

# 5. the Story of the Awakening

by W.T. Stead

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*The Revival in Wales was a spontaneous and individual movement that brought about a sense of community and purpose, improved the quality of work, and reduced vice and immorality.*

**Scripture:** Psalm 51:10, Acts 2:17, Ephesians 5:18, Colossians 3:16, James 5:16

**Topics:** "Holy Spirit", "Revival Movement"

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## Description

W.T. Stead shares the powerful story of the Welsh Revival, which began with individual prayers for spiritual quickening and spread like wildfire through remote villages and mining communities. The Revival was marked by fervent prayer, fasting, and a deep surrender to Jesus Christ, leading to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the conversion of many souls. Evan Roberts, a young theological student, played a significant role in carrying on the work of the Revival throughout Wales. The movement was characterized by passionate singing, heartfelt prayers, and a sense of the all-pervading influence of the Spirit of God, transforming lives and communities.

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## Transcript

THE Revival in Wales began in Cardiganshire. For a long time past the Welsh Christians had been moved to pray specially for the quickening of religious life in their midst. The impulse appears to have been sporadic and spontaneous. In remote country hamlets, in mining villages buried in distant valleys, one man or one woman would have it laid upon his or her soul to pray that the Holy Spirit might be poured out upon the cause in which they were spiritually concerned. There does not seem to have been any organised effort anywhere. It was all individual, local, and strictly limited to the neighbourhood. An old Salvationist, for instance, suddenly had it borne in upon him that he was nearing the bourne from which no traveller returns. Of his own future he had no doubt. But what of the future of the others whom he so soon must leave, and leave forever?

Spiritual life was languishing in his local corps. No one was being converted. So he determined to give himself to prayer and fasting, giving Heaven no peace or rest all day or all night until the blessing came. One whole day he fasted, and the whole of the following night he prayed. And lo! it seemed as if the windows of Heaven were opened and showers of blessing descended upon the dry parched ground. The Revival broke out in his corps and many souls were gathered in. A similar blessing was enjoyed by one of the churches in the village, but it passed over the rest. Some, like Gideon's fleece, were drenched with dew, while all around the land was dry.

The story of the very first outbreak of the Revival traces it to the trembling utterance of a poor Welsh girl, who, at a meeting in a Cardigan village, was the first to rise and testify. "If no one else will, then I must say that I love the Lord Jesus Christ with all my heart." The pathos and the passion of the avowal acted like an electric shock upon the congregation. One after another rose and made the full surrender, and the news spread like wildfire from place to place that the Revival had broken out, and that souls were being ingathered to the Lord. But the Revival was soon to find its focus in a young theological student of the name of Evan Roberts, who had abandoned his course at Newcastle Emlyn to carry on the work of the Revival throughout Wales. His own simple story of how he came to the work is told elsewhere in this booklet.

I went down to South Wales to see for myself what was going on. I described my impressions in the Daily Chronicle, the Christian World, and the Methodist Times. I cannot do better than reproduce my report:

"The British Empire," as Admiral Fisher is never tired of repeating, "floats upon the British Navy." But the British Navy steams on Welsh coal. The driving force of all our battleships is hewn from the mines of these Welsh valleys, by the men among whom this remarkable religious awakening has taken place. This morning, as the slow train crawled down the gloomy valleys--for there was the mirk of coming snow in the air, and there was no sun in the sky--I could not avoid the obvious and insistent suggestion of the thought that Welsh religious enthusiasm may be destined to impart as compelling an impulse to the churches of the world as Welsh coal supplies to its navies.

Nor was the force of the suggestion weakened when, after attending three prolonged services at Mardy, a village of 5,000 inhabitants lying on the other side of Pontypridd, I found the flame of Welsh religious enthusiasm as smokeless as its coal. There are no advertisements, no brass bands, no posters, no huge tents. All the paraphernalia of the got-up job are conspicuous by their absence.

Neither is there any organisation, nor is there a director, at least none that is visible to human eye. In the crowded chapels they even dispense with instrumental music. On Sunday night no note issued from the organ pipes. There was no need of instruments, for in and around and above and beneath surged the all-pervading thrill and throb of a multitude praying, and singing as they prayed.

