**The Welsh International Brigade Volunteers:**

**Extra-parliamentary anti-fascist activism or humanitarianism; Community consciousness or communist coercion?**

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**Abstract**

This short dissertation for a Welsh History module examines the printed memoires and oral testimony from the Imperial War Museum Sound Archives of three Welshmen, Alun Menai Williams, Edwin Greening and Robert (Bob) Peters, who joined the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War to analyse their individual motivations for their actions through a psychosocial lens. Their testimony is then cross referenced principally against the historiography of Hywel Francis and Robert Stradling. The traditional viewpoint projected by Francis is that the majority of Welsh volunteers had a mining background and were motivated by anti-fascist sentiment, but Stradling challenges this as only one perspective of a variety of Welsh responses, some of which supported the Nationalist cause, and further suggests that membership of the Communist Party led to some being coerced into action for the Republicans. The analysis of the three biographical accounts shows that years of economic hardships in the depression of the Twenties and early Thirties had coloured the experiences of these men and each chose voluntarily and independently to join the Brigade movement, making informed choices based upon their education, knowledge, social circumstances, and the skills they had to offer. The study applies close study of individual cases to unpick the data and broader view of historians Francis and Stradling.

**Introduction**

*‘From all peoples, from all races, you came to us like brothers’.[[1]](#footnote-1)*

This dissertation aims to compare the testimony of three Welshmen, survivors of the Spanish Civil War, against the established history for evidence of correlation with the accepted view of anti-fascism as the main driver in the community, and the revisionist challenge of other factors and even opposing viewpoints. This study seeks to explain why these men left the social struggle at home to join the Spanish in their own words. The key questions are to identify motivating factors in their psycho-socio–cultural history that produced the desire to participate, whether as a mutual class struggle, as an extension of extra-parliamentary activism, or humanitarian duty provoked by empathy with the Spanish cause, or any other reason, and then to compare this to the accepted history and the criticisms of alternative interpretations.

The First World War resulted in such devastating destruction that many sought a lasting vehicle of peace. Where the League of Nations could have helped demilitarisation, new global stresses occupied world leaders: a severe economic depression, the alarm in western democracies over the Russian Revolution and the growth of international communism and, including, worrying support for Hitler’s leg-stretching *Lebensraum* manoeuvres and Mussolini’s Abyssinian adventures.[[2]](#footnote-2) These all presented disturbing portents. In 1934-1935, while the British Cabinet procrastinated over dividing Mussolini and Hitler,[[3]](#footnote-3) local peace-activists, new ‘apostles’,[[4]](#footnote-4)like Lord David Davies and the Rev. Gwilym Davies co-founders of the Welsh League of Nations Union ,[[5]](#footnote-5) promoted support for the League of Nations’ principles and campaigned against the new European arms race through an independent national ballot with five pertinent questions circulated door-to-door in 1935.[[6]](#footnote-6) Over a million of the Welsh electorate voted for peace with Aberdare, Rhondda and Merthyr Tydfil polling some of the highest turnouts in Britain.[[7]](#footnote-7) Welsh internationalism is to be admired considering that Wales had suffered badly during the ‘locust years’ of the post-war economic depression at the mercy of an unsympathetic Westminster government.[[8]](#footnote-8) Because the socialist and communist strongholds of the Welsh valleys had voted overwhelmingly for peace, the humanitarian support for Spain from 1936 and for the refugees is justifiable, but does that explain the direct-action internationalism of the Welsh International Brigade volunteers months after the ballot?[[9]](#footnote-9)

The Spanish Civil War was not a patriotic war that demanded loyal military duty by British men or any other nation, except the Spanish, yet it attracted international fighters because social theorists and historians agree it was an ideological war. This unusual status explains continued study and re-evaluation. Gerald Brenan’s contemporaneous history demonstrates how the Republicans were anxious to safeguard their young democratic movement and social reform programme,[[10]](#footnote-10) and why the opposing Nationalists, composed of reactionary groups, were intent on resisting the capitulation of power to the people.[[11]](#footnote-11) Unfortunately, Spain became a polarised battleground for two external ideologies: fascism, backed by Germany and Italy, and communism backed by the Soviets. Meanwhile, the middle ground of Europe sat on the fence with a non-intervention policy.[[12]](#footnote-12) The civil war became a testing ground for new armaments and ‘total war,’[[13]](#footnote-13) and signalled the horrors soon to engulf Europe.[[14]](#footnote-14) However, this study will not examine details of the devastating atrocities against civilians or military action. This dissertation will cross-examine the historiography of Hywel Francis and Robert Stradling, against the written and oral testimonies of Welsh International Brigade members, Alun Menai Williams, Edwin Greening and Robert (Bob) Peters. The aim is to assess whether the volunteers’ social backgrounds and their degree of political enlightenment impacted on their motivation to volunteer for the Spanish Civil War. Were the social reforms of the Second Republic of interest, was it the threat to democracy posed by fascism or was it a more visceral, emotional or a spiritual decision that led the men to Spain?

The published thesis from Hywell Francis on the Welsh Brigaders has been the traditional voice used by Graham Davies and others.[[15]](#footnote-15) It demonstrates strong links to union, socialist and communist activists, who had served in union lodges and other politico-social organisations, continuing the tradition of extra-parliamentary protests, strikes, demonstrations and hunger marches, where some were even jailed for their activities.[[16]](#footnote-16) Francis focuses his study on the anti-fascism of the men of the South Wales Miners’ Federation, a cause to which his sympathies as a historian are well established.[[17]](#footnote-17) Francis openly acknowledged Robert Stradling’s later challenge to his work but recognized that Stradling had access to new material from the Moscow archives.[[18]](#footnote-18) However, Francis’s closeness to his subjects allowed him the confidence of the families to private correspondence, oral testimony and memoires that has provided a rich resource to all historians and subsequent scholarship.[[19]](#footnote-19) The miners were not the only participants; most Welsh volunteers were working-class, though some professionals, like surgeons and nurses, participated.[[20]](#footnote-20) Stradling sought to drive a revisionist wedge through the ‘sentimental’ truth-claim of Francis that the ‘mining valleys took Spain and the Means Test as synonymous’ and challenged the objectivity of the study ‘of one homogenous community and its culture’.[[21]](#footnote-21) He questioned the depth of voluntary compliance and enthusiasm within the ranks, pointing at coercion and divisive ongoing monitoring in the field at Communist Party level.[[22]](#footnote-22) He used material from the Moscow Comintern archives of desertions and denunciations, and pointed to the lack of positive post-war volunteer memoires. Stradling introduced mixed messages from contemporary sources that reference alternative opinions within the Welsh community. The comparison of these two historical perspectives will form the basis of the examination of the testimonies mentioned, however further evidence will come from other sources.

