John Poyer – Starting the second civil war in Wales

[00.00]

This is the incredible, but true, story of John Poyer of Pembroke. Poyer’s early years are obscure, but he rose from poverty to become the mayor of the isolated and poor town of Pembroke in the farthest reaches of south west Wales.

When Civil War broke out in 1642, Poyer seized the town and castle for Parliament, although surrounding areas like most of Wales were loyal to the Crown. He then successfully held the strategic foothold of Parliamentary power in the west until summer, 1645, despite repeated attempts by the larger forces to regain control.

But after the King was captured, Poyer believed his contribution to the cause was grossly undervalued by a distant Parliament in London, and he became deeply angered when they accused him of drunkenness and embezzlement and refused to recompense him for the monies he said he and his soldiers were owed.

In 1648, out of patience, Poyer responded by violently driving out Pembroke’s Parliamentary garrison and refusing to return the town and its castle to Parliament until he had been paid. Receiving no satisfactory response, Poyer switched sides and led a force in the rebellion which became known as the Second Civil War. An angered Parliament sent detachments from the New Model Army under Oliver Cromwell to put down the uprising. Poyer was taken for trial in London where he was eventually executed by firing squad in Covent Garden on 25 April 1649.

Afterwards, Poyer and his story faded from memory and he rated little more than a passing mention in books about the Civil War in Wales, but now, after years of research, Dr Lloyd Bowen, Reader in Early Modern and Welsh History, at Cardiff University, has published an enthralling biography of his tempestuous life. He talks to publisher, Mike Gibbs, about Poyer and Pembroke.

[02.16]

Mike Gibbs: Lloyd, why are we talking about John Poyer? You’re obviously fascinated by him and he’s obviously one of those figures who are not in the forefront of people’s thinking when it comes to the Civil War, and yet you have produced such a fascinating and widely acclaimed book.

[02.38]

Lloyd Bowen: As a Civil War historian, I was always aware that there was something different about Pembrokeshire that was different to the surrounding areas, and I knew that there was this shadowy figure, John Poyer, who was involved in it. Many years ago, when I
was very green at a lecture in Cardiff, a woman of some advanced years turned to me and said ‘what do you do?’ I said ‘I do 17th century history’, and she said ‘isn’t it terrible what they did to John Poyer?’, and I have to admit that I didn’t know what they did to John Poyer.

From that early ignorance, I became more interested in thinking about who was this guy and how was he involved. I read the usual sorts of accounts of him and he comes across as a pretty reprehensible chap in fact. A turncoat, an individual who had changed sides, a man who was a bit of a tragic figure, but a minor figure at that. I accumulated some material over a period of time that began to flesh out the story in some quite interesting ways. Accumulating that material, as I progressed, I realised that this was material that other historians had not encountered, or had not really thought about in the ways that I was thinking about it.

One of these breakthrough moments was actually coming across a text in Los Angeles, where you don’t expect to get too much in terms of a Pembrokeshire story, but it was when I held a Fellowship at a place called the Huntington Library, which is in San Marino in Los Angeles. I was reading a pamphlet, which to this day is one of my favourite title pamphlets of the Civil War. It’s called “Animadversions of the Mark for the Satisfaction of the Contumacious Malignant”, which doesn’t tell you what it’s going to be about.

What it’s about is a remarkable narrative of the Civil Wars in south west Wales from somebody who was clearly there, and with that title why would you ever think that that is what it’s about, but it is. Piecing these things together allowed me to come up with a rather more rounded picture of who this John Poyer was and to recognise that he was perhaps more central to the story of the Civil Wars in south Wales than we had recognised, but also, perhaps, slightly more representative of a more general opinion within the Civil Wars, which is of a comparative moderate who finds the grounds upon which he once stood at the start of the wars, eroded away from him and being left high and dry. Over time, shall we say, I had enough within the files to think about writing a book, and when lockdown hit and we all had some time on our hands, I was able to write one.

Mike Gibbs: What was Pembrokeshire like at the beginning of the Civil Wars?

