The Sacking of Lawrence

ALAN CONWAY

I. INTRODUCTION

IN 1841 the Rev. Benjamin Williams became the minister of Tabernacle Baptist Church in Merthyr Tydfil, South Wales. Fourteen years later his son, Peter Williams, became founder, publisher, printer, and editor of the Merthyr Telegraph, a weekly penny newspaper which lasted until 1881. The paper was violently anti-Catholic and fairly radical in its political ideas. When the Civil War broke out in the United States, the initial reaction was strangely cautious; whilst unable to support the South on account of slavery, the paper adopted a chiding tone towards the North on account of its failure to come out immediately in favour of emancipation.

If there is any one thing which would weaken the South and strengthen sympathy for the North it would be the determination of the latter to incorporate with . . . the preservation of the union, the abolition of slavery . . .

But the North refuses to exercise the power placed in its hands. The rank fumes of slavery will still contaminate the nation and the Southern plantations re-echo the shriek of the tortured negro. The bloodhound’s bay will still proclaim the abhorred institution’s existence and the crack of the driver’s whip the domineering tyranny of the white man over the black . . . War may ravage and desolate North and South, hundreds of thousands of gallant citizens may fall, millions of money may be expended, the union must be preserved, and with it slavery. This is the text of Mr. Lincoln’s policy. Who will justify it? . . . The North requires a better cause than that of honour. . . . Let the emancipation of the negro be her battle cry . . . and then every patriot, every freeman, every lover of liberty will say, go on and conquer for the redemption of the slave.1

Like many others, however, Peter Williams had to wait for Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation but in his New Year editorial of 1863 he declared his intention to destroy, if at all possible the sympathy among his countrymen for the “vile, tyrannical South” created by the agents of the Confederacy with the co-operation of the London Times.2

The opportunity to deal a telling blow in this direction occurred in September, 1863, when an eye-witness account of the sacking of

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2. Ibid., January 3, 1863.

(144)
Lawrence came into his hands. Together with a violent diatribe against the South he printed the letter as coming from the Rev. Samuel Roberts. The latter was a Congregational minister from Llanbrynmair in Montgomeryshire, a man of great influence and known throughout Wales as "S. R." Considerably troubled by the difficulties of the Welsh tenant farmers, he organized a company which bought 100,000 acres of land in east Tennessee in 1856 for the purpose of founding a Welsh settlement. Disputed titles to the land, court cases and finally the Civil War rendered the project virtually still born and eventually Samuel Roberts followed the majority of those who had emigrated with him in 1857 to the North.

The editor of the Merthyr Telegraph, by attributing the authorship of the letter to Samuel Roberts, was, however, wielding a dangerous two-edged weapon. Undoubtedly the latter still had great influence in Wales but to many of the Welsh both in the United States and in Wales itself, deeply concerned over the abolition of slavery, Samuel Roberts was suspect, firstly on account of his attempt to establish a settlement in Tennessee and secondly because he had shrewdly, if unwisely, pointed out that the abolition of slavery could create as many problems as that of slavery itself. Typical of such feeling was a letter written in June, 1861, from Ohio by Humphrey and Sarah Roberts to their family:

The Welsh in America have worshipped Samuel Roberts, Llanbrynmair like Great Diana of Ephesus. He sent a letter here to the North recently saying that he had swallowed the accursed doctrine of the Slave dealers in Tennessee. . . . If he came with his letter, the preachers of the North would give him the coat of tar and feathers which he deserves.3

Whether the editor was aware of this feeling towards Samuel Roberts or whether he felt his residual prestige justified the printing of the letter is problematic.

Unfortunately, he would seem to have been mistaken on this question of authorship, because a study of the papers of Samuel Roberts in the National Library of Wales4 indicates that at the time of the raid he was travelling in Ohio and Pennsylvania. Moreover there is no knowledge of Samuel Roberts ever having been in Lawrence, let alone the eight years mentioned in the letter, as he did not leave Wales until 1857.

As a result of the researches of the editorial board of the Kansas State Historical Society, the identity of the writer has been established as that of Samuel Reynolds. The U. S. census for Kansas,

3. National Library of Wales—Ms. 2600 E.
1860, shows that one T. Reynolds, age 32, a native of England, was farming in Wakarusa township of Douglas county, and S. Reynolds held agricultural lands in the same township, although apparently out of the county at the time the census was taken. In the Kansas state census, 1865, Thomas Reynolds, age 37, is listed in the city of Lawrence as a tailor, and Samuel Reynolds, a native of England, age 40, is shown as a farmer of Wakarusa township. Samuel's family included a child, age 9, born in Kansas, which would put him in the area at the latest by 1856.\(^5\) The fact that the men's birth places are listed as "England" does not preclude the probability that they were emigrants from Wales.

