

## Thomas Evan Nicholas, 1879–1971

On 6 October 1879, at Blaenywaun Felen, Llanfyrnach, Pembrokeshire, Elizabeth Nicholas presented her husband, David, with their fifth child, whom they named Thomas Evan; but throughout adulthood he was known either as T. E. Nicholas or Niclas y Glais. In his long life he would prove to be one of the stormiest of Wales' stormy petrels. During the following year the family moved to Llety, above the village of Crymych. The 1881 census reports that David Nicholas, aged 37, was born at Castellon, Pembrokeshire, describing him as a farmer of 57 acres; Elizabeth Nicholas, also 37, was born at Llanfyrnach; next comes Anne Thomas, 14, step daughter and general servant; she and the Nicholas children were all born at Llanfyrnach: Sarah 7, David 6, William 4, Anne 3, and Thomas 1. Thomas Evan went with his Welsh Independent mother to her chapel, rather than with his Baptist father. At the village school at Hermon he and a few other children from the hills were isolated from their fellows by dint of their belonging to another community. These monoglot Welsh speakers gained little from the school's teaching through the medium of English, though young Niclas memorised the poem *Dinistr Jerusalem* (The Destruction of Jerusalem) and practised reciting it on the long walks to and from Hermon. What education this boy received, including English, came from his home and Sunday School.

On leaving the Hermon village school at the age of thirteen he was employed first at the village shop and then at *The Swan Inn*, Crymych, before working for a short time in 1897 at Treherbert in the Rhondda Valley, though little is known of this period. What we do know is that he spent three years at Watcyn Wyn's<sup>1</sup> Gwynfryn Academy, Ammanford, where his tutors were Watcyn Wyn and Gwili (Revd. John Jenkins). In old age he declared that "he hadn't seen any new developments in theology since his instruction under those two 'great men,' that the religion of the New Testament is for the uneducated man and that Watcyn Wyn had opened his eyes to how excellent the simple doctrine of the Gospels really was."<sup>2</sup> It was these same tutors who directed his thoughts towards socialism.

In 1901 he was ordained to the ministry among the Welsh Independents at Horeb Chapel, Llandeilo and in the following year he married Mary Alys Hopkins.



T E Nicholas, Nicholas of Glais, 1879-1971, as a young man

After serving his first pastorate for just two years he left 'after increasingly strained relations with the more staid section of his congregation owing to his radical views and also rumours of a romantic entanglement'.<sup>3</sup> He moved far away from Llandeilo, settling in Wisconsin as minister of the Welsh Congregational Church at Dodgeville, though settling is hardly the right word as within a year he was back in Wales. It is said that William Lewis, a farmer from the village of Glais near Swansea, met Niclas' father at Crymych fair and enquired after the minister-son, whose preaching as a student had impressed him. David Nicholas, on hearing that the Glais chapel was then without a pastor, pressed Lewis to get him invited there. A church meeting at Sion Chapel, Glais, held on

<sup>1</sup> Watcyn Wyn (Revd. Watkin Hezekiah Williams) 1844–1905. Teacher, bard and preacher. Ran the Hope Academy at Ammanford, 1884–88; Ysgol y Gwynfryn 1888–. Ordained 1888.

<sup>2</sup> David H. Howell, *Nicholas of Glais, the People's Champion* (Glais Historical Society, 1991), 49.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

3 May 1904, was presented with two names, the Revd. T. E. Nicholas and a student, Sam Jones of Gorseinon; Nicholas gained overwhelming support but for some reason a second meeting was held, this time at Mynyddbach chapel. This was the period which gave him his title of *Niclas y Glais*, the signature he used for his articles to *Y Geninen*.

Niclas quickly became aware of the poverty and hard living conditions of the miners and their families and of the harsh working conditions in the mines. He championed the cause of the miners and of the downtrodden generally, becoming a hero in their sight. He was not, however, revered by everyone. A prominent figure in the village was mine owner and Welsh speaking Nonconformist Evan Lewis; neither he nor the other 'respectable' middle class chapel leaders of the area could stomach this radical in politics and theology. Niclas was not fighting the correct battles!<sup>4</sup> During this period Niclas came under two major influences: in theology he was much impressed by R. J. Campbell,<sup>5</sup> proponent of the *New Theology* with its liberal interpretations of the Bible and their application to a radical social policy, whilst in politics he came under the influence of Keir Hardie,<sup>6</sup> Labour M.P. for Merthyr Tydfil since 1900. Niclas was further influenced by two Welshmen of an earlier generation, Robert Owen<sup>7</sup> and R. J. Derfel.<sup>8</sup> He joined the Independent Labour Party in 1905 and in December of that year presented his own views on *Llais Llafur/The Voice of Labour*, declaring, as Derfel had done, his belief in the brotherhood of man, peace and righteousness, equality and nationalisation of the land, a world free of poverty, prisons and royal families as well as competition and exploitation. This was the essence of his Christian Socialism, which he proclaimed from pulpit and platform and in the press.

Perhaps the most remarkable of these socialist evangelists among the Nonconformist ministry was the celebrated eisteddfodic bard, the Revd. Thomas E. Nicholas of Seion Independent Chapel, Glais (1879–1971). He turned from writing the traditional poetry of his early period to add his gift of verse to other methods of propaganda in order to further the workers' cause; his *Cerddi Gwerin* were hymns to social justice and the living wage. He became closely associated with Keir Hardie, serving as the first Welsh editor of the ILP's *Merthyr Pioneer* from its first appearance in 1911, was a founder member of the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1920 and for nearly seventy years (until his death in 1971) was an uncompromising but much loved symbol of the union between Nonconformist radicalism and the extreme political left.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The self-educated scholar, Bob Owen, Croesor, maintained that the reason for this was the centrality of total abstinence and sabbatarianism.

