



Robert Lewis

## Reluctant emigrants: Welsh immigration to the United States, 1850-1930

De migratie vanuit Wales was slechts een kleine kabbeling in de toestroom van Europeanen in de negentiende eeuw. Desalniettemin kenmerken de Welshse migranten zich door een sterk gemeenschapsgevoel en 'etnische' identiteit. Robert Lewis beschrijft hun bijdrage aan de Amerikaanse samenleving en hoe zij uiteindelijk in die melting pot worden opgenomen. Daarbij gaat hij ook in op de motieven van Welshmen om te migreren.

In popular accounts of the 'peopling' of America, European immigration in the nineteenth century is often described in graphic terms as a flood, a river, a tidal wave. By the same metaphor, immigrants from Wales merely added a small stream to that flow. To the 32 million Europeans who arrived in the United States between 1815 and 1914 during the 'European century' of migration, the Welsh contributed less than a quarter of a million. Almost every country in Europe, including the Netherlands, furnished a higher proportion of its population. Like many other Europeans, the Welsh were also concentrated in a few specific localities; in 1900, almost a fifth of all Welsh immigrants were living in adjoining Lackawanna and Luzerne counties in Pennsylvania, and mainly in the cities of Scranton and Wilkes-Barre, less than twenty miles apart. What does that reluctance to emigrate and yet to congregate together tell us about Wales, the Welsh, and the Welsh in America? Recent research provides some plausible explanations.

It is not possible to provide precise figures for Welsh immigration in the nineteenth century. Charlotte Erickson, the leading historian of emigration from Britain, found that the English remained 'invisible' in the United States; they merged too easily with the native-born population to

leave many traces of their presence.<sup>1</sup> The Welsh also often escaped notice. According to U.S. census statistics, 89,603 immigrants from Wales entered the country between 1820 and 1950, and of these, 84,443 came between 1850 and 1930. Unfortunately, officials on both sides of the Atlantic made few distinctions between elements of the British population, and greatly underestimated numbers. Only in 1908 did the British Board of Trade begin to keep separate statistics of Welsh and English passengers on transatlantic crossings; only in 1875 did American port authorities categorise the Welsh as a group of distinct regional origins. U.S. Bureau of the Census statistics of the American population born in Wales give the most accurate impression. In all four returns between 1880 and 1910, there were more than 80,000 'foreign-born' Welsh, with a peak of 100,079 in 1890. A further difficulty is the unknown number of immigrants who returned to Wales. The best estimate is that some thirteen per cent of the Welsh - a smaller proportion than the English (21 per cent) and lower than almost all other European nationalities - did not settle permanently in the United States.<sup>2</sup> To use a very crude index of the extent of emigration, in the peak years between 1846 and 1914, for every 10,000 people in the British Isles, every year, on average, 77 Irish, 20 Scots and 12 English left - and 3 Welsh.<sup>3</sup> A very approximate net total of 200,000 Welsh emigrants between 1850 and 1920 seems a reasonable inference.

It was not that the Welsh were content with their lot in the nineteenth century. Wales was a small country of 8,000 square miles, or the size of an average state on the eastern seaboard of the United States. The fertile coastal fringe and the eastern plain close to the English border held the bulk of the population - half a million in 1800, double that in 1840, and less than 2 million in 1900. There were limited market opportunities in agriculture. Poor-quality mountain moorland suitable only for pastoral farming, mainly raising sheep, covered much of the country. Many who had subsisted on small hill farms of twenty acres lost security when landlords responded to

1 Charlotte Erickson, *Invisible Immigrants: The Adaptation of English and Scottish Immigrants in Nineteenth-Century America* (London 1972).

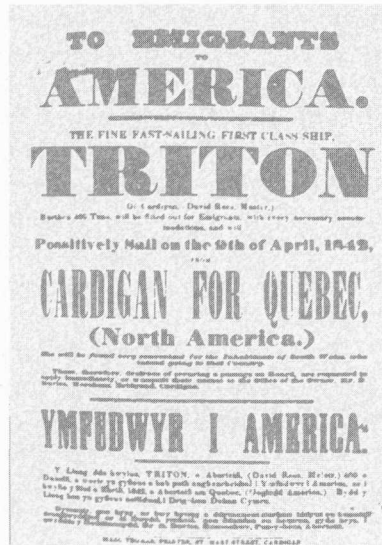
2 Rowland T. Berthoff, *British Immigrants in Industrial America, 1790-1950* (Cambridge 1953) 5-11; Maldwyn A. Jones, 'The Background to Emigration from Great Britain in the Nineteenth Century', *Perspectives in American History* 7 (1973) 21-28; Mark Wyman, *Round-Trip to America: The Immigrants Return to Europe, 1880-1930* (Ithaca 1993) 10.