Lloyd Bowen: When we look at Pembrokeshire in the first half of the 17th century, we’re looking at quite a fascinating part of the country. An epithet that is granted to the county, slightly problematically but nonetheless revealingly, is ‘Little England beyond Wales’.
Contemporaries recognise that southern Pembrokeshire, in particular, is something of an anomaly in Wales.

[06.20]

It is something of an anomaly because of the settlement of Flemish immigrants and Normans who settled in the south of the county, the lowland part of the county, built a number of castles and administered this area. Because of that, it was quite Anglicised in its speech patterns, in its farming and in its connections. It’s quite closely connected, for example, with the south west of England, places like Bristol and Somerset.

[06.49]

This is a county that is interesting in terms of its culture, in terms of its connections and, to some degree, in terms of its economy and its economic woes because this was a place that throve on the cloth trade. By the early 17th century, the cloth trade is in rather a decline and so this is a county, and a county town in Pembroke, which is battling with a degree of almost deindustrialisation.

[07.24]

At the centre of Poyer’s story, and at the centre of a lot of the Civil War narrative, is the town of Pembroke and its castle itself. Pembroke Castle is a very significant and imposing structure, which even in the relatively decayed town of Pembroke, because Pembroke doesn’t have a huge economic driver behind it at this time, is still seen as an imposing place, a hugely important defensive structure.

The castle was a real stronghold recognised by contemporaries, and it was surrounded by a walled town that was also important as a defensive structure so, although there had been a long period of peace, we must remember that Pembroke sits on Milford Haven. Milford Haven is an entry point, not just into Pembrokeshire of course, into south west Wales, but potentially into the rest of England.

[08.26]

Why do I say that? Well, it is a potential weak point in the nation’s defences. Let’s remember that the Pembrokeshire man, Henry VII, invaded England through landing in Milford Haven. What you have across the water from Pembroke, and Milford Haven as well in this period, is Ireland so there are concerns about Catholic Ireland and invasion, potentially, from Catholic continental powers, which is why, throughout the early 17th century, anxiety surrounds Pembroke and its castle, because there is an understanding that if we have a hostile force of Catholics who are able to take over the town and the castle, then they have a defensive position on a hugely navigable river, a navigable port, that could cause real structural defensive problems in the realm. It could become the basis for a new invasion.
Pembroke town, although it’s not thriving economically, is nonetheless a centre, if you like, in the defensive wall of England and Wales, and Poyer will come to exploit this in due course.

[09.40]

**Mike Gibbs:** What do we know about the young John Poyer and how did he get into politics?

**Lloyd Bowen:** He’s connected with more powerful individuals, let’s put it that way, and I think that they help him climb the greasy pole of local politics. He is connected when Sir Hugh Owen becomes its mayor or lead official, and he goes up with Owen to the Long Parliament as his servant in 1640, and there he must have been exposed to the febrile nature of London society and politics at that time.

[10.13]

Importantly then he returns to Pembroke, and in October 1641, he himself is appointed Mayor of Pembroke. That means that he is the chief official, effectively in control of the town’s government. If you like he’s become a big fish in a small pond.

[10.31]

**Mike Gibbs:** What’s the role of mayor at this time when the Civil War begins?

**Lloyd Bowen:** As Mayor, he is the lead civil official but when we have Civil War breaking out that means that he takes on and assumes a military role. Usually the mayor changes every year, there is a new election, but he effectively states that, because of the emergency situation of Civil War, this will now be a rolling position that he will occupy and he does so into the mid-1640s.

[11.04]

**Mike Gibbs:** He holds Pembroke in the Parliamentary cause. How did the people in the town react?

**Lloyd Bowen:** Important in understanding the response of Pembroke to the outbreak of the Civil War is to look back a few months and to go to the Irish rebellion of Catholics, which occurs in October 1641. The outbreak of the Irish rebellion is an electrifying event throughout England and Wales, but if you are in Pembroke, if you’re on the river of Milford Haven, you’re only 50 miles or so across the Irish Sea.