<sup>5</sup> Reginald John Campbell, 1867–1956. Born London; Educated, Nottingham University College; Christ Church, Oxford. Congregational Minister, 1895; at Brighton, 1895–1903; City Temple, London, 1903–09; Kings Weigh House, 1909–15; Church of England, 1915; Canon & Chancellor of Chichester Cathedral, 1930–46. Pioneer of the liberal *New Theology*. Several visits to South Wales which attracted many young working-class men, including James Griffiths, later M.P. for Llanelli.

<sup>6</sup> James Keir Hardie, 1856–1915. Born Lebrannock, Lanarkshire. Errand boy, miner, stationer. Lanarkshire Miners' organiser; Secretary, Scottish Miners' Federation, 1886. Founder member, ILP. Contested Mid-Lanarkshire 1888, 1895; M.P. West Ham South 1892–95, Merthyr Tydfil from 1900.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Owen (1771–1858). Born Newtown. Founded New Lanark community, based on co-operative principles; also New Harmony, Indiana. Father of the co-operative movement.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Jones Derfel, 1824–1905. Founder-member, Manchester & District Fabian Society. Poet, socialist and pamphleteer. Baptist lay preacher, he came under the influence of English secularists. Opened bookshop and printing press in Manchester, to publish and sell Welsh books and socialist pamphlets.

<sup>9</sup> Kenneth O. Morgan, *Modern Wales: Politics, Places and People* (Cardiff, 1997), 66–67. Footnote: There is a portrait and obituary of Nicholas on the front page of the *Morning Star*, 21 April 1971.

Niclas became particularly well known as a powerful preacher, especially in Welsh, and was in great demand at *Cyrddau Mawr/Big Meetings* (Preaching Festivals). He also turned his pen to the writing of poetry as a means of making known his socialist message, competing at the many eisteddfodau held in South Wales so that by 1910 he was popularly known as *Bardd y Werin/the People's Poet*. In 1911 he accepted Keir Hardie's invitation to become editor of the Welsh column in his *Merthyr Pioneer*, to which he contributed a weekly article for ten years. His work also appeared regularly in the years before 1914 in *Y Geninen* where he responded to a series of anti-socialist articles written by the Revd. W. F. Phillips,<sup>10</sup> Calvinistic Methodist minister and Liberal candidate for Gower in December 1910. In reply to Phillips' claims that socialism was materialistic and completely incompatible with Christianity, Niclas argued that the very coming of Christ to earth was pointless unless it was a divine command for man to build a heaven here; the removal of slums, poverty and drunkenness were God-given human responsibilities. Phillips had complained that Labour held meetings on Sundays to which Niclas retorted that if Labour principles were not worth preaching on Sunday they were not worth preaching at any time. But the main thrust of Niclas' righteous indignation was at politicians and theologians who stated that the social pattern was all part of God's plan and that there must always be rich and poor. 'But I reject the god who arranges this. I denounce him as an oppressor. I challenge that he is unjust. The God of capitalism and kings, the God of priests and popes, He is not God.'<sup>11</sup> He became a close friend of Keir Hardie and acted as his election agent in 1910. Throughout this period *Niclas y Glais* was a prominent crusader for his brand of Christian Socialism and through his powerful oratory in Welsh succeeded more than any other ILP spokesman in presenting the socialist message to the mining communities of South Wales.<sup>12</sup> His fame spread and before long he was accepting invitations to address North Wales quarrymen. Soon he was rarely in his own pulpit on two consecutive Sundays. In response to complaints from his congregation he began to hold a preaching service at Seion on Thursday evenings.

Then in January 1914, despite two unanimous resolutions from the Seion congregation asking him to stay, he left the hurly-burly of Glais and the coalfield for the seemingly quiet Cardiganshire village of Llangybi, between Lampeter and Tregaron, to be pastor of two Welsh Independent churches, Ebeneser, Llangybi and Llanddewi Brefi.

Within months the quiet was shattered even in Llangybi by the outbreak of the Great War. At once Niclas turned his energies, oratory and pen to denouncing the conflict. He was appalled by the idea of shedding blood and alongside this went his Marxist hatred of capitalism, which he saw as the primary cause of the conflict. In a conversation with a Mr. John Griffiths of Swansea he recalled that in 1914, "Not one public figure ... including ministers was a pacifist. I travelled a lot through Wales talking about peace and correcting some of the deceitful remarks that were being made about the cause of war." He used pulpit, platform and press to oppose the conflict and organised the No-Conscription Fellowship in Cardiganshire.

His efforts were hampered by Orders in Council in December 1914 which 'forbid us from publishing anything that is likely to retard recruiting or reflect in any way on the actions of

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<sup>10</sup> William Francis Phillips, 1877–1920. Calvinistic Methodist minister, journalist and writer. Virulently anti-socialist.