Fraser Raeburn’s quantitative and qualitative study of the Scottish contingent reveals similarities to the Welsh, in close interpersonal ties and community backgrounds.[[23]](#footnote-23) In Stradling’s Irish study, religious beliefs were found to divide the participants. O’Duffy Catholic ‘Blueshirts’ supported Franco. Anti-fascist, anti-British Irish Republican Army members under Ryan, perceived to be anti-Catholic, supported the ‘red’ Republic, but struggled to co-operate with British field officers.[[24]](#footnote-24) Raeburn analysed the Scots’ religious background,[[25]](#footnote-25) but Francis paid little heed to religious belief in the Welsh volunteers, except to indicate that anti-Catholicism from Nonconformist ministers resulted in greater donations to Aid Spain relief.[[26]](#footnote-26) Richard Baxell’s thesis examined the entire British Brigade,[[27]](#footnote-27) and Davies has produced an digestible overview of the Welsh contingent.[[28]](#footnote-28) Traditionally, the Liberal Nonconformist Wales of Lloyd-George had supported ‘five feet nations’,[[29]](#footnote-29) but Francis suggestion that Welsh nationalists generally avoided declaring support for either the Republican cause or Basque or Catalan national ambitions is challenged by Delgado’s recent paper.[[30]](#footnote-30) Richard Kisch, a contemporary of Orwell in Spain, chose not to focus on his personal experience in the POUM but describes the impact on the Spanish people.[[31]](#footnote-31) In fact, the entire historiography of the war is enormous and divisive, both in and outside of Spain, and careers, like that of Paul Preston and Stradling,[[32]](#footnote-32) have been built on the bones of the fallen, but the bones are not quiet. Recent exhumations prove the reports of the inhumanity of the Francoist troops that horrified the anti-fascists.[[33]](#footnote-33) The defence of democratic ideals in Spain continues,[[34]](#footnote-34) and humanitarianism is still appreciated.[[35]](#footnote-35)

Chapter One will explore the social-political history of Wales that Francis claimed impacted upon the Welshmen’s decisions to participate through the volunteers’ words, using memoirs and recorded oral testimony, and to weigh this against Stradling’s scepticism. It will explore the sources of radical political or informative material available in Wales, examples of direct action at home and the subsequent choice to carry this action abroad. Chapter Two will examine the historiography against the men’s actions, and critically examine the methodology. Chapter Three explores the retrospective legacy and whether the belief that initiated their participation was strengthened or challenged by the experience.

**Chapter One: The Social History of Three Welsh International Brigade Volunteers**

*‘You can go proudly.’[[36]](#footnote-36)*

As Alun Menai Williams and British Army Medical Corps colleagues waved from the banks of the Suez Canal to the Italian troopship passing on its ‘unobstructed way’ to Abyssinia, he was acutely aware of this ‘obscenity’ in the untamed expansion of fascism.[[37]](#footnote-37) Williams was disappointed with the ‘toothless and helpless’ League of Nations that ‘went to sleep and died’ and the ‘National Government’s right-wing bias and fears of communism‘ that chose to overlook the ‘fascist threat’.[[38]](#footnote-38) Cabinet papers from 1936 confirm his suspicions that despite the Ethiopian crisis, foreign policies prioritised the isolation of Mussolini from a potential alliance with Hitler, leading to continuing appeasement, and the non-intervention pact against Spain.[[39]](#footnote-39) Spain was not deliberated until the coup was underway. Initially, the Nationalist groups were labelled ‘insurgents’ and the problem was perceived by Cabinet members as ‘troublesome’ because it interfered with the Italian negotiations, but presented an excellent opportunity for Britain to create an airbase at Gibraltar, unchallenged by the warring Spanish parties.[[40]](#footnote-40) Even the bombing of Guernica on 25th April 1937 rattled the Americans more than the Cabinet.[[41]](#footnote-41) If MI6 collusion in aiding Franco had remained hidden,[[42]](#footnote-42) the interpretation of initial Cabinet deliberations might have indicated that the non-intervention policy with France arose from government lack-of- preparedness, or accidentalism at its worst, leaving it to individuals like Williams to decide for themselves to abandon hope in peace and the League of Nations, and join the fight to defend the ‘gang rape of a country’, based on their own knowledge and conscience.[[43]](#footnote-43)

Williams returned to civilian life, monitoring the news, from the *Daily Worker* to the government-backing mainstream media.[[44]](#footnote-44) He attended speeches at Hyde Park and the anti-fascist protest at Cable Street against Mosely’s Blackshirts. His old schoolfriend, Billy Davies, who was more politically aware, went to Spain first.[[45]](#footnote-45) Though antifascist, Alun decided to volunteer not for combat but for more humanitarian grounds, believing his medical skills, trained but untested by the British Army, could be valuable to the Spanish Republicans.[[46]](#footnote-46) Bob Peters, a recent Welsh emigrant from Penarth to Canada, witness to the precarious employment opportunities of the poor in Wales and Canada in the Depression, became aware of the situation in Spain. For him and a colleague, talk of starting unions for deckhands and the rise of fascism in Italy and Germany took on an immediacy with news of the coup in Spain against a legitimate government with clear aims to ‘end poverty and economic and social discrimination.’ Thus, they found ‘their cause’.[[47]](#footnote-47) The left-leaning *Toronto Daily Star* had inspiring reports from journalist Frederick Griffin, at the Madrid battlefront, and the example of Canadian communists volunteering for the Popular Front, roused ‘the idealist and angry poor of Canada’, including Bob and his friend.[[48]](#footnote-48) Meanwhile, self-educated communist activist ex-miner Edwin Greening in Aberdare abandoned his ongoing efforts to improve both local problems of poverty and his personal prospects to heed the call to arms. Edwin was a campaigner for aid for Republican Spain, however returned-International-Brigader-turned-recruiter, Will Lloyd, called for volunteers at a local meeting and Edwin offered.[[49]](#footnote-49) Since Edwin’s brother had been refused on medical grounds, Edwin says that he would have applied sooner but he thought his use of spectacles would be reason to reject him.[[50]](#footnote-50) None of these three men ever hesitated in thinking that their individual contribution would not help the sum of the parts in defending the rights of the democratically elected government to implement much needed social reforms, and each arrived at the decision independently, not coerced but united with others by common causes.