[11.41]

What Poyer and the people of Pembroke see are refugees, English refugees, who are telling tales of atrocity of Catholics in Ireland, literally washing up on their shores. We know some of the impact that happens in local society from the correspondence that Poyer sends to Sir Hugh Owen, the MP in Parliament. He is discussing the refugees that are washing up on the
shoreline from the rebellion and this electrifies local society. It means that the question of who is going to control the arms, who is going to control the military of the area is a question that is now thrown into sharp relief. Are you going to look to Parliament to defend you or are you going to look to the King?

[12.29]

It’s clear that Poyer recognises his best chance of survival for himself and for his town in the face of what he thinks is an oncoming Catholic tide, to be in the Parliamentarian cause, and so he mobilises the people of Pembroke to follow his lead in repairing Pembroke’s town walls and mobilising on behalf of Parliament. He is very proud of the fact that he sees himself as one of the first Parliamentarians in Wales, indeed.

[13.04]

**Mike Gibbs:** What was the reaction from the royalist factions because the rest of, or much of the rest of Wales, was royalist?

**Lloyd Bowen:** What we see in Pembrokeshire in 1643 is a tide of royalism that is washing up against the walls of Pembroke and Pembroke Castle. We know that a siege is raised, albeit quite briefly, against Pembroke at this time, and we know that Poyer and the townspeople hold out against it. It’s suggested in some contemporary journalism that the town actually falls. It seems what probably happens is that the town is taken by the royalists but they hole up in the castle; the Parliamentarians and Poyer manage to hold out.

[13.47]

Ultimately, a man called Richard Swanley comes to their aid with a flotilla of Parliamentarian ships. There’s this ‘miraculous delivery’, as it’s described in contemporary publications, which allows the relief of Pembroke, and on that basis the security of Parliamentarian Pembroke is assured. There are a number of royalist manoeuvres into and across the county, but from that base the Pembrokeshire Parliamentarian party is able to push out in 1644 and 1645, and regain territory ultimately. Poyer is at the heart of that resistance against local royalism.

[14.31]

**Mike Gibbs:** Was Poyer held up as a hero by the Parliamentary pamphlets and by the Parliamentary leaders at this time?

**Lloyd Bowen:** Interestingly, the London press is not that interested in what is going on in Wales. Their eyes are turned very much to their backyard. That’s not to say that Poyer doesn’t gain some good press, he certainly does. One of the problems that Poyer has, however, is that he simply doesn’t think he’s getting the press he deserves, because a huge amount of the praise for Pembrokeshire, the “little miracle” that happens with it holding out
in this place ‘environed with so many enemies’, as one contemporary notes, is that a lot of the praise actually goes to these people who come along whilst Poyer’s been holding out for a number of months in the castle.

He is held up as a paragon of obdurate resistance in some parts of the Parliamentarian press, but Poyer is not a very good spin doctor and he doesn’t manage to get his narrative across very well, if you like. He doesn’t have a lot of connections in London who are able to tell his story for him.

Mike Gibbs: What was Poyer’s response as this phase of the war came to an end?

Lloyd Bowen: Poyer is slightly aghast I think, in 1645-1646 when Parliament wins the Civil War and the concern about immediate survival is over, to find himself, effectively, frozen out of the peace dividend. He is not praised by his Parliamentary masters, and he is not rewarded with great sums of money or positions of power in local society. Problematically, he sees these ex-enemies moving against him suggesting that he is an upstart who has been destabilising society, rather than solidifying Parliamentarian power in the area.

It’s really important to recognise Poyer as emblematic of a wider impulse within society in England and Wales at this time, which is to say that he is a Church of England man. He is a man who bequeaths chalices to the churches in Pembroke at this time so he is a Parliamentarian who is a real moderate of that party.

