A Plaid Cymru publication **3d.**

The Welsh Condition

EMYR HUMPHREYS

(Head of Drama Department, U.C.N.W. Author of: *The Little Kingdom, Hear and Forgive, In Front of the House of Baal, Ancestor Worship.*)

In the twentieth century the concept of nationality, like the nonconformist conscience that used to loom so large in politics, has taken a terrible beating. The British Empire went to war in 1914 to save 'little Belgium,' presumably, from joining the Common Market some forty years too soon and in 1918 that bizarre Welshman David Lloyd George did strange things to the map of Europe in the name of 'self-determination' and 'national sovereignty.' Those twin scourges of modern civilisation, communism and fascism, had their own ways of juggling with the hot potato of nationalism: the merry Georgian allowed cultural differences to flourish inside the iron power-structure of the USSR like so many flower-boxes on the narrow sills of a hundred prison windows; Hitler and Mussolini used the grievances of racial minorities as pawns in their ruthless and brutal power-games.

Perhaps the most interesting deviation of all has been the strenuous efforts of the United States to instil a sense of nationality into the heterogeneous multitudes fleeing from poverty and ancient national identities to the freedom of a Promised Land governed by Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness. The most effective agent of unity, the best bonding material to weld these recalcitrant elements into some semblance of a unified community was the English language delivered on the eastern seaboard some three centuries before by one of those upheavals of the nonconformist conscience to which the English, thank God, are habitually prone.

Throughout our time, nationality has always been something about which we get excited: at one moment to be embraced as a principle of good behaviour and a main source of moral worth, and at the next to be held at arm's length, to be spurned and despised and stigmatised as the origin of mass hysteria and irrational reaction. The one conclusion we are obliged to accept is that it is here to stay. By now even sociologists can accept the idea of nationality with reasonable calm as a fact of life, alongside sex and hunger.

This means, among other things, that if I am born Welsh there is very little I can do about it. In spite of the fact that many of my fellow countrymen over the last few centuries have undergone the operation, I am obliged to testify that to change my nationality would only be a little less difficult than changing my sex: and, as a quick glance at the House of Commons would confirm, fraught with psychological hazards of the greatest complexity. All that is open to me is to consider the history of my people, observe it repeat itself as history always does like choruses and sunsets, and to decide whether or not I have a moral obligation to bring up my children in the same tradition. I believe I have.

We, of course, are the aboriginal British and no one else in these islands has a genuine title to that name. The rocks among which we live are named by geologists everywhere after the tribes of our remote ancestors. We were always few in number but we have never lacked the capacity to persist. It took the Anglo-Saxons three centuries to deprive the British of the rich province now described as England. (I forget how many weeks it took the Normans to achieve the same conquest.) The Celtic past is still a potent ingredient of English culture from Cumberland to Cornwall and from Yorkshire to Dorset, and it is often to the west and the north that the English artist retreats in order to refresh himself at the springs of his inspiration.

But beyond the west there is another entity, puzzling, remote, foreign; that territory called 'Wales' where mythical leaders like Arthur, Llewelyn, and Owain sleep in the Caves of the Underground and an ancient culture survives through centuries of oppression and opposition. Welsh, as every schoolboy knows, in all Teutonic languages means 'foreign,' 'a stranger,' and it is not the least of the Welshman's burdens to be from time immemorial a stranger in his own country, or as one of our greatest poets put it in one of his rare outbursts in the English tongue, 'A pilgrim in a foreign land.' 'Welsh' is not what he calls himself in his own language. Here he uses the warmer word 'Cymro' which means 'brother' and has an altogether more bracing and comfortable connotation.

The attentive reader will already have detected the shrill note of chauvinism (to which all foreigners are prone) but if he wishes to understand something of the psychology of a Welshman he must also bear with fortitude the rising note of the tribal lay as the native reminds himself of the living past, the history and tradition of his race. (The reluctance of the Englishman to suffer this noise is understandable: no one likes to hear a serial story in which he keeps figuring as the leading villain.)

Let us cut the long story short. Let us forget the mediaeval scene and the Welsh of those far-off centuries trying like the modern Israelis to reconquer the land that belonged to their remote ancestors. The first Tudor monarch flew the Red Dragon over the Tower of London and it seemed to the Welsh that the ancient prophecies had been fulfilled and that the throne of London had been restored at long last to the rightful kings of Britain descended from Brutus, Arthur and Cunedda. The King called his eldest son Arthur and created the child Prince of Wales. He removed all the crippling disabilities that had weighed down the Welsh since the Glyndwr rising and many Welsh families like the Cecils, the Herberts, the Vaughans, the Powells, the Middletons and even the Joneses rose in the royal service and became a dominating element in English ruling circles.