The vast congregations were as soberly sane, as orderly, and at least as reverent as any congregation I ever saw beneath the dome of St. Paul's, when I used to go to hear Canon Liddon, the Chrysostom of the English pulpit. But it was aflame with a passionate religious enthusiasm, the like of which I have never seen in St. Paul's. Tier above tier from the crowded aisles to the loftiest gallery sat or stood, as necessity dictated, eager hundreds of serious men and thoughtful women, their eyes riveted upon the platform or upon whatever other part of the building was the storm centre of the meeting.

There was absolutely nothing wild, violent, hysterical, unless it be hysterical for the labouring breast to heave with sobbing that cannot be repressed, and the throat to choke with emotion as a sense of the awful horror and shame of a wasted life suddenly bursts upon the soul. On all sides there was the solemn gladness of men and women upon whose eyes has dawned the splendour of a new day, the foretaste of whose glories they are enjoying in the quickened sense of human fellowship and a keen glad zest added to their own lives.

The most thorough-going materialist who resolutely and forever rejects as inconceivable the existence of the soul in man, and to whom "the universe is but the infinite empty eye-socket of a dead God," could not fail to be impressed by the pathetic sincerity of these men; nor, if he were just, could he refuse to

recognise that out of their faith in the creed which he has rejected, they have drawn and are drawing a motive power that makes for righteousness, and not only for righteousness, but for the joy of living, that he would be powerless to give them.

Employers tell me that the quality of the work the miners are putting in has improved. Waste is less, men go to their daily toil with a new spirit of gladness in their labour. In the long, dim galleries of the mine, where once the haulers swore at their ponies in Welshified English terms of blasphemy, there is now but to be heard the haunting melody of the revival music. The pit ponies, like the American mules, having been driven by oaths and curses since they first bore the yoke, are being re-trained to do their work without the incentive of profanity.

There is less drinking, less idleness, less gambling. Men record with almost incredulous amazement, how one football player after another has foresworn cards and drink and the gladiatorial games, and is living a sober and godly life, putting his energy into the revival. More wonderful still, and almost incredible to those who know how journalism lives and thrives upon gambling, is the fact that the most conservative daily paper of South Wales has devoted its columns day after day to reporting and defending the movement which declares war to the death against both gambling and drink.

How came this strange uplift of the earnestness of a whole community? Who can say? The wind bloweth where it listeth. Some tell you one thing, some another. All agree that it began some few months ago in Cardiganshire, eddied hither and thither, spreading like fire from valley to valley, until, as one observer said to me, "Wherever it came from, or however it began, all South Wales to-day is in a flame."

However it began. So it is going on. "If no one else, then I must." It is "Here am I, send me!" This public self-consecration, this definite and decisive avowal of a determination to put under their feet their dead past of vice and sin and indifference, and to reach out towards a higher ideal of human existence, is going on everywhere in South Wales. Nor, if we think of it sanely and look at it in the right perspective, is there a nobler spectacle appealing more directly to the highest instincts of our nature to be seen in all the world to-day.

At Mardy, where I spent Sunday, the miners are voluntarily taxing themselves to build an institute, public hall, library, and reading-room. By their express request the money is deducted from their wages on payday. They have created a library of 2,000 books, capitably selected and well used. They have about half a dozen chapels and churches, a co-operative society, and the usual appliances of civilisation. They have every outward and visible sign of industrial prosperity. It is a mining village pure and simple, industrial democracy in its nakedest primitive form.

In this village I attended three meetings on Sunday-- two and a half hours in the morning, two and a half hours in the afternoon, and two hours at night, when I had to leave to catch the train. At all these meetings the same kind of thing went on, the same kind of congregations assembled, the same strained, intense emotion was manifest. Aisles were crowded. Pulpit stairs were packed, and, 'mirabile dictu!' two-thirds of the congregation were men and at least one-half young men.

"There," said one, "is the hope and the glory of the movement." Here and there is a grey head. But the majority of the congregation were stalwart young miners, who gave the meeting all the fervour and swing and enthusiasm of youth. The revival had been going on in Mardy for a fortnight. All the churches had been holding services every night with great results. At the Baptist Church they had to report the addition of nearly fifty members, fifty were waiting for baptism, thirty--five backsliders had been reclaimed.

In Mardy the fortnight's services had resulted in 500 conversions. And this, be it noted, when each place of worship was going "on its own." Mr. Evan Roberts, the so-called boy preacher of the revival, and his singing sisterhood, did not reach Mardy until the Sunday of my visit.

