. Many of Owen’s primary sources consist of letters and articles posted in magazines and newspapers throughout Wales. Given the short length of Owen’s book, his conciseness, while adverse to a well-reasoned discussion of the riots, is not unexpected. The unique perspective that Owen offers is the connection of the Rebecca Riots to the Ceffyl Pren and how the tradition was an important precursor to the riots themselves. Owen provides substantial evidence, and his writing style is easy to follow and understand.

Throughout his book, Owen, like many other Revisionists, sympathizes with the plight of the worker and commoner, suggesting that it was the commoner who defined society, not the aristocrat or politician. In reference to Owen’s passion for the commoner’s place in society, his son states in his father’s obituary that “The feature that united his work and interests was his belief in the significance of people in society, that their customs and interaction arose from this
and that their environment in turn reflected it.”\textsuperscript{18} As is noted by his son, Owen stresses the importance of people throughout his work.

The next Revisionist author cited is Pat Molloy, author of \textit{And They Blessed Rebecca: An Account of the Welsh Toll-gate Riots 1839 - 1844}. Molloy’s book is sometimes considered a true “revision” of Williams’ work. It was written nearly thirty years after Williams, so it offers new insights and information regarding the Rebecca Riots. Molloy offers numerous primary sources, including quotes from people of the time, pictures of various sources (such as the notes that Rebecca left), proclamations from Queen Victoria regarding the arresting of the rioters, as well as numerous quotes and pictures from the newspapers of the time. Furthermore, Molloy will often focus on a specific person for a number of pages, not only discussing their involvement in the affairs of the time, but also giving a brief history of their personal lives and happenings; this inclusion of external factors shows how certain personal events influenced the individual’s decision to be part of Rebecca and her daughters.

Among the three branches of historians, Molloy is truly unique. He is a revisionist solely in the fact that his work is truly a “revision”, specifically of David Williams’ work. However, as an Irishman, his Welsh political leanings are nonexistent. Regarding Williams’ book, Wynford Vaughan Thomas states that “Williams’ book will always remain the standard work on the wider aspects of the disturbances…but there is room for a new look at the evidence; a view, as it were, not from the dock but from the policeman in the witness box.”\textsuperscript{19} This is a reference to Molloy being a Policeman in Ireland.

\textsuperscript{18} Huw Meredydd Owen, “My father died this month,” accessed March 29, 2016, \url{http://www.huwmeredyddowen.com/#!Trefor-M-Owen-fy-nhad-my-father/c11o8/i6l83ilr19}.
\textsuperscript{19} Molloy, \textit{And They Blessed Rebecca}, ix.
The final Revisionist author is Rhian E. Jones. In her book *Petticoat Heroes: Gender, Culture and Popular Protest in the Rebecca Riots*, Jones takes a more unique approach to the riots, relating them to the political and equality movements of the time. Jones makes the case that the main purpose of the riots was more than revenge for high tolls during a time of depression, suggesting that they were also a statement demanding more equality and freedom. While these aspects are touched on in other books, especially with the riots’ relationship to Chartism, no author places as great an importance on them as Jones.

Along with John Davies, one might say she is the epitome of a revisionist. The first evidence of this can be found in the title of her book. She calls Rebecca and her daughters “heroes.” Throughout the book, Jones sympathizes greatly with the plight of the workers and implies that she believes they were justified in their actions. Furthermore, Jones is known for her strong labour views. Furthermore, Jones epitomizes “revisionist” in a different way, through the fact that she is presenting the riots through a light that has not been discussed in depth before.

The only Nationalist author is Gwynfor Evans. His work, *Aros Mae*, is like John Davies’ *A History of Wales* in many ways. It was written approximately two decades before Davies’ book and, save for various quotes and sources, it is entirely in Welsh. Evans offers a closer relation between the Rebecca Riots and the Chartist Movement in England. While many other authors note the distinct differences between the Rebecca Riots and the Chartist movement, Evans is unique in his penchant for drawing closer ties between the Rebecca Riots and Chartism. He sees the two not only as related, but in many ways he considers the riots to be the expression of Chartism in Wales.

Evans was the epitome of a nationalist. Not only did Evans have nationalist views, he was the leader and president of Plaid Cymru for over 36 years. Given these facts, it is quite
unsurprising that his work would tend to portray the English as the enemy in many accounts, and the common Welshman as a hero who only wanted to reclaim his home. While these sentiments do appear occasionally, the majority of his work is fairly unbiased.

The first of the authors whose bias remains unknown is Derek Draisey. His book *The Rebecca Riots Within Ten Miles of Swansea* is quite the opposite of Davies’ work. While short, Draisey provides numerous primary sources regarding the riots and discusses their intricacies, including information on their return in 1842. Draisey’s only shortcoming is the lack of range: While Draisey provides an overview of the riots, the majority of his book is devoted to the riots of the Gower peninsula. Given the fact that all of the riots throughout the Gower occurred during the return of the riots, Draisey’s discussion of the events prior to the hiatus covers merely one chapter and is therefore minimal.

Determining which of the three historical groups Draisey aligns with or what biases he might have is extremely difficult. Draisey is a much lesser-known author. He publishes his books himself, through Draisey Publishing, and they all focus on the history and culture of the Gower Peninsula - in other words, the city and county of Swansea. At least half of Draisey’s book on the Rebecca Riots consists of quotes from informants, such as John Jones, along with excerpts from newspaper articles and messages from Rebecca. In the part written by Draisey himself, very little bias is discernible. At most, certain quotes from Draisey suggest that he sympathized with the rioters.

The second author with unidentifiable bias is Christopher Schenk, who wrote *The Rebecca Riots: Then & There*. This is written in narrative form and provides a unique view of the riots from the position of a person who experienced them. It combines primary sources and historical fact with a semi-historical story. It uses sources such as Ceredigion newspapers, letters
from Rebecca and her daughters, along with historical books, a number of which are used as sources in this paper. Schenk’s work is mainly useful for the number of primary sources it provides. Like Draisey, Schenk is relatively unknown, even among Welsh historians. A deeper understanding of his historical and political biases is difficult, if not impossible, to determine. There are no hints of Nationalism in his writing, neither could instances determining if he is Traditionalist or Revisionist be found.

The third author with unidentifiable bias is Henry Weisser. His book *Wales: An Illustrated History*, like many other generic history books regarding the history of Wales, merely touches on the Rebecca Riots. It offers a general overview of the events, along with their ultimate outcome. However, unlike many other general Welsh history books, Weisser’s book is unique in the fact that it directly relates the Rebecca Riots to the Merthyr Rising of 1831. While many other books simply treat the Merthyr Rising and the Rebecca Riots as consecutive events in the history of Welsh protesting, Weisser draws a direct tie between the two events. This tie is only further expounded upon in the works of Williams and Molloy. While Weisser has this advantage, his writing style has its flaws, and he is often too concise and short-spoken regarding historical events. He explains some in detail, while brushing over others, spending a page or less in discussion.

Weisser is similar to Molloy in that his Welsh political affiliations are nonexistent. However, unlike Molloy, his position in authorship regarding the riots is also nonexistent. Weisser is a general British historian, who has written books not only on Wales, but also England, the island of Great Britain, and the United Kingdom as a whole. Weisser is an American historian from New York who simply specializes in the history of the British Isles.  

While Weisser’s lack of personal connection to Wales may forgo many unique perspectives that only a Welshman could have, it does not cause any detriment to the quality of his work.

The final author with an unidentifiable bias is Catrin Stevens. Stevens wrote the short book entitled *Terfysg Beca: The Rebecca Riots*. Stevens is a history and Welsh teacher from Ceredigion, who taught at Trinity College in Carmarthen.²¹ While most of her books are meant for children, she also wrote a number of short books discussing important events in Welsh history, one of which is *Terfysg Beca*. Although Stevens was a history professor before her retirement, she was mostly uninvolved in any significant historical authorship. Her lack of historical works, along with her general obscurity, makes identifying her political and historical views difficult, if not impossible.

Chapter Two

The First Riots and Their Origin

The episodes of civil unrest and disobedience that would come to be known as the “Rebecca Riots” began in 1839 in southwest Wales. The numerous factors that caused the riots, however, had been building up for over a decade. Some of these factors coincided with the factors that spurred the Chartist Uprisings in Wales, but the primary causes of the Rebecca Riots were ultimately unrelated to the Chartist Movement. As previously stated, the Chartist Movement was primarily targeted toward the Government, demanding more rights for the working class. While the Rebecca Riots were also carried out by the working class, and mirrored the Chartists in the fact that the workers wanted more freedom, much of the comparison between the two protests ends there.

Regarding this trend of civil, social, and economic unrest in the years surrounding 1839, and the numerous factors that led to the Rebecca Riots, Derek Draisey notes,

South Wales was already a hotbed of serious unrest in the 1830s and ’40s. There was a series of bad harvests, food shortages, at least two trade depressions as well as frequent strikes and riots in the industrialized areas. Moreover, workers had for a short time taken possession of Merthyr Tydfil, and extremists known as Scotch cattle were terrorizing Monmouthshire. Then there were the chartists who were everywhere, demanding that the lower classes should have a say in government. In the farming communities of West Wales there were grievances over paying high rents, church rates, tithes, poor law and tolls.22

Clearly these factors all played into the reasons for the riots. The lack of money, food, and poor harvests directly influenced the views of the Welsh toward the tolls and taxes they were forced to

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22 Derek Draisey, The Rebecca Riots Within Ten Miles of Swansea (Swansea: Draisey Publications, 2010), 1 - 2.
pay. The creation of the numerous toll-gates throughout south and west Wales only increased the Welsh people’s dislike of taxes and the rich people who were enforcing these taxes on the poor.

A. H. Dodd’s explanation of the origins of the riots are similar to Draisey’s. Dodd, however, places a greater importance on the influence of Chartism. He notes that “the grievances expressed in Chartism, sharpened by the bad harvest of 1838, found a new target in turnpike gates, the visible symbol of the small farmer’s burdens…” Furthermore, the economics of southwest Wales in the middle of the nineteenth century were complicated due to factors such as remnants of medieval politics, privately-owned roads and lands, and the high taxes imposed by land owners on their farmers.

In nineteenth-century Wales there was a tradition of ancient families, often descended from medieval Welsh princes, owning vast amounts of land. One such family, the Dynevor family, owned a seven-thousand-acre estate in West Wales. David Williams notes that even this estate “was dwarfed by the seventy thousand acres of its chief rivals, the Cawdors of Stackpole and of Golden Grove,” which “covered virtually the whole of seven parishes south of Milford Haven, as well as a considerable part of another three.” While these families had vast amounts of land, they were certainly not the only ones to hold such vast estates.

Because so much of the land in Wales was owned by wealthy families, travelers often had to traverse across private estates. In many cases, it was impossible to travel from one point in Wales to another without passing through some form of privately-owned property. Owners of private property realized that they could charge people for crossing roads on their land, and they began to erect toll booths to stop travelers and charge fees.