Alun Menai Williams, son of acclaimed poet and colliery official Huw Menai Williams, has written an engagingly poetic but politically enlightened personal account from his youth to his experiences in Spain, stating that he makes no apology for his storytelling style of ‘people’s remembrancer’.[[51]](#footnote-51) He explained that he is short on details because of selective memory, in which the ‘mental nasties’ of the horrors he witnesses resulted in ‘denial’ and ‘long spells of amnesia’.[[52]](#footnote-52) This is best understood as Post-traumatic Stress Disorder.[[53]](#footnote-53) He grew up in a relatively prosperous home with seven siblings until the 1926 Lockout and Great Strike, when his father’s mine closed and poverty crept up on his family. His father disappeared into socially isolating depression and economic ‘impotence’ on the dole.[[54]](#footnote-54) So, Alun finished school at fourteen and signed on immediately as a child miner to help support the family, surviving the horrors of a pit rockfall and three and a half years at the coalface. His testimony points to the struggles, ’the change and upheaval’ in the Welsh mining communities through the decade from the Great Strike to the Spanish Civil War, describing the impact upon the social fabric.[[55]](#footnote-55) Like many young people, he ‘Ragged-trousered-ly’ sought explanations for the plight of his class. His father and others introduced him to the budding-Bolshevik’s-bucket-booklist in the Workmen’s Hall library.[[56]](#footnote-56)His memoirs are littered with personal and poetically colourful commentary on contemporary political and economic events and analysis of the effects or relevance to the events in the narrative. The people, he suggested, were ‘crushed’ by the Wall Street Crash in 1929 which only proved advantageous to the City’s brigade of ‘bowler hat and pinstripe’ ‘floundering in phoney economic theories’, and the court bailiffs of mining villages where they ‘worked overtime’.[[57]](#footnote-57) The Williams were evicted, saved only from homelessness by help from Huw’s literary friends. The life of unemployment in a new valley, separated from the support network of the old ‘belonging society,’ and family tensions resulted in Alun’s second spontaneous choice to follow the migratory exodus route of many young people from South Wales to London.[[58]](#footnote-58) Life in London was tough amongst the impoverished room-renting labouring classes. It may have been the ‘heart of the Empire’ as his teacher once told him, but he was saddened to see the ‘pin stripes and umbrellas’ ignore the ‘bedraggled men marching in step with banners aloft, declaring they were hungry’?[[59]](#footnote-59) A wristwatch and learning to cheat could prove useful survival tools, he decided, though the second was contrary to memories of Welsh nonconformist teachings of ’Thou shall and shall not’.[[60]](#footnote-60) The later route to Spain for Alun lay in his third snap decision: to join the British Army. ‘The Guards,’ he suggested to the recruiting sergeant, who quickly dismissed the idea, though Alun stood six foot two. No, the Medical Corps was the life-changing decision by that sergeant.[[61]](#footnote-61)

Alun’s literary description of the desperation in the valleys of the twenties and thirties is matched by Bob Peters’ testimony, recorded by freelance writer Greg Lewis.[[62]](#footnote-62) Written seventy years after the events, it contains some primary sources. Bob was born into a large family in Penarth. His father, a chauffeur before the Great War, was promoted to Calvary officer in the field, only to ‘disappear’ completely, and the implication is ‘conveniently’, before returning home to his working-class roots and nine children.[[63]](#footnote-63) Bob also left school at fourteen to assist the family purse with shop work and milk-rounds. With the deep depression in South Wales, Bob’s older brother emigrated to Canada in 1927. Bob asked to try Australia but at sixteen years his mother gave him permission to go to Canada through the Salvation Army assisted scheme.[[64]](#footnote-64) He worked on farms, in lumber camps, on construction, and then boats on the Great Lakes.[[65]](#footnote-65) He witnessed the social effects of the Great Depression, the homelessness, ‘the hobo jungles’ and the drifters.[[66]](#footnote-66) Even in Canada, politics became polarised from the formation of a local union of fascists to the more popular ‘socialism and communism’ and anti-fascism.[[67]](#footnote-67) The cause of Spain became a rallying cry for the unions and Communists to fight ’international fascism’; Bob and his friend ‘knew all about it’, including the social aims of the Second Republic of Spain, and were adventurous and keen to help.[[68]](#footnote-68)

Edwin Greening was another young man struggling to survive the indignities of endemic poverty in the mining community of Aberdare in the Communist stronghold of the Cynon Valley.[[69]](#footnote-69) His testimony has been retrieved from letters to families, friends and the *Aberdare Leader*, diaries and notebooks, written contemporaneously.[[70]](#footnote-70) He is more direct and detailed than Alun Williams, who authenticated his notes. Sometimes social and political commentary is repeated but his notebooks proved useful towards the end of the Spanish Civil War to rebuff criticism, for his later book and recorded interviews in the *Imperial War Museum Sound Archives.*[[71]](#footnote-71) Edwin grew up acutely aware of his family’s humble class and the inability to rise out of it even through constant self-education. Meritocracy did not exist in the habitus of the Welsh mining communities, it seemed to him.[[72]](#footnote-72) Like Alun, he joined his father, a skilled miner, at the coalface also aged fourteen, and he expresses a sense of regret repeatedly that society marked a miner or an ex-miner as just that, a lesser mortal fit only for that purpose. The books in the miners’ libraries, his Uncle Gwilym’s book collection,[[73]](#footnote-73) Workmen’s Halls, the cinemas,[[74]](#footnote-74) meetings and the Left Book Club[[75]](#footnote-75) could all inspire the men like Edwin, Alun, and Bob to learn, but Edwin argues that, if opportunities were still denied, the system was inadequate and needed changing. This then became the focus of his early life: political activism. Looking to advance his circumstances, though hindered by the difficulties in steady employment, he studied constantly for matriculation to university; he was the epitome of the autodidact, or, as Hywel Francis called him, ‘a Worker Intellectual.[[76]](#footnote-76) He never mentions religion but frequently states that he did not drink, smoke or gamble; traits of a nonconformist habitus transposed, according to Will Paynter and Phil Abrahams in Francis, and Greening’s interview, into the Spartan ‘personal discipline’ of early Communist Party members.[[77]](#footnote-77)

