

WILLIAM EVANS: A Proponent of Emigration

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ONE can thumb the biographical dictionaries ranged round the walls of any university library and never find the name of William Evans (1806-1887). Nor can his name be found in any of the histories of emigration. Yet, in the Atlantean perspective of our time, his ideas and work acquire a new significance and relevance, and the strange drama of his life a new meaning.

He was a Welshman, born in Swansea, who imbibed the radical social doctrines of Robert Owen. He migrated to Staffordshire: home of the English pottery industry where turners, handlers, hollow-ware-pressers, flat-pressers, oven-men, slip-makers, throwers, lookers-to-ware, packers, printers, gilders, and painters—all the myriad crafts of an industry which was then being mechanised, were huddling together for protection into a united trade union which could shelter them against the hardships caused by the new machines. The fiery evangel of the Celtic Evans illuminated the cause of their own misery, which was largely due to their displacement in the pottery economy by machines. One of these machines, 'the rolling monster', displaced men by the score as a printer of designs: and it was followed by another called 'the scourge' because it stamped out plates and, with them, the livelihood of men.

Evans arrived, and set up a newsagent's shop in Shelton. On his shelves he stocked the standard works on which they could feed their grievances: Mary Wollstonecraft, Rousseau, Mackintosh, Channing and Emerson. In 1843, he began to issue his own newspaper *The Potters' Examiner and Workman's Advocate*.

Now, the potters had tried many panaceas. In the twenties they founded a pottery works of their own, but with indifferent success. Later they listened, hungrily but hopelessly, as apostles of "home colonisation" stumped the towns of Stoke, Langton, Fenton, Hanley, Burslem, Tunstall and Shelton. But Evans was different; he did what the others could or would not do, and urged them to fly from it all. On 14 January 1844, he published in his newspaper some letters from Six Mile Prairie, Illinois, which showed where his thoughts were leading; and on 3 February followed this up by suggesting that the potters should

purchase land in America. He dilated on the advantages of living in America—tobacco grew there in abundance, together with the clay for making the pipes in which to smoke it. Land there was sixty pence an acre freehold, as compared to sixty pounds leasehold at home. Even the pots, he urged, wore as good a glaze, and were in greater demand. On 2 March 1844, Evans, published a searing article in the *Potters' Examiner*, which revealed his scheme:

“England has had her day,” he wrote, “her sun is setting. . . How necessary then is it for us to awake from our lethargy, and, like intelligent men, to calmly consider the best means of escape. As a body of operatives, we stand unequalled for trades power and pecuniary means throughout the whole British public. . . The United States of America must and will become the most powerful nation of the globe. . . the great political leviathan that shall ultimately revolutionise the world.”

Touching the strong Old Testament fed consciences of his nonconformist readers, he quoted *Isaiah* 35:1-2 with particular reference to the western states of America:

“The wilderness, and the solitary place, shall be glad for them; and the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose. It shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice even with joy and singing, the excellency of Carmel and Sharon; they shall see the glory of the Lord, and the excellency of our God.”

He opened his columns to the testimonies of those who had gone over, especially to George Flower, whose Illinois community at New Albion he wished to imitate. To persuade those who did not enthuse over his plan, and to strengthen the waverers, he reported every new case of a machine displacing human labour,—as, for instance, in the issue of 6 April 1844:

“One of these machines with the assistance of two women or boys of fourteen years of age, will do as much work as six middling workmen. One woman for about *two shillings* will make 60 dozen cups, for which we should receive at most places, from fifteen to seventeen shillings”.

For cautious, practical souls, Evans' arguments were couched in hard economic terms. The growth of surplus labour as a result of machines, he re-iterated, was “the Pandora Box of industry from which flow all the evils that afflict the sons of toil”. The only logical remedy, therefore, was to emigrate and so create a scarcity of labour.

