



BOOK REVIEW

Daryl Leeworthy. *Causes in Common: Welsh Women and the Struggle for Social Democracy*

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In this slim volume, Daryl Leeworthy sets out to position working-class Welsh women in the history of social and political activism in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Wales. This is historical territory which, traditionally, has been dominated by men. Where women have figured, attention has fallen on members of the social elite and of the wives of prominent political figures: often women who came from traditions of Liberal politics. Instead, Leeworthy's interest is in the labor movement and, in particular, in the realms of local government and local communities, which he sees as the key domain of his subjects.

Organized chronologically and taking in a turbulent century-and-a-half of social and political change, from chartism in the 1830s to devolution in the 1990s, the content is necessarily selective. Leeworthy adopts a semi-biographical approach, identifying and highlighting the activities of specific working-class women who were active participants in the campaigns and causes that he sees as signifying each era. He starts, not with the well-known late Victorian and Edwardian campaigns for women's suffrage, but with the anti-slavery, anti-Corn Law, and chartist movements that engaged women activists decades earlier. In chapters 2 and 3 he examines the contribution of women to the labor movement up to 1928 and in chapter 4 he looks at the emergence of women on the radical left through their participation in the Communist movement

In doing so, Leeworthy shines a spotlight on women like Grace Scholefield, who became the south Wales regional organizer for the Women's Labour League in 1916, and Minnie Pallister who became regional organizer of the South Wales and Monmouthshire ILP Federation in the same year. He also highlights the importance of looking at sub-parliamentary level politics to gain a full picture of the extent to which women were engaged in decision-making and agenda-setting in their communities and regions. In chapter 5, for example, he points to the work of Lily Jones as chair of Monmouthshire County Council in the mid-1960s, and to Elvira Gwenllian Payne, the first black woman to be elected a councilor in Wales, for the Vale of Glamorgan Borough Council in 1979.

Yet, as Leeworthy acknowledges, formal party politics in Wales remained overwhelmingly male dominated into the last quarter of the twentieth century. It was in the less rigid environment of the women's liberation movement, explored in chapter 6, that many Welsh women felt more empowered to protest and campaign on a variety of issues ranging from reproductive rights to domestic violence, equal pay, housing, education, and social services. For lesbian and trans women too, Leeworthy argues, women's liberation groups provided a platform for highlighting inequalities and sometimes provided momentum for the establishment of separate organizations like the North Wales Lesbian Group, founded c. 1976 in Bangor.

By the 1990s the conferences, campaign group meetings, protests, and newsletters produced by the diverse range of organizations in Wales, founded under the loose umbrella of the women's liberation movement, had begun to subside. To continue his story to the end of the twentieth century, Leeworthy turns his attention in the concluding chapter to the educational sphere, charting the rise of women's history and gender studies in Wales in the 1980s and 1990s. He sees this, in part, as an attempt to capture the memory of women's organizations as they disbanded, but this shift in emphasis toward women's educational initiatives does come as something of a surprise in a book which is otherwise focused more on national and local politics. Notably, the concluding chapter offers only a brief commentary on how women fared in the structures of devolved government established in Wales after the 1997 devolution referendum, while more space is devoted to the work of women historians and other educators.

Causes in Common contains a useful "Select Bibliography" of primary and secondary source material to guide readers keen to embark on further research. A biographical appendix featuring the key women activists mentioned in each chapter might also have been a useful addition. That said, Leeworthy does a painstaking job of teasing out some of the elusive details of the activities, networks, and campaigns of previously unknown women, through his close reading of a range of archival, audio, and printed sources.

This is not a book that dwells at length on definitions or academic debates. The "Welsh Women" of the title were diverse in their views, in their social backgrounds, and in their approaches to the struggle for social democracy. Many of them came from outside Wales, often bringing with them political interests nurtured elsewhere, and finding in Welsh industrial towns opportunities to organize, campaign, and proselytize about the labor movement and women's place in it. They ranged from the daughters and wives of miners or other industrial workers, who felt at home in the traditional structures of the labor movement; to women from minority ethnic groups, single mothers, and gay women who did not. In its title and its weaving together of over 150 years of women's activism in Wales, the implication of the book is that there was a sense of common cause shared by these women, though Leeworthy does not deal with this question head on.

While in one sense this is regrettable, on another level it leaves readers free to focus on the key strength of the book: Leeworthy's re-telling of an important era in modern Welsh history, through the actions of women activists and campaigners, instead of via a *great men* narrative. In doing so it throws new names into the historical spotlight and has new insights to offer a wide constituency of readers. Even for those already familiar with the aspects of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Welsh history, it offers a fresh perspective and has something new to say.