

TYF YR HYN SYDD O'H HYN FU: AN ANALYSIS OF WELSH NATIONALISM

By H. W. J. Edwards

Mr. Tom Ellis, senior burgess for Wrexham in the British House of Commons at Westminster, has written in *Socialist Commentary* (1977): "It is a sad commentary on the state of socialist theory in Wales that some proclaimed Leftists not only fail to see (that Welsh language activists are in the vanguard of the true struggle for socialism) but actually denounce defenders of the language as privileged cultural élitists." Mr. Ellis' article makes the thesis that members of Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg (1) and Adfer (2) together with those who campaign for more schools where Welsh is the medium of instruction are attacking the capitalist system at its weakest point. The movement, he contends, is part of a struggle among many nations within Europe against the centralism, hierarchy and uniformity of capitalist state structures especially those in "Britain," Spain, and France: it is difficult for Welsh left-wingers to grasp that the socialist struggle against capitalism has a cultural content as important as the more popularly understood economic goals.

He then denounces the Welsh nationalist movement, Plaid Cymru, for proposing to build its own Welsh 19th century-style sovereign state, rather than work for a European union based on decentralized communities, cutting out the nation-state structure. "The aim of the Left in modern Europe must be the dismemberment of the nation-state and the establishment in its place of a political structure better designed for leading mankind out of the awesome impasse which it has led itself into." (Someone like Mr. Harry Worth might well wonder what substantives "it" and "itself" stand for. "The left," "the nation-state" or "mankind"?)

Mr. Ellis quotes the existentialist, Sartre, who has asserted that to speak an oppressed language is a revolutionary act which effectively attacks capitalism at its softest spot, and that the major threat to capitalism comes from the rejection by nationalists of the conformist authoritarianism and ethnic hierarchy implicit in a multi-ethnic state system.

A Myth Within a Myth

This argument is by no means new, even if it be presented in a new manner. Indeed, the strongest element today within Plaid Cymru (The Welsh Nationalist Party) tries to present itself before the Welsh electorate as essentially anti-capitalist and the residuary legatee of some allegedly authentic Welsh socialism. One may express surprise that Mr. Ellis has not met the many members of Plaid Cymru (including at least some of their senior burgesses at Westminster) who show that they dislike the sovereign state and plead for some international *justitia* which would reduce the sovereignty of nation-states. Still, I am no counsel for Plaid Cymru: I would rather seek to expose as false the myth of a "Welsh radical tradition" inseparably connected to the Welsh tongue. I cannot avoid noting that Plaid Cymru has little to say upon Welsh law; and its "history" tends to magnify the near-past at the expense of the total history and especially the genesis of Wales as a nation. A few Welsh Nationalists, notably the great Celticist, Arthur Wade-Evans, and a former president, the chaired bard of Plaid Cymru, Saunders Lewis, criticized and criticize the party because of its leftward twist and its determination to use the near past in its political calculations. One would recommend this political party to familiarize itself with Welsh law and Welsh history which reveals a kinship-oriented, hierarchical social system rather than a socialist-equalitarian bureaucratic society.

But the Welsh radical-socialist myth is a myth within a myth: the myth of revolution itself and that very revolution necessarily bound up with blocs within a semi-circular parliament of European type, and those blocs being called "the Left."

"A Work of Art and Time"

I apologize for this incursion into party politics for which I have no taste, as Mr. Gwynfor Evans, president of Plaid Cymru, observed in 1961. My only concern is that what we may call philosophical liberalism and its offspring have provided their adherents with what their adherents believe is a monopoly of the social conscience, especially in matters having to do with "race," a word they use in the most dissipated sense. A Labor M.P. for a Welsh constituency, Mr. Neil Kinnock, has just

coined the term, “linguistic racialism,” in order to attack some alleged insistence of schoolteachers in Ynys Môn (Anglesey) that children should ask in Welsh permission to go to the lavatory. The truth is that the Left in Great Britain is split down the middle upon the question of language, (3) especially regarding the Welsh language. But while the Welsh belong to the same Caucasoid race as the English, with perhaps some greater element of the Western Mediterranean or Atlantic-Mediterranean sub-race (which they share with their Cornish “Cousin Jack Welshmen”) it is the concept of nation — what Disraeli called “a work of art and of time” — that primarily plays its part in distinguishing the Welsh from the English.