Like Alun and Bob, he had periods away from Wales for work, adrift without study material and political allies. He became ‘hooked’ on politics early, starting in the Independent Labour Party before moving to the Communist Party.[[78]](#footnote-78) He describes differences in attitude, activity and the theoretical political education, and declares the Communists were superior in all aspects, detailing all the publications to which he had access.[[79]](#footnote-79) He taught himself to speak publicly and authoritatively.[[80]](#footnote-80) He recognized the inadequacy of virtual representation to resolve all ills, though he lobbied and challenged the local Labour MP in numerous public meetings.[[81]](#footnote-81) When normal representative means failed to address the Unemployment Bill and the Means Test, he became a leader of extra-parliamentary marches.[[82]](#footnote-82) His only encounter with Mosely’s Blackshirts came when his group sang over the top of their propaganda meeting in Aberdare, noting that the fascists generally avoided his valley.[[83]](#footnote-83) He was thus a visible member of the Communist Party, fighting ‘the scandal of unemployment and the menace of Fascism and war’, but he was not unaware of affairs in Spain.[[84]](#footnote-84) Though anti-war, Spain and the Republican cause were another crusade to him, and, given his recorded activism, it appears that he liked to lead from the front. In this context, Edwin, more than Bob or Alun, fits the profile of Hywel Francis’ Spanish Civil War volunteer, that of a committed communist ex-miner anti-fascist political activist.

The *Imperial War Museum Sound Archives* (IWMSA) have hours of recorded interviews, by researcher Conrad Wood and others, of volunteers across all the classes and all the regions, from university-educated surgeons to lowly ex-miners and deckhands.[[85]](#footnote-85) These all testify that, as the Right Honourable Rhodri Morgan writes, they had ‘gut feelings about the evils of fascism that didn’t reach the highly-educated politicians and diplomats of the establishment, who stuck religiously to non-intervention’ despite, as the *Sunday Times* explains, the atrocities of the Guernika bombing or the strafing of civilian refugee columns.[[86]](#footnote-86) Recordings exist of Williams, Peters and Greening but the researcher has cross-referenced to other members of the IB to confirm and verify the findings that socio-political motivational factors impacted upon decisions to volunteer and secondly to discover how the experience changed post-war outcomes. Some volunteers identify earlier socialist sympathies but most talk of anti-fascism. However, anti-fascism was not the only driving ideology or discourse, and the psychosocial analysis of volunteers’ testimonies has yet to be applied closely, though Preston has examined some principal protagonists in this fashion.[[87]](#footnote-87)

The social histories of these proletarian Welshman in the economic depression from the 1920s to 1930s illustrate that they were not alone in exhibiting all the signs of Marx’s alienation from the product, process and Self.[[88]](#footnote-88) The predominantly Conservative National Government, led by Baldwin and Chamberlain and backed by the ‘pinstripe and bowler hat/umbrella’ *bourgeoisie,*[[89]](#footnote-89) seemed impervious to parliamentary lobbying or extra-parliamentary action with a ‘Safety First’ approach that extended to the lockouts, strikes and hunger marches that exacerbated alienation from Jarrow to South Wales.[[90]](#footnote-90) The blackened death of the pit had not been improved by migration or emigration in the Black Death on Wheels (or steamer) and life on the dole brought the ‘social hell‘ of depression, grinding poverty and lost years.[[91]](#footnote-91) [[92]](#footnote-92) Edwin describes himself as unmarriageable as an unemployed-ex-miner-sometime-labourer.[[93]](#footnote-93) Indeed, the men married late. Bourdieu’s argument that the collective habitus is rarely overcome to improve the social standing of an individual was of great concern to Edwin as he struggled to educate himself out of his predicament.[[94]](#footnote-94)

‘I believed in the Marxist axiom,’’the basis of life is struggle’’. I braced my shoulders and faced the grim reality of Aberdare Valley with its 50% + workless, Wales with its 25% workless and Great Britain as a whole with 16% unemployed.’[[95]](#footnote-95)

He sought solace in the class struggle only for this to mark him as ‘dangerous’ troublemaker with the authorities as it did others, and opportunities were frequently blocked.[[96]](#footnote-96) He sought to be a voice for the voiceless in his valley. Even after a middle-class career as a teacher, Greening declared to his interviewer that as an employee of the education authority he remained in his habitus of a member of the proletariat.[[97]](#footnote-97)

It is evident from these histories that the struggle to survive in South Wales for the young unemployed was the predominant factor that governed their lives; thriving was a pipedream. Far from the proletariat being ready for a revolution in Britain, these men just wanted a fair wage and respect from government, and certainly not institutional support for fascists.[[98]](#footnote-98) ‘Communism is an anathema to the British people’, declared Edwin in his interview; it was never going to be embraced globally and did not warrant the institutional anxiety and control that it caused.[[99]](#footnote-99) Supporting social reforms and defending democracy in Republican Spain became an extension of their struggles in Wales.