What happens to Parliamentarianism in 1646 and into 1647 is that sort of moderate party comes under enormous pressure from individuals like Oliver Cromwell, his independent allies and, of course, the New Model Army. When Poyer looks at the New Model Army, when he looks at the ideas that it has for governing the country, for reforming the church, when he looks at the so-called independents, who are this more radical faction within the Parliamentary party, now seizing control of the levers of local government, he is again feeling entirely frozen out.

He is therefore emblematic of what you might describe as the middle ground of Parliamentarianism which has been squeezed out, and when he looks about him, he sees a Parliament that he doesn’t recognise any more. This is not what he went to war for in 1642, and so he articulates a resistance to the local enemies and in turn what they do is they tell
Parliament this is somebody who we need to remove.

It’s pretty clear, at some points in 1647, that Poyer begins to fear for his life. He begins to fear that they actually have plans to murder him, and this is a very perilous situation in which he finds himself.

[18.30]

**Mike Gibbs:** How do things come to a head?

**Lloyd Bowen:** Things come to a head, partly through Poyer being entirely frozen out and wondering whether he is going to be ruined financially, whether he’s going to be imprisoned, and, as I said, whether he might be murdered. What he looks to do is to recapture some of his power base.

[18.50]

How does he do that? He goes back to what he knows. He effectively kicks out the Mayor of Pembroke and installs himself back in his old position in late 1647, and claims to be the individual who now has control of Pembroke and has control as Governor of the Castle. But, the New Model Army and its allies in the locality are in no way going to go along with someone like Poyer being in this position of command.

[19.23]

They send down a New Model Officer, a man called Christopher Fleming and they send him down with orders, effectively to take control of Pembroke Castle off Poyer and to run it on behalf of the New Model. Initially Poyer simply says ‘no, you’re not coming in, we will not allow this to happen, this is simply not something that you have authority for’. But then there is a small skirmish in which a couple of Fleming’s offices are killed. This is reported in the more radical Parliamentarian presses with titles like ‘a bloody slaughter at Pembroke Castle in Wales’, and so on. It’s clear that in that initial mutiny, Poyer is resisting the New Model. It’s clear that he has crossed something of a Rubicon, that he has stepped into a place wherein there is no coming back into the Parliamentarian fold.

[20.21]

For Poyer, there are some good decisions to be made now about whether, potentially, he flees or whether he pushes ahead and pushes on with, what we might describe as, resistance, resistance to what he sees as an alien Parliamentarian party, and ultimately that’s what he does. He goes from a relatively limited mutiny, then into a more organised resistance to the Parliamentarian party.

[20.52]
Mike Gibbs: This starts what has become known as the ‘Second Civil War’?

Lloyd Bowen: That’s correct. The Second Civil War is a term of art used by historians to describe an outbreak of violence in 1648 that is quite complicated in that it involves, what we might describe as ‘local disturbances’, like that that’s happening in Pembrokeshire. We also have, for example, resistance that is breaking out in Kent, in Essex, in the north of England and indeed in north Wales.

But also, Charles I has been treating with the Scots, and the Scots are trying to get an army together to invade England in support of Charles I’s claim to the Crown over Parliament. The problem that we see with the Second Civil War, on the anti-Parliamentarian side, is that it’s very ad hoc, it’s not very joined up, it’s not very clear.

Nonetheless, what is clear is that, when somebody like Poyer begins this sort of limited mutiny, it really does begin to spread like wildfire, particularly throughout south Wales. What this tells us is that the groundswell of antagonism towards this more radical Parliamentarianism is quite deep in Wales. He is articulating and putting himself at the head of a movement that is quite popular, a desire to return the King to his throne or at least, shall we say, to get some kind of negotiated settlement in which the King is at the top of the hierarchy as he used to be, that the church is put back together again and looks like the one that we knew in the time of Elizabeth and James I.

What we find in south Wales is that this initial revolt snowballs very quickly into a rising of men, armed men. Some are Poyer’s brother-in-law’s regiments, Rowland Laugharne. They are demobilised, but they don’t have any back pay and so they’re saying ‘what the heck is Parliament going to do for us if they won’t even pay us anymore, and so we will now come on board with this rebellion’. And so Poyer does something, -I talked about a Rubicon, here is the real Rubicon; he issues a declaration in support of the King.

