THE YEAR 1839 witnessed the first appearance in South-West Wales of Rebecca, the mythical heroine.

Author David Jones reveals in a new book, published tomorrow, one admirer who shared the romantic and literary evidence, that the riots they inspired were more widespread and serious than was thought; even Queen Victoria felt compelled to demand urgent action.

The response to the disturbances, and to the fascinating meetings which accompanied them, was of the utmost importance in the history of modern Wales.

Rebecca's Children, A Study of Rural Society, Crime and Protest, sets the riots in the wider context of a changing rural society. It is a study of Rebecca's children, the peasantry of Wales. DAVID JONES exposes their economy, poverty, family life, popular culture, social attitudes, crime and politics.

Much of this material, especially on deviancy, is published for the first time and it illustrates how Rebeccaism grew naturally out of a fertile soil.

Even the extensive and sustained presence of soldiers and policemen could not completely eradicate the phenomenon.

THE WELSH RIOTERS as pictured in the Illustrated London News in 1843.

When Rebecca ran riot in Wales

EXTRACTS from Rebecca's Children by David J V Jones, Claredon Press, Oxford.

POVERTY

SOME OF the people did compare well, confirming the Morning Chronicle's first favourable impressions of the region, and there were the usual cautionary tales of farmers whose dress and lifestyle belied their hidden wealth, but the majority of rural inhabitants lived hand to mouth.

People were discovered in terrible straits, emaciated, naked, fainting for lack of food and diseased from head to toe. When Anne Davies of Cardigan, Mary Anne Aubrey of Llandagod and other befuddled characters crawled before the Poor Law and police authorities, even hardened magistrates were moved to protect.

Dead infants were so thin that coroners sometimes asked murder inquiries, and no one visited Carmarthen in winter time without being struck by the hollow faces of the unemployed and the slow gait of hungry mothers. The poorest in this region still gave birth in stable, and died hardly noticed on frosty mornings.

In this Nonconformist land the only miracles were Sarah Jacob of Llanfihangel-yng-Narcau and a succession of other strange girls, who lived for months without food. All the government inquiries, including the Poor Law commission of the early 1840s, found that hundreds of families in this region had insufficient income for even basic requirements.

CRIME

THE EXTENT of violence in rural communities was a topic of much interest to contemporaries. Defenders of Welsh peasant society spoke of peaceful communities, where religion and education had made a positive impact. The standard of private and public behaviour was said to have improved markedly in the second quarter of the 19th century.

Yet optimists like the Welsh that they knew little of the knife and the gun, exclaiming admirer who shared the common belief that brawling, cutting, and brandishing were things that belonged to foreign seamen and drunken vagrants. Yet every now and then, admitted the Carmarthen Journal, faith in the peaceable nature of the region was shaken.

On one such day, in 1819, a stream ran blood red for two miles down Pencader mountain, and as its source was the headless body of a woman. A different perspective on the incident was offered by critics of rural society, and apologists for urban civilization.

The Royal Commission on the Constabulary Force in 1838 suggested that much deviant behaviour, notably of a violent nature, was tolerated in backward societies, and it was claimed, in Wales that even the crime of murder had been ignored by, or hidden from, the inefficient forces of law and order.

The blood in the stream was a sign of the dark forces in the peasant psyche. In such a demoralized society, as the argument continued, the Rebecca riots came as no surprise.

THE WELSH RIOTERS as pictured in the Illustrated London News in 1843.

The breaking of the windows of one of them was attributed to boisterous young recruits and Rebecca sent money to cover the cost of their replacement.

Young girls who were openly indiscriminate, and old men who should have known better, were other targets of Rebecca's wrath. When gentlemen farmers and maidens were discovered in compromising positions, the latter were ordered to leave their jobs and the former were obliged to renew their marriage vows.

Several men were punished for deserting their families for alternative female company, and David Jones of Trándyrecr in Cardiganshire who had committed no crime, was told to stay at home and curb his wife's venomous tongue.

Rebecca's interference even reached into the families of the clergy and the gentry, anonymous letters publicised their personal weaknesses and on one famous occasion a warning couple were excommunicated at her behest.

In October, 1843, fifty people appeared outside the home of the sister of Mrs Walters, the estranged wife of the vicar of Llanddewi, who was taken from Llywellyn by the vicarage where she and her husband had to swear to be loving and dutiful partners.

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