

## **Evan Seys (1604–1685)**

*Clive Jenkins*

**Evan Seys** (alternates: **Yevan** or **Ievan**) (1604–1685) was an eminent lawyer of his day and rose to national office under Oliver Cromwell as Attorney General, subsequently serving as a Member of Parliament from 1659 to 1681. From c.1649 until his death he was also consistently important in the politics of his native Glamorgan, and of Gloucestershire. He was a committed and active Protestant and an antiquarian scholar to boot.

### **Origins**

Seys was born into a squirearchical family of Boverton Place in the Vale of Glamorgan. They claimed descent from Bleddyn ap Maenarch, an eleventh-century lord of Brecon. In the nineteenth century, descendants of the family through a female line were still incorporating the alleged arms of Bleddyn, and perhaps do so even now. But it was standard practice for “new” families in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to descry a noble ancestor perched on a conveniently remote crag enshrouded in the conveniently obfuscating mists of the Heroic Age. Evan’s properly documented forebears are far less romantic and far closer to home: his great-great-grandfather (floruit 1520s) was David ab Ieuan Sais (variants: Saice, Sayes and Seys), i.e. “son of John the Englishman”, of Cowbridge, so a burgess rather than a gentleman who was likely to have been rurally based; and, given his surname, the descendant of a fairly recent English incomer. Brian James, however, states that “despite his name, David ... was probably a Welshman from the hill country of Glamorgan or possibly from the Border Vale” without citing his evidence. So this is baffling not clarifying: these backwoods, remotish, heavily Cymric, thinly populated, were unlikely “berceaux” for “a son of the Englishman”; the lowland littoral from Chepstow westwards or the Usk/Wye valleys were more likely halting points on the High Road from England. Conversely, if David was an “echt Cymro” from these racially unmixed Glamorgan hinterlands, why was he called “Sais”? Whatever his occupation, status, and antecedents, David, the Cowbridge burgess, sought to gentrify himself buying -in partnership- a portion of the manor of Eglwys Brewis which bordered on the later family seat of Boverton and, on his own, land in Ruthin, Pendoylan and Talygarn. His two sons also lived in Cowbridge, though usually termed

yeomen, that conveniently flexible epithet. One of them, Yevan, had his son, Roger, educated (where and by whom?) and then legally trained. There may have been other sons over these earlier generations equally fortunate given the proliferated Seys cousinhood of Evan's own seventeenth-century day. But, back in the Tudor period, the family, recent *gentry/nouveaux riches*, were rising into the local elite by a shrewd blend of lawyering, marriage and land-buying: Roger's wife brought him the lands on which he built Boverton Place, his son Richard's, Evan's mother, brought property near Swansea. This blend Evan was to continue on a large scale to considerable effect, adding a prudently mutable infusion of politics to the mix.

Thus the filiation is:

- Ieuan Sais (fl. ?c1490/1500s)
- David (fl. 1520s)
- Yevan Saisy (fl. 1530s/50s)
- Roger Seys (c 1539-1599) m. Elizabeth Voss
- Richard (c. 1565-1640) m. Margaret Evans
- Evan m. Margaret (b. 1608) the daughter of Robert Bridges of Woodchester (c. 1579 – 12 May 1648).

## **The speech at school**

Evan attended Cowbridge School and is first heard from, aged 14, formally orating in Latin before an audience of its co-founder, Sir John Stradling, 1st Baronet, and his lady, of his own parents quite possibly, plus some distinctly lesser local worthies. This was probably a special occasion to celebrate the school's tenth anniversary rather than the annual speech day familiar in recent times. Nor was Seys likely to have been the head boy: even if the concept is not itself also anachronistic, there were presumably pupils markedly senior to him: he himself was to stay at school until the age of 17, when in 1621 he went up to Christ Church, Oxford. Rather, he may well have been chosen as orator because he was virtually the Stradlings' social equal — or at least on the way. Indeed, he was probably the pupil of highest social status. This had been bestowed, of course, by his own parents, also local potentates, therefore well worth the honour and flattery which the choice of their son accorded them, and which, if present, they could savour at first hand. And young Evan must have been a good scholar to

boot. He was, however, just the upmarket mouthpiece: the actual author of the speech was the master, the Revd Walter Stradling, a poor relation of the founders.