<sup>11</sup> Howell, op.cit., 11–14.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Pope, *Building Jerusalem* (Cardiff, 1997), 42–44.

the Government with regard to the war. The penalty is suppression of publication and confiscation.’ This is part of a letter dated 14 December 1914 from G. A. Griffiths of the *Cardigan and Tivyside Advertiser* explaining to Niclas why his open letter to Mr D. J. Davies of London could not be published. Nothing daunted, Niclas published his article in the *Labour Pioneer* of 8 January 1915 and then had it circulated as a pamphlet.<sup>13</sup> It is worth noting that Niclas always writes in Welsh whereas both D. J. Davies and G. A. Griffiths use English. Its content shows clearly why the authorities wanted him silenced. Davies had written to the *Advertiser* with strong condemnation of the pacifist’s stand. To his suggestion that ‘it would be more worthy for him as a minister to write under a pen-name’, Niclas retorts, ‘Are you suggesting that it would have been more suitable for Christ to preach the Sermon on the Mount under a pen name? I stand on the same ground as that sermon on the subject of War.’ Davies says that Niclas ‘reaches the zenith of his infamy’ in claiming that wounds to Belgian children are lies, adding, ‘I hurl the lie back to him. Let him nail it to his desk and ponder over it. I myself have seen little boys and girls without hands and other personal disfigurements, the handicraft of the atrocious German hordes.’ In reply Niclas states that that matter has to be proved as not one such child had appeared in Britain. He complains that Davies had not answered a private letter, which Niclas had written to him, but instead wrote to the *Advertiser*, adding that people seeking the history of the war in the future would be far more likely to turn to the *Labour Pioneer* than to the *Cardigan and Tivyside Advertiser*. Davies claims that the Turks were innocent of any such atrocities as committed by the Germans, adding as his peroration, ‘And what crime has Belgium committed?’ Niclas is not slow to remind him of the ‘Congo Atrocities’, when the Congolese were reduced to slavery by the King of the Belgians and that one estimate put the dead at twelve million in twelve years, adding that the Revd. R. J. Campbell had preached two sermons in the City Temple on these cruelties. He then reminds Davies that down the years he had written a number of articles condemning German militarism. Davies has suggested that no other country has ever been as cruel as Germany. Niclas asks whether he knows the history of Great Britain in South Africa; Davies should buy Winston Churchill’s books on the war in South Africa. And what of Kitchener’s campaigns in the Sudan and the sufferings of women and children at the hands of British soldiers? He asks, ‘Have you heard that soldiers shot an innocent man in Llanelli? Have you heard that soldiers have shot ordinary people in Dublin? Have you heard similar stories from South Africa where soldiers shot women and children?’ He turns his attention to Britain’s ally Russia: six members of the Duma who objected to the war were in prison whereas Karl Liebknecht who opposed it in the Reichstag was still free. He encourages Davies to read Russia’s history over the past fifty years: ‘Russia has lived on cruelty and continues to do so. The cruelties of Russia in peacetime are worse than anything Germany has done in wartime.’ He then adds that neither the Kaiser nor the Presidents of France and America may declare war without the approval of their parliaments but Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey had done so, with more than 200,000 troops sent to France before Parliament knew anything. The three enemies of humanity are Monarchy, Militarism and Priesthood. They have misled the people today so that the workers of Europe are fighting for their oppressors. Niclas appreciates Davies’ concern for the Belgians; everyone with an atom of common sense would feel for them. But what of the thirteen million people in this country on the edge of famine although working? Davies is ‘concerned about Belgian women, misused by German soldiers, but what of the thousands in London who sell their bodies every night for a crust of

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10. T. E. Nicholas, *Dros eich Gwlad* [For your country], 1915.

bread? This is the war of the great ones not of the people. Niclas will not allow Sir Edward Grey and Kitchener to tell him who his enemies are and he will not be silent in the face of an unjust war. Should his churches tell him to back the war or at least remain silent, he would give up his churches and work with pick and shovel or sell calico as in former days. He was reared on a comparatively poor hearth and had decided when young that he would try to do something for the class to which his father belonged. Offending kings is nothing in his sight, whereas becoming a traitor to the common folk of his land would be a great sorrow.’ This rather long synopsis of his words is profoundly moving even in translation almost ninety years later and it leaves one in no doubt as to why the authorities wanted to silence him. Kenneth O. Morgan writes: ‘The Revd. T. E. Nicholas, minister of Seion chapel, Glais, and the Welsh editor of the *Merthyr Pioneer*, often fell foul of the establishment for his Marxist and anti-war views. The chief constable of Glamorgan, Captain Lionel Lindsay, made frequent attempts to have him prosecuted. With more sense, the Home Office ignored Lindsay’s missives of complaint ...’<sup>14</sup>

In 1915 his great friend Keir Hardie died, his heart broken by the acceptance by his own voters of the prevailing anti-Hun jingoism, which led to their booing him at a meeting. It was Niclas who preached the sermon in the memorial service at an Aberdare chapel, with police in the congregation taking notes. The preacher was summoned for sedition under the notorious Defence of the Realm Act (DORA) at the instance of his archenemy, the chief constable of Glamorgan,<sup>15</sup> but the case was withdrawn.

The wife of the squire of Derry Ormond, Winifred Inglis-Jones, wrote on 22 November 1917 to Mrs Drummond of the Patriotic Women’s Party, seeking her assistance ‘to get a most objectionable and dangerous man in this neighbourhood put away for a bit’. Though his views upset ‘the better thinking portion’ of his congregation, they attracted others, particularly the young. Because people in the locality benefited from his services as a dentist, they were unprepared to report what he said in his sermons which, because they were in Welsh, were not understood by her.

On Sunday, 29 September 1918, Niclas and W. C. Anderson M.P. were to address an ILP meeting at Mountain Ash but the meeting had to be abandoned because of the disturbance caused by discharged soldiers, whose abuse included such sentiments as ‘You would let the Germans come here’ and ‘Get these conscientious objectors off the stage or else we will come down and do it.’

In 1918 the authorities used DORA to bring him before the Lampeter magistrates for a sermon he had preached in his own church but he succeeded in getting the case dismissed by showing that the comments which caused offence were in fact a quotation from Philip Gibbs.<sup>16</sup> Captain Lindsay was in constant hot pursuit and in October 1918 he sent a dossier to the Special Branch containing transcripts of some of Niclas’ recent speeches in Glamorgan, claiming that he found sedition in the speaker’s abuse of Prime Minister Lloyd George, his

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<sup>14</sup> Kenneth O. Morgan, *Rebirth of a nation: Wales 1880–1980* (Cardiff, 1981), 166.

