

**‘Societie has snapped its mystic chord’:
Home, Family and Society in Nineteenth-century Welsh Writing in English**

Jane Aaron

During the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries major changes occurred in the domestic and social arrangements of the British elite and their dependants, as the bourgeoisie gradually increased its political and cultural ascendancy over the old gentry. Within the large landowners’ mansions, the great open halls of the earlier era were supplanted by drawing-rooms and dining-rooms, as the extended family, which had included not only blood relatives but also a retinue of domestics and tenants of the estate, gradually shrunk to its nuclear core, strictly dividing itself from its ‘downstairs’ servants. These changes took place more slowly in Wales, however, where there was no large aspiring early-capitalist bourgeois class, and where the old indigenous gentry had had a particularly esteemed role as preservers of Welsh-language culture. The Welsh-language terms for ‘home’ and ‘family’, ‘*cartref*’ and ‘*teulu*’, encode the older more extensive concepts, ‘*cartref*’, from ‘*câr + tref*’, initially signifying a settlement of loved ones, and ‘*teulu*’, from ‘*tŷ + llu*’, a numerous household. Both terms convey an idea of ‘family’ as a community or society settled in one home location and united by bonds of interdependency as well as blood. Changes to this old-established order, seen as imposed from without by an alien culture, were deplored by both the Welsh- and English-language writers of Wales in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

This paper focuses primarily on English-language fiction, beginning with appreciative depictions of the Welsh squirearchy’s extended families in the writings of Anna Maria Bennett, Ann of Swansea and Thomas Richards. By the mid-century, however, Goronva Camlan (the pseudonym of an Anglican clergyman, Rowland Williams) in an 1846 poem entitled ‘Modern Assassination’, from which the quotation in this talk’s title is taken, was deploring a Wales ‘shorn / Of all we claimed peculiar’. The old ‘societie’ with its ‘ancient kindness, and homelie mirth’ had been killed off, he claimed, leaving but an ‘unhomely’ array of estranged self-seekers. Others, however, argued that in fact since the mid-eighteenth century, Welsh culture had responded to the gradual erosion of the old order by establishing, or revivifying, ‘peculiar’ institutions, such as the Eisteddfod or the ‘Society’, or *seiat*, of the Calvinistic Methodists, which in effect retained in the communities they created the old pattern of extended family loyalties, rooted in place, egalitarian in ethos, and supportive of Welsh-language culture. Fictional representations of these new ‘homes’ and ‘families’ are discussed in the second half of this paper, which makes reference to the work of T. J. Llewellyn Prichard, Eleazar Roberts, Mabel Holland Grave, Sara Maria Saunders and Harry Lindsay, among others.