

..... And Why I Joined!

Prof. Gwyn Alf Williams of Cardiff is interviewed by Phil Cooke.

On general election day, 1983 Gwyn Alfred Williams (Gwyn Alf as he is universally known) walked into 51 Cathedral Rd. and signed on the dotted line. The significance of the event went unreported in the press. This is the first political interview Gwyn Alf has given since he joined the party, and in it he gives his reasons for doing so.

It seems to me that most of your historical research has been on a European canvass. Yet, in the last five years you've written more than almost anyone I can think of on Wales. Why?

The first two articles I ever had published appeared in 1959 and 1960. The later one was a study of Gramsci's concept of 'hegemony', the earlier one was about Merthyr. Sometimes I feel that my work has been about nothing else! When I was in grammar school I was interested in France, and quite good at French, although English was my main subject. I wanted to do English, Maths and French - my father was a bit scientific - this wasn't possible, so I did History, with fateful effect. I won an Open Scholarship to Aberystwyth where it was my intention to specialise in the French Revolution in the History department. But in 1943 I joined the Army instead. I taught History and French in the College of the Rhine Army, after my exertions in the D-Day invasion.

When I eventually got to Aberystwyth I was dazzled by Treharne who was teaching Medieval History in a modern way and that led me into my Ph.D. on Medieval London - a strange, modern European city in which Welshmen featured notably. Indeed, you could say that my approach to Wales has been through its European connections - something that was lost with Nineteenth Century imperialism. Then, in 1954, David Williams made me a job in Aberystwyth and I was able to pursue my hobby of Welsh his-

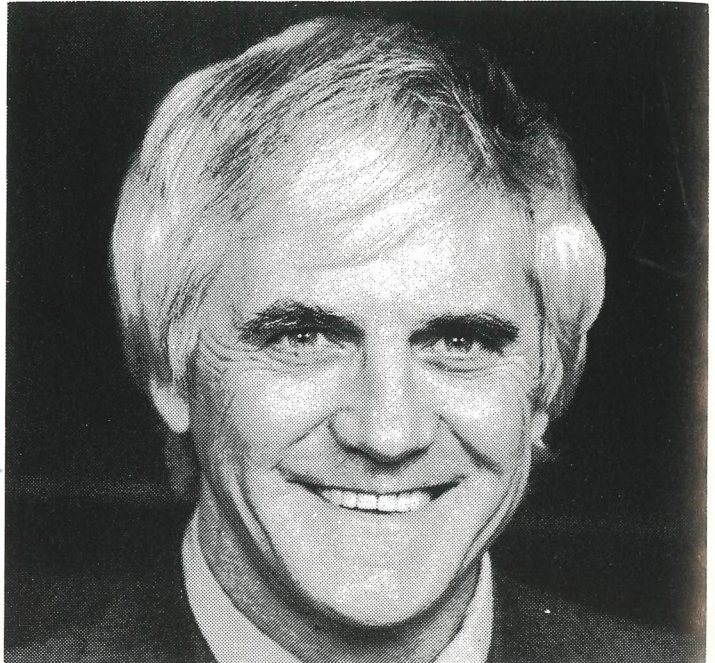
tory more seriously. I've published a lot on it recently because it's been bursting to come out for ages.

You're internationally acknowledged as the person responsible for making the key ideas of Gramsci available to the English-speaking world. What is the significance of his work for you?

I'd love to do a book on Gramsci in Welsh. I spoke Welsh till I was five but lost it - in the Army mostly - now I'm taking classes in Y Clwb Cymreig Caerdydd. I'm determined to speak it fluently. In the 50's Richard Cobb got me a three-month spell teaching in one of those weird and wonderful American University outposts in Turin. I arrived there to find a Gramsci cult in full swing and determined to get to the bottom of it. Funnily enough, there were other English-speakers who got to Gramsci before me. One was the Scottish socialist and nationalist Hamish Henderson who translated the Prison Letters in the 1940's but he couldn't find a publisher.