It is the habit of many Welshmen who dote on radicalism to portray ancient Welsh society as equalitarian. Even though a certain love of liberty possessed the Welsh, Welsh society was never equalitarian (to confuse liberty with equality is a common blunder). Every year, thousands of Welshmen congregate at a chosen place where the royal and national eisteddfod assemblies. This eisteddfod (a session) existed centuries before a certain romantic man of Glamorgan, Iolo Morgannwg, invented a series of rituals complete with vestments, the horn of plenty and so on. The function of the original eisteddfod was similar to that of a meeting of a medieval guild: to award the title of bard to someone who qualified by his masterpiece. Wales was traditionally divided into several kingdoms, or principalities, and the bardic chair, then, as now, highly coveted, was only the eleventh chair in the hierarchy of honor in the hall of a Welsh prince. Welsh society knew both honor and inequality.

Welsh law, moreover, differed fundamentally from English law in that its enactments supported inheritance by *gavelkind* in contrast to federal principles of primogeniture. This led directly to the creation of the *gwerin* class. I have been asked many times by English people whether a *gwerin* was the same as a yeoman. It was not the same. A Scot might come nearer to the truth by thinking of a member of the *gwerin* class as a bonnet laird. The *gwerin* were associated with the *gwely* or “bed.” The radicals, who have sought to utilize Welsh nationalism as a force for socialist revolution, have attempted to portray the *gwely*, and the *gwerin* class associated with the *gwely*, as an example of the equalitarian and socialist tradition in Welsh

culture. But this is inaccurate. While the gwerin were only one class in Welsh society, they belonged to the gwely as a member of a kinship group, and were by no means to be likened to the concept of a socialist cooperative.

Descent from Princes

It is no oddity that certain names tend to be found in one area of Wales rather than another. Johns is common in Pembrokeshire: it is not to be found in Northwest Wales where Jones takes its place. Some years ago I met a Hopkins in Anglesey. I asked her whether it was not a fact that she or her father came from Glamorgan. It was a fact. The names of Thomas, James and Nicholas are very common in the South-West (Dyfed). Jenkins, Morgan, and Evans are usually found in the south. Pugh, Pritchard (Prichard), Parry, Owen, Hughes (Huws), and Wynne (Gwyn) are generally found in the North, especially in the Northeast. Most Welsh surnames are patronymics, the letter *s* (at the end) or *p* or *b* (as in Bowen and Bevan) telling us the name of someone's father. (4) In the rolls of recusant Papists (Pabydd is not a derogatory term in Wales) one man of the gwerin class who refused to attend the services of the Reformed Church put his name down as Edward ap Morgan ap Gwilym ap Harry ap Thomas. Most Welsh at that time were illiterate, but they had good memories and prided themselves on their pedigrees. They had good reason to do so. Because of gavelkind, sooner or later, their pedigrees would reach to a petty prince. Vaughan, a name common in the Southeast, is a corruption of Fychan (little), and a sign that the person was descended from a petty prince. My own surname is chiefly found in the south. It has a Welsh form — lorwerth.

What is "Celtic" about Wales, as about Scotland and Ireland, was and still is to some extent the existence of a larger kinship group approximate to a clan. In Welsh society this was the commote. Unlike England, Wales had next to no serf class. Migrants to the Vale and other places, in the 12th and 13th centuries, generally lived in new townships e.g. Flemingston near Cardiff. They became enfranchised. But when Edward I and Edward II discussed the political relationships between Wales and England both English kings informed Llywelyn Bren, chief of the commote of Senghennydd, that, were Llywelyn to accede to the English proposals, his hillmen would

be enfranchized. This made no sense to Llywelyn Bren or to others of his class or, indeed, to the hillmen in Wales as a whole. Enfranchisement just did not exist. They had no idea of it. They were already free, though not in the present accepted sense of freedom. That is to say, they assumed that men and property were subject to reciprocal rights and duties. Nothing comparable to the concept of ownership in fee simple entered their minds. Indeed, it seems that very few people in medieval Europe owned anything in fee simple.