<sup>15</sup> Lionel Lindsay, son of Colonel Henry Grove Lindsay, ex-chief constable of Glamorgan, & The Hon. Ellen Morgan, daughter of Viscount Tredegar; brother of Colonel H. E. Morgan Lindsay, landowner & Conservative candidate for East Glamorgan, 1900.

<sup>16</sup> Sir Philip Gibbs, 1877–1962. Journalist; Official War Correspondent in the Great War; author of several books on that war. Roman Catholic.

description of King George V as ‘an individual who has not sufficient talent to be Chairman of a Parish Council’ and his attacks on the whole capitalist system. However, this was overtaken by the Armistice of 11 November.

During this period Niclas had been active in organising the Cardiganshire lead miners and the farm labourers of North Pembrokeshire and Cardiganshire into trade unions. Both groups of men were badly paid and badly treated. Anger grew too as farmers’ sons were less likely to be called up than those of poorer families. Many farmers served on war tribunals and used their position to shelter their own sons from the war. Matters came to a head with the passing of the Corn Production Act of August 1917, which made provision for the setting up of Wages Boards and District Committees for the regulation of labourers’ wages, with a minimum weekly wage of one pound, five shillings. The *Welsh Gazette* for 8 November 1917 reported a meeting at Llanilar, addressed by the Revd. T. E. Nicholas, at which a branch of the Agricultural Workers’ Union was unanimously established; by May 1918, there were 48 members. By the end of October 1918 he had addressed at least twenty two meetings around North Pembrokeshire and Cardiganshire. Then, in the summer of 1918, he was prominent in establishing a Cardiganshire Labour Party.

Within a month of the Armistice, Lloyd George and his Coalition went to the country, promising *a land fit for heroes* and winning an overwhelming but short-lived victory. Niclas took up Keir Hardie’s mantle, fighting the new Aberdare seat, one of the two created out of the old two-member Merthyr Tydfil constituency. Niclas heroically stood as a Labour and Pacifist candidate against Hardie’s successor as M.P. in the old seat, Charles Butt Stanton.<sup>17</sup> Stanton, born locally at Aberaman, had been a militant miners’ leader but the outbreak of the Great War turned him into a jingoistic demagogue. He fought the 1915 election as an Independent Labour/Coalition candidate with Liberal and Conservative backing on the ‘straight war ticket “to fight against the Huns for our homeland” ’ while in 1918 his manifesto’s demand of ‘the filthy, murderous Huns’ was to ‘make Germany pay and expel all aliens’. Niclas’ campaign was marked by his being abused as ‘pro-German’, ‘dirty conchie’, and ‘ILP bastard’. Threats of violence also abounded. A Mountain Ash meeting was broken up by a mob of fifty or sixty people. It was far from being an easy fight. ‘The supporters of Stanton, howling for vengeance on “the filthy murderous Hun”, subjected his opponent to verbal and physical violence and Niclas found himself in danger of his life, not least from newly-enfranchised women voters crazed with the lust for revenge.’<sup>18</sup> In such a climate Niclas did well to obtain 21% of the vote (for election details see Appendix 1).

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<sup>17</sup> Charles Butt Stanton, C.B.E., 1873–1946. Born Aberaman. Left-wing miners’ leader. First secretary, Aberdare Socialist Society; President, South Wales ILP. Became a pro-war demagogue. With Ben Tillett, he founded the Socialist National Defence League in 1915. Founder, British Workers’ National League, 1916. Vice-President, National Democratic Party. Labour candidate, East Glamorgan, Dec. 1910; Independent-Labour/Pro-Coalition M.P., Merthyr Tydfil, 1915–18; NDP M.P. Aberdare, 1918–22. Later worked as a violinist and a publican; appeared in Hollywood films as Archbishop of Canterbury and an English butler.

<sup>18</sup> Kenneth O. Morgan, *Modern Wales*, 284.

Niclas, under pressure, resigned his pastorate sometime in 1918: many chapels had banned him from their pulpits on account of his social applications of the Gospel and especially for his militant pacifism. For his part his increasing disillusionment with the churches was hastened in the Great War by the way in which ministers, like John Williams, Brynsiencyn,<sup>19</sup> acted as recruiting officers for Lloyd George's government and by the fact that most members supported the war. Earlier his comment on the revival of 1904-05 had been that 'the oven was warmed ... but no bread came from it for the people'. He was strong in his condemnation of ministers who proclaimed the wrath of God, commenting in a lecture on 'Religion' that 'the church represents God as an arbitrary, tyrannical and vengeful being, who sends souls to hell merely for not believing ... Preaching by the orthodox clergy is a dreary business. They do not preach a true God or a true Christ. They tell of an angry God whose wrath can only be appeased by murder.' Niclas saw true religion as recognising 'the divinity of man made in the likeness of God and having the spirit of God within him, who is not a fallen being but is continually advancing to higher levels and who is endowed with unlimited possibilities ... It has never persecuted nor excommunicated anyone and has never taught that God will inflict eternal punishment on anyone.'

When at Glais he had acted as agent and canvasser for a Mumbles ILP dentist candidate for the local council, at the same time picking up basic skills from him. After the war he and his wife received further training from D. Ernest Williams of Mountain Ash. They set up practice in Pontardawe, leaving there in 1921 to settle in Aberystwyth, where he remained for the rest of his long life. It is said that he had his surgery in a shed in a garden in Elm Tree Avenue. The late Revd. Morgan R. Mainwaring of Port Talbot described graphically how he lost a filling from a tooth one Sunday morning when preaching at Aberystwyth. When wondering where he could find appropriate help on a Welsh Sabbath he remembered Niclas, who welcomed him warmly and solved his problem while the pair engaged in a wide and deep roaming conversation. No doubt it was the dentist who did most of the talking.