Thus composed and delivered, its tone is, unsurprisingly, sycophantic, but the speech is the main source for the foundation and refurbishment of Cowbridge School, and by extension useful evidence for Jacobean grammar schools on a broader plane. Strikingly, Sir John had presented his own, at £10, very expensive copy of the *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* of the Flemish geographer Ortelius: so Geography as well as Classics was on the curriculum.

## **The Interregnum, 1649–1660**

Come to man's estate (in both senses), Seys enjoyed a long and successful legal and political career, although the latter was not of the first rank: successful in part because he was "flexible" and sure-footed in that era of political tsunamis. He was Recorder of Gloucester in 1649 and a Bencher of Lincoln's Inn in 1652. He went on to hold legal office in Wales under the Protectorate and was a member of the committee for governing Glamorgan, in which capacity he examined the charters of its boroughs in the 1650s, presumably with a view to remodelling them to favour his own Cromwellian party. This culminated in his becoming the Attorney General to Oliver Cromwell and serving as MP for Glamorgan during the evanescent rule of Richard Cromwell in 1659. At Oliver's quasi-royal funeral he was an official mourner.

But this devoted Cromwellian then had a change of heart – or head. The year 1659 also saw him as part of the broad (indeed "rainbow") coalition of "moderates" preparing the restoration of Charles II. From 1661 to 1681 (namely up to his very last years) he was MP for Gloucester, having smoothly crossed into the Restoration era via the bridge of his new-found Royalism and Loyalism.

Seys prospered materially as well during these politically variegated decades: in 1656 he capitalized on his Gloucestershire connection by acquiring the Manor of Dymock off Sir John Winter, a staunch royalist who had suffered financially because of his convictions. In 1666–8 he bought a substantial slice of the Glamorgan lands worth £12,000 alienated by the Earl of Pembroke. The Gloucesterian connexion went back to 1638 at least when Evan had married Margaret, daughter of Robert Bridges of Woodchester, who brought him £2,500 (at least £1,000,000 in our money) earmarked to buy land. Even a bizarre family rift of his youth turned out to his advantage: his eldest brother, Roger, was disinherited for striking his mother

and proceeded to compound this and destroy any hopes of rehabilitation by embarking on a career of wildly oscillating religious extremism. Emerging from a Jesuit seminary as a priest in the 1620s, Roger was, by the 1640s, an “itinerant Puritan minister of radical views” (Philip Jenkins).

Evan, by contrast, seems essentially to trim to the side of those wielding power, wealth, and authority at any given time: his own parents and Sir John Stradling in his youth – he became the formers’ heir in place of the disgraced and extreme Roger –, the Rump Parliament in 1649–53, Lord Protector Cromwell in 1653–8, Richard Cromwell briefly in 1658–9, King Charles II immediately afterwards, and the Earl of Pembroke in 1666–8. His mouthpiece delivery in adolescence of a speech truckling to the local great and good (probably including his own parents) was a harbinger.

His career enjoyed the most worldly success of any seventeenth-century pupils at Cowbridge School, with the striking exception of his junior, Sir Leoline Jenkins (1623/5–1685).

Jenkins’s was all the more impressive as he was of much humbler origin: the more impressive also as he never wavered from his staunch Royalism and Anglicanism, although he suffered from this materially after the fall of Charles I in 1646. Much the same can be said of Evan’s close kinsman, Richard Seys of Swansea, and a host of fellow Glamorganites of all ranks, while for the radical left, the mid-Walian Vavasor Powell supported the Rump and then the brief Republic of 1649, but was openly and bravely defiant towards the Protectorate and towards the restored monarchy; and this oddly assorted trio could well have endured far worse persecution (Sir John Winter of Gloucester likewise): Cromwellian rule, which got a grip on the country from 1653 after a prolonged stretch marked by intermittent chaos (1646–53), was particularly harsh in obdurately royalist shires like Glamorgan, and Seys was one of its leading agents there. He, conversely, seems to have enjoyed an unbroken run of success in the 1640s, 1650s, and 1660s alike: he could have mentored his younger contemporary the Vicar of Bray.