Stradling questions the absence of volunteer voices in memoires, implying that the experience in Spain was not as edifying as the Francis’ folklore-history suggests. This researcher would propose four causes of reluctance, but there are probably more. Firstly, as Alun identified, there was the effect of PTSD, a desire to forget the horrors for a while, then secondly, the entry into the horrifying chapter of World War Two; survivors of the sierras also had to survive that conflict. Thirdly, there was institutional bias against these volunteers for daring to flout the Foreign Fighters law. Some were communists, but others were also marked as dangerous dissenters, therefore publishers would be cautious if offered a manuscript, and besides these men were trying to create new lives in a post-war world without a social label. Lastly, sometimes the encouragement of others is necessary to unlock the ‘secret’ of the Legend and leave its legacy for future generations.[[100]](#footnote-100)

**Chapter Two: The Legend of the Welsh International Brigaders**

*‘You are History’[[101]](#footnote-101)*

Hywel Francis and Robert Stradling have analysed the evidence as a quantitative and qualitative exercise with a top-down overview, as have others, like Baxell and Fraser.[[102]](#footnote-102) Marxist historian Francis, with strong links to the miners via the South Wales Miners’ Federation, based his figures upon his 1977 thesis. Francis covers much of the stepwise development of the extra-parliamentary activities of the communist community, unions and the Labour Party from the ‘industrial struggle at the pit’, that Greening mentions, and the community activities in the 1920s and 1930s that built a united front.[[103]](#footnote-103) Hardened Tory attitudes and liberal laissez-faire among traditional elites that had governed the politics of Wales in the House of Commons were supplanted by strong socialist and communist activism in the valley communities as the change in voting habits over decades reveals.[[104]](#footnote-104) The objective of the valleys’ unemployed was economic survival. Global trade for Welsh coal had plummeted, pit closures followed, the coal owners pushed wages down after the end of the 1926 lockout, and the exodus to England and the colonies began for the young, like Williams, Greening and Peters. The Unemployment Bill and the Means Test were protested half-heartedly by the weak Labour Party, as Greening illustrates in his chapter ‘Edwin Greening versus George Hall’,[[105]](#footnote-105) and the hunger marchers tramped to London to be ignored by Baldwin and the Cabinet.[[106]](#footnote-106) These then were the disenchanted local activists that Francis identifies, engaged in a constant social struggle and using the time of unemployment and lockouts to educate themselves about other economic and social systems. Aggravated by government intransigence in resolving the economic misfortunes of South Wales, establishment discrimination and jailings of activists, and witnessing collusion with the growing extreme right wing, Spain became a beacon in their fight for democracy.[[107]](#footnote-107).

However, Robert Stradling questions whether there were sufficient of these men to confirm Francis’ supposition that the principal motivation for the subsequent narrative of Glyndwr-style folklore heroes was ‘fighting for fairness’ or whether it was not merely coercion from Communist party hardliners that forced men to go.[[108]](#footnote-108) Another query from Stradling is why the Welsh turned up later than other groups from Britain. The first wave, in the autumn of 1936, was composed of idealistic middle to upper class intellectuals, men like Orwell, John Cornford and Ralph Fox, with private means to support their own journey.[[109]](#footnote-109) The Welshmen were generally poor after years of hardship and required assistance to go. They arrived in batches from the end of 1936 to 1937, until the committees ran out of volunteers in 1938.[[110]](#footnote-110) If analysis shows a disproportionate number of Communists in the group, whether miner or other occupation, this was to be expected given that the CPGB was funding each man on his journey.[[111]](#footnote-111) Vetting was essential to ensure that single men, preferably trained soldiers or possessing other useful skills, such as radio operators, linguists, mechanics, surgical and nursing staff could reach the front via secret routes organised with European colleagues. Not all were accepted in London or Paris, where a second medical was performed. Furthermore, a political assessment was made, as to loyalty to the cause. Most men were sufficiently cogent in socialist material, yet not all were CPGB members as the lists show.[[112]](#footnote-112) Since Stradling’s study with post- Glasnost access to the Moscow Comintern and Special Branch files, the number of volunteers with Welsh roots has crept upwards. Unfortunately, the proven cruelty of the Nationalist troops during and after the war, means that some men died in mysterious circumstances, in battle and as prisoners, with their resting places unknown.[[113]](#footnote-113) Information was denied for many years by the Francoist regime.[[114]](#footnote-114) The new Law of Democratic Memory is facilitating continued academic research, archaeological digs, exhumations and reburials and memorials and international associations assist in safeguarding material, continued education and the aiding of family members who wish to visit the sites where their forebears fought and often died.[[115]](#footnote-115)

In his Data Analysis, Stradling picks apart records to arrive at a figure of 148. He separates these into ‘serving’ soldiers and those in administrative or support roles, even separating anti-tank and artillery from the number.[[116]](#footnote-116) He does not explain the rationale for segregation, but it devalues the contribution of volunteers like medic Alun, Bob Peters as a dispatch rider , or even the surgeon Dr Alex Tudor Hart to the whole effort.[[117]](#footnote-117) He corrects Francis’ figure of Communist Party membership based upon the latest numbers and proceeds to diminish the ‘overall density’ of Party members to ‘just over 70 percent’, less than the Battalion figure of 74 percent, but higher than the French group. By arguing that ‘a high proportion’ had no mining background with around forty not even communist, he seeks to challenge the accepted history. Yet, the analysis of the origin, occupation, and political party membership of the Welshmen seems to confirm Francis’ findings.[[118]](#footnote-118) Francis’s review of the men’s letters confirm their allegiance to the cause.[[119]](#footnote-119)

Both Francis and Stradling discuss the difficulties in recruitment at local level. For example, initially the CPGB asked Billy Griffith to recruit, then requested that he should go to Spain in 1938, to which he remarked: ‘In the early days one was victimised and lost one’s job. Later the struggle became sharper, and one went to prison. Now it was expected that one should die for the party.’[[120]](#footnote-120)This cynical man became a political commissar to the British Battalion, and as such, the Party informer. Griffiths was one of those complicit in the records that emerged from Moscow, with the power to imprison or sentence to death those who did not tow the Party line in Spain and Greening came in his sights.[[121]](#footnote-121) Stradling uses the Moscow files based on political commissars’ notes to challenge both the discipline of the men and the loyalty to the cause.[[122]](#footnote-122) However, the evidence and notes from Moscow and Kew are often incomplete, contain errors and can be personally charged, requiring scepticism in the interpretation. The International Brigade Memorial Trust website and other historians, like Davies, add an advisory notice of this .[[123]](#footnote-123) Kevin Morgan has examined the MI5 and Special Branch surveillance of the British Communists, including the period of the 1930s. [[124]](#footnote-124) He finds that successive Home Secretaries ‘declined to authorise a Home Office Warrant on Moseley’ but supported known fascists, like Maxwell Knight, working for MI5 to infiltrate and monitor the British Communists. He cites IB fighter, Ralph Fox, who wrote about suspicions of surveillance, before dying in Spain in 1936. The King Street headquarters where the Spanish volunteers were interviewed were bugged for decades.[[125]](#footnote-125)