3 Glyn A. Williams, 'The Crucible,' in Williams, *When Was Wales? A History of the Welsh* (Harmondsworth 1985) 180.

the rising price of corn during the Napoleonic wars by abolishing traditional leases and charging higher annual rents or enclosing marginal land. Tenants dispossessed became landless labourers. There were other threats to local autonomy. The Act of Union in 1536 had brought increasing political and economic domination from England. The Welsh language lost ground, especially in the southern lowland areas. Evangelical religion and revival crusades after the 1770s drew many to the Calvinistic denominations - to the Congregationalists, Methodists and Baptists. Nonconformists felt aggrieved when the government in 1836 commuted tithes paid to the established Anglican church into fixed money payments that were more burdensome and difficult to evade. Adding to this general unrest with the standing order was political dissent mixed with economic discontent.

Complaints against tolls charged on public roads culminated in the Rebecca riots and the destruction of deeply unpopular tollgates. Chartist demonstrations for electoral reform led to a violent confrontation with the militia in Newport in 1839. All south Wales seemed in ferment between 1839 and 1843.

One response to the lack of opportunity was migration. The traditional route was to England - from north Wales to Merseyside, from the centre to Shrewsbury and the Midlands, and from the south to London and the Home Counties. For those unwilling to serve as domestic servants in English households or as farm labourers, the industrial revolution offered other avenues for employment. By the early nineteenth century, the narrow strip, one mile wide and twenty miles long, around Merthyr Tydfil in Glamorganshire was the world's foremost producer of iron. Large-scale iron-smelting had begun fifty years earlier using charcoal as fuel. When



This poster advertising a ship leaving Cardigan on 9 April, 1842 also addressed the more than ninety per cent of the population of Cardiganshire for whom Welsh was the first, and sometimes the only, language. Uit: W.J.Lewis, *Hanes Darluniadol O Geredigion / An Illustrated History of Cardiganshire* (Aberystwyth 1970), 87.

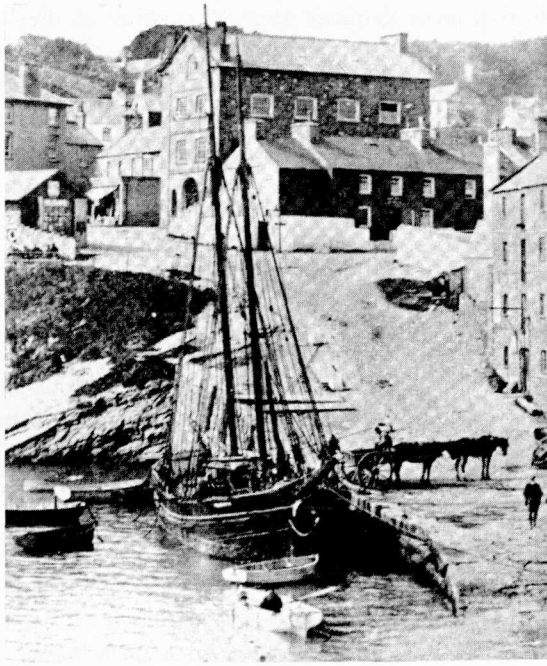
supplies of wood were exhausted, anthracite, the hard 'stone coal' found in the Rhondda valley in greater quantities than anywhere else in the British Isles, was readily available. It proved to be the most suitable for the new process of steel-making in the 1860s. For a century, the South Wales coalfield was the world's largest. The population of the Rhondda valley grew from 11,735 in 1861 to 163,000 in 1921, and attracted migrants not only from rural Wales but southwest England and beyond. Indeed, employment in the coal mines or iron foundries within the country is almost certainly the major reason why fewer Welsh than English, Scots or Irish emigrated to North America.<sup>4</sup>