In the way of political cataclysms, the English Civil War/Interregnum gave opportunities for “new men” to rise: Phillip Jones, the leader of the Roundheads in Glamorgan, was, like many of his followers, from the extreme west of the county: largely hilly and infertile. A gentleman in name only in 1641, with a yeoman’s income of £20 a year, he had become by 1658 Comptroller of Cromwell’s household with the title of Phillip, Lord Jones. Like Seys, but even more remarkably, he not only survived the Restoration but flourished under it: was put

on the Glamorgan Bench in 1672 – a sure sign of rehabilitation – and died worth c £1,500 a year in 1673 with a large country house in the Vale at Fonmon.

Seys, his supporter and follower, did not have so far to travel, being already of an affluent gentry family of the Vale, then the key portion of Glamorgan given its rich farmland; nor did he rise so high. Even so, he held positions under the Cromwells – Attorney General for the whole of England and Wales and MP – that his ancestors had never enjoyed under the old regime. His grandfather, Roger, had been Queen’s Attorney for Wales under Elizabeth, his father, Richard, had enjoyed the grandiose title of Attorney-General of Glamorgan, an office he duly passed on to Evan in 1636; but these were sectional and, therefore, lesser versions of Attorney General. And like Jones, he consolidated this self-enhancement under the Restoration, remaining an MP for most of Charles II’s reign, namely for most the rest of his own life. There was increased wealth as well as office: his purchase of the Pembroke lands (1666–8), which was probably facilitated on favourable terms because Seys was a member of the moderate party which looked to the Earl for leadership.

Philip Jenkins argues that this moderate party was significant in South Wales throughout the period of the 1640s–80s, although, given the extreme political volatility of that time, naturally mutating over the years. There were two other main factions. First the high/inveterate royalists, regionally headed by the Marquises of Worcester based at Raglan Castle. This party was mainly Anglican but with, damagingly, some Catholics, the most prominent of whom were the first two Marquises themselves. And, at the other extreme, the equally inveterate left-leaning Parliamentarians/Republicans who overlapped in religion with the Sectarians and who either would not accept the Restoration or were not accepted by it.

The core quest of the moderates was for a regime, which in an era when anarchy loomed, could provide firm stable rule fused with the upholding and dissemination of a Protestantism conservative enough to bolster the values/interests of the ruling elite. Thus these moderates were centrists, fearing both mass Protestant sectarianism/anarchy and Roman Catholicism, and, in effect, post-Restoration, High Anglicans and Royalists (whether Anglican or Catholic) who supported Absolutism. However, post-1660, the moderates were themselves practically all Anglicans of some sort, at least outwardly.

How far this moderate model fits into the bloodier and most anarchic years of the Civil War/Interregnum of 1642–53 is questionable. It is hard to know how in these apocalyptic circumstances such a party could have organized itself or many potential members even been

aware of each other. And that Seys could at that time be fitted in to such a tendency is even more questionable. There is no evidence yet unearthed of his political sympathies/activities until he comes to light as Recorder of Gloucester in 1649 when he was already 45. Thus he was serving the Rump in the very year of the regicide, which the Rump had authorized: no “decent interval” for Seys. This hardly fits a moderate mode. Then in 1652 the Rump endorsed him as a Bencher of his Inn. His subsequent, seemingly seamless, transition to working for the Protectorate (1653–9) may with this background appear as opportunism rather than moderation. A few moderate Anglicans/Royalists in Glamorgan and elsewhere did pragmatically and gingerly serve the Protectorate in the quest for stability: perhaps in South Wales disillusioned by the Catholicism of their erstwhile leaders, the Worcesters. But Seys’s CV indelibly marks him as having come to “moderation” from the opposite radical/republican background, at least in his outward subscription. And the scale of his activities, the high office they earned him, rapidly made him a pillar of the regime of both Cromwells. However, the Protectorate did for a few years offer an opportunity to secure the moderates’ key objectives. Secondly, Seys’s transition from Rump to Protectorate can also be explained by each successive Interregnum regime and the local Republicans/Radicals needing each other very much as mutual props, especially in such Royalist areas as Glamorgan: if they did not hang together, they would hang separately. So anti-Royalists of all shades at the centre and the grassroots had to keep their considerable internal differences within bounds. Thus mere opportunism is too simple an explanation, although the personal aggrandisement of the likes of Jones and Seys strongly implies it was one element.