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These booths ultimately brought about great revenue. Because there were few well-kept and easy-to-travel roads in south Wales, it was very likely that a person would have to travel a toll road to reach their destination. Given that numerous travelers had to take these roads to reach their location and many farmers carried their produce by these roads, tolls on such roads ensured daily profit for the owners of the land. The popularity of these toll roads led to the creation of “Turnpike Trusts” to manage them.

These trusts maintained the roads, built tollbooths to collect the money, and often built their own roads from which they could collect tolls. Surprisingly, many Welsh people actually supported these roads. While the poorer citizens in Wales held nothing but disdain for the roads and their tolls, those who could afford the tolls felt the building of new roads was well worth the money it cost to construct them. One citizen praised these roads in a news article from 1834, five years before the riots began:

Allow me through the columns of your paper to propose a vote of public thanks to the Trustees in Carmarthenhire, for the very spirited manner in which I understand they have, singly, constructed a Bridge at Loughor, in about eighteen months, to facilitate travelling from one county to the other.25

This view was held by many wealthy Welshmen, as attested in other newspaper articles.

Furthermore, there were few, if any, wealthy Welshmen who took part in the riots.

While the building of new roads greatly helped transportation within Wales, the tolls were often quite costly. Many farmers, who were already experiencing a depression in crop growth and sales, had little extra money to spare for infrastructure. Regarding the number of tollbooths, Henry Tobit Evans notes that there “were five different trusts leading into the town of Carmarthen, and any person passing through the town in a particular direction had to pay at three

turnpike gates in a distance of three miles.”26 While in this location there were three tollbooths in three miles, Evans notes that in some locations there were more, and in others there were fewer.

The Turnpike Trusts knew exactly what they were doing when they built their tollgates: obtain the most money possible from the people passing through them. They knew that they could do this best by setting up their tollgates near city and county borders, and on specific roads that were used for trading. Regarding the locations and number of tollbooths in one area, David Williams notes that,

[b]ad roads were nothing new; it was the frequent toll gates which now made them oppressive. These were so arranged that persons, leaving the side roads, had to pay however short might be the distance they travelled on a trust road. When they had paid they were given chits which ‘cleared’ the gates for a certain distance. But the chits of one trust did not ‘clear’ the gates of another, and as the roads were small and their roads interlocked there were frequent ‘plague spots’ where travelers might have to pay twice or even three times within a short distance.”27

People who lived near the county borders were at a great disadvantage. There tended to be many more tollbooths on roads near borders than within the counties themselves. Evans notes that the “turnpike roads were held under separate trusts, and the trustees found it necessary, in order to protect the interests of the tallyholders, to place their gates near the confines of their respective districts, so as to prevent persons from other districts travelling their roads free of charge.”28 Therefore, Evans states, it “frequently happened that persons living and travelling within any given district, were only charged one toll for the use of a considerable length of the road, while those living on the borders, and having occasion to travel out of the district, had frequently to

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26 Henry Tobit Evans and G. T. Evans, Rebecca and her Daughters, Being a History of the Agrarian Disturbances in Wales Known as The Rebecca Riots (Cardiff: The Educational Publishing Company, 1910), 4.
28 Evans and Evans, Rebecca and Her Daughters, 4.
pay at two gates within a comparatively short distance.” Ultimately, the frequency of the gates was just one of the many complaints that average citizens had regarding the toll roads and the turnpike trusts.

Not only were the number of tollbooths and gates troublesome to the farmers and traders of Wales, many of the gates and booths were illegal. Due to the great revenue that the gates brought in, many people became greedy and erected booths and gates with no government or turnpike trust approval. Others accomplished this legally by “renting” a toll gate and booth from a Turnpike Trust. In these situations, the money gathered would go almost entirely into the owner’s pocket, with none of it going to support the road itself. So, while the owners of these ‘farmed’ toll booths and gates had to pay a small rent to the Turnpike Trust, the remainder of the money gathered was theirs, and they felt no obligation to use any of it to help with the upkeep of the road.

Molloy discusses this further, citing an article written for The Times at the time of the Rebecca Riots. The reporter states that the road was “full of deep holes at almost every step, covered here and there with large loose stones and so thoroughly bad that a traveller who would venture to go faster than a walk after nightfall would do so with the certainty of either breaking his own leg or his horse’s leg, or perhaps both.” One would not expect a road in such dismal conditions to be a toll road, but the author further states that the tolls were “heavy.”

While toll roads were a great cause for the riots, they was not the only cause. One other great instigator for the riots involved economic conditions caused by poor harvest. Many Welsh were farmers on the great estates. The landowners would charge the farmer for his room and

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29 Ibid.
30 Molloy, And They Blessed Rebecca, 25.
31 Molloy, And They Blessed Rebecca, 25. Cited from The Times, 28 September, 1843.
board, and the farmer would keep whatever remained from the money he made from that season’s crop. However, due to extreme weather, there had been a run of poor harvests. An article in the *Monmouthshire Merlin* in September 1839 notes,

The anxiety of the public mind on the subject of the harvest has increased extremely during this Week the continuous heavy rains with which we have been visited for some days, causing an apprehension that the crops will prove as bad, if not worse, than last year. Many intelligent agriculturists, however, are far from desponding, and express an opinion that, with a few days of dry weather, the result of an average crop may even still be anticipated, the high price of corn last year having induced farmers to appropriate a larger extent of land to the cultivation of wheat than heretofore. Corn and currency - money and markets, supersede all political considerations, domestic and foreign, and the Corn Laws and our monetary system are now the themes of every circle.”

Thus, although the harvest of 1839 itself was predicted to produce fairly average crops, the harvest was not nearly sufficient enough to be prosperous, due to the weather. The author also notes that the prediction of an average crop, while not good news, was not as bad as it could have been. This is due to the fact that the weather, among other aspects, had caused the harvests in the previous years to be dismal.

It was not only weather that caused this economic recession among farmers in Wales; another factor was industrialization. The industrial revolution affected economies throughout all of Europe and the United States, thus it affected various jobs in Wales in the same manner that it affected the rest of the world. While many jobs were being created, many other jobs were being destroyed due to the new technology. Pat Molloy notes that in South and Mid Wales the industrial revolution was making itself felt there for it was the centre of an extensive flannel weaving industry, stretching so far back in the life of mid Wales that the very word flannel has its roots in the Welsh language, an industry now facing ruin under the twin impacts of economic depression and competition from the great steam-driven mills of the north of England. There, as in many other rural districts, a whole way of life was on the point of extinction, undermined by the

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rapid mechanisation of processes hitherto carried out in cottage and country
workshop.\textsuperscript{33}

Thus, while the farmers and produce sellers took the most losses from the depression of the first
half of the nineteenth century, they were not the only ones who were suffering from
modernization and taxes, and they were not the only ones who would participate in what would
become the Rebecca Riots.

As stated, farmers and produce sellers were not the only ones to join the riots. Two other
groups were prevalent among the Daughters of Rebecca: coal miners and those who had lost
their jobs \textit{due} to coal mining. Coal mining was a relatively new trend in Wales. The popularity of
coal mining outstripped many other jobs, leaving the workers at such jobs unemployed. David
Williams notes that “small metallurgical industries, such as iron works at Whitland and
Carmarthen, and tin-plate manufacture in the Teify valley, relics of the pre-industrial age, were
now disappearing with the development of the coalfield.”\textsuperscript{34} Thus, many workers who lost their
jobs in other industries due to coal mining took part due to lack of money for the tolls, and those
who were working in the mines took part due to the number of times they were forced to pass
toll gates to get to and from their job.

While these economic conditions played a great role in the beginning of the Rebecca
Riots, another great factor was not a condition, but an event: the destruction of a workhouse,
merely four months before the outbreak of the Rebecca Riots. J. Graham Jones connects this
workhouse’s destruction with the Rebecca Riots, stating that “the burning of the new workhouse
at Narberth in January 1839 was followed in May by the destruction of a new gate at Efailwen on

\textsuperscript{33} Molloy, \textit{And They Blessed Rebecca}, 12 - 13.
\textsuperscript{34} Williams, \textit{The Rebecca Riots}, 88.
the borders of Carmarthenshire and Pembrokeshire.” Jones makes the connection that both events were part of a greater bout of civil and worker’s unrest that had been building up for at least the last decade. This position is expounded upon by other authors.

Another example of civil unrest - the common man taking laws into his own hands - and precursor to the Rebecca Riots was what was known as the *ceffyl pren*, or the “wooden horse.” Events such as these foreshadowed the desire for the theatrics and costumes that were so prevalent in the riots. During the *ceffyl pren*, the events that usually occurred involved an effigy of a person who had broken what was then considered to be the “moral code;” this effigy was carried either on a wooden stick or chair that was held up by the people involved in the event, or on a ladder at the front of a procession.

This procession would parade outside the house of the “guilty” person, to the accompaniment of various noises made by the group, such as the beating of saucepans and other utensils. The purpose of this procession was to draw attention to the breaking of the moral code and to make a laughing stock of the person who had supposedly done the offence. In reference to the view of the *ceffyl pren* by the people of the time, the newspaper *The Welshman* notes that

> Some married parties in the parish of Newchurch, in this County, having been suspected of matrimonial infidelity, the disgraceful exhibition called ceffyl pren, and known in some parts of England by the term *riding stang*, was paraded through our streets on Wednesday night last, with the usual paraphernalia of torches, &c., at a late hour, and was accompanied by actings...

This form of the common people taking the law into their own hands naturally was aimed toward fellow citizens and not the government, but it is considered to have inspired many aspects of the Rebecca Riots.

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It was not only the style of events such as the *ceffyl pren* that inspired the Welsh commoners to take the law into their own hands, but the success of these events. Had the *ceffyl pren* been ineffective, and those involved punished to some extent by the law enforcement of the time, the desire to continue taking the law into their own hands and commit acts of civil disobedience may have waned. However, while the acts involved in the *ceffyl pren* were ultimately successful, the results were often unpredictable.

No matter the unpredictability, “as a means of social control…there can be no doubt that the *ceffyl pren* was generally effective. An old woman, who was aged ninety-six in 1858, reported that she had often seen the *ceffyl pren* in Breconshire used ‘with great effect, as quarrelsome women had a great dread of its appearance’.”\(^{38}\) The purpose, use, unpredictability, and, yet, ultimate effectiveness of the *ceffyl pren* is seen by many to foreshadow why the Rebecca Riots were so popular among common people, why the attacks were often sporadic and unpredictable, and, finally, why the people felt their actions would be effective to make some kind of difference regarding the tollbooths of southwest Wales.

The first of the actions that would later be known as the Rebecca Riots occurred on 13 May 1839. The dismal economic conditions and high taxes and tariffs finally incited the poor men of south Wales to act. On the night of 13 May, “a gang of men, dressed as women, gathered at the Efail-wen toll-gate in Carmarthenshire. Within minutes the gate across the road had been completely destroyed.”\(^{39}\) The reason why the rioters chose the gate at Efail-wen as the first gate to be attacked is not certain, although logical deductions can be made. The most logical of these is that the first group of rioters all lived in the area around Efail-wen.

