

The Journal of
Glamorgan History

Morgannwg



Volume LIV 2010

The authors of these monographs on Iolo Morganwg, produced by the University of Wales Centre for Advanced Celtic Studies and reviewed in previous editions of *Morgannwg*, share a desire to rehabilitate him, and at an academic level they have certainly done so. However, with the exception of the first volume of essays, the interests of these authors have mostly been a good deal narrower than Iolo's. Much of Iolo's work that would fascinate the enquiring general reader, on subjects as various as archaeology, architecture, agriculture, antiquities and topography remains to be explored.

Brian Davies
Pontypridd Museum

FRANÇOIS DEPEAUX (1853-1920): *LE CHARBONNIER ET LES IMPRESSIONISTES*, by Marc-Henri Tellier. Published by the author, BP21, 6231, Bois-Guillaume, France, 2010. 302 pp. Illustrated. 99 Euros.

It was the painter Claude Monet in 1892 who called his friend from Rouen, François Depeaux, 'the coalmerchant'. In the decades leading up to the First World War Rouen was the chief port in France, and almost a third of its trade was with Swansea. French homes and industries were heavily dependent on anthracite from south Wales. François Depeaux, the subject of this lavishly-illustrated and magnificent volume, came from a rich Rouen family, well-established in the clothing industry. A man of superabundant energy, he struck out on his own as a businessman, crossed to Cardiff in 1875, then discovered the delights of Swansea, and travelled back and forth thither all his life. He bought ships and developed an immensely successful trade importing south Wales coal into Rouen. He also played a major role in the public life of the area, and died in 1920, just on the eve of the tragic changes in Welsh-French economic relations in the 1920s.

The first half of this history, by a young art historian from Rouen, deals with Depeaux's life and economic activity, the second with his lifelong passion for the work of the Impressionist painters. He was not only a great coal importer, but also a ship owner and an inventor of coal-crushing machines which enabled his workers to produce highly marketable briquettes of fuel in Rouen. He was active in movements to persuade French workers to avoid alcoholism. He was a pioneer of public baths in France, for although the *douche* was a French invention, the French public took a lot of persuading to take a shower. Depeaux played an important role in establishing the College de Normandie, a kind of English public school transplanted to

France, and was active in fields such as the restoration and protection of historic monuments, and was a great advocate of Impressionist painters, leaving much of his superb collection to French museums.

It is in this first half of the book (chapter three) that we have an account of his Swansea business: he had an office and agents in Swansea, was a member of the Swansea Chamber of Trade, and his company, The International Company, bought land in 1901 from Moore-Gwyn of Neath, to open an anthracite mine at Aber-craf on the borders of Glamorgan and Breconshire. In 1903 the mine was extended to cover the land of Hen Noyadd – familiar to us as the terminal point of the Swansea Canal. The workforce were partly Welsh but also comprised Portuguese and Spaniards, and it is likely that most people familiar with the upper Swansea Valley will have heard of the houses of the Spanish workers. The International Company survived up to 1922.

In the second half of the book we have a detailed account of the immense collection of art which Depeaux was able to build up, using the profits of his mine and business enterprise. Depeaux was interested in the development of institutions in Rouen and in Swansea, and delighted when Richard Glynn Vivian – patron of the artist Gustave Doré – endowed the art gallery in Swansea which bears his name, and which opened in 1911 just after his death. Depeaux organized an exhibition of the paintings and metalwork of ‘The School of Rouen’ in June and July 1914 at the Glynn Vivian. The gallery still has a small but very fine collection of Rouen pictures donated by Depeaux.

Although an industrialist, he owned several properties in the country around Rouen, and his favourite paintings were landscapes, above all, the work of Alfred Sisley, which was then very little appreciated. Depeaux took Sisley and his partner, both of whom were extremely ill, to south Wales in 1897, persuaded them for the sake of their children, to get married in Cardiff and then gave them a honeymoon at Penarth and at the Osborne Hotel, Langland Bay, Gower. The work Sisley produced here were his last paintings and it is fortunate that the National Museum has one of Penarth and another of Rotherslade Bay, Langland.

Glamorgan historians will probably see parallels between Depeaux and the activities of art patrons, also industrialists, people also endowed with some sort of social and public conscience, such as William Menelaus, Joseph Pyke Thompson, Richard Glynn Vivian, and above all, perhaps, the two

Davies sisters of Gregynog. This book is a remarkable testimony to a period now wholly lost, if not forgotten, of Franco-Welsh economic activity. The author of this splendid volume frequently talks of the 'paradoxical' quality of Depeaux, with his grim and grimy industrial activities enabling him to be a great patron of the arts. It is surely a paradox to be found in all the artistic patronage of the period. It is perhaps some slight satisfaction that when one looks at Monet, Sisley and Toulouse-Lautrec in the Musée d'Orsay, they are really there because of the labours of workers at the top of the Swansea Valley.

*Prys Morgan
Swansea*