In a paper by Edwin Greening describing the 1926 Lockout, there is an interview with Aberdare activist Max Goldberg about his imprisonment with hard labour as an active Communist. The charges usually levelled against activists were for possession of material liable to cause dissension among the forces or civilian population, the Defence of the Realm Act.[[126]](#footnote-126) Prison sentences conveniently permitted bosses to sack the ‘agitator,’ adding to further social isolation and discontent. [[127]](#footnote-127) Thus, the authorities could misuse the law to persecute those with Communist links. This discrimination against the Communists continued long after their participation in Spain. Bob Peters had decided to return to Wales on repatriation. He was lucky to have a choice. The Canadian government refused entry to Canadian volunteers as undesirables under the foreign fighters’ law and many non-citizens were marooned in exile in Europe. This has relevance today with the case of Shamima Begum and her battle with the Home Office over her revoked citizenship.[[128]](#footnote-128) In light of recent conflicts, with the Ukraine being the latest, historians like Raeburn believe that research on ‘radicalisation’ in the international recruitment of fighters or humanitarian support is important, given the fragility of citizens’ rights in the face of following ill-chosen crusades. [[129]](#footnote-129) When World War Two began, Brigade volunteers were frequently ‘exempt’, a euphemism for ‘not required’ because of their political beliefs,[[130]](#footnote-130) but these three volunteers heeded the patriotic call-to-arms against the Axis powers, and eventually contributed again to the anti-fascist battle.

In Spain, the commissars’ political analysis in the archives frequently conflicted with the military record; ‘good comrades’ might make poor fighters, and vice versa.[[131]](#footnote-131) Furthermore, where records showed ‘desertion,’ unexplained absences from the battalion might be explained by the volatile nature of the trialling of *Blitzkrieg* on the Spanish plains. Men could be separated from their battalion for days trying to break back through the rapidly moving frontlines to safety, as Greening and Williams report.[[132]](#footnote-132) Davies has included many short records of the men that present such contentious accounts.[[133]](#footnote-133) The ‘Nominal Roll’ of the Battalion was kept daily. After Ebro, Alun detailed the losses to Edwin from the Roll, when Edwin’s team reappeared and boosted the numbers.[[134]](#footnote-134) Stradling mentioned that Greening came under ‘suspicion for serious disaffection’ during the Ebro campaign and wonders if Edwin ever knew the source. It appears that Griffiths believed him to be a neo-Trotskyist that encouraged desertion, an accusation that placed Greening in great danger of imprisonment or worse.[[135]](#footnote-135) Indeed, Edwin records two events that may explain this suspicious ‘Third Party’ assessment of his state-of-mind but knew nothing until later of any hidden agenda. Firstly, after a battalion talk by CPGB leader Harry Pollitt on the 28th of August 1938, in a face-to-face handshake with Pollitt, Edwin recalls bursting into tears.[[136]](#footnote-136) Given that he and Alun Williams had three days before buried their friend, Tom Howell Jones, in a crevice on a stony hillside in the Sierra de Pàndols, then received a letter from home informing of his niece’s death, he had just learned from Pollitt that the European political situation was deteriorating still further; he was temporarily overcome. He insists that neither he, nor any man he knew, ever begged to be repatriated.[[137]](#footnote-137) There were such repatriation requests though, as Stradling shows with Paynter’s account, especially between the battle of Jarama and Brunette.[[138]](#footnote-138) The second incident was a strange conversation between Edwin and two Brigade members, Jim Brewer and Lance Rogers. about investigations into unexplained absences from the Battalion. Edwin deemed it alarming enough to challenge at headquarters, rebuffing any queries directly with commanders through his own dated records.[[139]](#footnote-139) Unfortunately, the ‘mischief-making’ and incomplete records’ issue rumbled on later, as a source of anguish, recriminations and mystery for the survivors and families of the deceased.[[140]](#footnote-140) Greening was not the only Brigader to fall foul of gaps or misunderstandings in the records.[[141]](#footnote-141) The psychology or motives behind the dangerous and politically damaging reports appears not to have been examined, yet Stradling used these themes to undermine the cause.

Maurice Levine, a British Battalion member from Manchester, contends that the phrasing and interpretation of material by historians has also resulted in mistrust.[[142]](#footnote-142) Levine dismissed Orwell’s *Homage to Catalonia* as divisive. Firstly, he expresses anger at Orwell’s description of quiet trenches, when his front was under pressure, and secondly in the presentation of the anarchist-versus-Communist subplot in Barcelona in 1937.[[143]](#footnote-143) He also cites Hugh Thomas’s offensive assertion that many volunteers were ‘ne’er-do-wells and had personal problems’.[[144]](#footnote-144) The reader must judge from the men’s own accounts and the researcher must constantly cross-reference to many sources to verify circumstances and rebuild the events.[[145]](#footnote-145) Stradling acknowledges in his preface that he had the support in his writing of two volunteers, Frank Thomas, the only Welshman who fought on the Francoist Nationalist side, and Lance Rogers, whose ‘mischief-making’ and contradictory records might suggest that both men had cause to influence the rewriting of history.[[146]](#footnote-146) Thus, the use and misuse of unreliable and biased archival records is of great relevance to the honour and the ‘legend’ of these men, and caution is advised.[[147]](#footnote-147)

Stradling goes further to present a series of challenging arguments that this dissertation cannot address but that point to a general indifference and cynicism in the province that is belied by the conventional truth-claim. He uses a variety of sources and techniques, for example analysis of the split press. He compares the right-wing *Western Mail,* owned by the Catholic Bute family, who had economic interests in Spain, supported non-interventionism and possibly financed Franco,[[148]](#footnote-148) with the nonconformist *Seren Cymru,* voice of the Baptists, that even forgave the anticlerical violence, citing the reformist need of the Spanish people to throw off the yoke of Catholicism.[[149]](#footnote-149) Anticlerical violence was a common thread in the *Daily Mail* to encourage support for Franco by fascist-supporting Viscount Rothermere.[[150]](#footnote-150) Stradling therefore suggests that Welsh public opinion must be examined with a wider range of sources for evidence of support of Franco as well as the Republic.