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If this is the case, then the men would have had to pass by that toll-gate often, whenever they travelled on that road. The tolls for that road were quite high for the time; Derek Draisey notes

in 1839 a typical toll board might read:
- For each horse drawing a carriage          6 pennies
- For each horse not so employed             2 pennies
- For each score of cattle               1 shilling  6 pennies
- For each score of sheep               1 shilling

There were other charges, but what needs to be remembered is that one shilling is equivalent to five modern pence.\(^{40}\)

At this time, £1 was divided into 20 shillings or 240 pennies.

These tolls took up a considerable part of the average workers’ salary. At the time of the Rebecca Riots, the average worker made approximately £1 per week. Farm laborers had to make due on about 10 shillings per week. And for the workers who had to pass through the tollgates several times daily, the effect the tolls had on their wallet is obvious.\(^{41}\)

Some landowners were even less generous in their payment. For example, the Third Lord Dynevor paid his servants on his lands and gardens seven shillings per week (or £18 per year) in 1811.\(^{42}\) This is almost one-third less than the average wage. So, for example, if the average laborer had to bring a score of sheep past a toll-gate twice in one day, that would cost the equivalent of one fifth of his weekly earnings. However, since not all workers were paid so much, the percentage a toll cost would be much greater for some, such as Lord Dynevor’s laborers.

Another possible reason for the riots beginning in Efail-wen is the town’s proximity to the town of Carmarthen in Carmarthenshire, which was surrounded by toll gates. Frequent trips

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41 Draisey, 1.
to Carmarthen from surrounding villages were extremely common. Often, one had to visit the town to gather supplies that could not be found in the smaller villages. A final possible reason for the first attack being at the gate at Efailwen was its recent construction, built to tax the numerous lime traders in the area. The Whitland Trust established this road, but for the longest time, it did not tax the road, establish tollbooths, or repair the road. But on 24 January 1839, it decided to establish tollgates on the Efailwen Road, as well as three other roads, all of which were known to be used to carry limes. These four tollgates were completed just as the lime-carting season began, a week before the first riot.43

As noted previously, farmers and other workers had to travel across toll roads every day simply to go to and from work. While the farmers were crossing the tollgates to sell their wares, the other workers mostly labored in mines. Coal mining was a large source of revenue, especially in the south Wales valleys. Other forms of mining were prevalent as well, such as lead mining, but they were not as prevalent as coal mining. In some cases, the mines would be a fair distance from the homes of the workers, so one might have to cross more than one toll road simply to arrive at work. Needless to say, the cost of this was great for a person being paid only ten shillings per week.

This exorbitant cost led to miners and farmers finding a number of methods to beat the tolls legally. One of these methods foreshadowed the riots, establishing the ease of building a crowd to destroy the gate in the middle of the night. One method of avoiding tolls was to travel at odd hours, when the booths were unmanned. Because laborers and farmers were already evading tolls by keeping odd hours, it was not difficult for them to make the sacrifice of sleep for the sake of destroying a single tollgate.

Regarding these odd hours, Catrin Stevens notes that “Toll-gate keepers could only charge travellers for one journey per day, so farmers would gather at gates at midnight to travel back and forth within twenty-four hours and save money. It’s easy to imagine a gang of farmers, full of righteous anger at their abject poverty, gathered at a toll-gate at midnight, ripe for revolt.” Thus, arriving at tollgates in the middle of the night would not be a new occurrence for the farmers, miners, and traders that crossed them, and the toll collectors would not be surprised to see a large group of farmers arriving at this time of night. While there were a number of other methods the workers used to try to cut back the number of tolls they paid every day, this was the one that would have the greatest effect in regards to how the Rebecca Riots began.

Whatever the reason for the choosing of Efailwen as the location for the initial riot, the first gathering of disgruntled workers was successful. They all agreed that they were tired of the poor economic conditions, greedy landlords, and, most importantly, having their money taken away numerous times per day on various toll roads. Now that they had created a name and disguises for themselves, the men chose 13 May 1839 as the date. This was merely one week after the new gate at Efailwen was erected.

The first attack was a complete surprise. While later attacks occasionally included notices and warnings, the first attack at Efail-wen came with nothing. Whatever planning the rioters did, was done in relative secrecy. They did not seek public help by placing notices on doors, nor did they hold any public meetings regarding the destruction of the gate. No authors offer any evidence that the plan to riot was made public beforehand by any member of the group.

Very little is known about the attack on the tollbooth at Efailwen itself, apart from a few basic details. A number of men dressed as women, with blackened faces, came as a group to the

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44 Stevens, Terfysg Beca, 11 - 12.
toll gate and booth near Efailwen in Carmarthenshire and destroyed both the gate and the booth. There has been much speculation concerning how the event took place. For example, Pat Molloy compares the group to a drunken party, returning home from a night at the pub after a wedding ceremony or some other service.

If the case is as Molloy surmises, the worker at the tollhouse and his family would have had no idea what was going to occur until it actually happened. Molloy notes that the “terrified toll collector and his family fled as the gate was attacked with felling axes and their house was sledge-hammered and put to the torch. It was over in minutes and the jubilant crowd, responding instantly to their leader’s command, went back the way they had come and disappeared into the gathering darkness…”45 However, the account that Molloy gives is based merely on tradition and hearsay.

David Williams, on the other hand, provides an account of the event that is based on what is actually known of the first riot. He states that on “the night of 13 May, scarcely a week after it had been erected, the gate at Efail-wen was destroyed and the tollhouse set on fire.”46 This simple statement is all that is truly known about the first Rebecca Riot. Rebecca and her daughters came, saw, and conquered. No one paid much attention to the first riot, due to its random location and speedy occurrence. The people who cared the most were the members of the Turnpike Trust who established the gate.

The gate was quickly re-erected, and the Trust ensured extra security for this gate by swearing in constables to protect it. However, it was destroyed again on the night of 6 June 1839, merely weeks after the first one was destroyed. Unlike the first riot, this second attack on the

45 Molloy, *And They Blessed Rebecca*, 2.
Efail-wen gate was not a complete surprise. A number of days before the attack, handbills were placed on the doors of public places, with information about a meeting in regards to the destruction of the tollbooth.

This public recruiting let the Turnpike Trust know that a second riot was very likely to occur. In an eyewitness account, Alcwyn Evans discusses these handbills, the meeting that followed, and the riots themselves. He states,

1839 June 15th. Some time ago, handbills were tined on many public doors at Efelwen, near Llandissilio, Co. Pembr. and in that neighborhood stating where and when a meeting would be held to take into consideration the propriety of the Toll Gate fixed at Efelwen… The magistrates in the vicinity were told that it was generally expected that the concourse would proceed from the meeting to destroy the Toll Gate and House. Several special constables were sworn in, and sent to protect the place. The evening, about a week ago, came, the meeting was held, and immediately at its conclusion, about 400 men, some dressed in female garments, and others with blackened faces, marched to the toll-gate, huzza-ing for free laws, and free travelling to coal-pits…

Henry Tobit Evans notes that at about “10:30 p.m. of the day mentioned, a mob of about four hundred men…marched to the toll-gate, huzzaing for Free Laws and toll-gates free to coal pits and lime kilns; and after driving the constables from their stations, and pursuing them to the fields adjoining, they returned to the gate and demolished it and the house.” The constables who were set to protect the gate simply fled at the sight of the hundreds of protestors with various weapons and other large items such as pots and pans.

A second riot, at a different location, followed closely after the first at Efail-wen. Much less is known about this riot compared to the first. This riot was at a different gate at Maes-gwyn and was hardly covered in the papers. The Saturday of the week following the riot at Efail-wen,

48 Evans, 25.
“some two hundred disguised rioters appeared at the Maes-gwyn gate, and, with much firing of guns, destroyed it also.”

Unlike the second riot at Efail-wen, there were no planned meetings or warnings of the event.

Before the riots would subside, one more riot occurred, once again at Efail-wen. This final destruction has been made famous. Unlike the first three riots, the final occurred in the middle of the day. In the middle of the afternoon of Wednesday, 17 July, rioters gathered with blackened faces and dressed in women’s clothing. The constables defending the tollgate ran in the face of the crowd, save one who was unable to get away. He was assaulted. It was on “this occasion the leader was addressed as Becca, and the name ‘the Rebecca Riots’ thereby came into use.”

It is interesting to consider that the first riot in which the name “Rebecca” was used would be the last riot in the Rebecca Riots for almost three and a half years. After this third riot at the gate of Efail-wen on 17 July 1839, the Rebecca-ites would be silent until November of 1842.

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49 Williams, The Rebecca Riots, 187.
50 Williams, 188.
Chapter 3

Three Year Break

To fully understand what caused these three and a half years of silence, a number of questions must be considered. The first of these involves the cause for the initial stopping of the riots. The Rebecca-ites had destroyed four gates in a short amount of time, had just identified themselves as “Rebecca and her daughters,” and had numerous other tollgates, which were daily taking money from poor farmers, that they could destroy. Yet they stopped their destruction abruptly.

The first cause of this that should be considered is location. While there were four riots in 1839, there were only two locations. Three of the riots were at the gate at Efail-wen, while one was at the gate at Maes-gwyn. Both of these locations are in Carmarthenshire County, fewer than ten miles apart. This close proximity severely limited the number of people who were involved and how wide the riots spread. History has often shown that the events in one county or area of a country do not always affect the events in another county or area in a similar manner.

There was historical precedent for localized violence in Wales. The Merthyr Rising, a possible example of Chartism in Wales, took place in 1831. While it had nationwide effects in regards to worker’s rights and trade unions, the rising itself did not spread after the initial Merthyr Rising, led by Lewsyn y Heliwr and Dic Penderyn, occurred from 1 - 7 June in Merthyr Tydfil.51 Thus, the greatest workers’ rising in Welsh history did not lead to further riots in other counties. Once the goal had been completed, the rioters stopped, and did not try to start uprisings in other cities or counties within Wales.

In the same way, it is not difficult to see why the original riots in Carmarthenshire did not spread throughout the rest of Wales immediately. While there is ample evidence to support the theory that significant uprisings in one county need not be significant in another, it does not explain what the reasons are for this non-proliferation. These reasons are numerous, and many are directly related to the entirety of Wales - locational demographics, general population, terrain, county borders, the locations of communities, and other such factors. Like the factors that caused the Rebecca Riots themselves, the factors that caused the original four riots combined to create a state of “critical mass,” resulting in the three year hiatus.

The first factor, demographics, is critical. The population of Wales, according to the census of 1831, was slightly above 800,000 people. This was an enormous increase from thirty years prior, when the population was approximately 500,000. The most populous areas, as today, were around Cardiff and Swansea. Carmarthenshire, while having recently seen a marked increase in population in towns such as Carmarthen, was still sparsely populated in many areas, especially in areas of farming and countryside.

By 1839, of course, this population would have risen significantly. The census of 1841 places the population of Wales at 911,321 - an increase of over 100,000 people from the 1831 census. Concerning the counties which the gates at Efail-wen and Maes-gwyn affected, *The Glamorgan, Monmouth, and Brecon Gazette and Merthyr Guardian* states that the population of Carmarthenshire in 1841 was just over 106,000, while the population of Pembrokeshire was just over 88,000. This is a large difference from Cardiff and Swansea, both included in the county of

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Glamorgan at the time, the population of which was approximately 200,000 - more than the
counties of Carmarthenshire and Pembrokeshire combined.

