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Welsh Americans: A History of Assimilation in the Coalfields

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In the final analysis, this is an interesting and informative read, a good blend of personal, local history set against a backdrop of serious conservation efforts at the state level.

Welsh Americans: A History of Assimilation in the Coalfields, by Ronald L. Lewis. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008. x, 395 pp. Illustrations, maps, tables, notes, bibliography, index. \$49.95 cloth.

Reviewer Ron Roberts is professor emeritus of sociology at the University of Northern Iowa. He is the author of *John L. Lewis: Hard Labor and Wild Justice* (1994) and editor of *Iowa's Ethnic Roots* (1993).

Ronald Lewis's *Welsh Americans* is the culmination of a lifetime's study of a people on the move to preserve or improve their ways of living. Lewis's earlier work has often focused on the struggles of Appalachian peoples to survive and to build lasting communities. This latest work by Lewis is a product of his training as a historian as well as his personal experience as the descendant of generations of Welsh miners.

The nineteenth-century Welsh miners who came to this country brought two contradictory skills and attitudes with them. They came largely from the south of Wales, where miners' lives were cheap and unions were a necessary weapon against starvation and unsafe conditions in the coal mines. They brought their unionism and radicalism with them to this country, but they also brought mining skills and knowledge to the American collieries, which gave many of them the ability to move into supervisory jobs on the side of management.

Lewis helps us untangle the miasma of ethnic and class struggles in turn-of-the-century coal country. He cites several conflicts between Irish and Welsh miners. Irish miners were willing to work for less than the Welsh, so mine bosses often used them to break miners' solidarity in strikes in Pennsylvania, Illinois, and Ohio. Lewis's carefully detailed portraits of such conflicts illuminate the contradictions and nuances of these struggles for self-interested justice. One cannot help but be moved by the Welsh miners' struggles with hunger and safety concerns in the mines.

Perhaps Lewis's most singular contribution is his integration of the biographies of Welsh immigrants with the larger demographic and economic forces impelling their actions. He includes various Welsh captains of the American coal industry as well as many Welshmen who moved from the labor force to the managerial side.

Unlike their rural brethren who created Welsh farming communities, Welsh coal miners did little to preserve their ancient language. They were far more likely to adapt the English of their coworkers as

soon as possible. Thus, the Welsh language, one of the oldest surviving native tongues of Europe, did not fare well in the mining villages of America. This was true even with the poetic and musical fêtes, the *eisteddfod*, that were promoted so vigorously from the 1870s to the early decades of the twentieth century.

Just as the early Welsh coal diggers represented the working class, their heroes of song and story came out of that class. John L. Lewis (1880–1969), the complex and sometimes heroic leader of the United Mine Workers of America, was lionized by most of his men (and often reviled by others). Yet the author's most fascinating story of a Welsh working-class hero is that of Mary Williams Thomas. Born in one of the many mining villages of the south Wales valleys in 1887, she married at age 16 and had two children by her husband, Thomas, before he deserted her and went to work in the coal mines in the western United States. When she went in search of him, she found herself stepping into one of the most vicious class wars in American history — the coal strike in Ludlow, Colorado, in 1913. Of the 2,000 miners and their families who joined the strike, most were immigrants like Mary. The owners of the mines threw the miners out of their rented homes and attempted to starve them back to work. Moreover, they brought in hundreds of “gun thugs” and state militia to terrorize the miners. Lewis chronicles Thomas's strength and heroism with dispassionate detail. At the end of the story (and the book) is the image of a dauntless person who lived up to the highest ideal of Welsh identity and womanhood of her time and place. Incidentally — and against all odds — she lived a long and happy life.

Mary Thomas's story is one of the many reasons one should read and reread Ronald Lewis's epic *Welsh Americans*. It is one of the rare books in ethnic history that deserves the appellation *classic*.

Forgotten Firebrand: James Redpath and the Making of Nineteenth-Century America, by John R. McKivigan. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008. xvii, 291 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$45.00 cloth.

Reviewer Mark Wahlgren Summers is professor of history at the University of Kentucky. His latest book is *A Dangerous Stir: Fear, Paranoia, and the Making of Reconstruction* (2009).

James Redpath was a little-known nineteenth-century reformer with a great deal to be little known about. Antislavery, the single tax, equal rights, Irish independence: for 40 years, there were few good causes to which Redpath did not devote his pen. Only now has a historian returned the favor. John McKivigan's *Forgotten Firebrand* gives an un-