

And Wales

Alastair Wilson

(The author is a former Communist councillor in Aberdare and has stood five times as a parliamentary candidate.)

1979 is the centenary of the birth of Niclas y Glais (Rev. Y. E. Nicholas). His 90 years of life formed a bridge from the early socialists Pam Jones, Derfeluum and Keir Hardie, with whom he was joint editor of the Socialist *Mothyr Pioneer* before the First World War, to modern socialist politics. He was also a nationalist and his life extended from the origins of modern Welsh nationalism in the Cymru Fydd movement of the 1880s and 1890s right up to post-Second World War campaigns for a Welsh Assembly.

Niclas, who was a non-conformist minister, was originally a member of the ILP. He joined the British Communist Party in its earliest days. He, like Keir Hardie and the British Labour Party (until 1928), supported the concept of home rule for Wales.

There has just been a referendum to decide on whether the people of Wales should have a Welsh Assembly, with limited powers, and based on the 40 per cent limitation of our normal democratic election practice. The decision has been an overwhelming No.

Is this the end of the national problem in Wales? Should socialists now forget it and concentrate on all British policies?

The Tories, the CBI, the six Labour MPs who supported the No lobby have befogged the issue by presenting the Welsh Assembly Bill as a measure which would increase bureaucracy, cost £12 million annually and lead to the separation of Wales from the United Kingdom. Certain sections of the nationalist movement have encouraged the feeling that a Welsh Assembly would encourage separation.

Reaction on the right and sectarianism on the nationalist left have both tended to bedevil the discussions. The Labour government's inability to win the support of the six Welsh Labour MPs and of a large section of the English Labour MPs for the 1974 Labour election manifesto's policies on Wales and Scotland, was probably the most important cause of the defeat of the Yes campaign.

Wales Needs a Bilingual Eisteddfod

Many of those who claim to represent the traditions of Wales do not appear to have any relationship to 20th century Welsh traditions at all. There is a turning back into a history that is based on illusions—of a classless kind of society without cruel Welsh speaking coalowners. A hankering for some kind of

village co-operative industry while, in fact, Japanese, American, and German industrialists are encouraged to invest in Welsh industry and therefore control an increasing part of the economic life of Wales.

The closest allies of those who seek to maintain and extend the speaking of the Welsh language are surely the English-speaking people of Wales. They must be convinced by reasoned argument that the Welsh language and the Welsh national identity are worth preserving, not just for those who live in Wales and speak Welsh, but also for those who live in Wales and speak English. I don't think a Welsh-only National Eisteddfod, for instance, is the way to win support for the maintenance of our nation, its language, or its national consciousness. It is *isolating* the Welsh-speaking part from the rest of the people—isolating the minority of the nation from the majority.

Has the campaign of obliterating English road signs in Wales really won support or lost it for the Welsh language—for example, in Gwent?

Wales is a bilingual country—and I think that the National Eisteddfod should be bilingual—for why should the majority of the people of Wales be denied participation in its musical and literary competitions?

If there were some kind of bilingual Festival (Eisteddfod) centre with theatre, art gallery, opera, ballet, folk-dancing, disco, leisure activity and permanent teaching of Welsh from infant class level upwards, what a huge reservoir of English-speaking Welsh people there would be to be brought into the cultural life of Wales. They could be encouraged to become Welsh speakers. What a great mass of talent could be released into the world in Welsh or English.

The Welsh language is becoming beseiged and many of those who seek to preserve it are actually helping to destroy it by keeping it within a gradually narrowing space. Is it not time to go forth and evangelise among the English-speaking Welsh to convince them, in English, of the need to speak the other language of Wales?

Moreover, of course, as has so often been written in *Cyffro* (the journal of the Welsh Committee of the Communist Party), there can be no effective preservation of the Welsh language if the communities within which the language is spoken are continually being eroded by the migration of the young to look for work.