However, population means nothing without considering density. Glamorgan was
approximately 855 square miles, Carmarthenshire was 925 square miles, and Pembrokeshire was
610 square miles.\(^5\) Thus, the counties of Carmarthenshire and Pembrokeshire combined were
almost twice the size of the county of Glamorganshire, yet contained almost the same amount of
people. The population density of Carmarthenshire was 114.5 people per square mile; the density
of Pembrokeshire was somewhat heavier, with 144 people per square mile, and the density of
Glamorganshire was much heavier, with 234 people per square mile.

It is also key to note that the population density differed in another way in these three
counties. The population of Glamorgan was highly centered in the cities of Cardiff and Swansea,
while the counties of Carmarthenshire and Pembrokeshire had no urban areas at that time. The
two counties had a number of large towns, but nothing to the extent of Glamorganshire - which
had two large cities that contained a majority of the population. While Glamorganshire was
urban, Carmarthenshire and Pembrokeshire were still highly pastoral. Even today, with the
exception of Llanelli in Carmarthenshire, the counties of Carmarthenshire and Pembrokeshire
remain diversely populated. For example, while Pembrokeshire contains over 122,000 people,
the largest town, Haverfordwest, contains fewer than 13,000 people.

This combination of concentrated urban populations, but sparse population elsewhere is
key to understanding the failure of the Rebecca Riots to spread. With the local increase in
population, the farmers being forced to pay the tolls could easily find people to join them in
destroying the first tollbooth at Efailwen at towns such as Carmarthen, yet, due to the areas of

\(^5\) “Report of the Commissioners,” The Internet Archive, accessed April 6, 2016,
farmland and nature between the growing town of Carmarthen and other large towns in counties such as Ceredigion, Pembrokeshire and Powys, it was unlikely that the momentum would spread much further than the original county, especially not soon after the first riot.

One cause for this was the lack of railway. Railroads began flourishing in England and Scotland in the early 1830’s. However, like many other advancements, it took longer to gain momentum in Wales. While England had a large amount of track in the 1830’s, the railroad did not reach even Cardiff, the most populous city in Wales - 91 miles away from Efail-wen - until 1841, long after the first riots occurred.\textsuperscript{54} It took longer still for the railroads to reach counties such as Carmarthenshire and Pembrokeshire. By 1852, England and Scotland had over 7,000 miles of rail track. However, the number was less significant in Wales. Even 9 years after the Rebecca Riots had ended, Wales was still dotted with more turnpikes and tollbooths than railways.\textsuperscript{55}

Furthermore, while the telegraph would soon envelope the British Isles, at the time of the Rebecca Riots it was used almost solely for railway matters. Thus, the riots occurred merely years before quick travel and fast communication would explode upon Britain.\textsuperscript{56} It could be surmised that, had the Rebecca Riots occurred just a decade later, they would have been much larger and had much more influence. Naturally, many aspects of the riots would have been different once the railroads and telegraph became common throughout Wales.

Another factor that enforced the locality of the first riots, along with their failure to spread, was the strength of households within the farming community. Farmers would have


\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.
numerous workers helping them throughout the day, and these workers would join the farmer and his family in their house for meals and socialization when not working. David Williams notes that “there was no great social gulf between the farmer and his labourers as there was, for example, in south-east England…In Wales they shared the same inadequate diet, and worked the same interminable hours, from sunrise to sunset, often rising at 4:30 in the morning…the men and the lads slept in outbuildings, in dark, badly-ventilated lofts over stables or cowsheds, or even in carthouses.”\(^{57}\) A great portion of the workers life was spent on the land on which they worked.

Due to the long working hours and time spent with the farmers, many of the people who would one day be part of Rebecca and her Daughters did not go much further than the land they worked on, the land they lived on. This would truly discourage riots in other parts of the country and even perhaps the county, due to the simple lack of spreading of information. Free time might be spent at the pub closest to the farming land. Sometimes this was in a small town, but it was not always the case. Thus, not only did the sparsity of the population in this area account for a factor in why the riots did not gather larger crowds in other areas, but also the hours and living conditions that came with the jobs of many of the rioters.

The geographic position of the town of Carmarthen itself also played a great role in the localization of the riots. Carmarthen is fairly centered within the county of Carmarthenshire. It is a relatively equal distance to any of the closest towns in other counties, such as Swansea in the county of Swansea, Haverfordwest in Pembrokeshire, and Builth Wells in Powys.\(^{58}\) The average distance to each of these places was approximately an hour on horseback. Thus, while the


original movement would find easy support in the large towns of the same county as the new
tollgates, gaining support from the large towns in neighboring counties where no new tollgates
had been built would be a much harder feat to accomplish.

The second factor, general population, is closely related to locational demographics. Even
today, Wales is sparsely populated, but the population is denser in the southern counties,
particularly in the valleys. The original riots occurred on the border of Carmarthenshire and
Pembrokeshire. Today, Carmarthenshire and Pembrokeshire both have a population density of
77 people per square kilometer. To compare, the City and County of Cardiff has a population
density of 2,505 people per square kilometer. With a population density so low today, one can
imagine how low the population and how sparse the population density were at the time of the
Rebecca Riots. Therefore, the difficulty of setting off a large movement from three or four local
riots is clear. While Carmarthenshire is not the least densely populated county of Wales, it is
clear that immediate continuing riots would be rather difficult to procure.

The population census of 1831 places Wales just below one million inhabitants, while the
census of 1841 places Wales just above one million inhabitants. Thus, it is safe to say that the
population of Wales at the time of the first Rebecca Riots in 1839 was approximately one
million. While Carmarthenshire had experienced a surge in population compared to what it was a
decade or two before, the general population percentages for each county were fairly equivalent
to what they are today. Cardiff, Swansea, and Newport were the most populated places, while
Carmarthenshire was in the middle to less populated of the counties.

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59 “How Densely Populated Is Your Area?,” Population and Migration, accessed April 22, 2016,
60 “The UK population: past, present, and future,” Focus on People and Migration, accessed November 6,
2015, http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/fertility-analysis/focus-on-people-and-migration/december-
61 Davies, A History of Wales, 90 - 93.
Most sources are in agreement regarding the population of Carmarthenshire. While the scrupulous methods used in the 1841 census had not yet come into effect, the majority of sources agree the population of the county was over 100,000. One source places the population of Carmarthenshire in 1831 at 100,740.\textsuperscript{62} There is one source that provides a different estimate. In her book about Welsh language statistics, Dot Jones claims that the population of Carmarthenshire according to the 1831 census was 84,339.\textsuperscript{63} However, no evidence is provided for this claim, and no other sources verify it.

The number of 106,000 is approximately 77,000 fewer people than who live in Carmarthenshire today. Given that Carmarthenshire today, as stated above, has merely 78 people per square kilometer, the population density of Carmarthenshire at the time of the Rebecca Riots would have been approximately 44 people per square kilometer. So, even though the county had recently seen a drastic population increase, the ultimate population density was relatively low, and it was highly uneven. The population was not spread out equally throughout the county; instead, there were large towns with large populations with sparsely inhabited farmland in between.

It was not only the lower population of Carmarthenshire compared to other counties that contributed to the riots’ lack of spreading after the first four riots of 1839. While the population density of the county itself is a factor in the slow spread of the original Rebecca Riots, the size of the county and its location in relation to other counties also affected the spreading rate of the riots. As previously stated, the county of Carmarthenshire is relatively low in regards to population density compared with the other counties of Wales. However, the population and

density of the counties bordering Carmarthenshire would also have had an effect on why the riots refused to spread immediately.

If the counties surrounding Carmarthenshire were larger in population or smaller in size, perhaps the riots would have had further reach than they originally did. However, this was not the case. The counties which share relatively long borders with Carmarthenshire are Ceredigion, Pembrokeshire, and Powys. The counties which share relatively short borders with Carmarthenshire are Neath Port Talbot and Swansea. As stated before, Carmarthenshire is 19 of 22 Welsh counties in regards to population density. The counties of Ceredigion, and Powys are 21 and 22, respectively. The county of Pembrokeshire is ranked slightly above Carmarthenshire, taking the 18th spot. However, there is less than a one percent difference in density between these two counties.

Thus, the counties that share the largest borders with Carmarthenshire have less or very slightly higher population density than Carmarthenshire. Swansea and Neath Port Talbot, which share very small borders with Carmarthenshire had a higher population density at that time than they do today. However, Neath Port Talbot’s higher population density is due merely to the size of the county. The county itself had many fewer people than Carmarthenshire. Swansea, however was a much larger county in regards to population, mostly due to the popularity of mining. The mining of coal and other natural resources in Swansea made it a popular county for poorer people who needed a job and could not find it elsewhere.

Without a doubt, general population, population density, and the specific densities and sizes of the various counties including and surrounding Carmarthenshire played significant roles.

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in why the Rebecca Riots did not spread past the four occurrences of 1839. However, these factors are not the greatest causes. There are two other factors that played significant roles in why the riots did not spread immediately. The first factor is the accomplishment of the original goal. This is often considered to be the prevalent factor in why the Rebecca Riots stopped so soon after they began.

The original goal of the first Rebecca Riots was not to start a nationwide movement and destroy as many tollgates as possible, although this viewpoint became prevalent in the revival of the Rebecca Riots of 1842. The rioters were angry with the tolls, the tollgates, the turnpike trusts, and the fact that the trusts often did not even use the money gained to keep the roads nice. However, the Rebecca Riots began as a response to the erection of a single gate. The gate at Efail-wen was particularly troublesome to the travelers of Wales due to its location and toll, as previously stated. The commoners of Wales saw this gate as completely unnecessary, used as a simple ploy for greedy trust workers to get more money.

This tradition of greedy turnpike trusts erecting gates for nothing more than extra profit was nothing new to the farmers of Wales. Catrin Stevens notes that the “Trusts’ agents, such as Thomas Bullin of Swansea, were very greedy. They began erecting extra bars across side-lanes, to catch tenant-farmers on their way to market or to the coast to fetch lime to dress the land.”

While all tollgates were considered by farmers and the common man to be annoyances, hindrances, and symbols of the greedy upper class, some of the money from some of the tollgates did actually go to the upkeep of the roads. It was the tollgates built by men such as Thomas Bullin, gates whose tolls went solely to the greedy men of the trusts rather than toward the up

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keep of the roads - tollgates such as Efail-wen - that truly annoyed the farmers and commoners of Wales.

As previously discussed, one might say that the tollgate at Efail-wen was the tipping point for the farmers who travelled in Carmarthenshire. They felt that this specific tollgate was so unfair and unnecessary that they decided to destroy it, to make a statement. The gate was successfully destroyed and thus, for a short amount of time, the rioters were successful. In proving the thesis that the destruction of the single gate at Efail-wen was instrumental in why the riots did not immediately spread to other tollgates, the fact is often presented that no other gates were destroyed between the destruction of the gate at Efail-wen and when the Turnpike Trust decided to rebuild it. The rioters were focused on one goal and one goal only - destroying the Efail-wen gate.