It was the failure of the last short-lived Republican regime in 1659 which itself had brought about the collapse of the equally short-lived rule of Richard Cromwell (“Tumbledown Dick”) to carry such Interregnum “worthies” as Jones and Seys with it which doomed the Republicans. It appeared to be left-wing sectarian, and under it Quakerism was spreading fast enough in the arable lands of the Vale of Glamorgan, around Seys’s Boverton, for example, to threaten squirearchical dominance there. The Quakers were hostile to tithes and rents, were then by no means pacifist, and indeed led locally by Roundhead veterans of the New Model Army. With the Cromwells gone, the Restoration of Charles II appeared to Seys (as to many others of the broad elite) as the only barrier to this threat of expropriation from fanatical populists.

## The Restoration, 1660–1685

The reign of Charles II was also vicissitudinous, but at least avoided the bloody anarchy and destruction of the Civil War. And a moderate party can be more clearly discerned in Glamorgan. Broadly, the interests of ex-Cromwellians (now born again as Anglicans and Royalists: prime examples Seys and Jones) continued to align with those of the true Royalists and of the regime in general throughout the 1660s. The threat to moderation was still thought to come from a possible Roundhead insurrection backed by Dutch arms (England was at war with the Netherlands 1665–7). As for Royalist reciprocation, Seys himself was made secure by a royal pardon in 1662 and was allowed to keep the rank of serjeant at law conferred on him by the Rump. Back home in Glamorgan, he was at some point put on the Commission of the Peace. Thereby he was re-admitted to at least some share in the governance of a county which he and his unpopular and unrepresentative clique had recently sought to dominate. The Bench of Justices was time-honoured in gentry eyes. Ideally it should be broad-based and representative (of themselves). Retrospectively, Seys might well have considered this measure of reintegration with the now predominant true royalists among his fellow gentry more advantageous than spearheading a precarious, provocative, quasi-revolutionary takeover of Glamorgan against its grain. Inclusion of ex-Cromwellites in such a traditional body also furthered the attainment of general as well as personal security.

Regionally, the President of the Council of Wales was the Carmarthenshire -based Earl of Carbery, the biggest Welsh Cromwellian turncoat of the lot. Hence, he was probably a man after Seys's own heart, and Carbery certainly provided some insurance along with the more locally focussed Jones that those with his brand of CV were relatively secure. Carbery, resident in South Wales and holding the most powerful Welsh office, was a more effective counterweight to the Marquis of Worcester than the time-honoured but absentee Earl of Pembroke, although Pembroke's South Welsh agents sustained his connection: see the 1666–8 land sales.

But, as the 1670s got underway, the Roundhead/Dutch threat faded to be replaced by that of a domestic Catholic coup backed by French arms: the opposite extreme. In Wales, Worcester replaced Carbery as President in 1672. He was, unlike his forebears, a strong and sincere Anglican, but this was not generally believed. Too many of Worcester's immediate family and entourage remained Catholics; one or two close relations were even priests. He was a close friend of James, Duke of York, who embodied the lethal combination of heir to the

throne and recent Catholic convert out and proud: hence, Worcester was widely, if erroneously, regarded as a crypto-Papist, his conversion to Anglicanism insincere: just a pretext to unite his formidable territorial interest with delegated Government power and command of the Chepstow garrison. In any case, the acknowledged true Anglicans surrounding him were extreme, keen on persecuting Dissenters while such as Seys wished to reach out to the more moderate of these in – within bounds – a Protestant ecumenicalism. There had been disputes in Glamorgan between High Anglicans and moderates as early as 1661. And Seys, given his record under the Interregnum, could as well have been accused of being a crypto-Dissenter as Worcester was of being a crypto-Catholic. The moderates emphasized the need to consolidate what moderate Protestantism there was in Wales against the allegedly fused perils of Popery and ignorance on one side, and on the other extreme Protestant sectarianism. Anti-Popery in Wales had a specific colouring based on the potential threat from neighbouring Ireland, which could be a springboard for French invasion.