I have called Evan Roberts the so-called boy preacher, because he is neither a boy nor a preacher. He is a tall, graceful, good-looking young man of twenty-six, with a pleading eye and a most winsome smile. If he is a boy, he is a six-foot boy, and six-footers are usually past their boyhood. As he is not a boy, neither is he a preacher. He talks simply, unaffectedly, earnestly now and then, but he makes no sermons, and preaching is emphatically not the note of this Revival in the west. If it has been by the foolishness of preaching that men have been saved heretofore, that agency seems as if it were destined to take a back seat in the present movement.

The revival is borne along upon billowing waves of sacred song. It is the singing, not the preaching, that is the instrument which is most efficacious in striking the hearts of men. In this respect these services in the Welsh chapel reminded me strangely of the beautiful liturgical services of the Greek church, notably in St. Isaac's, of St. Petersburg, on Easter morn, and in the receptions of the pilgrims at the Troitski monastery, near Moscow.

The most extraordinary thing about the meetings which I attended was the extent to which they were absolutely without any human direction or leadership. "We must obey the Spirit," is the watchword of Evan Roberts, and he is as obedient as the humblest of his followers. The meetings open--after any amount of preliminary singing while the congregation is assembling--by the reading of a chapter or a psalm. Then it is go as you please for two hours or more.

And the amazing thing is that it does go and does not get entangled in what might seem to be inevitable confusion. Three-fourths of the meeting consists of singing. No one uses a hymnbook. No one gives out a hymn. The last person to control the meeting in any way is Mr. Evan Roberts. People pray and sing, give testimony or exhort as the Spirit moves them. As a study of the psychology of crowds I have seen nothing like it. You feel that the thousand or fifteen hundred persons before you have become merged into one myriad-headed, but single-souled personality.

You can watch what they call the influence of the power of the Spirit playing over the crowded congregation as an eddying wind plays over the surface of a pond. If anyone carried away by his feelings prays too long, or if anyone when speaking fails to touch the right note, someone--it may be anybody--commences to sing. For a moment there is a hesitation as if the meeting were in doubt as to its decision, whether to hear the speaker or to continue to join in the prayer, or whether to sing. If it decides to hear and to pray the singing dies away. If, on the other hand, as usually happens, the people decide to sing, the chorus swells in volume until it drowns all other sound.

A very remarkable instance of this abandonment of the meeting to the spontaneous impulse, not merely of those within the walls, but of those crowded outside, who were unable to get in, occurred on Sunday night. Twice the order of proceeding, if order it can be called, was altered by the crowd outside, who, being moved by some mysterious impulse, started a hymn on their own account, which was at once taken up by the congregation within. On one of these occasions Evan Roberts was addressing the meeting. He at once gave way, and the singing became general.

The prayers are largely autobiographical, and some of them intensely dramatic. On one occasion an impassioned and moving appeal to the Deity was accompanied throughout by an exquisitely rendered

hymn, sung by three of the Singing Sisters. It was like the undertone of the orchestra when some leading singer is holding the house.

The Singing Sisters--there are five of them, one, Mme. Morgan, who was a professional singer--are as conspicuous figures in the movement as Evan Roberts himself. Some of their solos are wonders of dramatic and musical appeal. Nor is the effect lessened by the fact that the singers, like the speakers, sometimes break down in sobs and tears. The meeting always breaks out into a passionate and consoling song, until the soloist having recovered her breath, rises from her knees and resumes her song.

The praying and singing are both wonderful, but more impressive than either are the breaks which occur when utterance can no more, and the sobbing in the silence, momentarily heard, is drowned in a tempest of melody. No need for an organ. The assembly was its own organ as a thousand sorrowing or rejoicing hearts found expression in the sacred psalmody of their native hills.

Repentance, open confession, intercessory prayer, and, above all else, this marvellous musical liturgy--a liturgy unwritten but heartfelt, a mighty chorus rising like the thunder of the surge on a rock-bound shore, ever and anon broken by the flutelike note of the Singing Sisters, whose melody was as sweet and as spontaneous as the music of the throstle in the grove or the lark in the sky. And all this vast quivering, throbbing, singing, praying, exultant multitude intensely conscious of the all-pervading influence of some invisible reality--now for the first time moving palpable though not tangible in their midst.

They called it the Spirit of God. Those who have not witnessed it may call it what they will; I am inclined to agree with those on the spot. For man, being according to the orthodox, evil, can do no good thing of himself, so, as Cardinal Manning used to say, "Wherever you behold a good thing, there you see the working of the Holy Ghost." And the revival, as I saw it, was emphatically a good thing.

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