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## GWYN ALFRED WILLIAMS, 1925-1995

### (1) L. J. Williams

The death of Gwyn Alf Williams marks the passing of a remarkable man and an exceptional scholar. We shall not see his like again. Others, in some cases consciously, have a few of Gwyn's attributes: but whilst some have this or that feature or characteristic, no-one remotely approaches the organic whole. At one level, of course, that is simply banal: we can all of us - despite the wilder claims of modern geneticists - be said to be unique, but for most of us that fact, if it is a fact, still leaves us with our lives essentially - and perhaps fortunately - mundane. Not a word that would spring to mind in thinking of Gwyn or considering his explosive impact on people, place and subject.

In the immediate aftermath of Gwyn's death most of the public pronouncements understandably perhaps, concentrated on his highly visible - and richly illuminating - media activities. Some obituaries in the national broadsheets gave perceptive preliminary assessments of his place as a historian. There remains the necessity to survey his work as a historian, in, and of, Wales. This brief notice is not the place, nor is the present writer the person for that. Llafur is proposing seriously to initiate the process in a dayschool devoted to Gwyn and to David John Victor Jones whose sad early death was noticed in the previous issue of this journal. The present piece is thus neither an obituary nor a professional assessment: it is simply a personal memoir of a short slice of Gwyn's life; the years between 1954 and 1963 when he was an Assistant Lecturer and then Lecturer at Aberystwyth.

Of course his association with the college stretched both before and beyond these years. He had been awarded an open scholarship in the entrance examination in 1943 and held a University scholarship and later Fellowship attached to the college as a post-graduate working on his massive thesis on medieval London in the early 1950s. And a generation later he served as a Vice-President alongside another major Welsh historian (also from Dowlais and also vertically disadvantaged -but happily still with us) - Glanmor Williams.

Most of Gwyn's incessant and varied activities during these years are not recorded. Some could make for lurid speculation: envisaging staff meetings in the Department of Welsh History between Gwyn, David Williams and T. Jones Pierce conjures up the sort of surreal scenario that Gwyn, the novelist and dramatist *manqué*, would have relished - except, of course, that in those far off days they probably never (or rarely) had staff meetings. Most of his activities in any event took place 'beyond my ken'. What one does remember is that he was great fun, hugely creative - and a bit of a dandy. But the fecund intellectualism, which might have been daunting, was always tempered by a readiness to listen and to take seriously one's own more pedestrian ploddings.

Perhaps I should confess before the Committee on Public Safety that I taught Gwyn to drive, an activity which - for a historian - he showed a great reluctance to look in his rear-view mirror. He also had a tendency suddenly to declaim about Dic Penderyn when I was more anxious about the unpredictable behaviour of pedestrians in Terrace Road. In those

days people from Aberystwyth had to take their test in Machynlleth starting, appropriately enough, at the Owain Glyndŵr Centre. Gwyn - astonishingly - passed first time, but restored a sense of perspective when, euphorically driving back, he ran off the road at a fortunately grassy corner.

More characteristically Gwyn gave endless time to students. Holding court with coffee and Gauloises certainly, but more substantially inspiring with lectures where the attendance commonly exceeded the size of the class. That was remarkable enough for someone who was still really struggling with his stammer, but what sometimes gets lost is that he was an effective **teacher** and not just a virtuoso lecturer. He took the time and effort to type long, constructive, guiding comments on essays which were returned with much animated discussion: he had a marvellous gift of sending away students - certainly the best of them - feeling that they had done something really good and -even more important - could do even better. The rest of us could only catch glimpses of this in the occasional public lecture - if you could get into the old Exam Hall - on science fiction or whatever was buzzing inside his head; or catch a whiff from the award-winning one-act play (*The View from Poppa's Head*) which he wrote for the students for an NUS festival.

