

A NEW ACCOUNT OF GEORGE SHELL AND THE NEWPORT RISING

by Malcolm Chase

The one great event which I can recollect was the Newport riots in November 1839. George Shell, the brave youth who was shot in the Westgate Hotel, lodged with us, or in the same house, I forget which. He often used to take me on his knee at meal times and would dance me up and down as I sat astride of his foot. On the very morning before he left on his fatal expedition he kissed me tenderly as if I were his own. He never returned; his loss was mourned by all the neighbours.

It was on the very day that the miners and workmen set out for their march on Newport. The long procession passed our door. I was taken out to see the men as they marched by, I think from [blank in the original] I afterwards heard that mother expected to find father in the procession, for some of the men were pressed into it unwillingly. But no he was not there. George Shell was, however, and he stepped out of the ranks to kiss me and to shake hands with old friends and neighbours.

Onwards they went in that ill-considered, badly conceived, and recklessly planned march, many of them to meet death, amongst whom was the youthful George Shell, beautiful as a woman, they say, although I can scarcely remember his features. They had staves, crude weapons, a few muskets, some miners took tools &c for they meant mischief. Later in the day Father arrived safe at home; he said perhaps it was best that he was not at home. Mother knew what he meant.

On the following day as I came home from school I heard the news, for I saw George's brother (so I was told) crying and raving like a madman at the news of George's death. I cried too, many cried, it was an ill-starred day for many in that place. (George Howell, 'Autobiography of a Toiler')

Who was George Howell?

Aged just nineteen, George Shell was the youngest of those killed in the Chartist attack on the Westgate Hotel on 4 November 1839. He had managed to force his way into the building where he was shot several times. He took an agonising three hours to die and his body was one of ten that the authorities then buried under cover of darkness in unmarked graves in the churchyard of Newport's St Woolos church.² But who was this other George who left such a vivid – and until now unpublished – description of the fatal march on Newport?

George Howell was only just six (he was born 5 October 1833) at the time of the Rising. His father, a stonemason, had recently moved from Somerset to South Wales to work on the construction of a reservoir in the Afon Lwyd valley. Educated entirely through evening classes from the age of ten, George worked successively as a farm boy, shoemaker and from the age of twenty-two, having moved to London, bricklayer. He then rose quickly to prominence in London and national politics. He first achieved public prominence as the secretary of the London Trades' Council; he then became the secretary (1865-69) of the Reform League, the organisation that spearheaded the campaign for parliamentary reform that culminated in the Second Reform Act of 1867. Subsequently Howell was secretary of the Parliamentary Committee of the Trades Union Congress and from 1885 until 1905 the 'Lib-Lab' MP for the East London constituency of Bethnal Green North-East. He was also a prolific and influential author on industrial relations and the history of trade unionism. He died in 1910 and his extensive personal library and archive are now housed in the Bishopsgate Institute in the City of London.

George Howell was a politically astute but controversial figure. His avowed stance as an 'Advanced Liberal' (his self-description on arrival at Westminster) meant that his career was often out of step with the growth of labour militancy and socialism in the decades either side of the turn of the century.³ Historians emphasise that he never outgrew 'the cautious radicalism of his early years'.⁴ Biographical accounts of Howell routinely note that he had been a Chartist, in 1848 joining the branch in the Somerset village where he worked as a shoemaker. However, the significance of this for his later career has never been teased out. 'No more than an adolescent fancy', his biographer called it.⁵ Howell himself barely discussed his involvement in Chartism in his published work.⁶ Even in 1848 Howell seems to have had little sympathy for the politics of direct action. Instead he was to be drawn to the example of William Lovett and the London Working Men's Association (the historian of which he later aspired to be).⁷

Howell's acquaintance with Wales was brief. He recorded a family tradition claiming descent from the 'Hoels of Carnarvon Castle ... in direct line from the Bards of old Briton [*sic*]' – perhaps a mangled reference to the twelfth-century poet prince Hywel ab Owain Gwynedd. But George speculated no further, emphasising instead that both sides of his family 'were all obliged to earn their bread by the sweat of their brow. If there was not positive poverty there was certainly no affluence'.⁸ It is unclear even if he ever visited Wales again after his parents moved to Bristol in 1840. However for about twelve months prior to that their home was one of a handful of houses facing onto the Monmouthshire Canal between Pontnewynydd and Pontypool.⁹ It was from here that the six-year old George Howell witnessed the Chartists' march on Newport.