So great was Evans' enthusiasm, that the newly formed Trades Union of Operative Potters diverted their financial resources to establish a Joint Stock Emigration Company. To supplement these funds, Evans urged that since there were 7,000 operative potters in the trade, it should be easy to persuade 5,000 of them to take out an individual one pound share, giving

the Joint Stock Emigration Company a working capital of £5,000. This could be raised, he went on, by each shareholder paying a shilling per week. To encourage them he dangled a special report from David Dale Owen on the mineral wealth of Illinois before their eyes. The possibilities of a twelve thousand acre settlement in the sun appeared most attractive as Evans painted it. To life as his audience lived it in Staffordshire: "whirling dust and rattling engines" were the normal concomitants of a potter's sixteen hour day. Evans expanded the theme of "The Land! The Land!! The Land!!!" in stirring words: in Staffordshire all they could hope to see was "infancy in rags, youth in decrepitude, manhood in graves, with the ever present prospect haunting the imagination like some frightful dream". But if they flew to the "beautiful prairies of the West, to most liberal institutions of present man, to the untaxed plains, rivers and lakes of a free country" they would leave for ever such unpleasant scenes "to pursue an unfettered life of happiness and content amid the varied scenes of nature and the handi-works of God."

"Fly to the beautiful prairies," he urged them, "fly to the freedom of nature, to the most liberal institutions of present man, to the untaxed plains, rivers and lakes of a free country . . . abandon the loom for the spade, the factory for the farm".

(II)

His scheme caught on. The potters were paying a matter of some sixty or seventy pounds a week in unemployment benefits. This, as Evans pointed out "might be dispensed with by the removal of its claimants to happy homes in the western world. . . where all the powers in their existence will be called into active operation". Letters were approved to George Flower and John Tyler on the potters' behalf, and Evans busied himself with reprinting Flower's *Errors of Emigrants*, Cleave's *Immigrant's Handbook*, and Mann's *Emigrants Complete Guide to the U. S. A.* On 25 August 1844, Evans was still plugging the urgency of the £5,000 capital. He asked intending shareholders to contribute sixpence a week for forty weeks, and urged each branch committee in the pottery towns to keep a book of all those members of the craft who had not paid, and to persuade them to do so. If local branch persuasion could not work, he urged them to send the names of unwilling members to the central committee who would "appoint a special deputation to wait upon those parties to explain to such unwilling members. . .

the objects of our society". He concluded: "Let your motto be *Five Thousand Shares*".

George Flower replied with a letter dated 6 August 1844 which Evans printed on 5 October. In it, Flower suggested that two or three persons be sent as a committee, and offered "we will here digest, or rather correct, the details of the plan". He warned the committee not "to be in a hurry, but to take time". By 12 October, all the potters' lodges voted their confidence in Evans, whose success had brought down upon his head the attacks of the *North Staffordshire Mercury*.

For the next twelve months, the main task was to collect the subscriptions, and to appoint the estate committee who were to travel out to the United States of America and survey the land. In public houses all over Staffordshire, regular meetings were held, with the secretaries collecting the sixpences of intending subscribers.

Finally, by early 1846, Thomas Twiggs left Staffordshire with two companions to purchase the land. Their plan was to buy as much as their capital would allow, and split it into twenty acre tracts. Immigrants were to be chosen by ballot when subscriptions reached each successive fifty pound level. They would arrive to find a cabin built for them, five acres of land broken and sowed with wheat and corn, and the other fifteen awaiting cultivation. To repay the Emigration Society they would pay five pounds a year for ten years, plus ten pounds as an expenses fee. These twenty acre allotments were to alternate across the tract purchased by the Emigration Society, allowing the intervening spaces to be enclosed in much the same way as the vacant squares on a crossword are formed by the completion of the pattern. William Twiggs did his best. He and his companions rode out to Illinois, then on to Wisconsin, where they purchased the land, and in two years had settled 134 individuals on 1,600 acres.