The Emergence of Wales as a Nation

Wales became a nation during the period of expanding capitalism. In 1800 there was only one town in Wales, Merthyr Tydfil, with 7,000 inhabitants, although Howell Harris, the Methodist evangelist, was able to gather 10,000 people together in Neath 30 years before to hear about a better life after death, in heaven, where each would receive "according to his need".

Capitalism, and the Methodist Revival, improved roads—these were the main factors in the creation of towns in Wales. The population of Merthyr increased to 90,000, Aberdare to 55,000, the Rhondda to 160,000 and Cardiff, Swansea and Newport to 200,000, 130,000, and 90,000 respectively by 1921.

By the middle of the 19th century there had never been such a great mass of Welsh-speaking people in one place as there were at Merthyr and Aberdare and these towns were able to absorb the non Welsh-speaking English into their various communities, Caedraw, Blaengwawr, etc.

So in Wales nationhood, the speakers of the Welsh language, the development of the consciousness of being Welsh, not English, was associated with *work*, work in Crawshay's, Guest's or Fothergills ironworks, or the collieries of Thomas Powell (founder of the Powell Duffry), and David Davies (Blaergwawr), David Davies (Llandinam), Evans Bevan, Llewelyns, and so on.

And by 1921 with 130,000 miners in South Wales there were more people speaking Welsh, 1,100,000, than ever before or since. The development of the Welsh nation was, therefore, closely bound up with the process of industrialisation.

Wales is a Poor Nation

Today there are 88,000 unemployed in Wales and only 35,000 miners. Eight pits are threatened with closure. Apart from Northern Ireland, Wales is the poorest and most deprived part of the United Kingdom.

There are now only about 600,000 people who speak Welsh. The employers no longer live there and economic life is controlled by anonymous millionaires in London, Brussels, Detroit and Tokyo, together with London-based nationalised firms. They hire and fire. The valley communities—Merthyr, Aberdare and the Rhondda—have lost a large part of their population: the population of the Rhondda, for example, has been halved, down to 88,000.

In 1948, elected bodies, district and county councils, elected hospital committees, controlled and administered social security, education, health services, water, in some places electricity and transport. Many of these democratic powers have been taken over by non-elected quangos. Local authorities,

whose members are directly elected, have less powers than they had 100 years ago—for example over the health services.

From 1921 there was, for most of the time, a prolonged economic crisis in Wales, lasting until 1939, with 500,000 people, mainly the young from the older well-established industrial valleys, migrating to England and abroad. Since 1945 there has been considerable economic instability and during this period of economic stress some democratic rights, particularly in local government, have been removed.

National Regeneration

What I think is necessary now is a programme of national regeneration in Wales. I do not think that this can be carried out in isolation, in fact it is essential that it can be done as part of a plan for regeneration in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Most of Wales' deprivations are similar to those of the North East of England, or Cornwall, where old industries are being run down.

We are all suffering from a run down of British capitalism—from the refusal of British big business to invest in British industry—from a social system which uses modern technical advances for profit rather than to serve people's needs and make a civilised existence possible for everyone.

Such a plan of regeneration would, of course, need new kinds of policies, a big increase in the social wage (the money spent on social services, health, pensions, housing, public transport, education, etc.), greater investment in industry, increased wages, changes in foreign policy with reduction in defence expenditure, a big extension of nationalisation, increased democratic and civil rights, more open government and the involvement of millions of people by direct participation in making decisions about issues that affect the extent and quality of their lives.

This would mean a big extension in the number and powers of elected public bodies, community councils, district councils, county councils, regional councils (say for the North East, Cornwall—all the English region), together with Welsh and Scottish Assemblies.

Nationalism and Internationalism

There is some crude argument on this subject. "I'm not a nationalist I'm an internationalist," say some of my Labour Party friends. Any director of a multinational could say this. Clearly, nationalism can be reactionary—as with the Afrikaner national movement in South Africa based on apartheid and the exploitation of cheap black labour. It can also be progressive, as with the national liberation movements of southern Africa which want to end apartheid and cheap black labour. Similarly with

internationalism—the internationalism of big business investment in South Africa and the support of apartheid is quite different from the internationalism which supports those who oppose apartheid in South Africa.