He continued to sally forth as preacher, lecturer and speaker to proclaim his message of social justice and peace based on his own mixture of Christianity and Marxism, going wherever he could find a platform, though many churches remained closed to him. In the early 1920s he gave a lecture to the Young People's Society at Moriah, Fochriw, in spite of the opposition of the minister, who painfully remembered an earlier visit by Niclas during the war, which did not go well.

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<sup>19</sup> John Williams, 1854–1921. Born Llanfrydog, Anglesey. Calvinistic Methodist minister and popular preacher. Used the pulpit as a recruiting platform during the Great War. Hon. D.D. (Wales) 1917.

The Russian Bolshevik revolution of October 1917 was for Niclas ‘the greatest formative influence in his political career’, according to J. Roose Williams. The founding of the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1920 saw Niclas as one of its first members. It seems likely that he must have supported that party’s first ever candidate, Bob Stewart,<sup>20</sup> in the Caerphilly by-election in August 1921. Though a member of the Communist Party, he remained active within the Labour Party until 1926 when he was expelled for criticising Ramsay Macdonald<sup>21</sup> for being too right wing. He became the leading Welsh crusader for Communism and between 1917 and 1945 he gave over a thousand lectures on the Soviet Union. After his visit to the U.S.S.R. in 1935 he gave his famous lecture, *Hen ddyn mewn byd newydd/An old man in a new world* on more than two hundred occasions.

In the words of Kenneth O. Morgan:

There were some picturesque spokesmen for Communism in Wales. One impressive example was the Revd. Thomas Nicholas, Glais, formerly Keir Hardie’s Welsh editor of the *Merthyr Pioneer*, and a distinguished poet. He was finally expelled by his congregation for his left-wing activities, and in the Second World War was imprisoned for sedition after some remarkably free-wheeling invasions of civil liberty by the Cardiganshire police. He finally set up business in Aberystwyth as an unlicensed dentist, whose dental therapy and left-wing ideology served almost as parts of the same distinctive treatment. Nicholas until his death in 1971 was an eccentric and much-loved symbol of the nonconformist radicalism of pre-1914 diverted into more revolutionary channels.<sup>22</sup>

As the twenties gave way to the thirties, so fascism cast its shadow over Wales as over the rest of Europe. Some voices were raised in Wales in the period 1934–39 but none louder than that of Niclas in strong condemnation of what was happening in places like Germany and Spain. He was prominent in seeking to gain sympathy and support for the Spanish Republican cause. Largely due to his efforts a memorial to the Welshmen who died in the Spanish Civil War was placed in the hospital at Stalingrad. As he travelled up and down Wales addressing meetings, he took up again his political journalism, and contributed a weekly article to *Y Cymro* from 1937 onward in which he attacked both Nazi/Fascist aggression and British appeasement as moving Europe towards war. He described the time of the Munich Agreement between Hitler and Chamberlain as the most lonely in his life for he knew it would lead to war. Then in August 1939 came the German/Soviet pact, which Niclas accepted as being for the best. He claimed that the U.S.S.R. had signed the pact out of a concern for world peace and he opposed the war with Germany, thus antagonizing public opinion. With the fall of France and the growing threat of German invasion, public fears grew and action was taken not only against aliens and pro-German sympathisers but also against Welsh Nationalists and members of the Communist Party as well as others on the left

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<sup>20</sup> Robert Stewart, 1877–c.1967. Born Dundee. Jute worker and ship’s joiner. Leader, Dundee Socialist Prohibition Fellowship. Prison as conscientious objector in Great War; 77 days for sedition, 1921, on flimsy evidence. Founder Member, Communist Party of Great Britain. Party representative in Moscow; smuggled thousands of pounds to help the Communist cause in U.K. Dismissed by order of Communist International, 1923. Acting Secretary, Communist Party of Great Britain, 1925–26.

<sup>21</sup> Rt. Hon. James Ramsay Macdonald, 1866–1937. Born Lossiemouth. Various jobs. Journalist, editor *Socialist Library & Socialist Review*. Secretary, Socialist Representative Committee, 1900–12. Labour M.P. Leicester, 1906–18; Aberavon, 1922–29; Seaham, 1929–31; National Labour M.P. Seaham, 1931–35; Scottish Universities, 1936–7. Leader of the Opposition 1922–23, 1924–29. Prime Minister 1924, 1929–35; Lord President of the Council, 1935–7.

<sup>22</sup> Morgan, *Rebirth of a Nation*, 282.



in British politics. It was a time when concern for civil liberties was set aside. Cardiganshire police, at the express order of the Chief Constable who was ‘gunning’ for Niclas, arrested him at Llanbrynmair on 11 July 1940 and he was taken to Aberystwyth police station where he was accused of being a fascist and subjected to ‘some remarkably casual treatment’<sup>23</sup> because on his wall was a *Daily Express* map into which German Swastika flags had been placed to mark the course of the various campaigns (the author recalls having a similar map with various flags supplied by the newspaper). He and his son, Islwyn, were taken to Swansea prison, where they joined thirty-four other political prisoners, being locked up three to a cell.