This focus on Efail-wen, and thus not on the general destroying of tollgates and houses, is shown through a notice that was posted all throughout towns near Efail-wen, especially Llandissilio. Llandissilio is a large village in Pembrokeshire, merely a number of miles from the gate at Efail-wen, which rested near the Pembrokeshire-Carmarthenshire border. Pat Molloy notes that, soon after the rebuilding of the Efail-wen gate, there were “notices pinned to chapel doors announcing a further meeting ‘for the purpose of considering the necessity of a toll gate at Efail-wen,’ an ominous reference to the new gate quickly placed across the road alongside the ruined gate house.”66 Thus, the riots were local, and the rioters, while perhaps hoping for a larger movement of rioting, showed no outward signs of such a goal.

The gate at Efail-wen was re-erected, the notices were issued, and the gate was destroyed once again. It was re-erected a second time, and then destroyed for a third. It was this destruction

66 Molloy, *And They Blessed Rebecca*, 3.
that convinced Thomas Bullin, the owner of the Turnpike Trust that built the gate at Efail-wen, to cease trying to erect a gate at that location near the Pembrokeshire-Carmarthenshire border. Terry Norman provides some information regarding this man: “the owner of the tollgate was one Thomas Bullin, an Englishman who owned Turnpike Trusts all over southern Britain, from as far afield as east London, Portsmouth, Bristol and west Wales. Bullin was persuaded to pull the Efail Wen gate down and 'Rebecca' disappeared for a while…”67 The original goal that the protesters had set had finally been accomplished, and thus the rioting ended for a time.

There is one exception to the theory that the original riots were solely against Efail-wen, and that involves the destruction of the tollgate at Maes-gwyn, also known as the Llanboidy or St. Clear’s Tollgate, due to the villages surrounding it. This tollgate was completely separate from that at Efail-wen, and the reason for its destruction remains something of an anomaly. Pat Molloy states that “two hundred men, some on horses, most on foot, descended on the Maes Gwynne gate, near Llanboidy, five miles from Efail-wen, and to the roar of gunfire chopped it to pieces. There was not a special constable in sight, for Llanboidy was a lonely place of narrow lanes at night…”68 Unlike Efail-wen, the gate at Maes-gwyn was not on a large road, it was not right on the border between two counties, and it was not on a road that was used commonly for carrying products meant for trade, such as grains and fruits, especially limes, at least not nearly as much as the road on which the Efail-wen gate was built.

So, if the original Rebecca Riots were solely against the one gate at Efail-wen, why was this smaller, less-important gate destroyed? One possible reason is that it was built at the same time as the gate at Efail-wen. The gate was only one or two weeks old when it was destroyed. So,

68 Molloy, And They Blessed Rebecca, 3.
while it may not have been important, it was new.\textsuperscript{69} It can easily be understood how much farmers hated new tollgates: another toll to pay each day, another road on which it was no longer free to travel. With the recent surge of disobedience in regards to the destruction of the Efail-wen gate, the desire for the destruction of another new gate is not hard to imagine.

A second possible reason for this gate’s destruction was its proximity to Efail-wen. The tollgate at Maes-gwyn was fewer than ten miles from the tollgate at Efail-wen. Both roads on which the gates were placed were important roles for farmers and other sellers coming from Pembrokeshire and Carmarthenshire to other counties of Wales, especially those selling limes. A possible final reason for the destruction of the Maes-gwyn tollgate is based more on hearsay than fact. This reason is that the rioters simply wanted to destroy another gate, because they enjoyed it. This is shown in the fact that a number of the scholars who have discussed the Rebecca Riots see the first riots as something similar to parties who simply enjoyed the destruction as a mob.\textsuperscript{70} This is surmised from the facts that the rioters were often drunk, would sing songs, chant for free laws, and destroyed the gate in a play fashion.

It must be considered what would have happened if the Turnpike Trust had decided not to rebuild the Efail-wen gate. Had the Trust decided to leave the gate in ruins, the Rebecca Riots might have ended then and there. The farmers came, they saw, they conquered, and that was the end—or could have been. While the destruction of the gate, along with the refusal of the Turnpike Trust to rebuild it, could have stopped the riots for good, the true outcome can only be speculated.

\textsuperscript{69} Williams, \textit{The Rebecca Riots}, 187.

\textsuperscript{70} Molloy, \textit{And They Blessed Rebecca}, 2.
Another reason why the riots did not continue immediately is retribution. Not all of the rioters who destroyed the Efail-wen gate remained anonymous, able to return to their normal lives as farmers and traders after the original riots of 1839 ended. A number of them were recognized and were turned in. The members of Rebecca and Her Daughters that were recognized and captured were punished - some of them severely, some of them far less so. At least two men were arrested and charged with destroying the tollgate.\footnote{“Committed to Carmarthen County Gaol,” \textit{The Cambrian}, July 27, 1839, accessed November 17, 2015, \url{http://newspapers.library.wales/view/3329595/3329598/12/llandissilio}.
\footnote{Evans and Evans, \textit{Rebecca and Her Daughters}, 25.}

The arrest of members of the Rebecca Riots would certainly have been a damper on rioting spirits. That, combined with the other factors already mentioned, especially the fact the tollgate at Efailwen not being re-built, could also have been seen by the rioters are good reason to stop. But, perhaps just as important, the threat of prison or deportation to Australia would have played a role in Rebecca and her daughters not continuing the riots soon after the Efail-wen victory.

There was yet another factor: government retribution. The government in London sent soldiers to the affected area of Wales.\footnote{Evans and Evans, \textit{Rebecca and Her Daughters}, 25.} This show of military force in Wales was almost unprecedented. Lacking any real police force, justice in Wales was usually achieved through the community. Thus, in a country where miscreants were expected to be punished by a public shaming, the threat of being sent to a place as terrible and terrifying as a prison was something new entirely for most Welshmen.

A final reason for the sudden end of the first Rebecca Riots is the spontaneity of the first riots. There was no warning behind the first destruction of the gate near Efail-wen, nor the destruction of the gate near Maes-gwyn. The warning for the original riots occurred only after
the first gate had already been destroyed once. Had the gate not been re-erected after its first destruction by the daughters of Rebecca, all of the original riots would have been completely spontaneous. They were not meant to last indefinitely, but to complete the goal of destroying the specific gates, then end. This they accomplished. As David Williams notes, the requests by the Turnpike Trusts to erect new gates in place of the ones destroyed at Efail-wen were denied by the government, and the riots ended.

As discussed, there are a good number of reasons for why the original riots did not continue immediately after the third destruction of the gate at Efail-wen and sole destruction of the gate at Maes-gwyn. These include the victory at Efail-wen and Maes-gwyn, the spontaneity of the original riots, and the threat of retribution after a number of the rioters of Efailwen were caught and punished for their crimes. These two main reasons no doubt played a role in why the riots did not return in the next three years. However, they do not answer all the questions that could be posed as to why the riots did not continue immediately, or restart sooner than they did.

First, while the gates at Efailwen and Maes-gwyn were indeed not rebuilt - affording the rioters victories - other gates were built throughout Wales and in English border towns between August 1839 and October 1842. One such gate, built in 1841, was the Hereford Gate. While this gate was in England, many Welshmen who lived near the Wales - England border passed through this gate to take their wares to markets in England. The construction of the Hereford Gate came with a number of protests by farmers. These protests were usually carried out in the form of minor misdemeanors at the gate along with court cases against the Trust who built it and the Keeper of the gate who collected the tolls. Unlike the first three actions of the Rebecca riots, the protests at the Hereford gate were not violent, and a number were not even illegal. The

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aggrieved farmers did not try to destroy the gate or attack the gate-keeper, but merely attacked the trust that operated the gate through the methods of trying to evade tolls, along with legal court proceedings.

There are a number of examples of Welshmen and other commoners trying to evade the tolls at this specific gate. The first occurred very soon after the gate was first built. The Monmouthshire Merlin notes that “Mr. Wm. Prosser, farmer, of the parish of Clodock, in the county of Hereford, was charged with having passed through the new Hereford road gate, on the 29th day of June last, with sheep, and evaded the toll. Fined 5s. and costs.”\(^74\) A further, similar event occurred at the Hereford Gate a few months later, when it was not as new. The Merlin states that, “Richard Rosser was charged by John Sims, toll gate keeper, with defrauding the collector of the Hereford toll-gate on the 24th of October. - Fined 5s.”\(^75\) Throughout 1841 and into the beginning of 1842, there were numerous notes in local newspapers regarding men who had been caught passing through the Hereford gate without paying the toll or not paying it fully.

Reasons for why gates such as the Hereford Gate and others in Wales and English border towns did not spark a return of the riots, but simple acts of civil disobedience and refusal to pay tolls, is mainly contributed to the people involved in the riots. Most of the people involved in the riots at Efailwen and Maes-gwyn were from Carmarthenshire and Pembrokeshire. Many of them knew each other. It is understandable that one group of friends and acquaintances starting riots in one part of Wales would not necessarily lead to other such groups starting riots in other parts of Wales.


Furthermore, the leader of the original riots, Thomas Rees (Twm Carnabwth), never participated in any further riots after the original three at Efailwen.\textsuperscript{76} He was not traveling throughout Wales trying to recruit others to start more riots. His victory had been won when the government refused to let the Turnpike Trust rebuild the Efailwen gate. In the same way that a protest in one city often remains in that city, the riots remained in the towns on the Carmarthenshire-Pembrokeshire border until some weeks after their return in 1842.

Instead, as previously discussed, commoners throughout Wales, such as the aforementioned Richard Rosser, chose to protest peacefully and quietly. Throughout the years of silence, Welsh newspapers offer numerous cases of commoners and merchants refusing to pay tolls at gates, with many of them being charged fines in court because of it. However, there were no instances of violent attacks at the various gates reported in any of the papers. The combination of the local nature of the first riots with the transition to peaceful protest at gates throughout Wales discouraged further rioting during these three years.

Another reason for the lack of riots between 1839 and 1842 was the returning of economic prosperity, even if it was during a time of continued recession. Numerous newspapers throughout Wales between 1840 and the summer of 1842 had articles with headlines such as “Returning Prosperity.” One such article states,

\begin{quote}
We are glad to find the evidences of reviving trade dwelt upon in the preceding number not only strengthened and confirmed, but that further development of a healthy action in the mainsprings of commerce is being made daily in the principal marts. Yes, truly, there is a general setting free of the springs of industry, and these impulses, with the sum of employment afforded by the gathering in of the harvest, now in the beginning, cannot fail to alleviate materially if not wholly to relieve the distress arising out of want of work. There can be no doubt whatever that a change for the better has taken place, since anti-corn law journals admit it.\textsuperscript{77}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{76} Molloy, \textit{And They Blessed Rebecca}, 35.
Numerous articles of this type were written during the silent years. Another article, from September 1840, states that “Ploughing and threshing have been carried on to a great extent. With respect to the former, the land has worked remarkably well while the latter has, in most instances, fully realized the expectations of the growers.” This article is from *The Demetian Mirror*, a prominent newspaper which covered Carmarthenshire and Pembrokeshire – the counties in which the riots started and would return. From this, it can be surmised that the harvest of 1840 in those counties was as good or better than expected.