Mike Gibbs: How does Parliament react? What forces do they send and how does the conflict evolve?

Lloyd Bowen: In many ways Parliament is quite slow to recognise the significance of what’s going on in south Wales. The distance actually causes Parliament to be a little bit slow in reacting properly and recognising the significance of the rising that’s happening in south Wales. There is also the case that Parliament is worried about what’s going on in the north with the Scots coming down, so they don’t want to commit forces to parts of the country, the far west or what have you, and leaving the Midlands and the South exposed to an incoming
Scottish army.

Over time, they do come to recognise that this is a very serious threat to Parliament’s existence because they recognise that this rebellion is growing in popularity, and they know that Parliament doesn’t have a huge level of a foundation of support elsewhere in the country, and so they do indeed send forces down to the West principally under the command of Colonel Thomas Horton. They also send Oliver Cromwell ultimately down into south Wales too.

The forces that are rallied behind what we might describe as ‘Poyer’s banner’ ultimately come under the command of his brother-in-law, Rowland Laugharne. The forces that Laugharne manages to gather together will meet those of Thomas Horton at the Battle of St Fagans in Glamorgan in May 1648. It is evident that St Fagans is a disastrous defeat for this uprising, that the New Model Army, these hardened officers and infantrymen, sweep over and decimate the royalist rebel forces. Tenby falls to Thomas Horton relatively quickly, but Pembroke is a much more difficult nut to crack. Oliver Cromwell’s chaplain, a man called Hugh Peter, reckons that it was one of the most difficult sieges that they had ever seen, in fact, trying to take over this castle.

Cromwell is also seriously hampered by the fact that he doesn’t have the truly heavy ordinance that he needs to break through the thick walls of Pembroke Castle. The really large cannon that he sent for, they actually sink to the bottom of the Bristol Channel so there is a long delay in which Cromwell is frustratedly sitting before Pembroke and then, ultimately, Cromwell manages to get hold of the heavy guns he needs and there is no relieving force that is coming from the royalist side. There is no liberating navy as there was when Swanley came into Milford Haven. Poyer and his colleagues are on their own, they are entirely outnumbered and, when the heavy guns begin to pound Pembroke Castle, capitulation is relatively rapid in July 1648.

Cromwell says to John Poyer ‘I have considered my duty here and, effectively, if you don’t surrender the blood that will come thereafter is going to be on your own hands’. There is no question amongst the townspeople they need to capitulate, and ultimately that’s what they do.

Mike Gibbs: After that, Poyer and his colleagues are captured and eventually are taken
Lloyd Bowen: Yes, that's correct. The main protagonists that we're looking at here are John Poyer, his brother-in-law, Rowland Laugharne, and Rice Powell; three main rebels if you like. They surrender to the mercy of Parliament, which ultimately means that Parliament’s going to decide their fate.

They’re taken to Gloucester and then ultimately they are moved into London and imprisoned there while a number of more high profile royalists’ fates are considered. By ‘more high profile royalists’, we also include the King among that number. He is, potentially, a neighbour of John Poyer for a time as they are imprisoned in Windsor Castle. Of course, Charles is executed on 30 January 1649, and thereafter discussion in the fledgling Commonwealth moves to, shall we say, justice.

The word ‘justice’ is used a lot; what kind of justice should be meted out against the rebels? Importantly, someone like Cromwell thinks that an individual like Poyer is even worse than, shall we say, a committed royalist. He says that an individual like Poyer, who had been a Parliamentarian, is worthy of even greater punishment because they had once understood the Parliamentarian cause and then rebelled against it. He said, effectively, that they have ‘sinned against so much light’, and so what happens is that Parliament gives over the fate of these men back over to the army and they are put up before a military tribunal; effectively a court-martial.