What kind of national movement is there in Wales? Mixed. I think what divides them is the question of power.

Where should the power lie—with big business or with the people? The Labour government was prepared to give some power back to the people—the proposed Welsh Assembly was to take control of many quangos from bodies which were accountable upwards to the man who appointed them—the Secretary of State—and to make them instead accountable to the directly elected assembly. In this way the hundreds of thousands of Welsh electors would have an increased say in making decisions about health, water and other public services. No wonder the CBI and the Tories opposed the Bill.

But the real weakness was that no significant power over the economic life of Wales was envisaged—no strengthening of working class power—of people's power vis-a-vis the multinational firms from within Britain and from abroad. It did not propose any weakening of Henry Ford's or Hoover's power or strengthening of that of the Hoover workers.

It was difficult, therefore, to get people to vote Yes to this kind of attenuated body—which gave some more democracy but not the real democratic control over the right to work. Moreover they were told as well by some that this increased democracy was its opposite, increased bureaucracy and that it would probably lead to separation.

Public Activity

There are in Wales today a great variety of public activities, some dealing with economic demands, others are political. There is also a great deal of community activity. For example, recently the people of Hirwann, the trades unions, Labour MPs, and local authorities, after a long struggle lasting about four years, compelled the Gas Board to seek another site for the gas storage tanks. There have been successful sit ins in local hospitals for the maintenance of local services. Many thousands of public service workers have been on strike to improve their wages and conditions and have succeeded in breaking the government's wages policies. There are plenty of good people about, Christians, socialists, nationalists, trade unionists, those in the caring services, social workers, health workers, teachers, students, voluntary workers. And there are all the democratic political parties, Labour, Communist, Plaid Cymru, Liberal, together with the Welsh TUC, the Arts Council, all the organisations concerned with the arts, music, painting, drama—the great majority of the Welsh people. Can they not be won for a kind

of nationalism—a kind of Welsh Assembly which serves the needs of the people, expresses their aspirations and gives more power over their lives to the majority? Such an Assembly could become a force to change the nature of society.

The Communist Party

I think the Communist Party in Wales can start to present such a plan for we are fortunate in having a platform, the journal *Cyffro*, from which a large variety of people are prepared to speak.

At a recent *Cyffro* Conference, among the speakers were a Labour MP, the Plaid Cymru Chairman, the secretary of the Wales TUC, the secretary of the Welsh Communist Party, the Director of the Welsh Arts Council and the Editor and deputy Editor of *Cyffro*. This kind of conference is fine, but I think we need also to initiate discussion in factories about giving the people more say about democracy and I don't mean industrial democracy. I mean democratic election of public bodies, local and regional authority and assemblies in Scotland and Wales. For this kind of struggle was going on during the last century, for elected public health boards, Boards of Guardians, local and country councils, for the Reform Bills 1832 and 1867 during the same time when the struggle for the right to set up trades unions and the Labour Party was taking place.

The movement for a Welsh Assembly is a continuation of this tradition and it is a political struggle both within capitalism and is part of building the broad democratic alliance to get rid of capitalism. This, I believe, is why it is so important for the Communist Party not to drop the battle for Assemblies in Scotland and Wales, but to make these measures an essential part of the immediate programme of the labour movement.

Variety of Nations Not Cosmopolitanism

The people of Wales did not vote Yes because they were not convinced that a Welsh Assembly would be of any value to them now or in the future.

Therefore, it seems to me it is necessary to produce a plan for an Assembly in Wales and regional assemblies in England which does have some real value and does give some real power to the people, and to convince millions of people of the need for such a plan. It is also necessary for the labour movement in England to discuss the relationship between nationalism and socialism. For, as far as I can see ahead, I think if men and women are to have varied and exhilarating lives we should strive to maintain the existence of every nation now in existence, large or small, speaking ancient languages like Welsh or imposed languages such as English. For each nation has its own national characteristics and for each country they are as different as their cultural traditions.