Those who did emigrate abroad planned their destinations very carefully. Like the Dutch or Scandinavians, they generally followed friends and family and renewed local and regional associations in the new land. When 'Iorthryn Gwynedd', the Reverend R. D. Thomas, travelled to the United States in 1851-52 collecting funds for Congregationalist churches, he noted that the Welsh kept to their home-town groups during the voyage. During his year-long tour of New York, Ohio and Pennsylvania, Thomas stayed with 'the friends of the Old Country', mainly from Llanbrynmair in Montgomeryshire, and followed networks established by settlers from Llanbrynmair.<sup>5</sup> Nonconformist ministers like Thomas had great authority as advocates of emigration. Three ministers were particularly influential in the 1840s and 1850s through their sermons and writings. Benjamin Chidlaw had left Wales as a child, and when he became Congregationalist minister for the large Welsh immigrant community of Paddy's Run in Ohio, he made it his mission to persuade others of the blessings of America. Chidlaw returned in 1836 and 1839 to lead a crusade to save souls for

4 Brinley Thomas, *Migration and Economic Growth: A Study of Great Britain and the Atlantic Economy* (Cambridge 1954); Dudley Baines, *Migration in a Mature Economy: Emigration and Internal Migration in England and Wales, 1861-1900* (Cambridge 1985) 285-98, 301-3. See also Maldwyn A. Jones, 'From The Old Country To The New: The Welsh in Nineteenth-Century America', *Flintshire Historical Society Publications* 27 (1975-6) 85-100; Ioan Matthews, 'The World of the Anthracite Miner', *Llafur: Journal of Welsh Labour History* 6 (1992) 96-104.

5 Clare Taylor ed., *America, or Miscellaneous Notes on the United States Useful for Emigrants by Iorthryn Gwynedd* . . . [National Library of Wales MS.9521A] (1852; Aberystwyth: University of Wales, 1973); Clare Taylor ed., *Samuel Roberts and His Circle: Migration from Llanbrynmair, Montgomeryshire, to America* (Aberystwyth 1974); Joan Adams, 'Emigration From Llanbrynmair, Montgomeryshire to the United States of America, 1795 and 1856/7' (Keele 1974), <<http://www.embetech.demon.co.uk/gene/joanssess.htm>> [accessed 17/01/02].

Christ and for a Welsh America. His handbook of 1840 giving practical advice on travel and prospects was the most widely distributed of all emigrant guidebooks. In the 1850s, the Reverend Samuel Roberts and his cousin, Governor William Bebb of Ohio, planned large Welsh-speaking settlements in Illinois, Wisconsin and Tennessee. Roberts and Bebb's parents had come to America from Llanbryn-mair, and it



was among this group that he recruited. His land schemes gained wide publicity and notoriety, although

none proved viable. Michael D. Jones pinned his hopes for a new Wales outside Wales on Wisconsin and then in the 1860s decided that the Chabut valley in Argentina's province of Patagonia offered the best prospects.<sup>6</sup>

Letters home published in the Welsh-language press told of the blessings of America. The people in Illinois, Owen Williams wrote in 1851, 'take great pride in their liberty, won by their forebears. I expect that you are ready to say that slaves are kept in America. That is true but the people of Wales are comparatively more enslaved and we expect that, ere long, that America will be free of slavery.' Correspondents cited abundant food and cheap land as among the chief benefits. 'I am amazed at the efforts made by the Welsh in Wales to get a farm', the Reverend Hugh X. Hughes declared

Before 1860, many 'Cardis' left from small ports like New Quay in Cardiganshire where ships landed timber from North America and sometimes returned with emigrants. Uit: W.J. Lewis, *Hanes Darluniadol O Geredigion / An Illustrated History of Cardiganshire* (Aberystwyth 1970), 56-57.

6 Alan Conway, 'Welsh Emigration to the United States', *Perspectives in American History* 7 (1973) 210-26.

from frontier Kansas in 1869. 'When one becomes vacant there are hundreds trying to get it. But here you can be your own master without fear of being turned out and you can do what you like with your land.'<sup>7</sup>