It was also a formative period for him as a professional historian. He brought to (reduced for) publication his massive thesis on medieval London (with, as he acknowledged, the essential educating help of his colleague, Edmund Fryde). He also embarked on a series of articles - on Merthyr Riots, Friendly Societies, South Wales (and Merthyr) radicalism, Hugh Owen and Dic Penderyn - which were the essential foundation for the path-breaking books on Wales which began to appear from the late 70s. In between he had made scholarly attacks on a breath-taking array of periods, places and persons - medieval London, revolutionary France, twentieth-century Italy, and the Spain of Goya. It was all - and especially the return to his native roots - impassioned stuff. For Gwyn history was a battlefield. And rightly so, since most of the territory had long been occupied by the forces of property and privilege. It was time to recapture some of the ground. And he did.

## (2) Neil Evans

How do we begin to try to capture Gwyn's qualities? Energy and dynamism in abundance; great kindness and an occasional ferocity. A towering mind which dwarfed his body. He had insights which seemed to border on the miraculous. Indeed Gwyn would have had few difficulties in summing himself up in a phrase. As an external examiner he could tell me more about my students from reading their scripts than I could from teaching them in a rather intense atmosphere for two years. And the memorable comments upon them: 'Seems pleasantly bloody-minded' is a particular favourite. These were the qualities he brought to history. Ieuan Gwynedd Jones, no slouch at imaginative interpretation and insight himself, once said that most historians could detect a rise in the birth rate and record it. Gwyn, by contrast, would be poking his nose through the bedroom windows to find out what was going on! More than that he could tell the story with a verve and panache that was more than enviable. His public lectures are rightly legendary, though like a comic (he was once mistaken for Freddy Starr in a pub he had gone to for solace after an argument during filming with Wynford Vaughan Thomas!) he needed an audience to feed off. I once heard him

give the same public lecture twice in the same day. In the morning it was to the unresponsive and rather thin ranks of the Urban History Group at the Economic History Society Conference. They didn't understand his local references or his humour (some were clearly unfamiliar with the concept) and Gwyn's spirits sank lower and lower as the event went on. It cannot be reckoned one of his great successes, though the fault was not really his. The same evening he gave the lecture (different title, but same lecture!) to the massed ranks of a 1970s Llafur conference. From the beginning the audience, many of whom were not academics, were with him and certainly understood Gwyn's guiding principle that fun and education could, and ought, to go together. Finding a response Gwyn soared to ever greater heights. It was one of the most memorable lectures I have ever heard. Vividly Merthyr and its surrounding areas were recreated. He once spoke of David Williams having a Baptist style immersion in his subject. That was his approach to Merthyr and to every topic he touched.

When he left Wales for York he gained a freedom to experiment in history which had been denied him in Aberystwyth. David Williams had appointed him to do the Part One teaching he felt he could no longer do himself after he had turned his lecture notes into *A History of Modern Wales*. But subsequently he seems to have become frightened of the brilliant young Marxist and had confined him to first year teaching to minimise the potential 'damage'. York allowed him to become a world historian, and started him as a Senior Lecturer and then promoted him to Reader and Professor in successive years. He used to say, partly ruefully, but mainly with pride, that the courses he had developed at York were recycled as early Open University courses. Probably there was some exaggeration in that but he was certainly a captivating teacher. One friend, a York student in that era, decided from the beginning that he would follow Gwyn's courses, whatever he taught. Mainly it was the democratic revolution of the late eighteenth century. Out of this came his brilliant *Artisans and Sans-Culottes*. It rests on the massive work that he did with such intensity for special subjects, and claimed to be a simple latimer to Cobb, Soboul and Rudé. It is not, for it derives its own insights (notably into Tom Paine) from Gwyn's erudition. Who can forget its phrases? There was a dispute at that time - a rather turgid one - about whether the Girondins of the French Revolution were a genuine party, a loose faction or simply a figment of their enemies' imagination. Gwyn cut through it like a Gordian knot. They were 'that group that the guillotine amalgamated into Girondins' with the almost oxymoronic coupling of 'guillotine' and 'amalgamated' strengthening rather than weakening his point. Or read the bibliography. This is not a common instruction to give but Gwyn's are as funny as A. J. P. Taylor's and perhaps sharper. Soboul is 'rather clinical', Cobb 'the reverse of clinical'. This is a book which comes from a teacher of the class of '68 and is deservedly still in print. 'High adrenaline content' he remarks of E. P. Thompson; he should know. Out of this same democratic revolution - and York- came his work on Goya. The other great wave of challenges to the state in the post World War One era also came to his attention, via the work which he did on Gramsci. He produced an early (and still worth reading, despite Gwyn's later views on it) article on Gramsci and eventually a survey of the revolutionary currents in Italy at the end of the war and a translation of Paulo Spriano's *The Occupation of the Factories*. Despite this the huge project he planned on this hardly got off the drawing board; nor did the three volumes on the democratic revolution in Britain c. 1790-1830 which he talked about in his later years. This latter was the victim of his TV work and pop-