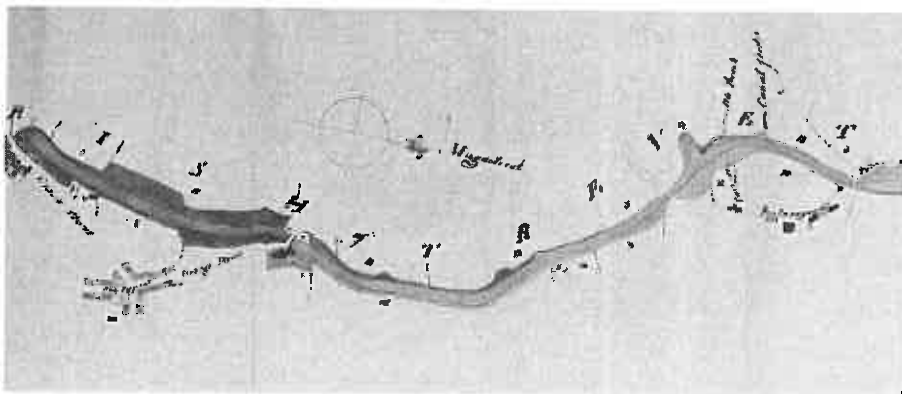
Howell never published his autobiography, but writing it was a project that occupied much of his time in later life. He left accounts of the events of November

1839 in no less than five separate manuscripts. The earliest, from 'Autobiography of a Toiler', is reproduced above. Although undated, Howell based this version of his autobiography on transcripts of letters he had written to a friend in America, 1870-1875.¹⁰ Subsequent versions omit the reference to Shell living in the same house as the Howells and it should be noted here that Shell's much quoted letter of 4 November to his parents, was written from Pontypool and mentions he lodged with a Mr Cecil.¹¹ We should note too that although Shell had a younger brother (Edwin, aged about eight in 1839) he was presumably living with his parents in Bristol where the family had moved a year or more earlier, leaving George in lodgings.¹²

All, however, include the vivid account of how Shell paused at the Howell's home as the march headed out of Pontypool. In the second-oldest version (written around 1890), Howell recalls his mother, Mary, lifting him up to view the marchers. Shell 'stepped out of the ranks and took me in his arms, and ardently kissed me. As he did so, hot tears fell on my face, and I said to my mother, "What is George crying for[?]" ... From the fact that I knew George sufficiently to be able to call him by his Christian name, he must have been known to my parents, as I subsequently learned he was, and a visitor to our home.'¹³ In a third version Howell speculates that not only his father but two of his uncles were lost on the mountain on the night of 2 November, and adds this detail:

When the tidings came of George Shell's death, I remember seeing strong men, as well as women, weep, the former swore also, great oaths the import of which I could not understand. Shell was well known, and had often dropped in to take a cup of tea at our house when he took me on his knee – hence I knew him'.¹⁴

Finally, in 'Memoirs of Busy Life', a version of the autobiography dated 1896 and which was prepared with publication in view, Howell added that the adult men of his family were not just lost in the hills but that 'they were in general sympathy with



The Monmouthshire Canal between Pontypool and Pontnewynydd in 1825 (Gwent Archives, Q/PANBR/49. Courtesy Gwent Archives).



Pontnewynydd from the Trevethin Tithe Map in 1840. Running down the centre is the Monmouthshire Canal and to its right, the Afon Lwyd river. (Gwent Archives, D4893. Courtesy Gwent Archives).