But the five thousand pounds was not forthcoming quickly enough. Another three thousand remained to be raised and, what made matters worse, the former unity of the various pottery workers now began to be seriously threatened. The hollow-ware-pressers took a strong deviationist line, and set up a rival organisation of their own. To counteract this, William Evans decided to broaden the basis of the Emigration Society by appealing to the distressed working men of other crafts and towns. With William Coates, he stumped parts of Lancashire appealing for further funds, claiming that "emi-

gration had stopped persecution of the working man in Staffordshire, and prevented the reduction of wages". He also changed both the title and place of publication of his paper. From being the *Potters' Examiner and Workman's Advocate* published at Burslem, it now became the *Potters' Examiner and Emigrants' Advocate* published at Liverpool. But though he found many sympathetic hearers, and was well reported in the papers, Evans could not control new developments in Wisconsin. There, the township of Pottersville was undergoing a kind of constitutional crisis, due to the despatch of an Estates Committee to secure equitable allotment of the lands which Twiggs and his two associates had purchased. Naturally enough, Twiggs regarded them as unnecessary, and wrote bitterly: "I am sorry to say that the generality of them are not the wise men of the East, but the foolish men of the West, and whatever unity there might have been amongst them prior to their leaving home, I can assure you that there has been very little since they came here". This discord amongst such a community was doubly unfortunate, since it impeded the process of legalising the potters' possession of the land they had bought (already a very difficult process), in addition to lowering the credit which such pioneer communities must obtain if they were to purchase the very elementary necessities of life.

(III)

Dissension in Wisconsin killed the project. The immigrants complained of the heat, the water, the Indians, and the sandy soil. Twiggs, who came home in 1849 a very sick man, complained that many of the immigrants cared for nothing but fishing and hunting and were not prepared to work. Yet Evans was not prepared to abandon the idea, and in January 1850 was speaking as far afield as Hull in Yorkshire, claiming that the new plot of land on the Fox River in Wisconsin would prove even more successful than the old one at Pottersville, and would sell at two hundred dollars an acre. But however enthusiastic he might be, and however much he might prime the financial carburetor, the mechanism in far away Wisconsin would not tick over. One James Buck wrote back to the radical *Manchester Examiner and Times* that on his way out in that year, he met "swarms" of emigrants returning from the settlement. The new land on Fox River he described as "a succession of dry sandy ridges, and between most of these a bog where the soil is as black and deep as any bog in Ireland. The sandy

ridges are covered with a stunted, poor timber, a sure indication of the properties of the soil". The end came with an indignation meeting held on 3 June 1850 at Fort Winnebago. A grand indictment of the project was prepared, incorporating charges of misrepresentation, corruption, and incompetence. By January 1851 the Emigration Society was dead.

The English historian of the Pottery industry, Harold Owen, finds nothing to praise in the scheme. For him it spelt the wreck of trade unionism in the potteries for the next fifty years, and diverted the potters from their task of securing the necessary social legislation to make emigration impossible. But such a view ignores the immense contribution made by such a movement as this to the general labour movement of the age. Certainly the potters had not achieved the success for which they had hoped, but they did not do so badly, since for the rest of the fifties the English labour movement, where organised, looked to America as the great escape hatch through which they might emerge to a world based on a more equitable principle of social justice. Nor should the demographic element of the experiment be forgotten. For the census of 1860 showed that no less than 76 families were settled in Columbia and Marquette Counties, most of them "prosperous farmers".

(IV)

The demographic aspect was not forgotten by Evans himself. For, as the Wisconsin project came to pieces in his hands, he turned to assist Sir Charles Adderley in the founding of the Canterbury settlement in New Zealand. That accomplished, he became the European lecturing agent for the Northern Pacific Railroad, in which capacity he helped to found the townships of Wadena and Hawley. In the eighteen eighties he was once more resurgent with a scheme to found Co-operative Colonies on the fertile prairie lands of Manitoba and the great North West of Canada on the route of the Canadian Pacific Railroad. He expanded on this theme in the *Co-operative News* and other journals under the nom-de-plume of Millway Vanes (his name anagrammatised), urging that these Canadian lands were "the most cheap and fertile in the whole world". But by then he was an old man who had passed his threescore years and ten, and his own words as a prophet were drowned by other more strident voices. Since he died on 14 March 1887 in his eighty-first year, no-one has seen fit to re-surrect his memory, or to probe the secrets of his extraordinary life.