*The Demetian Mirror* further mentions the “growing prosperity” of Aberystwyth, the largest town in southwest Wales (the counties of Carmarthenshire, Ceredigion, and Pembrokeshire), a number of times throughout 1840. A final article, from *The Welshman*, in 1841, notes that “[w]e are informed on good authority, that the crop is generally above an average.” Numerous other articles from 1840 and 1841 talk of good harvest, and high expectations for future harvests. This returning prosperity throughout 1840 and 1841, both in the Harvest and in larger industrial towns such as Aberystwyth, ensured that the farmers and other workers made enough money to not feel too destitute and burdened by the tolls.

The harvest was even predicted to be prosperous in south Wales the year of the return of the riots, with the Monmouthshire Merlin stating that “The harvest has already begun in this district, with the most encouraging prospects; the weather being all that could be desired for ripening the crops, and, owing to the almost entire absence of tempests they are standing in an

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excellent condition for the sickle.”81 However, the economy as a whole would take a turn for the worse by December of that year.

A final reason for why the riots did not begin again in the three years is related to both a reason for their disappearance as well as another reason for their continued absence. It was the threat of being sent to a gaol or a penal colony. A number of people were sent to trial for their involvement in the attacks on Efailwen. Not all were convicted, as is shown in the case of Morris Jones. One newspaper notes that “The Grand Jury found no true bill against Morris David, charged with having, with others, assembled at Evelwen, on the 6th June last, and having demolished and pulled down a dwelling-house, (toll house), toll gate, and gate posts, at Evelwen.”82 However, others were not so lucky.

While some were acquitted, a number of rioters were captured, tried, and sent to a gaol for a specific period of time.83 Just as the threat of gaol or the penal colony of Australia was an influence in the first riots not continuing, it remained an influence throughout the years of silence, especially given that many criminals committed to gaols had to wait a year at least to receive their hearing before the Grand Jury, which would determine their ultimate fate, whether it be continued imprisonment or acquittal. Given the ultimate success of the Efail-wen attacks, with the gate not being rebuilt, the recent prosperity of the harvest and economy, and the lack of any extremely inconvenient tollbooths being built, reviving the riots and risking gaol or Australia would have seemed unnecessary.

Chapter 4

Return of the Riots – The Causes

While the riots had been silent for a number of years, one of the reasons for their return in 1842 was related to the increasing violence supposedly perpetrated by toll-keepers. There were numerous instances in the silent years of toll-keepers being unfair and even attacking people who passed through the gate they kept. Some of these cases were heard; however, some were dismissed. One such case was mentioned in the Monmouthshire Merlin on 30 October 1841. The event occurred at a tollgate in Abergavenny. It states that “John Jones and Henry Collard, toll-gate keepers, charged with assaulting John Fisher and pulling from his horse, on the 12 Oct.”

This was merely one of many such attacks that were either claimed or actually occurred. This specific attack was dismissed based on the evidence of a P. C. Grubb, who apparently provided sufficient proof that the two men who claimed to be attacked were in fact too drunk to know anything that was occurring at the said time. However, the Merlin does not specify the evidence for this, and the evidence of a single man could have been forged.

Claimed attacks, whether real or fictional, were not the only grudges held against toll-gates and their keepers. A number of toll-gate keepers would charge extra money for various journeys, either for the Trust or to pocket for themselves. As with the charges of violence on the part of the toll-gate keepers, many of the claims of keepers charging extra tolls had both real and
fictional cases. One example of these claims of unfair tolls occurred merely a month before the case of violence on the keeper which was mentioned previously.

The *Monmouthshire Merlin* mentions that “Samuel Weech, toll-gate keeper, was summoned for taking two-pence toll for a horse passing through the new Hereford gate, belonging to Mr. Thomas Williams, of Llantilio Pertholly, farmer, who brought evidence to prove that the horse was going to the smith’s, to be shod.”86 At that time, it was uncommon to charge such high tolls for trips as simple and necessary as getting one’s horse shod. This incident provides another example of cases that would anger the common man and increase the hatred for tollbooths which was so common among the Welsh at that time.

Other cases brought against tollgates in the years in between the two outbreaks of rioting involved priests. It was common in that time, when religion was much more prevalent in Wales than it is today, to let ministers pass through toll-gates free of charge on their way to and from work, because they were going to preach at church. They were doing the work of God, and thus were above paying tolls for such a job (compare to the tax-exempt status of churches in the United States of America, and many other countries, today). However, one minister was charged a toll on his way to church on Sunday. *The Glamorgan, Monmouth and Brecon Gazette and Merthyr Guardian* states that,

> “At Romford, on Tuesday, Henry Gilburn, keeper of the Romford toll gate, was summoned for demanding toll from the Rev F. Ward, a Wesleyan Minister, when proceeding to his duties on a Sunday. Mr Ward contended that as he was proceeding to Brentwood, where he had been regularly appointed to preach, it was his “usual place of worship,” and he produced a vast number of authorities to show he was exempt.”87

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This alone would infuriate the common Welshman. For them, it was simply another example of greedy Turnpike Trusts and toll-gate keepers trying to acquire a few extra pence that they did not have the right to and did not deserve.

In this case, however, the event itself was not the end to the injustice. The decision of the judge and the bench in this case added insult to injury. The *Gazette and Guardian* concludes the piece by noting that “After a long argument the bench decided that the exemption extended only to the limits of the parish, and if he went out of the parish, he was liable.” Thus, even Priests were liable to tolls if the specific church they were preaching at on any given Sunday was not the church in the parish in which they lived.

A further example from 1841 of acts by toll-keepers that would infuriate the common Welshman occurred on 27 January of that year. In this case, it involved a wagoner, according to the toll-keepers, evading possible extra tolls. To explain this case, background information is necessary. Every horse that a traveller had when they passed through a toll-gate cost extra money, so it became a common practice for wagoners, who often had a good number of horses to travel with, to have someone on the other side of the toll gate bring two horses to a pre-decided meeting spot. Through this, the wagoner could bring fewer horses through the toll-gate when he crossed, and pick up the remaining ones once he had paid the toll.

This is exactly what Evan Powell did in January of 1841. The *Monmouthshire Merlin* states that,

“Evan Powell, a waggoner, was charged with evading the payment of toll at Pen-Y-Pound gate. It appeared by the evidence that on the evening of the 13th inst., the defendant drove his master’s waggon and four horses through the above gate, and paid the toll for the team; the collector, however, questioned him whether he had not other horses waiting nigh for the waggon, but which he denied. On following the waggon

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88 Ibid.
towards the town, defendant was seen to tack three more horses on to his team and continue his route.”

Thus, Evan Powell was convicted 5 shillings plus extra costs. It is easy to understand how this rule would seem unfair. If the horses he eventually tacked on were already beyond the gate at which he paid the toll, why would he be forced to pay tolls for them as well? They did not have to pass through the gate to get to where they were going.

The arguments used by the defendants of the toll gates and turnpike trusts could be surmised easily from the stated purposes of the tollgates, and previous cases. The most obvious argument was that the one toll gate that the various miscreants passed through represented a longer stretch of road. That single toll-gate was for a number of miles of road, so adding on animals after passing the tollgate let you cross a great portion of the road which the tollgate represented without paying the full share of the cost for the supposed “upkeep” of the road. The length of each toll road can be estimated to a close degree by the comparison of the number of miles of toll roads to the number of tollgates.

While the length of the toll roads in relation to the toll-gates as a possible argument against those who would add extra animals after passing the gate cannot be proven definitively, it can be supported by pieces of evidence published at the time of the events. One such piece comes from The Cambrian, a Welsh newspaper, which produced a long article on the history and uses of turnpike trusts in 1940. In this article, the paper notes that,

“It appears that there are 1,116 turnpike trusts, consisting of about 22,000 miles. In the appendix are the names, &c, of the trusts not exceeding ten miles, twenty miles, and thirty miles, as well as those exceeding thirty miles, together with the expenses of the repairs of the roads, and the management of each such trust for the year 1838, and the

number of gates and side-bars upon each. The number of toll-gates and side-bars are about 7,796.”

In 1840, if there were approximately 22,000 miles of road and roughly 7,800 toll-gates, averaging out to approximately one toll-gate for every 2.8 miles. From this evidence, it is clear that one toll-gate represented a large portion of road.

Thus, the case of the prosecutors against the people who would tack on extra cattle after passing through a toll-gate had a logical argument that would hold in the court, which it did. Evan Powell was not the only wagoner to be prosecuted for tacking on extra animals after passing a toll-gate. This practice was extremely common in south Wales. There were countless mentions in newspapers such as The Monmouthshire Merlin about these cases. Another such example involves a man named Philip Watkins. The newspaper states that “Philip Watkins was charged by John Collard, the toll-collector of the new Hereford-road Gate, with passing through the turnpike, on the 7th of February, with a cart and two horses, and when at some small distance, attaching two extra horses, thereby evading the payment of toll for the same - convicted in the penalty of 5s, and 17s costs.” Numerous offenses such as this occurred, all with convictions by the judge for the convicted to pay a monetary penalty, in order that the toll-gate and turnpike trust might make up the money it would have made if the convicted had passed through the toll-gate with all his animals.

While the charging of fines to people who tacked on extra horses and cattle after passing a toll gate may seem completely justified after looking at the evidence regarding how one gate of a turnpike trust might apply to three miles of land, the commoners of the time did not see it this

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way. They saw the gates as mere hindrances on a road that should be public. The connection between gate and the stretch of road did not play a great factor for the people of the time. They saw the gate as an obstruction on a road that they had used without tolls for many years beforehand.

Thus, with the numerous recent arrests and fines for common people crossing tollgates then tacking on extra horses afterwards, the dislike of tollgates would continue to increase. Practices such as this were extremely common between the two riot outbreaks. While one would suspect that such events would have been common from the moment tollgates and booths became common throughout south Wales, this was not the case. Examination of Welsh newspapers (those available today) shows that fines and convictions of wagoners and other men for tacking on extra horses, at least those made public, did not become common until after the first riots of 1839.92 Between 1835 and 1839, not a single source could be found regarding wagoners being fined for tacking on extra animals. However, numerous cases can be found between 1839 and 1843.

Another aspect that would ultimately lead to the return of the Rebecca Riots was the return of depression throughout Carmarthenshire, especially in 1842. Even though there were periods of economic boom in the years between the riots, these periods were taking part during a much larger period of depression. The main amenity affected in this depression was corn. James Rogers, a corn dealer from the village of St. Clears in Carmarthenshire, which is approximately 16 miles from Efailwen, at the Carmarthenshire-Pembrokshire border, discusses this severe depression that affected not only Carmarthenshire, but almost all of south Wales.