The best-documented case study is of 'Cardis' who emigrated to Jackson and Gallia counties in southern Ohio between 1835 and 1850. By meticulous research in obituaries and reports in newspapers and the religious press, Anne Kelly Holmes traced 1,722 individuals who came from Cardiganshire in south-west Wales. They left Mynydd Bach, a patchwork of small farms in fourteen parishes only ten square miles in the north-central part of the county, where there had been recent history of opposition to English-speaking landlords. The emigrants were not wealthy but had sufficient disposable property to afford the fifty pounds, one year's income for a tenant farmer, necessary for the family's passage. There was ready access to ships. In the days of sail, they could leave from one of the small local harbours - Cardigan, Fishguard, or Aberystwyth - that received timber ships from North America. Cardiganshire was a region without much experience of internal migration. Perhaps committed Christians had heeded the warnings of Calvinistic Methodist ministers about the moral temptations of sabbath-breaking and worldly pleasure in sinful Merthyr or pagan London. Indeed, the personal assurances of ministers like Edward Jones that Providence called them to go to America seem to have prompted the sudden exodus. It was a migration of despair and of hope.

The Cardiganshire emigrants travelled together and lived together in Ohio. In Jackson and Gallia counties, their limited funds allowed them to purchase only the less desirable tracts of tree-clad upland and rough pasture that earlier American settlers had avoided. Their farms were only two-thirds of the size of those of the Americans, only half as valuable, and marginal to commercial farming. However, the land was more fertile and they now owned the land freehold, independent of both landlords and English churches. Like Dutch immigrants, the Cardiganshire emigrants established fairly large, inwardly-looking, self-contained communities. For a generation, they reconstituted their traditional culture. They recruited ministers from the old country, built chapels of familiar design, and vested their lay leaders with traditional authority to punish moral lapses. In the communities far from secular influences, sanctions against sabbath-

7 Yr Anserau [*The Times*], April 9 (1851); Baner ac Anserau Cymru [*Banner and Times of Wales*], August 25 (1869), both in Alan Conway ed., *The Welsh in America: Letters of the Immigrants* (Cardiff 1961) 100, 127.

breaking, intemperance, unfair trading or irregular sexual conduct were remarkably effective.

Successful co-operative farming was a step to the next phase of rural capitalism. In the 1850s, many farmers in the two counties deeded part of their land to establish joint-stock iron foundries and received company stock in exchange. They supplemented meagre farm incomes by cutting wood in the months when the foundries accumulated supplies before firing the furnaces. With high-quality iron in great demand in Ohio, the communities prospered and there was an almost seamless transition to industrialism. 'Incorporated' Calvinism, Anne Kelly Knowles argues, reflected a strict code of social and economic conduct shared by the emigrants and retained by their American-born children. Intense localism and a puritanical spirit fostered the values of both the traditional moral economy and the new market society.<sup>8</sup>

Welsh immigrants also moved directly to large-scale industry. By 1851, farmers were only ten percent of the emigrants identified by occupation.<sup>9</sup> It was John F. Davis, a Welsh immigrant settled in Danville, who in 1842 demonstrated to entrepreneurs in Scranton, Pennsylvania, how anthracite coal might be used successfully in the iron furnaces. Soon, the unique skills of Welsh workers were in demand throughout the north-east Pennsylvania coalfield. Only they had experience of sinking the deep shafts needed to extract the narrow seams of hard coal safely and efficiently, and in supervising the iron furnaces. By 1870, Welsh immigrants were twelve per cent of Scranton's population. Welsh foremen used their powers of patronage to select their countrymen and their American-born children for jobs in the foundries and especially in the mines. Benjamin Hughes, the Welsh-born general superintendent of all the mines operated by the Delaware, Lackawanna, and Western Railroad Company, the dominant concern in Scranton, actively recruited skilled Welsh immigrants, even in the old country. W. R. Storrs, the company's general agent, complained in 1871 that the Welsh 'are clannish and the best places at their disposal are given to their friends'.<sup>10</sup>