An examination of the Merthyr parish records for the period 1824-1826 shows a family by the name of "Reynolds" living in the Merthyr area but the baptismal records make no mention of either Samuel or Thomas. They may well have been born in another parish as the sending of the letter to the Merthyr Telegraph is no guarantee that they were originally from Merthyr. It is, therefore, virtually certain that the true writer of the letter was Samuel Reynolds but the historian is left to speculate whether Peter Williams, the editor, over-hastily jumped to the conclusion that "S. R." could only be Samuel Roberts or whether, in his eagerness to damn the South, he changed the authorship of the letter on the basis that the name of Samuel Roberts, famous throughout Wales despite a decline in prestige, would carry more weight than that of the unknown Samuel Reynolds. The first explanation is the more likely and the more charitable but why were no protests forthcoming from Reynolds' brother to whom the letter was sent or from those who knew that Samuel Roberts had never lived in Lawrence or, if received, why were they not published?

Nevertheless the following editorial comment and letter on the "Tragedy of Lawrence," published in the Merthyr Telegraph on October 3, 1863, undoubtedly had considerable influence on the attitude of many Welshmen towards the Civil War and provided a formidable stick with which to beat the Confederacy.

II. The Welsh Editor Introduces the Letter of 1863 Under the Title, "The Tragedy of Lawrence"

A letter from the Rev. Samuel Roberts (late of Llanbrynmair) now residing in Lawrence, a town in Kansas, one of the Western States of America.

\(^5\) The Kansas State Historical Society has a Douglas county map of 1857, compiled by J. Cooper Stuck from field notes in the Surveyor General's Office at Lecompton, which shows that S. Reynolds occupied the NE\(\frac{1}{4}\), Sec. 13, T 13 S, R 19 E, and T. Reynolds occupied the SW\(\frac{3}{4}\), Sec. 7, T 13 S, R 20 E.
THE SACKING OF LAWRENCE

Horrible as are the details of the following letter, their correctness is beyond question, as they are written by a gentleman known throughout Wales, not only for his eloquence as a minister, and pre-eminence as author of some of the best hymns of our Welsh Sanctuary but for his undoubted christian character. Much has been said by the sympathizers of the South, and we regret to know that some of these may be found in Merthyr, that the army of the Confederacy is composed of men moved exclusively by patriotic feelings and that in the prosecution of the war, it is they only who practice what are called the amenities of modern warfare. The “Tragedy of Lawrence” will show the falsity of this, and will prove—if anything is capable of proof—that this army is a herd of assassins and that in their raids among unarmed people, neither the cries of women and children, nor the entreaties of old age, have any influence in staying their hands from shedding innocent blood. There is no doubt that for years past the cruelties of these pro-slavery people have been such as to call forth, by means of this rebellion, the vengeance of Almighty God upon them and that in His good time unnumbered hosts of these cut-throats, cowards, off-scourings of Europe and the American Continent, which now compose the Southern army, will be drained away from the face of the earth and that with their ignominious end will dawn an era of liberty and justice for the oppressed negroes, as well as many politically enslaved whites of the Southern States of America.

May God strengthen, say we, the arms of the noble army of the North, to bring about such a noble consummation and the world will be better by being rid of men whose conduct like that in Lawrence, is a reflection on our common humanity.

III. THE LETTER

LAWRENCE, 23 August 1863.

DEAR BROTHER,

You have doubtless heard before this will reach you of the dreadful calamity that has befallen Lawrence and vicinity, by the sacking and burning of the town and the indiscriminate slaughter of its citizens, on Friday, the 21st inst. by Quantrell and his band of incarnate demons (Flying cavalry in the Confederate service). The record will make a page in the history of America alike humiliating to every American who has a spark of manhood left within him, and disgracing, insulting and outraging to common humanity. Such a record would degrade the wildest savage tribe of
our Western plains; and yet these beings, animals (for I cannot call them men) are said to be our “erring brethren” whose rights have been invaded and whose institutions have been trampled upon.

What rights has a murderer, an assassin, a highway-man, but the right to be shot whenever and wherever found? The issue is forced upon us, the people of Kansas. These bushwhackers will kill us or we must kill them. They have proclaimed this policy for some time, and now they have practically and fully adopted it; and by the blessing of God, the issue shall be met by us, as men and patriots, firmly, quickly and, I hope, courageously.

Language fails me to depict the scenes enacted on last Friday. May I never behold the like again. But I must give you some idea of the raid and its dire results.

About sunrise, or a little before, on the 21st ult., four men forcibly entered the house of a Rev. Mr. Snyder, living about a mile south-west of Lawrence, and pierced him through and through with balls from their revolvers, while lying in bed by the side of his wife. At the same time, a body of about three hundred well mounted beings in the shape of men, and armed to the teeth, dashed into the town and spread themselves instantly over the whole business part of the place, shooting down every man who dared to show himself.