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92 Various Sources on Welsh Newspapers Online. Close review of newspaper articles before and after the year of 1839.
Writing in 1844, James Rogers notes that, while the depression due to weather and lack of crop seemed like a detriment recent to the time, it had actually been building up for over two decades:

In the year 1840, which was a very wet summer, nearly all the farmers of the Principality had to purchase corn, either for seed of bread, and, from the general poverty of the farmers, the labouring population as well as the trading community felt the effects of this visitation of providence severely… The capital of the farmer for the last few years has materially diminished in value, while the rates, taxes, tithes, county stock and even rents have been increased. High rents, heavy taxation, want of trade and the difficulty of obtaining by hard labour the amount necessary to meet the demands laid upon the farmer have been causes mainly instrumental in bringing about the present state of things…

Clearly, the economic situation of the common Welshman was not pleasant in 1840, and had not been for a number of years. Despite times of prosperity, the over-all depression would continue and in the two years to come, increasing in 1842, months before the riots returned. This, along with other factors discussed and to be discussed, was a significant cause for the return of the Rebecca Riots.

One can imagine how continuing and worsening depression would incite the common farmer and trader to fight back. They were already scrounging for money. Their farming seasons, and thus the amount of products they could trade, had been dismal for the past three years. The causes leading to the return of the Rebecca Riots were not all related to toll gates and crops, however. There had been general civil unrest throughout Wales for the entire year of 1842, until the riots returned in December of that year. Regarding this, David Williams states that

“the summer of that year there had been constant unrest in the industrial areas of the Midlands and the North. A cursory glance at the Home Office papers shows how great frequently the military were called upon and how great was the demand for the services of the metropolitan police. Even in far-away West Wales, The Welshman carried second

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editions with ‘Latest News from the Disturbed Districts’ which lost nothing in the telling.”

While none of this violence throughout the spring and summer of 1842 included the destruction of tollgates, it was clear that the farmers and poorer population of Wales were growing restless with the poor economic conditions and, ironically, the lower prices at which they could sell their wares due to that year’s harvest, which was better than the years before.

This violence in 1842 extended until the months just prior to the return of the Rebecca Riots. The civil disturbances changed from simple disobedience and unrest to actions such as workers’ riots. David Williams further states that in “August there were strikes at Cyfarthfa in a futile attempt to resist lower wages, and both infantry and cavalry were brought into the coalfield. In the countryside the summer was a glorious one, and the harvest much improved, but, ironically, the lowering of demand from the industrial areas still further depressed the prices of agricultural products.” Along with these occurrences, there was a revival of Chartism throughout south Wales. While Chartism never took hold in Wales as it did in England, this revival was a true nuisance for the authorities and aristocratic society of south and west Wales.

While Chartism was more prevalent in England, it had an influence in the south Wales valleys. The Cambrian notes a number of Welshmen were arrested for Chartist riots during 1842, one being Thomas Rees. Whether this was the Thomas Rees who was the leader of the first Rebecca Riots at Efail-wen remains unknown. What is known, however, is that Chartism was making a revival in Wales from the beginning of 1842, and it was disturbing enough for the law

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94 Williams, The Rebecca Riots, 189 - 190.
95 Williams, 190.
enforcement of south Wales to send several those involved in the protests to the various jails throughout Wales and even England.

Ultimately, the violence throughout south Wales in 1842, especially around July and August, was a strong precursor for the violence that would erupt with the return of the Rebecca Riots later that year. These destructive events occurred even as late as October, merely a month before the event that would bring about the return of the riots. David Williams notes that the “countryman’s secret weapon on a summer’s night is fire, and in October the corn stacks of some of the squires of south Cardiganshire were burnt.”97 David Williams concludes that these fires were without question the work of tenant farmers.

While the cases mentioned over the previous pages offers many causes for the common Welshman’s continued “righteous anger” against tollgates, tollbooths, turnpike trusts, and the members thereof, these were merely the beginning steps - one might say baby steps - leading to the large jump which would incur critical mass and cause the daughters of Rebecca to appear again. This “large jump” which would bring back Rebecca and the riots so closely associated with her name was the building of another tollgate and booth on the “Main Trust” - a stretch of road that went across most of Carmarthenshire, and into Pembrokeshire, which was managed by the Turnpike Trust of the same name. This trust was controlled by Thomas Bullin, the man who influenced the erection of the original gates which were destroyed at Efail-wen and Maes-gwyn.

Pat Molloy discusses the intricacies of the situation, including why it was such a large disturbance to the Welshmen of Carmarthenshire and Pembrokeshire, stating,

[i]n the closing weeks of 1842, after more than three years without a single attack on a Welsh toll gate, Thomas Bullin did it again. This time it was on the Main Trust, whose turnpike roads ran across fifty miles of Carmarthenshire, from its border with Breconshire in the east and into Pembrokeshire in the west, on the

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97 Williams, The Rebecca Riots, 190.
route towards Milford Haven and the ships for Ireland and the Americas. It had occurred to him that the hundreds of people traveling back and forth through the bottleneck of St. Clears, between Carmarthen and the many fairs and markets of the west, were making detours over the adjoining Whitland Trust roads, to avoid toll gates on several miles of the Main Trust. Putting one at a strategic spot just a couple of hundred yards to the east of St. Clears cross-roads would catch everyone.98

Thomas Bullin knew exactly what he was doing when he erected this gate. This gate was not erected to fund the upkeep of the road. It was erected simply for profit. Bullin did not like that so many people were evading large stretches of his toll roads, and he was going to put an end to this loss of profit.

This extra toll gate, ensuring that anyone who wanted to travel through Carmarthenshire to the Welsh coast in Pembrokeshire would have to pay a hefty toll, was the breaking point for the commoners in Wales. As previously stated, South Wales had been experiencing a severe depression for the past few years, one that had been building for two decades or more. The current tolls they were paying were harmful enough on their already meager profits, but this new toll gate brought a new fee that affected too many Welshmen to be ignored. This incited Rebecca to appear once more, for the first time in three years.

Before the return of the Rebecca Riots can be discussed, however, a question must be considered: were the riots that occurred in 1842 and 1843 the same riots that occurred in 1839? In other words, did the riots really return? Many times, similar events will occur with similar names, but they are not considered to be the same event. In order for the reasons for the hiatus to be logical, it must be proven that the riots which occurred throughout 1842 and 1843 were the same riots which occurred in 1839.

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98 Molloy, *And They Blessed Rebecca*, 36.
Historians of the Rebecca Riots all issue a resounding “Yes!” regarding this question. Williams, Molloy, Davies, Evans, and the others all state without question that the riots of 1842 were a continuation, not new events. Regarding the renewed riots, David Williams states that “It is clear that they had the Efail-wen ‘precedent’ in mind, for the name Rebecca was immediately brought into use.” Evidence of this is seen in many of the newspapers of the time. While the name “Rebecca” was not applied to the rioters in the initial report of the attack at St. Clears, it was clear she had returned. Then, by January of 1843, Rebecca was everywhere.

Thus, the Rebecca Riots began again, and this time they returned with a vengeance. It was less than half a day after the gate at St. Clears near Mermaid Tavern - dubbed the “Mermaid Gate” - was erected, that it was demolished by a large group of rioters, most of them tenant farmers. Given notice of the new gate, the rioters had a long time to plan when and how they were going to destroy it. The gate was opened in the middle of the day on 18 November 1842, and it was destroyed that night. Clearly, this new gate was considered a great hindrance and injustice, especially given the aforementioned economic conditions.

It cannot be known if the Rebecca Riots would have returned had it not been for the gate that Thomas Bullin built near the Mermaid Tavern at St. Cleans. It can be said, however, that the building of the Mermaid Gate set off a chain reaction that possibly not even the original rioters were expecting. As with the gate at Efail-wen, the Mermaid Gate was re-erected soon after it was destroyed, and as with the Efail-wen gate, it was destroyed again.

However, it was not only the Mermaid Gate that caused the riots to return. The Pwlltrap Gate, less than a mile from the Mermaid Gate, was an important factor in why the Mermaid Gate

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99 Williams, The Rebecca Riots, 191.
100 Williams, The Rebecca Riots, 190.
was so hated. Due to two gates, owned by different trusts, being so close together, it was not only the toll at the Mermaid Gate that was troublesome to the commoners of southwest Wales, but the fact that two tolls would have to be paid within one mile. David Williams states that “The Whitland Trust had its gate at Pwll-trap, to the west of the village, and travellers coming from Haverfordwest and Narberth would have had to pay twice, at Pwll-trap and the Mermaid, in less than a mile, if the new gate had been left standing. So, on the same night, the rioters destroyed Pwll-trap as well.”

Williams further notes that the similarity to the reasons behind and eventual actions regarding the destruction of the gates of Efail-wen and Maes-gwyn were no coincidence, and the name ‘Rebecca’ immediately came into use following this.

Approximately a week after this event, the Trusts held Quarter Sessions to determine how to react to the return of rioting. The Magistrates of both the Main and Whitland Trusts released a statement regarding these attacks. It states,

Whereas some evil disposed persons, unlawfully assembled at or near the village of St. Clears, have broken down and carried away the Llanfihangel (Mermaid) and Pwlltrap Turnpike Gates, and also the Bar at the Tave Bridge, the same having been legally erected. We, the undersigned Magistrates at an adjourned Quarter Sessions of the Peace, held this day at the Town Hall, Carmarthen, do hereby give notice that upon the gates again being put up by the Trusts, we are determined to support the Collectors in exacting lawful Tolls, and if complaint be brought before us that such Collectors have been molested or any injury offered to the Gates, the Offenders on conviction shall be punished to the utmost rigour of the law. And we do hereby offer a reward of £30, in addition to the sum of £20 offered by the Main Trust to anyone who will give such information as shall lead to the conviction of the parties so offending, or of those or of those who have already broken down and carried away either of the said Gates or Bars.

This Quarter Sessions could be seen as the action that sparked the true return of the Rebecca Riots - the riots that would last for the next year. If the Trusts had simply left the two destroyed

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101 Williams, 191.
gates as they were, the rioters may not have returned. It can be surmised that they might have disappeared as the rioters did who destroyed the gates at Efail-wen and Maes-gwyn. Instead, the Trusts promised to re-erect the gates, and once again promised to convict any rioter who was discovered. This time, they even offered a hefty reward for anyone who would supply information that brought the rioters to justice.

It did not take long after this information was released for the rioters to respond, and their response included the actions that would greatly inspire the continuous destructions of gates thereafter. On the evening of the same day on which the Trusts’ statement was released, the rioters struck again. The riots returned in full force after the first ones at the Mermaid Gate and Pwll-trap. Throughout December 1842 and until approximately September of 1843, there were countless riots all throughout south Wales, however they remained strongest in the counties in which they began - Carmarthenshire and Pembrokeshire.