8 Anne Kelly Holmes, *Calvinists Incorporated: Welsh Immigrants on Ohio's Industrial Frontier* (Chicago 1997).

9 William E. Van Vugt, *Britain to America: Mid-Nineteenth-Century Immigrants to the United States* (Urbana 1999) 100.

10 Quoted in William D. Jones, *Wales in America: Scranton and the Welsh, 1860-1920* (Cardiff 1993) 34.

That clannishness was evident everywhere in Scranton. Hyde Park, the district most densely settled by the Welsh, functioned as a community in exile. There were churches of all three major Welsh denominations, and the First Welsh Baptist Church was the largest and most prestigious in America. Sunday schools and the voluntary societies associated with the churches educated the American-born in traditional values. The foremost institution was the *eisteddfod*, the annual literary and musical festival held to promote the Welsh language. In Wales, the *eisteddfod* was part of Welsh tradition, re-invented in the nineteenth century, but popular and successful in the Welsh diaspora. Welsh choral societies had high status in Scranton and played a critical role in the development of a Welsh-American ethnic identity.<sup>11</sup> The old-country Welsh did hold on to their traditions, but their clannishness needs to be viewed in perspective. In 1886, about eighty per cent of Welsh immigrant men in Lackawanna county married women from Wales or of Welsh parentage, a ratio far higher than the English but considerably lower than the Irish and the Germans.<sup>12</sup>

By the 1880s, there were clear signs of cultural decline. The World's Fair *Eisteddfod* of 1893 in Chicago attracted Welsh from every country, but within the United States, creative writing in the Welsh language had lost its vitality. Welsh churches in Scranton and elsewhere began to split into ageing Welsh-language congregations that were only partly rejuvenated by new immigrants recruited to the mines, and the American-born who joined the mainstream Congregationalist and Baptist denominations. The Welsh press in America had aimed to communicate in both languages, but inevitably, coverage in Welsh receded as circulation dwindled. In the 1930s, the last major Welsh-American paper, *Y Drych* [*The Mirror*], reverted to English only.<sup>13</sup>

In some ways, America had a greater influence on the Welsh than the Welsh had on America. Richard Price, the outstanding radical intellectual of the late eighteenth century, was inspired by the American Revolution

11 Ibidem, chapter 2.

12 Rowland T. Berthoff, 'The Social Order of the Anthracite Region, 1825-1902', *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 89, July (1965) 270.

13 Jones, *Wales in America*, chap. 3; William D. Jones, 'The Welsh Language and Welsh Identity in a Pennsylvania Community', in: G. H. Jenkins ed., *Language and Community in the Nineteenth Century: A Social History of the Welsh Language* (Cardiff 1998) 261-86; Aled Jones and Bill Jones, 'Y Drych and American Welsh Identities, 1851-1951', *North American Journal of Welsh Studies* 1, Winter (2001), <<http://www2.bc.edu/~ellisjg/DRYCH.htm>> [accessed 23/11/01].

and by its cosmopolitan ideology to write his *Observations on Civil Liberty*. American temperance advocates and their uncompromising programme of total abstinence reinforced a puritanical conscience and respectability that many saw as the essence of the nineteenth-century Welsh character. The Welsh-American press and the ministers who advocated group-settlement in the American Midwest fostered an ethnic identity, a sense of peoplehood.<sup>14</sup>

Canadian emigration agent James Murray despaired of his recruitment campaign in the South Wales coalfield. 'The Welsh are hard to move', he complained in 1904. 'Home ties and old associations prevail more with them, I think, than either the English, Scotch or Irish. Their poetic nature, the old Welsh language in which the history and poetry of their country are embodied, all combine to strengthen their attachment to the "land of their Fathers", as they aptly term it.'<sup>15</sup> Reluctance and clannishness were connected. By the nineteenth century, the Welsh had a strong sense of their difference from the English. More significant than language was their adherence to a stern ascetic code that the Calvinistic denominations defended. For a generation, settlers in Ohio's Jackson and Gallia counties and in the north-east Pennsylvania coalfield kept themselves apart from other immigrants from Europe. Eventually, the 'side channel' merged with the 'mainstream' as those of Welsh descent realised the extent to which they shared American values.<sup>16</sup>

14 Glanmor Williams, 'A Prospect of Paradise? Wales and the United States of America, 1776-1914', in: idem, *Religion, Language, and Nationality in Wales: Historical Essays* (Cardiff 1979) 217-36; John Davies, 'Wales and America', *North American Journal of Welsh Studies* 1, Winter (2001).

15 Quoted in Lewis H. Thomas, 'Welsh Settlement in Saskatchewan, 1902-1914', *Western Historical Quarterly* 4 (1973) 448, in Wayne E. Davies, 'Falling on Deaf Ears: Canadian Promotion and Welsh Emigration to the Prairies', *Welsh History Review* 19 (1999) 110.

16 Kathleen Neils Conzen, 'Mainstreams and Side Channels: The Localization of Immigrant Cultures', *Journal of American Ethnic History* 11, Fall (1991) 5-20.