In this dash, two small camps of recruits on Massachusetts street (one of white, and the other coloured) were surrounded and the poor defenceless fellows, without a gun in camp and begging most piteously for their lives, were pierced through and through with bullets and all but four of the two unfilled companies [sic] left mangled corpses on the ground. One of these poor fellows thus barbarously murdered for daring to become a Union soldier was a nephew of mine, the sight of whose bleeding, mangled body I shall never forget.

The armoury was cut off from the citizens, pickets stationed around the town and no chance whatever of concentrating even twenty men with arms. The people were completely paralysed by this sudden and audacious dash; indeed the most of them were still in their beds when the work of murder commenced. The banks were robbed, safes broken open, stores ransacked and the best of everything taken, and then the buildings fired. Every man that was encountered was met by them with “Your money or your life” and with few exceptions the poor victim would be shot dead after handing over his purse and answering what questions they chose to put to him.

In several instances they ordered men to get water for them and
wait upon them in various ways, pledging themselves if they would do so their lives should be spared, and as soon as they had done with them, would turn round and shoot them down like mad dogs. One little child they shot dead because it cried. There were those with them who were evidently well acquainted with the town, as the places and persons of active and prominent Union men were made the special marks of vengeance.

General Lane's residence was among the first, and he himself had a narrow escape. The editors of the several papers were objects of special vengeance and two of them were caught and murdered. I shall not attempt to give you a list of the precious lives taken, nor shall I attempt to make an estimate of the property destroyed. This will be done through the papers more correctly than I can do it. I believe, however, that half our business men were either shot down or burnt alive in their houses; and out of the fine blocks of stores of every description only two solitary buildings remain and they were sacked. The rest is a mass of blackened ruins, under which lies, I fear, many a charred body, as many were shot down while attempting to escape from the burning buildings. I fear the dead will foot up nearly, or quite, two hundred. Nearly every house was fired and the best ones fired; but owing to the very stillness of the air at the time, the flames were extinguished in many of the houses as soon as the rebels would leave, and as they had such a large programme before them, the[y] could not repeat any of the performance. The work of murder, arson and robbery lasted about two hours and a half, in which time they had sent over 100 innocent men to the eternal world—deprived a large number of families of food, raiment, house and home and destroyed about two million dollars' worth of property. They then took up their line of march due south, detailing squads of men on either side of the road to burn every house and murder every man. Family after family would slip out into their cornfields to watch their houses burned by these invaders, without being able to offer the least resistance; and woe to any man who had the hardihood to remain at his house and offer remonstrance.

I live but two miles south of Lawrence, and three men were shot between Lawrence and my place for daring to remain in sight—all of them quite peaceable men, and two of them too old to be called upon to do military duty. And now comes the practical application of my own case. A squad of six men were sent from the main body to visit my house. With guns cocked and eyes glaring more ferociously than a tiger's, they dash up to the buildings, apply
the match to a large stack of Hungarian, then to the outbuildings, the barn and sheds and while these are rolling up their volumes of smoke and flames, the house is visited, trunks burst open, drawers and shelves ransacked, all valuables that could be crammed into pockets or strapped on their horses, taken and the rest enveloped in flames.

In a little longer than it has taken me to write this, everything inflammable was consumed—houses, furniture, bedding, clothing, books, provisions, outbuildings—all, all utterly destroyed. The work of eight years hard toil gone in as many minutes and another family thrown out of house and shelter.

By the time the flames began to recede the next house south of mine is rolling up dense volumes of smoke and soon the next, and next and next; and now they visit the house of the old greyheaded Dunkard, who, alas, thought that his age and religion would protect him, but the infuriated demons, thirsting for blood, shot him down regardless of the poor old man's cries and entreaties to spare his life. The track by fire and sword of these murderous villains was made through the valleys and over the hills as far as the eye could reach.

I cannot refrain from giving you an instance or two of the savage barbarity practised by these demons. They brought Mr Trask to the door of his house and told him if he would give up his money they would not shoot him, but as soon as he had given it up, he was instantly shot—he then tried to escape by running, but they shot him dead.

Dr Griswold was in his house when they attacked him. His wife ran and put her arms around him and begged most piteously for his life, when one of them passed his arm holding a revolver, around her and shot him dead.

Mr Fitch they shot in his house and his wife while running to his rescue was dragged away, the house fired and poor Mr Fitch burned up, it may be, alive.

A gentleman by the name of Palmer and his son were burnt up in their shop before dying from their wounds.

Mr Allison of the firm of Duncan and Allison, crawled out from under the burning ruins and they threw him back again into the fire.

But the heart sickens. I can write no more. Oh! God! who shall avenge?

Your brother. S. R.