What appealed to me was Gramsci's libertarian Marxism, which takes us out of the straightjacket of Marxism-Leninism. The idea and practice of building popular movements around a national base was very powerful. 'The national' and its link to 'the popular' were important in Gramsci's work. Remember he was a Sardinian, and his last project was to have been the history of the island; he spoke only in Sardinian in his final days.

Gramsci's idea of hegemony is fundamental. All hegemonies enshrine class-rule but expressed in non-class terms. It's more than an alliance, it allows subaltern groups to have their independence and their interests served. The Christian and Bourgeois ideologies are hegemonic in this way. It applies with particular force to women, I think, who have a



Gwyn A. Williams

kind of autonomy under both those ideologies but who, we now realise, are simultaneously oppressed. They, the unemployed - especially youth - and what I call 'displaced organic intellectuals' (workers by brain in dead-end white-collar work) add up to more than the official employed population of Wales. They are all **disinherited** and are in theory a force which could shape themselves into a hegemonic bloc organised around the national terrain. Gramsci tells us it is the role of The Party to mobilise this force: **a fo ben bid pont**'.

How does a boy from Dowlais get to move in such exalted intellectual spheres?

I've told you Gramsci was Sardinian! Sorry. I was born in 1925, an event shortly to be succeeded, of course, by a General Strike. I went to Gwernllwyn Chapel (Annibynwyr), spoke Welsh as people did in Dowlais and Heolgerig, and I've always felt I knew what the Welsh Welsh were on about. My

father's family came from Amlwch (an uncle was T. Rowland Hughes, but I'm not Johnny South) and Briton Ferry. The latter were 'Rhonc Liberals' according to my father. He was a pal of S.O. Davies - so there's one political strand or two. My mother's side (Sarah Herbert) were from Monmouthshire and were the real radicals. Her brother Roger worked for the Chartists. That gave me my interest in the Merthyr Rising, Dic Penderyn and all that.

My father's brother was Leyshon Williams, the playwright, strong Labour. When he joined it was said '**Leysh wedi mynd yn Bolsh**'. He wrote '**Y Practis**' '**Help Llaw (chwith)**' and '**Mab y Tŷ**' amongst other things, and also wrote for the BBC in the days of Sam Jones, Gunston Jones etc.

In '**Trip yr ysgol Sul**' he invented a horrible child called Glwyn Alfred. Sam Jones couldn't believe there could be such a combination of Welsh and English names, the programme technicians used to bribe kids to say they were called precisely that. So, in 1935 I made my first wireless appearance as

Gwyn Alfred. Sam Jones gave me sweets because he felt sorry for me with my hybrid names. I suppose after that my fate was forged.

You've been in 'fringe' politics for most of your life. Why have you never found, for example, the Labour Party a congenial home?

I was ruined to start with by becoming a communist at Merthyr Grammar at 14, though not a party member. I have never cared for the Labour Party; social democracy is a con trick. I thought it then and still do. I've often said that I was virtually born into a Labour Party ward meeting from which my expectant mother had to be speedily ushered. But the heroic yet corrupt Labour council of Merthyr said it all for me. The only thing to do with the Labour Party is to bury it - not on the parish necessarily - we should give it a state funeral O.K., but it must be quick.

Remember, too, that to be a communist was respectable (well, almost) in the inter-war years in South Wales. I learned a lot from an old bloke who gave us boys faded articles from exotic left magazines like 'The Liberator' from America, written by Max Eastman. We supported, even voted Labour, especially after the war.

I went to Yugoslavia with my wife in 1948 - to build a road. E.P. Thompson went to build a railway, lots of us did in those days. Tito was a hero. I actually joined and left the Communist Party first in 1948. Tito transcended the multicultural divide in Yugoslavia and stood up to the Russians. I'm still a Titoist. I remember the tremendous tension of 1950-51 when Labour got 14 million votes but lost to the Tories. I followed the Bevanite struggle very closely. I even joined the Aberystwyth Labour Party briefly in 1956, part of the 'Law not War' campaign over Suez. Hungary had done for me with the Communist Party. However, I left the Labour Party, also in 1956, accused of introducing politics into the Aberystwyth Labour League of Youth. So there it is.