Review:

Rebels and their Causes¹

Raphael Samuel

(The author is an editor of *History Workshop Journal* and Tutor in Social History at Ruskin College, Oxford)

A. L. Morton, who celebrated his 75th birthday in 1978, is the doyen of British Marxist historians, and the present volume testifies both to the generosity of his interests and the enduring vitality of his work. He is a man of letters rather than a career historian, a Communist writer who served his literary apprenticeship as a journalist on the *Daily Worker* (and as an occasional contributor to T. S. Eliot's *Criterion*) rather than in the research seminar. He wears his learning lightly. But his knowledge is both wide and deep. He is as much at home in the mental world of Robert Owen (to which his *Life and Ideas of Robert Owen* is a singularly attractive introduction) as in that of the 17th century Ranters; in literature as in history. His great gift for lucid exposition, and the broad Marxist understanding which informs it, is exemplified in the deservedly famous *People's History of England*, which has been more or less continuously in print since its first publication in 1938. It is not less apparent in such finely-executed miniatures as *The Everlasting Gospel*, a pioneering study of the Antinomian sources of Blake's politics and poetry, or "Genius on the Border", (first published in *The Modern Quarterly* and later reprinted in *The Matter of Britain*), a thought-provoking study of Haworth and the Brontes, in which he shows himself keenly aware of the dissonant and contradictory relationships between literature and life. His 50 years membership of the Communist Party is some indication of the steadiness of his political commitment, while an ever-lengthening list of publications demonstrates his creative staying power: neither his historical muse, nor his socialist determination, show any signs of drying up. The cause of "people's history", which he pioneered is now being taken up by young scholars and worker-historians all over the country, and one may expect that in future years Leslie Morton's contribution to it will receive the recognition it deserves. As Eric Hobsbawm points out in this book, when, in 1954 at Netherwood, A. L. Morton gave his pioneer paper on "The Role of the Common People in the History of British Capitalism

"it was much admired (but) we could hardly suspect that history from below would, some 20 years later, be one of the most flourishing fields of study".

The Volume

This book, though very welcome, is not an adequate tribute. There is no bibliography of Morton's writings (compare the excellently detailed list at the end of the recent *Festschrift* to Christopher Hill), and the portrait by Maurice Cornforth, though informative, lacks a cutting edge: we are given few clues as to the sources of A. L. Morton's political staying power, nor is there any discussion of the distinctively literary character of his work. What needs to be explained is instead taken for granted, and it is to be hoped that someone will take in hand a literary and political portrait of a man who is both representative and unique. The essays—all but one of them by writers who joined the Communist Party in the 1930s—testify to the stamina and loyalty of the older generation of Marxist intellectuals; they are attractively written and cover an inviting range of subjects; but though full of interest they are also, in some cases, rather slight, and there is a certain absence of either political thrust or theoretical problematic.

Nevertheless the volume is full of good things and will undoubtedly give much pleasure. A. L. Lloyd, whose own great contribution to "people's history" should surely earn him some tribute, contributes a splendid reconstruction of an 1870s ballad, powerfully evoking the days when Irish landlords were shot. This one celebrates the murder of the Third Earl of Leitrim who was ambushed and shot while travelling to court with eviction orders. Lloyd has used both the superb resources of the Irish Folklore Commission and the record of court proceedings to reconstruct the real-life circumstances on which the ballad draws. The evidence is rivetting, and the folklore archives give us a fascinating glimpse of the way in which fact is transformed into oral tradition, but it is a pity that Lloyd does not attempt to discuss this. He does, however, include a fetching letter, from the Irish folklorist, Tom Munelly, giving a vivid instance of the ways in which in Ireland the past lives on in the present.

¹ *Rebels and their Causes: essays in honour of A. L. Morton*, edited by Maurice Cornforth. Lawrence and Wishart. Paperback £2.75.