Civil liberties were more faithfully respected than in 1914–18, although even here there were some remarkable abuses such as the imprisonment without trial of the veteran socialist, the Revd Thomas Nicholas, for alleged sedition. His *Prison Sonnets* provided a powerful riposte from this unquenchably resilient spirit. ‘Stay Put’, a parody on a Home Office circular read out by the Swansea prison chaplain, is an especially poignant form of poetic protest.<sup>24</sup>

His poem, *Yr Indiaid/The Indians* describes his fellow inmates (see Appendix 3). During his imprisonment he wrote some one hundred and fifty sonnets based on incidents in the prison. These were published in Welsh in 1947, with a foreword by Dr. Iorwerth Peate, and later an English translation, *Prison Sonnets*, appeared. As writing paper was banned he first wrote them on the slate in his cell, copied them onto toilet paper and passed them to a sympathetic prison officer who smuggled them out. Then Niclas and Islwyn were transferred to Brixton Prison. The chapels of Wales and the Labour movement made strong protest on their behalf and they were released after four months. Niclas found further release from his predicament when on 22 June 1942 Germany attacked the U.S.S.R., thus enabling the dentist-preacher to fight Nazism and be loyal to the Soviet Union at the same time, a dual crusade he pursued with his usual enthusiasm.

After the end of World War II he continued to champion his causes – pacifism, the international brotherhood of humanity and a world without poverty, greed and oppression. At the same time he sought to work out these ideals as a Welshman in Wales. Throughout his life he remained in contact with a broad range of friends, Christian and Communist, as well as members of the Labour Party and Plaid Cymru (see Appendix 4).

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<sup>23</sup> Morgan, *Modern Wales*, 109.

<sup>24</sup> Morgan, *Wales in British Politics 1868–1922* (Cardiff, 1963), 295.

He poured out his heart and his Christian/Marxist credo in his poetry, as the ‘people’s poet’ (bardd y werin). Some of the poems were published in twelve volumes (see Appendix two). Two Welsh Communists speak of him in this way: according to J. Roose Williams, he



introduced ‘new revolutionary themes and a new revolutionary note into Welsh poetry which, at the time, was dominated by romanticism’; whilst Idris Cox <sup>25</sup> wrote in 1949, ‘No other Welsh poet of the twentieth century has been able to give so intimate an expression of the hopes, fears and aspirations of those who till the soil and who work in mine and factory’. His son, Islwyn, said in 1972 that ‘my father was a Communist out and out. He could quote Marx as well as the Bible.’ Nicholas himself had said to John Griffiths of Swansea that he ‘found that the socialist system, if worked properly, and especially the Communist

system, agreed very much with the doctrine of the Gospel. There is a great clash between what Jesus taught and the people’s way of life.’ On his ninetieth birthday he declared on television that he was ‘as much a Communist as ever, for despite the problems and divisions of the Communist world, Socialism remains the only way forward.’ His near veneration of Joseph Stalin was said to affect his judgement on a number of major issues. He defended the expulsion of Yugoslavia from the Soviet bloc and condemned all critics of the Soviet Union for ‘selling out to the American gangsters’. So it was that he tried to defend the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956. At home he saw nothing good in the Labour Party and rejected the Beveridge report as seeking to keep workers on the breadline.

Niclas died at home in Aberystwyth on 19 April 1971 at the age of 91. In many ways his going marked the passing of an era in Welsh life, religion and politics. And what of the man? Communists and Christians alike were warm in their expressions of praise and appreciation.

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<sup>25</sup> Idris Cox, 1899–1989. Born Nantyffyllon. Poverty prevented his accepting a grammar school scholarship. Miner. Educated London Labour College. Joined Communist Party, 1924. Full-time party official from 1927. Secretary, Welsh Council, Communist Party of Great Britain 1953–70. In his 1951 election address as candidate for Rhondda East, he exulted in his upbringing at the Sunday School at Siloh Welsh Independent Chapel, Nantyffyllon.

The Communist *Morning Star* honoured him by printing an obituary and a large photograph on its front page on 21 April, 1971. It stated that:

The Welsh Committee of the Communist Party yesterday announced with deep regret the death of T. E. Nicholas, the great revolutionary poet of Wales. He died on April 19 at his home, Glaslyn, Aberystwyth, at the age of 91 ... The Welsh Communist Party is at present preparing a symposium of essays on Nicholas' life and work, edited by Dr. J. Roose Williams, and contributed by Welshmen prominent in the cultural and radical life of Wales.

The Welsh Committee yesterday said: 'This booklet intended as a tribute to him in his 91<sup>st</sup> year will become an expression of our pride and love for the man whose life has now ended.' [The booklet entitled *T. E. Nicholas, Proffwyd Sosialaeth a Bard Gwrthryfel* was published at Bangor in the same year].

The 1914–18 war found him staunchly anti-imperialist and a pacifist. He welcomed the October Revolution and joined the Communist Party on its foundation, remaining a member up to his death.

He became a close friend of Keir Hardie, and in 1915 preached his funeral sermon at Aberdare to a crowded chapel with thousands listening outside.

In 1920 he gave up the ministry but continued the rest of his life to lecture and preach in chapels throughout Wales.

His poetry won many of the highest awards at Eisteddfodau as well as a remarkable readership among Welsh-speaking people.

Champion of the Soviet Union, in which he saw his hopes for national freedom and Socialism being realised, bitter opponent of fascism in Germany, Spain and elsewhere, Nicholas and his son Islwyn were imprisoned at the outbreak of the Second World War.

In jail he wrote his well-known Prison Sonnets and came out to continue to the end his lively and informed support for the world-wide movement for liberation.