Is it true that you recently left

the Welsh Communist Party because you felt your efforts were being undone by conservative elements?

Yes. My small 'c' communism was out of tune. Most of their time is spent talking about the Labour Party, a pro-

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foundly uninteresting topic. Then I had the greatest difficulty getting the magazine 'Y Gweithiwr' off the ground, despite apparent support. But the last straw was over the Communist University of Wales. This had the support of Bert Pearce but was met with apathy and resistance. We'd invited Ralph Miliband to CUW No 2. But he'd recently written that both the Labour Party and the Communist Party were obsolete and needed replacing. So, after accepting the invitation he was dropped by the powers that be. Already my communism (with a small 'c') was getting me accused of being a nationalist sympathiser, so I made my excuses and left. I don't want to hammer them though, there are many good people there.

Why did you join Plaid Cymru then?

I translate Plaid Cymru as the party of Wales. It's very easy to love Wales, it's the bloody Welsh are the problem!

You've been a sprinter rather than a marathon man in political parties. Is there any reason why your membership of Plaid Cymru should be longer than that of the others?

Yes, I'm older in the first place and I'm tired. I feel I've come home. I've always had the interests of Wales at heart, especially English-speaking Wales. The thing that really sickened me was seeing hundreds of Val-

leys' people coming down to Cardiff for a rugby international, shortly before the devolution referendum, all with 'No' buttons on their jackets. The schizophrenia of that brought Gramsci's analysis of ethnicity and class to life. I saw the connections between the two and realised that the lack of a strong national party was killing Wales.

What would you like to do - personally - within Plaid Cymru, and how would you like to see the party develop over the next five to ten years?

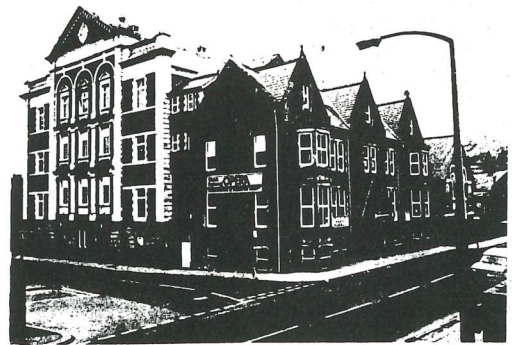
I would like to do what I do best. Write. Analyse. Serve as an ordinary worker. I'd like to revive the sub-currents of debate about the relationship between socialism and nationalism that have been forgotten in Plaid

Cymru's past. I'll do hack work, knock on doors, deliver the **Welsh Nation**. I'd like to make myself bilingual, but I want to reach the English-speakers who identify with Wales. **They are the real disinherited.**

I hope Plaid Cymru will become Gramsci's hegemonic party. I want it to become The Socialist Party of Wales over the ruins of the Labour Party. I want it to be a party like no other party. I want the Plaid to remain strongly committed to Parliamentary activity and to see it clearing the way for developing its base in groups such as the women's and peace movements. I want to see Plaid Cymru looking increasingly towards Europe and becoming a founder member of the U.S.S.E. - the Union of Socialist States of Europe.

I suppose I'm just a mirror image of Saunders Lewis in the final analysis. ■

CYNHADLEDD TREORCI



National Organisation of Plaid Cymru Trade Unionists

CONFERENCE RALLY

Park & Dare Hall, Treorci
8.30 p.m. Thursday, 27th October
(immediately after end of Conference Session)

Speakers:

BERNARD DIX

(former Assistant General Secretary, NUPE)

DAFYDD ELIS THOMAS M.P.

ROBERT SKILLICORN

(Regional Organiser, NUPE)

(In the Lesser Hall downstairs)