Stradling challenges the premise that the Welshmen were as valuable to the IB as the myth demanded by concluding that no-one in Spain remarked on any special Welsh quality except Franco’s psychologist, Colonel Vallejo, applying eugenic doctrine to IB prisoners to find the ‘Red Gene’ in the San Pedro concentration camp.[[151]](#footnote-151) The Welshmen did not seek to stamp their own identity. It was an international effort requiring cohesion.[[152]](#footnote-152). They modestly served where their skills were required. Alun served with the German battalion, then the Americans, then the British. Bob, the dispatch rider, was the link between various units. Only Edwin served solely in the British Battalion, and all served alongside Spanish soldiers. The Welsh did impress others with their level of political education, their interest in reading and singing and the production of wall newspapers.[[153]](#footnote-153) Those studies, on the dole, had left an international legacy.

**Chapter Three: The legacy of the Welsh Brigaders**

**‘***You are Legend.’[[154]](#footnote-154)*

After Spain, Alun became a storekeeper in a RAF establishment then a non-commissioned RAF Provost officer in the Second World War.[[155]](#footnote-155) He did not volunteer a second time to use his expertise and experience as a medic. The medical horrors witnessed in one war were sufficient. After demobilisation, he became store manager for a garage chain and eventually the General Manager. His life was thus a steady meritocratic rise in social standing from the fourteen-year-old, who descended into the bowels of the earth with a near-death experience to earn a crust for the family and a fortune for the boss. He was a quiet survivor of the Sierras, who missed his vocation as a writer or poet, and thus disappointed Stradling. With the right questions, the words were ready.

Bob Peters was one of those Brigaders who volunteered for the British Army early, only to be denied, until the State called him up as things deteriorated.[[156]](#footnote-156) Once more he was a driver, serving in Egypt, Sicily, Italy and Yugoslavia. He had now served almost eight years in the field, since being shot in July 1937 at the Battle of Brunette. The stray Italian bullet that ‘saved’ his life, had not exploded. The enemy were frequently using exploding bullets, dum-dums, prohibited by signatories to the Hague Convention of 1899.[[157]](#footnote-157) Having entered at an unusual angle, it was not easily tracked by the s*anitarios* (paramedics like Alun). A radiograph taken in Madrid showed the bullet was lodged intact near to the spine and surgeons opted to leave it alone. After recovery, he joined the driving pool as a dispatch-driver. He assumes bumpy tracks dislodged the bullet, which wormed a passage to the flesh of his arm with easier surgical access.[[158]](#footnote-158) Having survived two wars, he passed through a variety of modest jobs, always returning to driving, but never earned sufficient to resume life in Canada.

Edwin Greening, intent on improving his future, had determined to become a teacher long before the end of the Spanish Civil War. Chosen for an international observer’s training school before the Ebro battle in June 1938, he found that the British men present were ‘all university men’. When asked where he had studied, Edwin realised that he could hold his own in that habitus if the opportunity presented.[[159]](#footnote-159) He had to wait until he completed his military service in the Second World War to qualify as a teacher in 1948. From 1960 to 1968 he served his community as a district councillor.[[160]](#footnote-160) His inspiring journey of self-improvement had lifted him from Uncle Gwilym’s parlour aged ten to a teacher aged thirty-eight to become that ‘working class intellectual’ honoured by Hywel Francis.[[161]](#footnote-161)

Gone for these men of the valleys were the expectations of a mining job for life (or death and disability), the grinding poverty and large families. They all married late: Alun at thirty, Bob at twenty-five, and Edwin at thirty-six, and had living to catch up on and plans to action. The time in Spain was not forgotten, the friends they lost and the friends they gained, and the admiration for the Spanish in the ‘unequal struggle’.[[162]](#footnote-162) They understood but could not forgive that ‘Messrs Chamberlain and Daladier, authors of the hideous non-intervention pact had loaded the dice against [them]’.[[163]](#footnote-163) In the immediate weeks after their return, they were feted and often asked to speak. Bob and Alun were introverted in such meetings. Bob spoke at a fund-raising event for the Basque refugees, and Alun persevered against disbelieving anti-communist hecklers. So, he retired from public appearances, ‘crawled into his shell’ and resisted all ‘isms, political and otherwise, active or benign.’[[164]](#footnote-164) Edwin, when asked for an opinion, found he was laughed at for warning that ‘we are on the verge of war. I can literally smell the gunpowder in the air.’[[165]](#footnote-165) Thus most men were disinclined to write their own history, until Francis and others prised it out of them later. Though anti-fascism drew all three men to Spain, only Edwin remained politically active afterwards.

Each man expressed no regret, though they grieved for comrades and the cause. Alun was emphatic in his interview that he would do it again because he never met later the equivalent of the brave people he met in Spain.[[166]](#footnote-166) Bob said it was the only ‘worthwhile thing’ he did in his life and he was very proud.[[167]](#footnote-167) Edwin felt he gained the maturity required to be patient in his ambitions and with people, and that the Brigades showed that internationalism could fight tyranny.[[168]](#footnote-168) These sentiments are common to the other ‘citizens of the world‘ who volunteered, and explain why the Brigades continue to be celebrated, not just the Welsh group.[[169]](#footnote-169) These were ordinary men and women performing extraordinary feats for the rights of other ordinary people.