For the Welsh aristocracy the centralising policies of Henry VIII and Elizabeth were a blessed order of release from all the more onerous and burdensome duties attached to their position by Welsh culture and tradition. They were no longer obliged to engage in ceaseless battle against the enemies of the native way of life or to patronise a culture which demanded unstinting generosity and hospitality and open house for bards and singers and an intense attachment to the native language and the native soil. The prophecies had been fulfilled. Victory had been achieved. It was a time for the rational sharing of the spoils. The Welsh upper class in a few generations drifted far away from the old faith, the old language, the old law, the old customs. After the Act of Union in 1536, Welsh law was replaced by English law, and the language was forbidden in the law courts and in any of the processes of government. By the end of the Tudor period the first great centralised state in Europe would appear to have swallowed its first victim whole.

That this did not happen was due in the first place to the innate conservatism of the peasantry. Just as the Irish clung to their old faith and thereby preserved their nationhood, so the Welsh kept their ancient identity by their devotion to their language. Welsh education sprang from the desire of the common people to save their souls and improve their lot, and in that order. In the adult Sunday schools of the Methodist eighteenth century the Welsh became one of the first literate peasantries in Europe. Non-conformity in Wales was always more than a sectarian religious movement. The innumerable chapels dotted all over the Welsh landscape were more than places of worship. They were part of a network of little democracies where the ancient language found a new outlet of expression and a new strength.

When industrialism spread through the valleys of the south and in

the north-east, chapels went up just as quickly as terrace houses and were built by the common people themselves. University colleges to the ardent Welsh at the end of the nineteenth century were nothing more than florid Sunday schools run by former pupils filled with a proper zeal for liberal ideals and the rights of small nations everywhere. At the opening of the present century Welsh national consciousness seemed as vigorous, if not as violent, as that of Ireland. Lloyd George was only one among a host of young political leaders of nonconformist origin who were prepared to take the narrow and dangerous path to national self-fulfilment.

It was at this point that history began to repeat itself. Like Henry Tudor, Lloyd George was dazzled by a vision of greater power and greater personal glory. The aspirations of a small mountain people seemed as dust in the balance when weighed against the absolute control of a great empire in which the sun never set. When he attained absolute power he did little more for Wales than disestablish the Anglican Church. Later in his old age he helped to twist the long arm of Sir John Reith and to force the BBC, that essentially papal institution, into creating some kind of Welsh region, but by this time his fellow countrymen had ceased to idolise him. He still walked about in flowing white locks and spoke with silvery eloquence, but in the bitter thirties he was no longer Merlin the bard and magician and architect of easy victories. The majority of his countrymen had turned to a new party and a socialist vision of the new Jerusalem which seemed to fit very easily over the older nonconformist ideals.

In the chapel communities, confessions of faith controlled every aspect of the lives of the Welsh people: now, that altruism which had been such an attractive factor in Welsh civilisation since the Age of Saints and gave life to the image of Sir Perceval de Galles found a new outlet in a crusade to win political power for the poor, the downtrodden and the oppressed. Welshmen poured in the ranks of the Labour party as they had once poured into the armies of Henry Tudor, once again bent on the reconquest of England. Anyone who spoke to Aneurin Bevan, or indeed heard him speak, knowing the history of his people, could not mistake that atavistic fervour. It even explains his latent hostility to the language of his father who named him after a sixth-century bard: he could not tolerate the notion that some Welsh-speaking north or west Walian could have any pretensions to being a better Welshman than he was, in the forefront of the battle like David of old smiting the ancient enemy daily in the very heart of the empire.

Even the manner of his going was reminiscent of the end of Owain Glyndwr, a long twilight and a sudden mysterious nightfall.

To a future historian it may well appear that the Welsh loyalty to the Labour party began to loosen with Bevan's death. Obviously there are still an awful lot of Welshmen in the Government and it does appear as if the Tudor pattern has repeated itself and that Welsh political energies have been neatly channelled into the engines of the central government. But all the signs of the times in Wales seem to suggest that this is a temporary phenomenon and that it may not be too soon to start thinking of opening a fund for unemployed Welsh politicians.