The Welsh Trust was prepared to work with ejected Interregnum ministers to spread the word among the commonalty through preaching and translating edifying tracts into Welsh. They had after all the time and the mobility, unlike parish-bound conforming Anglican parsons. Even bishops such as Thomas of St David's favoured this co-operation. In the 1670s the Trust's known lay backers "read like a roll-call of Worcester's enemies" (Jenkins), and Evan Seys was prominent among them. The Restoration compromise was breaking down. It had depended on fudging a wide spectrum of semi-incompatible opinions. The essence was to let bygones be bygones as encapsulated in the Act of Oblivion of 1660 of which in descending order Carbery, Jones, and Seys were prime local beneficiaries. In the 1670s, however, Worcester regarded everyone who opposed his actions as crypto-Republicans/Dissenters, subversive of the House of Stuart: a tit-for-tat for their perceiving him as crypto-Papist. An ex-Cromwellian such as Seys was particularly easy to fit into his frame. This oversimplification, therefore caricature, gradually approached a self-fulfilling prophecy. The complex local reality came to be dominated over the course of the 1670s by two increasingly opposed and polarized factions. Seys and his like had very understandably never really been trusted by the local true Royalists. This may help explain why, having represented his native Glamorgan, a shire seat, under Richard Cromwell, he moved for the Restoration period to represent the erstwhile Republican/Puritan enclave of Gloucester, a less prestigious borough seat, but in a county where he had built up connections and interests both extensive and rooted. However, by the end of the 1670s, such mistrust was overt. The decade culminated in

the Popish Plot and the Exclusion Crisis. In the latter, Seys revamped his earlier role as an opponent of the Court and a member of the Country Party: he was an Exclusionist MP. In response, Worcester, leading the regional Royalist reaction, kicked Seys, despite his impressive legal credentials, off the Glamorgan Bench in 1680.

The 1670s, then, do not show Seys as a knee-jerk opportunist. Had he been so, he would have rushed to join the Worcester faction around 1672. He had his principles, or at least his position. This ex-Cromwellian and Puritan died in c.1685 a conforming Anglican protesting loyalty at least to King Charles II. But he had sympathy for moderate Dissenters among whom he had himself once been numbered and he wanted also to limit royal power. Complementarily, he was firmly anti-Catholic. Thus he ended up, whether he accepted the term or not, as a founder of the Whig Party.

### **The Political Career: A Summary**

Seys reached his zenith under The Protectorate: considerable local then regional power was his springboard to national prominence. To be slightly anachronistic, he was as Attorney-General a member of Oliver's cabinet: in the inside set of the insiders. He weathered the Restoration well, but was never again admitted to the national engine-room. As an MP he was immediately edged out of his native Glamorgan which he had recently taken a big hand in ruling. The "reconciled" Cromwellians gradually faded, symbolised in South Wales by the replacement of Carbery in 1672 and the death of Jones in 1673. And a "royalist reaction" gathered force. Seys's age could not have helped: in 1670 he turned 66; quite a tally when many members even of the elite topped by Charles II and Cromwell themselves expired (well) short of sixty. So he faced the Worcesterian onslaught of the 1670s as an old, then as a very old man: in 1680 when Worcester sacked him, he turned 76: frankly, he should have been dead. That he was not only alive, but also still fighting his corner in Parliament, is a tribute to his physical stamina and to his tenacity. But, by then, even political players in their early fifties were young enough to be his sons. Was he, as a compromised survivor from the regicide past, an embarrassment to younger members of his own side and an easy target for their opponents, in the manner of former keen supporters of Fascist and Communist regimes around 1980? Certainly as a backer of the Welsh Trust and perceived enemy of Worcester, and then as an Exclusionist, he was marked out as an oppositionist, both regionally and nationally. Perhaps he was chivvied into opposition: his purging from the Bench while/because he was an Exclusionist MP bathed his position in the most glaring clarity.