Poyer himself is in a pretty terrible state, a fairly destitute state. He has his wife and four small children, and he knows that this is not going to end well for him, and he looks to the military tribunal and attempts to make a case for himself that is based upon his steadfastness; the fact that he was an early Parliamentarian when nobody else was; the fact that he held out and remained faithful to the cause. This is a narrative that he tries to explain in a couple of publications that he circulates, probably to members of the army, that he tries to tell himself, throughout the 1640s in many ways, that he has been loyal.

The problem is that individuals are telling a very different story. They are saying that Poyer is an individual who cannot be trusted; that he is a man who is without doubt at the very initiation of this rebellion; that his mutiny caused all this bloodshed, and ultimately the court-martial comes to adjudicate the fact that all of the individuals before him in the trial are guilty. Because of the charge this put against them, all three are sentenced to death.
After the judgment of the court-martial, the military tribunal on these men, there is a flurry of petitioning, of letter writing, of entreating for some kind of reprieve, some kind of mercy. We know that the head of the army, Thomas Fairfax, receives petitions from John Poyer’s wife, from Poyer himself, from the wife of Rowland Laugharne, all pleading for their lives. He is evidently won over by these arguments that these are individuals who, if you like, in the antithesis of Oliver Cromwell's position on this, were once faithful servants and so do deserve some consideration, and so he does decide to award a degree of mercy. What might look quite unusual to modern eyes but, in fact, was not necessarily unusual within the circumstances of the military, Fairfax decides to employ an idea of decimation that was once known in the Republic of Rome, which is to say that if a group of soldiers had mutinied and had been defeated then only a proportion of them should suffer for the crimes of the greater number.

What is decided in this case, where you only have three individuals before you, is that ultimately one of them will pay the price, will atone for the sins of them all, and so one of them will be executed. It is decided that that number will be chosen by lot and they’re going to draw lots to see who’s going to go up against the firing squad.

They decide to leave this choice to God, if you like, and they want an innocent child to draw the lots on their behalf, and so a child is brought in to them. They have three slips of paper. Upon two of those slips of paper is ‘Life given by God’, and the third slip of paper is blank. We are then told in contemporary reports in newspapers that Laugharne and Powell have the pieces of paper with ‘Life given by God’ on them.

Poyer is the final one with the blank and the child asks Poyer supposedly ‘did I do my duty well’, and he says ‘yes, you have discharged your duty very well’. Pathetically then, Poyer is the one who is facing the firing squad, and shortly thereafter he is taken to Covent Garden and he is faced with a firing squad at the back, essentially, of St Paul’s. He ultimately is shot twice in the heart by this firing squad and is taken and buried in a local grave, leaving a young wife and four orphaned children to try and get through the 1650s without the breadwinner, which ultimately they do manage to do, and petition Charles II when he comes back to the throne in 1660, claiming that Poyer was not the faithful Parliamentarian, but rather a man who had rebelled on behalf of Charles II when the cause looked lost in 1648.
Mike Gibbs: Lloyd, it's been really fascinating hearing about this forgotten figure, John Poyer, 'warts and all', to use the Cromwellian term, I guess. Where can we learn more and tell us about your book and where it's available?

Lloyd Bowen: Surely. It's been wonderful to talk to you about him. My book is called *John Poyer, the Civil Wars in Pembrokeshire and the British Revolutions*. It's fortunately a paperback so it's not one of these that cost you £70 as is the way with a lot of academic texts these days.

[33.42]

Mike Gibbs: Lloyd, thank you very much indeed. I strongly advise people who are listening to this to take up that offer and go and read the book. Thank you.

Lloyd Bowen: That's very kind of you. Thanks very much for the opportunity to talk about him.

[34.00]

You can learn more about the story of John Poyer in Dr Bowen’s vivid biography, *John Poyer, the Civil War in Pembrokeshire and the British Revolution*, published in paperback by the University of Wales Press.

To understand what made the Civil Wars in Wales different from the rest of Britain, listen to the companion podcast, *Wales Besieged 1642 to 1648*, in which Dr Bowen explains how history, religion and language shaped the Principality’s royalism and made Wales a royalist fortress.

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