The national inclination towards altruism is once more raising its formidable head. Wales and the Welsh have a great deal to complain about: depopulation for example, a form of blood-letting and brain-draining from which the Welsh-speaking areas of Wales have suffered since the end of the first world war. Or the absence of any control over the national economy. Great English cities help themselves to Welsh water and sell it at a profit. Unemployment in Wales is higher in 1970 than it was in 1964. Many of the valleys of West Monmouthshire and Glamorgan are crippled communities, emasculated by rapid economic change and bewildered by a local power structure socialist in name but conservatively incapable of change. Many miles of Welsh railway have been torn up at the orders of a government-controlled corporation without being given the smallest opportunity to work out its own salvation. Wales has no control over unrestricted systems of mass communication — television, radio, the press — which invade every home, Welsh or English speaking, with an unceasing flood of mid-Atlantic mediocracy.

In spite of the fact that there now exists a Secretary of State for Wales in the Cabinet, government policy seems consistently bent on economic and social measures that will accelerate the process of obliterating every trace of Welshness in order to turn the country into a convenient recreation area for the great English conurbations, leaving what is left of Welsh industry to be tacked on to those planner's dreams called Severnside in the south and extended Merseyside in the north. Can the objective observer wonder when the Welsh say they feel themselves threatened? It is in this context that the statistics concerning the decline of the language should be studied. It is not merely a language — what Professor Tolkien has called 'The senior language of British civilisation' — that is being threatened; it is a badge of identity, an ark of the covenant, which has preserved in an unique way the existence of a nation.

Today it is the obvious rallying point of idealism and it receives its most ardent support from young people who have been brought up in those nonconformist homes which have become the strongholds of the Welsh tradition since the last war. This is where the movement to establish the Welsh language schools (Ysgolion Cymraeg) originated. This is where Plaid Cymru obtains its most dedicated support and it was young people from such homes who were sent to prison for causing a disturbance in the High Court. These young people are not professional protesters. Their manners are disciplined and gentle. They are characteristic of a long tradition of dissent and they are prepared to suffer to keep the language alive because they want their nation to go on living.

Cymdeithas yr Iaith (the Language Society) came into being in 1962 as a direct reaction to a single sombre broadcast by Saunders Lewis, probably the most important single figure in Welsh history since the eighteenth century. This broadcast is a key document to the understanding of what is happening in Wales and what will continue to happen for the rest of this century. It makes the life and well-being of the language a central political issue. This means, among many other things, that the persistent altruistic strain in the Welsh tradition which created Welsh nonconformity and indeed Welsh socialism has found a new outlet: and the cause is that much more attractive to the young because it is flatly opposed to the materialism and economic determination of the ruling party as expressed, for example, by the evidence of the Welsh Council of Labour on the future government of Wales presented last month to the Commission on the Constitution. (This sadly unsocialist document is based on the philosophy that the life of man must be determined by capitalistic profit.)

There is such a thing as ' the Welsh Condition ' and it has existed so long it is time that it was made known to psychologists in the wider world. Certainly since the end of the Middle Ages every bright young Welshman has had a choice and this choice itself, like the irregular mass of Snowdon, changes its appearance according to his angle of vision. If ambition and wealth and power are the highest virtues, then obviously he must strike out into a wider world and take the path of Henry Tudor or David Lloyd George. On the other hand, if he wishes to take up a cause, if he feels a deep sense of loyalty to the community which nurtured him, if he wishes to work out his salvation in fear and trembling, if he sets a high price on honour and personal integrity or if he is just a high-minded humanist, there is more than enough scope for his talents in Wales itself.

Human nature being what it is, both these magnetic poles are present in the personality of the ordinary Welshman and no doubt they help to explain why he has such long antennae and such a lively sense of guilt and sin. The Welsh condition is worth studying because it is spreading. In the next century it will be endemic not only among national minorities and small nations: the structure of international technology will ensure that it spreads to what used to be called the European Powers, where the sense of community, alas, may well be too weak to offer any effective restraint on personal or mechanical ambition.

Small nations have always appeared doomed to be absorbed by their greater neighbours and the struggle for survival seems certain to fail. But success and failure are relative terms, and the lost cause is certainly the more accurate reflection of the human condition. This is not a fashionable form of despair. To be reconciled to finitude, to accept the prospect of failure, can be the first step to true progress and genuine development.

(Reprinted from *The Spectator*, 28 March 1970, with due acknowledgement.)

Fill in and post to Plaid Cymru, 8 Heol of Frenhines, Caerdydd, or 89 Stryd Fawr, Bangor, Caerns.

(*a*) I wish to know more about Plaid Cymru.

(*b*) I wish to join Plaid Cymru.

M .....

.....

.....

PRINTED BY GEE AND SON, DENBIGH