Chiaroscuro may well have been his shade of preference enabling him to cling on to at least some official power: he did not *resign* from his Glamorgan magistracy. Hence in 1658 he was prominent in a precarious Establishment; in 1681 he was still prominent, but in opposition to the restored Court: rather more precarious. In a superficial paradox, Seys “adapted” far better to the Restoration in the 1660s than in the 1670s when he might have expected to have been ever more deeply embedded into the current Establishment as time helped the memories of the interregnum to fade. Conversely, he retained property and concomitant “interest” in at least two shires, a seat in Parliament thereby, and until 1680 one on the Glamorgan bench. He remained the reverse of disinherited, disgraced, exiled and forgotten — let alone executed; fates which, variously or in combination, had befallen quite a few of his old Cromwellian comrades. And the future lay with the Whigs. Seys himself, however, may not have enjoyed such prescience: in the year of his death this future was still very effectively occluded.

## **Seys the scholar**

Seys, like many educated and intelligent gentlemen of his day, was also a noted antiquarian with probably a big library at Boverton Place, so some of his wealth was diverted to scholarly interests. The British Archaeological Association was recently (July 2010) posting on its website a book full of medieval charters and the like which once belonged to him. The books provided by his Stradling neighbours for Cowbridge School set him off on a scholarly trajectory which was not simply exploited for self-aggrandisement.

## **Family, will, and death**

In his own will signed on 7 July 1682 (with a codicil dated 10 August 1684), Seys made proper provision for his daughters Margaret and Elizabeth (who appear to be still unmarried in middle age), and his heir was his son, Richard. There is no reference to his wife, the former Miss Margaret Bridges, who died 14 January 1651. The will breathes strikingly Protestant sentiment which must reflect his own beliefs rather than mere convention, because, as befitted a distinguished lawyer, he drew the document up himself in his own hand. His great age for the period meant he died within months of two much younger contemporaries with whom his life had intersected: King Charles II himself, and Sir Leoline Jenkins, although Jenkins survived until 1 September 1685, and was on hand at the proving of the will on 23 February 1684/5. Jenkins and Seys were both politicized lawyers from the Vale of

Glamorgan who had gone to the same school and subsequently done extremely well for themselves reaching what, shortly after their day, was to be termed the cabinet, although the younger man displayed more consistency of principle.

Seys's descendants and wider kin maintained his Whig allegiance in a Tory county until the family left Boverton in the late eighteenth century. The religious tradition was maintained equally. One of his daughters left an endowment of £600 in capital for a weekly sermon at St Illtyd's Church in Llantwit Major in 1705. But Evan's direct male line ended with the death of his grandson in 1718. The Boverton estate passed to cousins, then out of the family altogether when Jane Seys, born 1750, conveyed it c 1770 to her husband, Robert Jones of Fonmon, interestingly a descendant of the famous Phillip. After her early death, childless, he promptly sold it. The property passed through various hands, the Place was demoted to a farmhouse, and was on the way to ruin in 1861: a condition which was fully attained not long afterwards. Nonetheless, some folk memory of Evan lingered: "a majestic oak in the fold at Boverton" was "still shewn [to visitors] by the name of 'the sergeant's oak' " in 1830. As Wordsworth had it near the same time re the vanished dwelling place of a much humbler family, "yet the oak is left That grew beside their door": into the 1830s at least.

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*The Cambrian Quarterly Magazine* 1830, p. 172 on the oak

Dryden’s *Absalom and Achitophel* Pt 2 (1682): Worcester, by then first Duke of Beaufort, is eulogistically cast as “Bezaliel” lines 941–66. The Welsh he governs, “Kenites”, in the biblical allegory, are also praised for their loyalty to the King: Dryden cannot have thought Seys representative of his nation. But their land is disparaged as a “Rocky Province.” The whole poem is a witty and highly readable satire on the Exclusion Crisis and The Popish Plot from the Royalist perspective. Shakespeare’s *Henry the fourth* part 2 caricatures country justices in the personae of “Shallow” and “Silence” – of Gloucestershire no less. Seys was way above these two in point of legal expertise, general erudition, sophistication, breadth of outlook etc.; but many of his colleagues on the Glamorgan Bench were not. These two classics add background and elaboration.