The "Rights of Welshmen"

The supreme blunder made by Welsh egalitarians is to assume that *gwerin* means "people." We have *probl* for "people." This is not, as may seem, a corruption of the English word but a corruption of the Roman *publici*. The tragedy of Wales is that one important social class, that of the *boneddigion*, ceased to be itself about the 16th century and became the *uchel mawr*, virtually a copy of the English squirearchy. I am glad to say that in the autumn of 1977 it fell to my lot as president of Cofiwn (5) to speak of a possible Welsh constitution which would arise from the social structure as found in the Welsh tradition. I contended that the *uchel mawr* needed to be reformed to become closer to the old *boneddigion*. But can I give any equivalent? The nearest I can find is the Scottish clan leader as he was before 1745.

I am bound to assert that the difference between the *gwerin* class and the *boneddigion* is not as great as some pretend. I have already suggested this by pointing to the Welsh gavelkind. The English yeomanry, a class of very great value as Cobbett was right in telling us, was never "gentry." But the *gwerin* of Wales must be considered as uncommonly close to "gentry." Alas, in the 18th century a number of Welsh radicals saw fit to prate of "the rights of man" in a manner which fascinated the *gwerin*. Gwallt, (6) a Welsh poet, did, however, at Abergavenny in 1948 in a long lecture point out that these radicals never wrote of the rights of Welshmen. Strangely enough, as it may seem to some, the revolutionary Sorel and the counter-revolutionary de Maistre pointed out that in practical matters there never are "men" but rather Frenchmen, Germans, Englishmen, and so forth. If the "rights of man"

appealed to the gwerin of Wales, this was very probably because the gwerin were and still are skillful in the liberal arts. It is ordinarily to persons of the gwerin class that the great prizes for such work as the classical "awdl" are given (though members of the boneddigion, such as the Wynne of Garthewin or the Rhys of Dynefor, have sometimes been accomplished poets). To examine the word gwerin itself is important. It has one probable etymology, "gwreng a bon," a social class of gentle blood widely diffused and common only in that it is numerous.

It is thus a grave solecism to attempt to equate the gwerin with "the working class." Marx was right in a sense when he wrote that "the working class" has no fatherland. That many of the gwerin class today lack private productive property in no way takes from them their gwerin status. "Working class" hides identity rather than reveals it. Today's modern cities and boroughs also confuse the Welsh scene. To begin with several mining valleys in Southern Wales are greatly conurbated, so that two valleys complete with mountains (one near 2,000 ft) farms and lakes are described as the Borough of Rhondda. This area was once a commote, (7) and to many still is. Let us test it. Ask a man from Treherbert where he is from. He will not say "from Glamorgan." In Wales we find that the tradition of the commote is strong; and he will answer "I am a Rhondda man." It is the same with a man from Ystalyfera. Not a Glamorgan man, but "from Glyn Tawe." It is the same with someone from the Rhymney valley. Indeed, the stupid English division that split the latter valley into Glamorgan and Monmouthshire (Gwent) broke the tradition of "penmynydd" (mountain top) division. Even Caernarfon is so divided that a man from Abersoch will say he comes from Pen Llyn, a man from Pwllheli from Llyn and a man from Bangor from Arfon. (8)

European Nationalism

The genesis of European nationalism has nothing to do with "socialism" or what is called on the European continent "the party of movement." Breton nationalism began as a royalist movement and was opposed by the Jacobins. (9) The same was true for Frisian nationalism. It was left to the ultra-conservative de Maistre to defend the nation of Savoy against Garibaldi

and Cavour. Finnish and Flemish nationalism is conservative. Indeed, Plaid Cymru recently declared that it would not work with Flemish nationalists because they were "of the Right." The ultra-conservative Carlists in the 19th century Spanish wars included many Basques, and in the Spanish civil war of this century there were still many hill Basques among the Carlists who fought with Franco. The Liberals and Socialists of Denmark, while admitting that South Schleswig is historically a part of Denmark, do not want it to rejoin Denmark, as the people of South Schleswig are conservatively minded. Mr. Ellis' case is at best adventitious and are worst meretricious. Let him ponder upon the ancient Welsh proverb: Tyf yr hyn sydd o'r hyn fu. What is grows from what was.