TO  
PARTIES DESIROUS OF EMIGRATING  
**To AMERICA.**

18  48.

THE SHIP  
**BRIG CREDO,**  
*Of Liverpool, J. A. Thompson, Master.*  
WILL SAIL FOR THE PORT OF QUEBEC ON MONDAY  
**FOR QUEBEC DIRECT.**

*Chrysostomus John Humphreys, M.D.*

On the 4th of April next,  
And will take PASSENGERS upon the following terms and conditions:—  
Adults, 14 years of age and upwards . . . 5 0 0 with 5 0 0 head money  
Children, 1 year and under 14 of age . . . 1 10 0 . . . 5 0 0  
Infants, under 18 months . . . . . Free.  
Passengers to find their own provisions, &c., and their own beds and blankets.

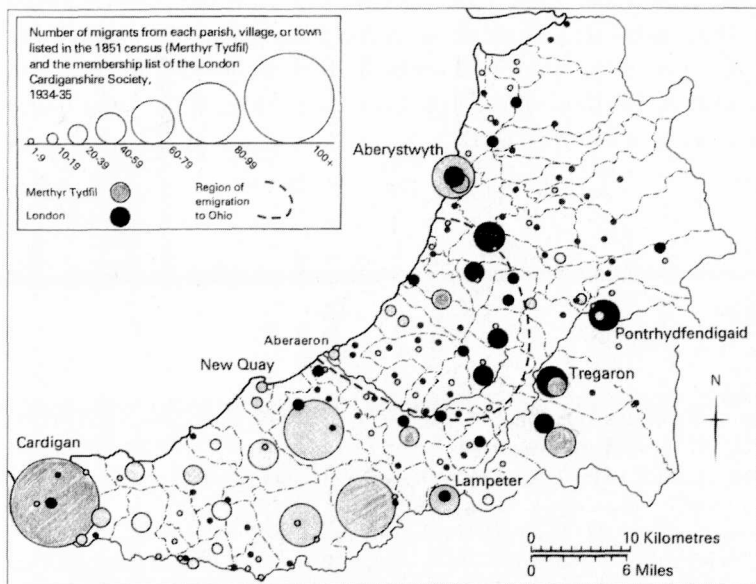
As a limited number only will be engaged, the Passage should be secured by the 12th of March at the latest, at which time a deposit of £2 for each Adult, and £1 each Child must be made, which will be refunded in the event of the Passengers declining the Voyage. The Passengers to be on board not later than Monday, the 3rd of April, when they will be required to pay the remainder of the Passage Money, and the Board Money.

For any further information that may be required, we will be pleased to supply it in the above form, or the equivalent, at the time or times.

places from which emigrants came

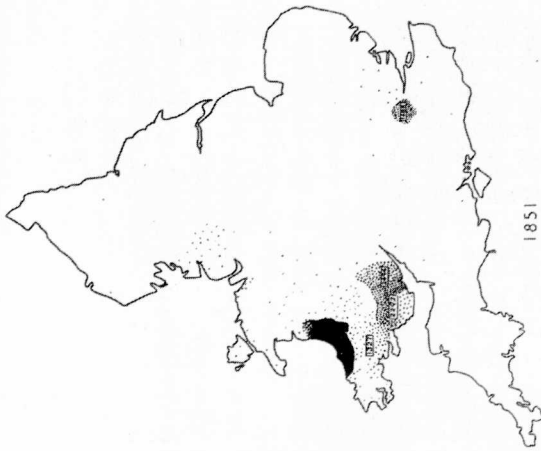


Destinations of Cardiganshire emigrants in the United States, 1795-1860. Uit: W.J. Lewis, *Hanes Darluniadol O Geredigion / An Illustrated History of Cardiganshire* (Aberystwyth 1970), 76.