ularisation. The first was really the victim of his return to Wales; we all regret the books that Gwyn did not write but who can say that he made the wrong choices?

His return to Cardiff in 1974 meant his return to Welsh history. In many cases he was picking up threads first held in Aberystwyth but now with the force and inspiration of an eruption of Welsh historical writing behind them. Quickly the books came flooding out. The definitive book on *The Merthyr Rising* in 1978, the year that David Williams, who had once planned one himself, died. The two following years saw his great book on the Welsh and the Atlantic revolution (sadly written too late for the bicentennial) split into two for ease of publication. Another of David Williams's projects had been realised. In 1979 he sketched out brilliantly an outline and more importantly an interpretation of Welsh history which will be one of his greatest achievements. The original *When Was Wales?*, the BBC Radio Lecture, provided a coherent framework for the whole of Welsh history; and enabled many to explore the idea of a Welsh identity from a critical, yet usable, perspective. It became the basis of a whole approach to, and synthesis of, the subject and Gwyn provided the inspiration and the more theoretical underpinning for it. The original lecture was given in a context where courage was at a premium. Listen to the tape. You can almost hear the gasps - or are they hisses? - when he says that the Europe of Saunders Lewis's *Brad* is our enemy; it is the Europe of Gramsci that we need to embrace. This became a TV series and a full scale book. The ambition he had for Cardiff and the Industrial South Wales Research Unit he and Dai Smith established there, was to set Welsh history into an Atlantic framework. Some of Gwyn's essays collected in *The Welsh in their History*, sketch this out though the grand aim was never realised. The failure was mainly to do with the cuts in research funding, though much good work did come out of Cardiff in the period and beyond. Most of it was the product of Dai Smith's students, rather than Gwyn's, however.

After Cardiff it was mainly TV and popularisation; retirement from the chair at Cardiff did not mean that he had time to write the massive tomes he might have done. He did provide much brilliant instruction, perhaps returning to the great days of his teaching at Aberystwyth and York in the process. Not all this work was memorable, but most of it was brilliant. In his last series, a typically wide-ranging review and analysis of the Arthurian legend he was back to his best; there was the poignancy of watching someone who we knew to be dying performing so well; and his mellowness in going to an Arthurian theme park and admitting that he had 'quite enjoyed himself.' He had not shown the same mellowness about his beloved Merthyr. I once, unwisely, asked him what he thought about the new evidence on Merthyr unearthed by Alexander Cordell in *The Fire People* and which had eluded David Williams, David Jones and Gwyn himself. It wasn't important, he stormed, Cordell had misread it and poor old Dic Penderyn was 'the village idiot'. He was annoyed that Cordell had procured a plaque proclaiming the martyrdom of Dic for Merthyr's public library. Gwyn's ambition to get one for Lewsin - the leader rather than the martyr ['We're weepy in Wales', he said once on TV: 'if you want to get ahead, get a nouse'] - remains unfulfilled. One of the best memorials to him will be to campaign vigorously for this.

Gwyn's role in Llafur was always central in one sense and tangential in another. He gave the first lecture at the Llafur AGM and spoke at large weekend schools in 1978 and 1989. He gave substantial financial support, paying his subscription every month rather than

every year. He was a vice-president for many years. But he was not one for the detailed work of the society and probably never attended a committee meeting. (Not that vice-presidents are expected to). But more importantly he was an inspiration to us all. Llafur had always been about creating scholarly history and communicating it to the widest possible audience. In Gwyn we had a human embodiment of these aims, even if emulating him seemed a daunting task. If Llafur collectively does half of what Gwyn did by himself it will be one of the success stories of twentieth - and twenty-first - century Wales.