**Conclusion**

*‘There was the spectacle, breathtaking in its grandeur, of the formation of International Brigades to help save a threatened country’s freedom and independence.’[[170]](#footnote-170)*

As the evidence shows, the bowler-hats-and-pinstripes in their London clubs reading the non-intervention-supporting mainstream press, approved appeasement in the House and Cabinet, backed the Blackshirts, castigated communists, disciplined dissenters, while scheming the next capitalist venture at the expense of the British proletariat. Meanwhile this study has introduced examples of the quiet and not-so-quiet men from the valleys who took on the mantle of leadership in the defence of social values, dignity in employment and unemployment, and democracy at home and abroad. The Welsh had overwhelmingly voted for the principles of peace and demilitarisation in 1935, but not at any cost. Self-educated, dignified despite years of economic hardships, politically astute enough to see what Eton ex-scholars did not see or did not want to see, these Welshmen did not ask to be heroes in the field of battle or afterwards in the history books.

They quietly left and said nothing, occasionally prompted by a friend, colleague, or Party meeting. Each just wanted to use their skillset and enthusiasm to support the anti-fascist cause in a practical way, as Alun Menai Williams writes. Bob expressed a modicum of adventure-seeking that brought him four thousand miles back to Europe, but anti-fascist politics lay as the prime reason. Edwin was not looking for a Communist revolution, though supported by the Communist Party and the Comintern. They read the alternative press and viewed the Civil War as an assault by Franco’s reactionary forces on all the social changes of the fledgling democratic government of the Second Republic, land reform, modernisation and unionisation, the power of the church, values that were familiar to the men of Wales. The espadrilled ragged-trousered Welshmen may have been foreigners but they were never alien to the cause fought in the plains and mortared sierras.

If Stradling questions the projection of folk-hero status to the miners of Wales at the expense of others, Hywel Francis did not write his history with this intention. Francis wished to examine the route to Spain through the unions, political parties and local activism. The miners were his link to this community and formed the greatest group within the volunteers. Though Edwin Greening and Alun Menai Williams were part of this group technically, Alun decided three and a half years underground and one pit rockfall was quite sufficient, and Edwin was frequently unemployed, leaving him keen to become an ex-miner by any means, especially if it involved books. Both historians do confirm the predominate anti-fascist ex-miner credentials of the Welsh volunteers, though alternative occupations were represented. Further exploration of psychosocial drivers for the subject history-makers remains a possibility.

Stradling remained sceptical at the end of his study of the ‘sense of historical mission’ and failed to attribute the ‘profound class solidarity and empathy’ that he believed the myth required. He questions whether a ‘unique informed […] internationalism’ and ‘unique political development’ is sufficiently proven to create another Welsh legend.[[171]](#footnote-171) This study challenges the misplaced focus and methodology of his investigations. Maybe, the myth is more powerful in that individuals with a similar socio-political background made the same decision independently without coercion.

Furthermore, this study has shown how relying upon archives for accurate information is as problematic as reading first person accounts. Just as these memoirs are coloured by the experiences and perspectives of the writer and biased, archives are not always neutral, especially if controlled by political bodies or intelligence surveillance. The use of these memoirs can be challenged, where they were not published as contemporaneously as George Orwell or Gerald Brennan, but adequate explanation of the post-Spanish Civil War difficulties and the men’s caution justifies the delay. Greening writes with most contemporaneous daily detail, Alun with most poetic eloquence and Lewis helped Bob to compose his story. Each has merits and just as the sum of the parts in the British Battalion made the joint effort worthwhile for a brief time, these works help us to analyse the historiography from beneath, and to bring in psychosocial evaluation that had a bearing upon individual actions in the making of history.

If these Welshmen were a community of twentieth-century justice-seeking Glyndwrs, creating myths of heroic deeds against superior military forces, then the bardic words that hailed the legend came not from Francis for the Welsh alone, but from La Pasionaria, Dolores Ibárruri, for all the International Brigades.

*‘Banners of Spain! Salute these many heroes! Be lowered to honour so many martyrs!’[[172]](#footnote-172)*

*7888 words*

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156. Lewis, ‘A Bullet Saved my Life,’ p.57; Robert Peters, *IMWSA,* Interview,14th May 2002, Discrimination at Army recruiting office against International Brigade fighters; Maurice Levine, *IMWSA,* Reel 5/6 26m 15s- 27m.25s Special Branch comments on returning, Discrimination in British Army in WWII. [↑](#footnote-ref-156)
157. Anon, ‘Practice relating to Rule 77, Expanding Bullets’, in *International Humanitarian Law Databases,* Available at <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/customary-ihl/v2/rule77> [↑](#footnote-ref-157)
158. Lewis, *A Bullet Saved my Life,* p.33-41 The story of Bob’s bullet. [↑](#footnote-ref-158)
159. Greening, *From Aberdare to Albacete,* p.79-82. ‘That memorable June…’ [↑](#footnote-ref-159)
160. Greening, *From Aberdare to Albacete,* p.127 [↑](#footnote-ref-160)
161. Greening, *From Aberdare to Albacete*, ‘A tribute by Dr. Hywel Francis’, 18th July 2003, pp.131-134 [↑](#footnote-ref-161)
162. Greening, *From Aberdare to Albacete,* pp.108-111; Williams, *IWMSA* interview. Reel 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-162)
163. Williams, *From the Rhondda to the Ebro,* p.179 [↑](#footnote-ref-163)
164. Williams, *From the Rhondda to the Ebro*, p.180 [↑](#footnote-ref-164)
165. Greening, *From Aberdare to Albacete*, p.116 [↑](#footnote-ref-165)
166. Williams, *IMWSA* interview, Reel 5. 16m30s-17m30s [↑](#footnote-ref-166)
167. Lewis, *A Bullet Saved my Life,* p.68; Robert Peters, *IMWSA* interview, Reel 2 24m, ‘Very proud’, ‘only useful thing I did in my life’. [↑](#footnote-ref-167)
168. Greening, *IMWSA* interview, Reel 7, 9m0s- 11m33s [↑](#footnote-ref-168)
169. Hopkins, *Into the Heart of the Fire: the British In the Spanish Civil War*.pp.108-125 [↑](#footnote-ref-169)
170. Ibárruri, *’A Salute to the International Brigades’*, [↑](#footnote-ref-170)
171. Stradling, *Wales and the Spanish Civil War.*p.178 [↑](#footnote-ref-171)
172. Ibárruri, *’A Salute to the International Brigades’* [↑](#footnote-ref-172)