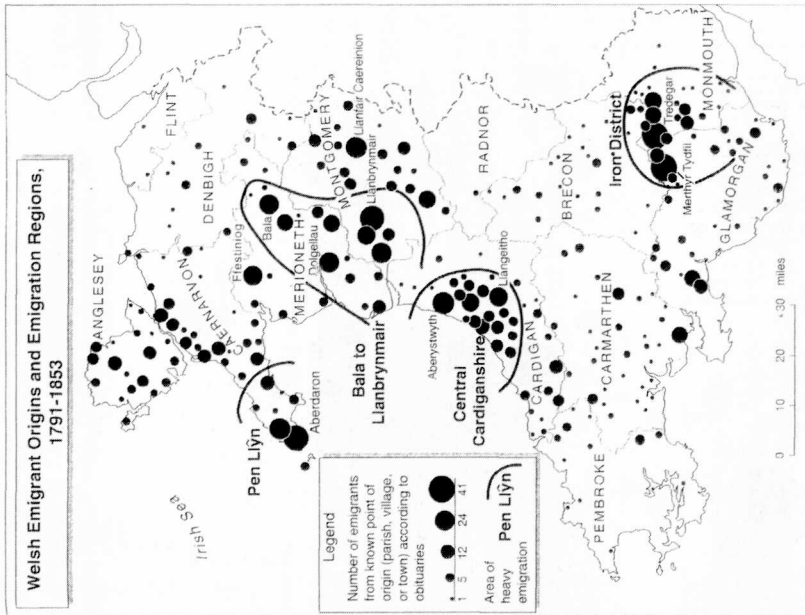


Migration to industrial South Wales and to London from regions of Cardiganshire in the mid-nineteenth century. Uit: Anne Kelly Knowles, 'The structure of Rural Society in North Cardiganshire, 1800-1850,' in Geraint H. Jenkins and Ieuan Gwynedd Jones, ed. *Cardiganshire County History. Volume 3: Cardiganshire in Modern Times* (Cardiff 1998), 91.

POPULATION BORN IN CARDIGANSHIRE  
IN THE 1851 CENSUS



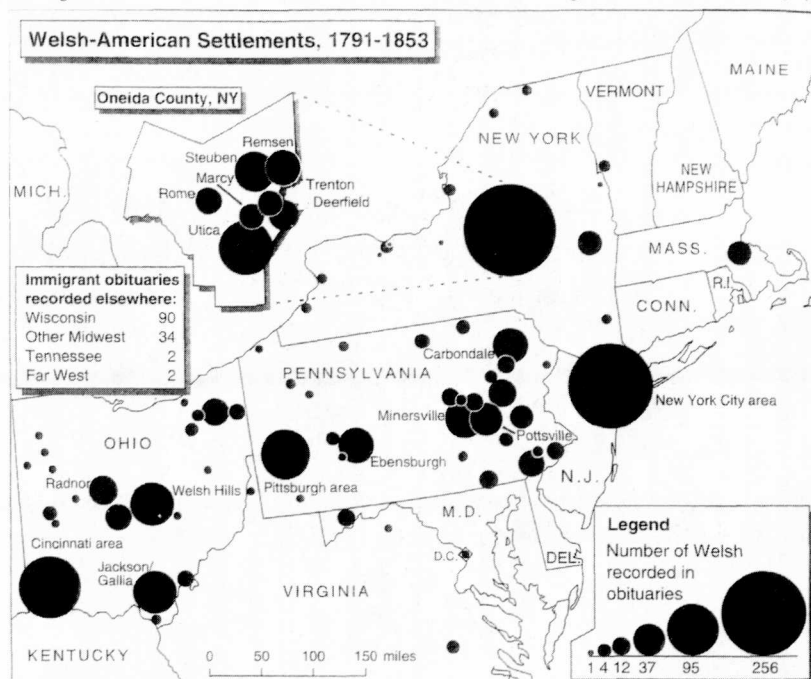
Those leaving the county went mainly to the coal and iron industry of South Wales or to London. Uit: W. J. Lewis, *Hanes Darluniadol O Geredigion / An Illustrated History of Cardiganshire* (Aberystwyth 1970), 74.



Uit: Anne Kelly Knowles, 'Immigrant Trajectories through the Rural-Industrial Transition in Wales and the United States, 1795-1850' in: *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 85 (1995) 249.



Emigrants from Cardiganshire to the United States, 1794-1860. Ohio was the most popular destination of emigrants before 1860. Uit: W.J.Lewis, *Hanes Durluniadol O Geredigion / An Illustrated History of*



*Cardiganshire* (Aberystwyth 1970), 76.

Uit: Anne Kelly Knowles, 'Immigrant Trajectories through the Rural-Industrial Transition in Wales and the United States, 1795-1850' in: *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 85 (1995) 254.