His obituary in the Union of Welsh Independents' *Blwyddiadur* says this:

He had a big heart and the pity of that heart stimulated all his work and activity throughout his long life. He inherited sympathy for the helpless from his mother and he learned to love, even when young, the simple honest folk of the Preseli slopes, and detested every power and influence that sought to oppress them and rob them of a full life. He did not merely pray that God would take the side of the weak against the oppressor<sup>26</sup> but gave himself to the battle with every weapon at his disposal, every weapon that fitted in with his basic convictions. He bitterly attacked every institution which oppressed or exploited people in their pitiful state and it was in this light that he saw every monarchy, priesthood, militarism and capitalism. It was no wonder that he embraced the new order in Russia and China and over-beatified them, seeking with great difficulty to reconcile the methods of the revolution with his convictions as a pacifist. He was a militant pacifist all his life and a fierce opponent of every war and because of the lack of sympathy on the part of churches and denomination he left the ministry, a step he regretted taking many times afterwards. As he said himself, the greatest influence on him was the Gospel and though his interpretation of it was not orthodox, he succeeded in emphasising and preserving an aspect of it which was lost to many in the heat of the Revival, namely its social obligations. He preached remarkably effectively for over seventy years with the tuneful bubbling of his voice exalting the "Carpenter's Son". Dewi Emrys said the truth about him, "He was not possessed by the bitterness of party but by the longing of every troubled soul for the perfect harbours."

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<sup>26</sup> A quotation from a Welsh hymn by R. J. Derfel: *Yn erbyn pob gormeswr cryf / O cymer blaid y gwan.*

Dr. Robert Pope has provided us with an important insight into Nicholas' place in the relationship between the churches in Wales and social and political movements in the twentieth century:

Nicholas is a vitally important character in the development of Socialism in Wales before the Great War. He not only had a firm grasp of Socialist essentials but had a sense of Welsh identity which had, for the most part, been lacking in labour circles. He claimed that of all the political theories, Socialism alone was truly nationalistic because one of its principal tenets was nationalization of the land. This would return the land to the hands of the people to be used for the benefit of all. For Nicholas, Socialism and Christianity were inextricably linked; both shared the ideals of Jesus's teaching but Socialism provided a 'practical expression' of those ideals. It was thus the way to 'assist in enthroning Christ in the life of the nation'. To do the work of Socialism was to do 'God's work in the world' ...

Christianity becomes little more than a religion of works-righteousness in which justification before God depends on self-sacrifice and humanitarian actions. This being so, many believed that the labour movement offered a better opportunity to live that life than did the church. Nicholas himself would ultimately become a kind of victim of this when he left the ministry in 1918 to become a dentist. Because of this, and also because of his later zeal for Communism, Nicholas tends to be dismissed as an eccentric. In the period before 1914, however, he proved a welcome asset for the labour movement because in him it had a popular, able and effective spokesman.<sup>27</sup>

David Howell<sup>28</sup> sums him up in this way:

On the personal level this was not an unblemished life but there is no mistaking his kindness and compassion for the poor around him; significantly he did not make a lot of money as a dentist. Nicholas was not a politician but a dreamer, a moralist possessed of an utter simplicity of faith, a pure-minded pursuit of a socialist Biblically-righteous society, an ideal he saw enshrined in the Soviet Union. If that vision could sometimes blind him, if in his detestation of capitalism he was incapable of conceiving that Socialism might sometimes be in the wrong and so conveniently chose to ignore its faults, yet we must admire him for adhering to the truth as he saw it, no matter what the cost in terms of personal standing among his fellows. Iorwerth Peate was right to stress that at the heart of everything in his life was staunchness to the ideal of the dignity and worth of human personality, of its very divinity, which he best saw achieved through a Socialist society. His espousal of this belief meant scorn, rejection and imprisonment. In his unwillingness to tolerate humbug or hypocrisy, his fierce denunciation of oppression, he was a rebel, an outcast. His mission in life was to serve the underdog; he was from start to finish the people's champion.

(The papers of T. E. Nicholas are in an archive at Bangor University. See Appendix 4).

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<sup>27</sup> Pope, *Building Jerusalem*, 42, 48.

<sup>28</sup> Howell, *Nicholas of Glais*.

## APPENDIX 1

### Election Results

#### Merthyr Tydfil By-Election, 25 November 1915 (caused by death of Keir Hardie)

Charles Butt Stanton (Ind.Lab)	10,286	62.8%
James Winstone (Lab)	<u>6,084</u>	<u>37.2%</u>
<i>Coalition Ind.Lab Gain</i>	<u>4,206</u>	<u>25.6%</u>

#### Aberdare, 14 December 1918

Charles Butt Stanton (Coalition NDP)	22,824	78.6%
Thomas Evan Nicholas (Lab/Pac)	<u>6,229</u>	<u>21.4%</u>
	<u>16,595</u>	<u>57.2%</u>

#### Aberdare, 15 November 1922

George Henry Hall (Lab)	20,704	57.2%
Charles Butt Stanton (NL)	<u>15,487</u>	<u>42.8%</u>
<i>Labour Gain</i>	<u>5,217</u>	<u>14.4%</u>

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## APPENDIX TWO

### The Indians

*36 of them were locked up in Swansea prison, 3 to each cell*

I hear them pacing, singing, dancing, weeping  
and disturbing other prisoners on every side;  
the cell is cramped for three and  
there is heard the sound of homesick sobbing  
for their lovely land far away.

They were brought to the cells from the ends of the earth,  
from the land of palms and bunches of wine grapes,  
and kept prisoner and hurt in this indifferent climate;  
stone cells for the children of sun and pine-tree.

I have observed the lion, wolf and panther  
their pointless pacing along the zoo's floors  
and these dark boys wasting their time,  
with civilisation's fist restraining their growth.  
Man and animal – it's so sad to watch them both  
pacing, behind the closed doors.