FOOTNOTES

- (1) "The Welsh Language Society."
- (2) "Restoration."
- (3) Certain Labour M.P's for Welsh constituencies are declared opponents of the idea of devolution and have asserted that there is a danger of making the Welsh tongue paramount in a Welsh Assembly and elsewhere. The most prominent among them is Mr. Leo Abse, M.P. for Pontypool. On television he objected to being called "a Taffy" when in London. However, his views on this, as on the question of the "Welsh language," might well be affected by the fact that he himself is not of "Taffy" descent.
- (4) The p or b are contractions of ap or ab (the latter before a vowel) so that ap Richard and ab Evan become Prichard or Bevan. A clear parallel can be found with O' and Mac.
- (5) "Remember."
- (6) This is his rightful bardic name.
- (7) Its great leader was Cadwgan, ally a Glyndwr. A Rhondda "gloran" can claim descent.
- (8) Just as Wales had few serfs, so it had no native burgesses save for those under the shadow of Norman castles. One of the few genuine burghs is Beaumaris, the citizens having a long tradition of courtesy. As late as 1857, as I see from a guide book of that year, Cardiff and Swansea were still small towns, Wales' largest conurbation then being Merthyr Tydfil. The contemporary conurbations only began to grow in the late 19th century, with the advent of immigrants — a large number coming from Ireland, a percentage of the population of Cardiff deriving from a Wessex background, with Scots also arriving under the patronage of the Marquis of Bute, a Gothic romanticist who built Cardiff Castle and the fairylike Castel-Cochin in the Taff Valley. Italians came "to the valleys" as café owners. Jews opened several synagogues in Cardiff, Merthyr Tydfil, Swansea, Greeks now have Orthodox Church in Cardiff, and Africans,

mainly Somalis, reside in large numbers in Cardiff. Wales has hardly felt the recent incursion of immigrants from Asia and the West Indies, except there are now traders and doctors of Pakistani and Hindu origin, but in West Wales and North-West Wales, several Poles have settled on the land as farmers, and as at Lampeter, their children are bi-lingual (Polish and Welsh). Of all the recent immigrants they seem to have been the most easily accepted. A number of Ukrainians in or near Wales suffices to have the Byzantine Catholic liturgy three or four times a year in St. David's Catholic Cathedral in Cardiff. Several Welsh, including myself, cannot help noting that the timbre of the Ukrainian male voices greatly resembles of that of the well-known Welsh male voice choir; and this circumstance may well endear them to us.

(9) Some Breton nationalists were executed for fighting on the side of Germany. Others, notably the aged Father Perrot, who was assassinated when at prayer, suffered for their neutrality. Many including children were herded into concentration camps soon after the invasion by Gaullist soldiers, even though de Gaulle himself was of part-Breton stock.

BOOK REVIEWS

PENNIMAN, R. HOWARD (ed.)

Ireland at the Polls

American Enterprise Institute, Washington D.C., 210 pp., \$4.75

Inflation and jobs were the basis for the surprise outcome of the 1977 national elections in the Republic of Ireland, according to a study published today by the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research.

Ireland at the Polls, written by four of that country's leading political scholars, analyzes Irish society, its political and electoral systems and the 1977 campaign and election.

"The Irish general election of 1977 produced many surprises — an unexpected change of government, the highest vote for a single party and biggest parliamentary majority in the history of the state, the precipitate resignation of two national party leaders, the defeat at the polls of three cabinet ministers, and the embarrassment of virtually the entire corps of observers and commentators, academic and journalistic — all of whom failed to predict the outcome," write two of the authors, Brian Farrell and Maurice Manning.

The upset was pulled off by the Fianna Fail Party, out of office since 1973, at the expense of the incumbent National Coalition of the Fine Gael and Labour Parties.

Farrell and Manning are lecturers in political science at University College in Dublin, and authors of numerous books on Irish politics. Farrell is also the senior current affairs presenter on Irish National Television and Manning a commentator for Irish National Radio. Farrell and Manning join in analyzing the 1977 campaign and election in Chapter 6 of *Ireland at the Polls*. In other chapters, Manning examines the Irish party system and describes the provisions for senatorial elections, and Farrell analyzes media coverage of the campaign.

Basil Chubb contributes two chapters to *Ireland at the Polls*, a brief political history of modern Ireland and a description of the operation of the electoral system with its single transferable vote arrangement. Chubb is a professor of political science at Trinity College, Dublin, author of a number of books on Irish government and politics, and a television commentator.