Nearly a month later, Rebecca and her children posted a notice regarding the gate at St. Clears. In the note, Becca states that what she and her daughters have done so far has been in the name of justice and fairness. Then, she threatens to act again for as long as the gates throughout rural and agrarian Wales remain. She states that the Trusts were “only picking poor labours and farmers pockets, and you [can] depend that all the Gates that are on these small roads shall be destroyed”\textsuperscript{103}. Furthermore, Rebecca states that “there are others which as marked with Becca, but they shall not be named now but in case they will not obey to this notice she shall call about them in a short time.”\textsuperscript{104} None of the tollgates or booths that so negatively affected the farmers


\textsuperscript{104} Ibid.
and laborers of southwest Wales were taken down, and new tollgates and booths continued to be built, so Rebecca came through on her promise.

By January of 1843, there had already been dozens of riots throughout south Wales. Regarding the outbreak of rioting, The Welshman notes that the rioters would assemble nightly for the purpose of destroying the turnpike gates on the various lines of road in the neighbourhood of St. Clears. These ruffians are headed by a very tall man, dressed for disguise as a female, who goes by the name of Rebecca, and as many of his associates are likewise dressed as females, the whole gang have been christened Rebecca and her daughters. These men are nearly all of them ably mounted, and are the terror of the neighbouring country. The Pwlltrap gate has been destroyed a great number of times, and as frequently replaced by the Trustees of the road, but immediately after its re-erection, the fellows have invariably assembled in greater force than before, and riding up to the gate, the following interesting colloquy has taken place. The leader of the mob addressing the others in Welsh, says, "My children, this gate has no business here, has it?" To which her children reply that it has not; the mother again asks what is to be done with it, when the children reply that it should be levelled with the ground. They then immediately break it down and disperse in different directions.  

Thus, the break in the riots that had lasted for over three years had truly ended, although the riots that returned were not exactly the same as the riots of 1839. The riots of 1839 were by one group of people who were especially frustrated with two gates. When those two gates were destroyed, they ended their attacks. While the riots that began in 1842 started in the same fashion - a group of workers who were especially frustrated with the Mermaid Gate - it did not end with the destruction of the gate as did the first riots. This riot began a chain reaction.

While it can be said that riots of 1839 were protests, mostly nonviolent in regards to people, the riots that returned have often been characterized as "war". They were extremely violent. No longer were they against simply toll gates, but against anyone involved in the system, and anyone who was considered to be a sympathizer to turnpike trustees and the rich. The riots

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became so violent that large groups of military men were sent to certain parts of southwest Wales where the attacks had occurred most.\textsuperscript{106} Catrin Stevens notes that “Between the autumns of 1842 and 1843 the Rebeccaites waged guerrilla warfare throughout the south-west… The attacks could become violent. The toll-keeper’s wife at New Inn, Cardiganshire was blinded and Sarah Williams was murdered at Hendy, Pontarddulais…”\textsuperscript{107} Stevens mentions other similar cases where homes of tithe agents were attacked, and the home of one priest was burned to the ground in a similar fashion to the toll gates and booths.

While the attacks of the revitalized Rebecca were much more violent, their focus was still mainly on tollgates and booths. These were without a doubt the same types of people who took part in the first riots. The three-year hiatus had not quelled their dislike for tollgates or turnpike trusts at all. However, this time, they decided to attack numerous tollgates all throughout Wales. The riots that began as an outrage over one gate - Efail-wen - and returned due to outrage over another - the Mermaid Gate - had truly taken their hold throughout all of Wales.

Ultimately, the returned riots lasted for almost a year. They were continuous throughout the winter, spring, and summer of 1843. Apart from one or two isolated incidents in 1844,\textsuperscript{108} no more tollgates or tollbooths were destroyed after the winter of 1843, and the turnpike system ultimately ended a number of years later. Thus, while Rebecca returned after her first disappearance of 1839, Rebecca was not to return again.

\textsuperscript{107} Stevens, Terfysg Beca, 15 -16.
Chapter 5

Conclusion

In conclusion, numerous factors were involved in why the Rebecca Riots ended in 1839, stayed dormant for over three years, then began again in 1842. As shown, it could not be narrowed down to two or three events. The reasons for the hiatus, just like the reasons for the riots themselves, needed a state of critical mass to take place. Over all, the reasons for the hiatus are divided up into three categories: the reasons why the first riots of 1839 stopped, the reasons why the riots did not begin again at any time between July 1839 and November 1842, and the reasons why the riots ultimately began again in November 1842. Each group of reasons for each category required a number of coinciding events which combined to cause the outbreak of riots, or lack thereof.

Through various primary and secondary sources, it was shown that the sudden stop of the first riots was due to three main factors. The first was the lack of motive. When the rioters attacked the tollbooth and gate at Yr Efail-wen, they were attacking that particular gate. That gate had been placed at a location that was particularly troublesome to the farmers and merchants who had to travel many miles to sell their wares. Its location near the border of Pembrokeshire and Carmarthenshire was on an important road used to carry produce, especially limes, throughout southwest Wales.

The exception to this theory, as stated, was the destruction of the gate at Maes-gwyn. It had not gathered as much attention, nor created as much of a protest, as did the new gate at Efailwen. However, the gate at Maes-gwyn was very close to the gate at Efail-wen - no more than ten miles apart. Thus, it was on a road that would have been used as a secondary road for
carting produce and other products. With the two gates so close to each other, bringing products in and out of Carmarthenshire and Pembrokeshire was very costly and troublesome. The destruction of the gate at Maes-gwyn was another attempt at making travel between the two counties less costly. Thus, once the two gates were destroyed, and not rebuilt by the Turnpike Trusts, the rioters had no more quarrel. Their task had been accomplished.

As stated, the second reason for the riots not continuing immediately after the first riots was demographics. Censuses showed that, while cities like Cardiff and Swansea had large and rising populations, the majority of Wales was sparsely populated, with most people inhabiting small towns or farmland. Along with this sparse population came the lack of communication. Given that railroads did not even make it to Cardiff until 1841, and telegraphs did not become a common form of communication until more than a decade later, the ability for those involved in the first riots to communicate on a large scale with other villages would have been difficult. Hence, the first riots stayed in a small area of approximately twelve miles.

The third reason for the riots not continuing immediately was the threat of punishment. It had been shown through events such as the Merthyr Rising of 1831, and others, that the punishment for disobeying the law, while usually ending in the convicted being sent to a gaol for a period of time, could be as severe as deportation to the penal colony on Australia. The threat of punishment relates in some ways to the task being accomplished. Since the initial objective they intended to complete was completed, why should the Rebecca-ites further risk being sent to gaol or Australia by attacking toll gates which they had no vendetta against?

Regarding the reasons for why the riots did not restart in any of the three years between the original riots and their ultimate return, the first reason was the spontaneity of the original riots. The original riots were not meant to continue on uncontrollably. In fact, had the gate at
Efailwen not been re-erected after its first destruction, the original riots might have been only one “riot”. Taking into account all of the newspaper articles and the original two notes from Rebecca in 1839, the only one of the four original riots to be planned was the second destroying of the gate at Efailwen. However, the notice specifically stated that the meeting was regarding the Efailwen gate. Given that there was no plan for riots past the ones at Efailwen in 1839, the likeliness of the riots beginning again in the months and years shortly after was slim.

The second reason that the riots did not begin again in the three years of hiatus was related to the tollgates themselves. The cause of both the first and second waves of rioting began with the erection of a tollbooth and gate which was considered particularly bothersome for farmers and commoners. As shown, the riots did not begin as a protest against tollgates, but against one tollgate. Many more tollgates existed which were not destroyed by the rioters. During the years of hiatus, no tollgates were erected that gave the commoners enough motivation to start the riots anew.

The final reason that the riots did not return in the three years is related to desire and economics. There was a slight increase in prosperity within the years between the two outbreaks. This provided less incentive to engage in an attack as destructive and dangerous as rioting. This is demonstrated throughout the years in the peaceful ways that the Welsh protested the gates, through various means. The first involved Welshmen gathering to protest in words only. They would demand lower tolls and more rights outside various buildings related to turnpike trusts and the government. However, they did not engage in any violent actions.

Regarding why the riots returned when they did, it was shown that the first reason was related to the decrease in the mild economic prosperity that had occurred in 1840 and 1841. Conditions in 1842 had returned to the way they were before the original riots. This would give
much more incentive for a poor farmer to resort to destructive methods to send his message. Given that the number of toll roads did not decrease at all, the lack of prosperity would bring the farmers back exactly to where they were three years prior.

The second reason the riots returned when they did was because of the upsurge of Chartist violence throughout south Wales. In the summer and fall of 1842, there were a number of attacks related to the Chartist movements that lead to a number of arrests, including that of Thomas Rees, who may have been the same Thomas Rees who took part in the first Rebecca Riots of 1839. These episodes of violence provided a catalyst which led to the eventual return of the Rebecca Riots that summer.

Finally, as discussed, the final reason the riots returned in November 1842 was the erection of the new “Mermaid Gate” in St. Clears. This gate was in a strategic point for the Turnpike Trusts, just like the gate at Efailwen was 3 years prior. This strategic location was extremely hindering to farmers and produce sellers on their daily journeys carting lime, meat, and animals to local town for selling. Given the recent economic downturn and the Chartist violence throughout south Wales, it can easily be understood why a gate at this location would cause another state of critical mass, inciting the angry farmers and commoners to begin the riots anew.

With all this in mind, one must ask, how did the three-year gap affect the Rebecca Riots themselves? The lack of riots for three years could have played a significant role in the success or lack thereof of the future riots of 1842 and 1843. Were the years of silence detrimental to the riots? Did they have some kind of positive influence on them? Or perhaps the gap played no influential role whatsoever?
It is difficult to determine if the riots would have been more or less successful had they continued immediately from the four original riots of summer 1839. However, given the information discussed regarding the spread of news and events, it could be surmised that the riots would not have grown at the speed that they did when they returned. Upon the riots return, they went from being irregular and interspersed to being frequent and continuous within a period of fewer than two months. They began in November of 1842, and by January of 1843, they were occurring all throughout south Wales, especially southwest Wales.

By this time, the events of the original riots were old news. In the three years of silence, the news of the riots at Efail-wen and Maes-gwyn had time to spread throughout all of Wales, especially throughout the south. This allowed for more people who were angry with the toll roads and the uncaring mentality of the wealthy and upper class to join Rebecca and her daughters in the riots. So, when the riots began again at the Mermaid Gate at St. Clears, more people were involved, and more people knew who the rioters were and what their history and ultimate goal was.

Had there not been a break between the riots, the riots might have stayed in the Carmarthenshire-Pembrokeshire region for quite some time before they expanded. Then, by the time they had expanded to any significant amount, they could have run their course, ending without the large influence the returned riots had. However, it could have also worked the opposite way. They could have continued much longer, and continually grown stronger as the riots increased. While a case such as this can be made, it ultimately cannot be known for certain how the lack of a break would have affected the riots in general. There is not enough evidence to make a viable case for either side - merely supposition and possibilities.
Ultimately, the riots played a significant role in Welsh history, inspiring many later events, people, literature, and even music. However, as noted throughout, the three-year gap is often skipped over in books and discussions; but, as shown, there were many events in those three years that affected the end of the first riots and their return, and the riots themselves would not have been the same without the hiatus. The numerous causes for the hiatus and the hiatus itself ultimately played an important role in the riots themselves.
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