### And when you pray and pray

And when you pray and pray I cannot listen,  
Your silky hands, so steeped in blood, I dread,  
From holy altar's, easeful shade I hasten

When on the upward steps I hear your tread.  
You dress your mealy words in subtle clothing,  
You bless the dogs of war with priestly cant,  
I loathe you with an everlasting loathing,  
Arch-hypocrite and royal sycophant.

Humanity in need can wait no longer,  
And you like foolish mummer on bended knee –  
The blood and fat of ox won't feed my hunger –

While untold corpses litter hill and lea.  
Your paws are red with blood, you fleshy knave,  
who panting runs with beast of primal cave.

*(Translation made for Ammanford, Carmarthenshire website)*

### APPENDIX 3

#### NICHOLAS' BOOKS AND PAMPHLETS

##### Poetry:

*Salmau'r Werin : a chaneuon ereill (1909) (The Psalms of the People)*  
*Cerddi Gwerin (1912) (The Songs of the People)*  
*Salmau'r Werin (1913) (The Psalms of the People)*  
*Y Rhyfel Anghyfiawn (c 1914)*  
*Cerddi Rhyddid (Songs of Freedom)*  
*Cerddi Heddwch (1920) (Songs of Peace)*  
*Terfysgoedd Daear (1939) (The Tumults of the Earth)*  
*Llygad y Drws (1940) [written in prison]*  
*Canu'r Carchar (1942) (Prison Songs, written in Swansea and Brixton prisons) (English translation published 1948)*  
*Cyflog Byw (1940s)*  
*Y Dyn â'r Gaib (1944)*  
*Dryllio'r Delwau (1949)*  
*Meirionnydd (1949)*  
*Y Gân Ni Chanwyd*  
*'R wy'n Gweld o Bell (I behold from Afar)*

##### Other Writings:

*Dros Eich Gwlad, Llythr Agored at Mr D. J. Davies, Llundain, ar y Rhyfel Anghyfiawn (1914)*  
*R. J. Derfel (1970)*

#### OTHER BOOKS AND ARTICLES

Ivor Thomas Rees, *Welsh Hustings 1885-2004* (Llandybie, 2005) [a who's who of all candidates for Welsh seats in parliamentary, European and assembly elections]

David W. Howell, *Nicholas of Glais, The People's Champion* (Clydach Historical Society, 1991)

Kenneth O. Morgan, *Wales in British Politics 1868-1922* (Cardiff, 1963)

Kenneth O. Morgan, 'The Merthyr of Keir Hardie' in *Merthyr Politics, the Making of a Working Class Tradition*, ed. Glanmor Williams, 1966

Kenneth O. Morgan, *Rebirth of a Nation: Wales 1880-1980* (Cardiff, 1981)

Kenneth O. Morgan, *Modern Wales: politics, places and people* (Cardiff, 1995)

D. A. Pretty, *The Rural Revolt that Failed* (Cardiff, 1989)

Daniel Hughes (tr.), *Prison Sonnets from the Welsh of T. E. Nicholas* (London, 1948)

Meic Stephens, *The Oxford Companion to Welsh Literature* (Oxford, 1986)

D. Gareth Evans, *A History of Wales 1906-2000* (Cardiff, 2000)

David Egan, 'The Swansea Conference of the British Council of Soldiers and Workers' Delegates July 1917',

*Llafur*, Vol. 1, No. 4, 1975

Deian Hopkin, 'Patriots and pacifists in Wales 1913–18: the case of Captain Lindsay and the Rev T. E. Nicholas', *Llafur*, Vol. 1, No. 3, 1974

Howard G. Jones, 'The Labour Party in Cardiganshire 1918–66', *Ceredigion*, Vol. 9, 1980–83

D. Ben Rees, 'Centenary of a Welsh Radical', *Labour Monthly* 1979

J. Roose Williams, 'T. E. Nicholas, Niclas Glais, The People's Poet', *Cyffro*, Gaeaf 1970

J. Roose Williams (ed.), *T. E. Nicholas, Proffwyd Sosialaeth a Bard Gwrthryfel* (Bangor, 1971)

Sian Howys, *Bywyd a Gwaith T. E. Nicholas* (MA thesis, University of Wales, 1985)

T. J. Morgan, 'Thomas Nicholas y Glais', *Y Genhinen*, 1971

D. Tecwyn Lloyd, 'T. E. Nicholas' in Aneirin Talfan Davies (ed.), *Gwŷr Llên* (London, 1948)

W. J. Edwards yn holi T. E. Nicholas, *Y Cardi*, Gŵyl Ddewi 1970

Jones, H. C., 'Wireless Whispers', *Cambrian News*, 22 May 1970 – 17 June 1970, 21 January 1972

#### APPENDIX 4

##### T. E. Nicholas Archive at Bangor University

The archive includes:

Poetry composed by T. E. Nicholas, ranging in date from 1900 to 1967, including work written while he was imprisoned at Swansea and Brixton in 1940.

Essays and articles taken from various publications on such subjects as the First World War, Socialism in Wales, Russia and the Second World War, together with parts of an autobiography.

Letters to and from T. E. Nicholas, 1942–1964. Among the correspondents are George M. Ll. Davies, Gwilym R. Tilsley, Pennar Davies and Goronwy Roberts M.P. Also, a photocopied letter from T. E. Nicholas to Meirion Roberts describing his dream relating to the dust cover for his book, *Dryllio'r Delwau*.

Miscellaneous papers including a scrapbook of cuttings relating to the arrest of T. E. Nicholas and his son Islwyn ap Nicholas in 1940. Also, scrapbooks of reviews of the publications of T. E. Nicholas and his son as well as details of the chapels in which T. E. Nicholas preached or lectured.