

Memories of a Model European, Mark One.

By Gwyn A. Williams, a redundant historian.

I HAD no idea the skins of the upper classes were so pink. They came out of Downing Street, Churchill and Eden and a bunch of indistinguishable men in identical suits, and all their faces glowed like babies' bums. With them was a stocky man in a foreign uniform. His face looked like the dark side of the moon. The crowd didn't know what to do; the visitor was a communist. Churchill made a gesture with his arm, in an intimacy almost tribal, and they burst into applause. By that time, I was leaping up and down, clapping my hands over my head and shouting 'Zivio Tito! Zivio Tito!'. He came over and shook my hand which, of course, I didn't wash for a week.

Tito and the Yugoslav Partisans were my generation's Che Guevara. I had gone to Yugoslavia in 1948 to work on a road linking Croat Zagreb and Serb Belgrade and optimistically entitled the Autoput Bratstvo-Jedinstvo, the Brotherhood-and-Unity Highway. I had been talked into it by my friend Iorri who, the previous year, had worked on the Samac-Sarajevo railway, where all the best people like Edward Thompson went.

Iorri was the son of a man everyone knew as Jack-Williams-the-Communist from Dowlais. On 4 February 1935, the day after the greatest demonstration in Welsh history when 300,000 people marched against the UAB Act, women in Merthyr sacked the UAB offices in Pontmorlais, burning papers, ripping out telephones and shouting 'Come down, Old Bug-Whiskers!' at a respected Quaker. The only people they'd listen to were Ceridwen Brown of Aberdare - and Jack-Williams-the-Communist. I went to his funeral after his return a broken man from Spain. There was communist ceremonial, with Dowlais Spaniards present. You could tell they were Spaniards: they wore brown boots and red ties and wouldn't speak to the curate.

The British Brigade in

Jugoslavia was no less international. There was a core of communist cadres who constituted themselves a vanguard by promptly commandeering the camp kitchen, a Chinese youth who called himself The Chink in the Iron Curtain and a couple from South Africa who were on their honeymoon. We started work at four in the morning and were required to raise a standard and sing an anthem. We compromised on Jerusalem. As the strains of . . . 'And did those feet . . .' rose in a grey dawn, Jugoslavs leaped to attention.

I remember walking in error into a prison farm, to preside over an ad hoc History Workshop in pidgin German with inmates and guards, seeing Serbian women wipe the lipstick incredulously from British lips and the editor of the Daily Worker's daughter, with a long cigarette-holder, holding court in a drainage ditch like a Red Princess ringed by adoring Montenegrins. I was told the precise acreage of Cardiff Docks by a Croat partisan girl.

I don't know what it's like in the Jose Marti Brigades in Cuba today, but I suppose there is always an element of fantasy about these exercises in proletarian solidarity.

Their language seemed to have no vowels; places were called Grk and Krk. We asked our interpreter, an excessively female person of eighteen who managed to make dialectical materialism sound like a pastorelle, to teach us to swear. They were very puritanical but she ultimately led us over to a remote corner of a vast maize-field and, in a conspiratorial huddle, breathed the Serbo-Croat for My God! which came over as Bogarr Mi! and precipitated a shameful mass collapse into petty-bourgeois hilarity.

On our way out, we were all thrown into jail in Trieste, or rather Trst, by the mercenaries under British command who then ran that place. The leader



Some early Welsh Titoists, Aberystwyth 1948.

of our Brigade had been an officer in the Eighth Army, as it turned out, in the same unit as the commander of our jailers. When they met, they simultaneously uttered an identical cry, along the lines of . . . 'I say, Bunty, what are you doing with this shower?' We were released.

I don't know what it's like in the Jose Marti Brigades in Cuba today, but I suppose there is always an element of fantasy about these exercises in proletarian solidarity.

What was real was the heroism, the stoic dedication and the candour of these peoples of an artificial state and of their communist movement which was trying, against the grain of history, to create a multiple nation of equals. The Montenegrin Milovan Djilas, author of that great book **Land Without Justice** and later dissident, would not call himself a Montenegrin before his judges; he was a Yugoslav, member of that new socialist nation created in the war in which nearly two million of them died, often at the hands of their compatriots.

God knows, the Partisans committed their own atrocities enough, but when you think of the centuries of murderous history behind them, of the mutual

massacres unleashed by the Germans, the chaos of killings by Ustasi, Domobrani, Nedic's gendarmes, Chetniks, Nazis, Fascists and contrast that with the Partisans' conduct during the Five German Offensives, the black and glorious days around Mount Durmitor, the building of communist community between men and women, peoples and nations, during the war itself, what choice was there?

We were there in that hard and bitter year of their expulsion from Cominform; as we came in at one end, they shot General Jovanovic trying to get out the other. The irony was that Tito had been more Stalinist than Stalin. No-one had been more of a Stalinist than the young Djilas; his brutality lost them Montenegro for nearly three years. In the many discussions we had with them at every level, what came over very strongly to me was that this was a dedicated communist movement very conscious of belonging to what they regarded as a small and backward country, which had quite literally copied every single thing their big brothers did, word for word and wart for wart. Despite their bravado, the break left them ut-

Radical Wales

terly bewildered. Their first instinct was to do the exact opposite of everything they'd done over the last three years; for a moment, anarcho-communism lived again.

They had to start all over again. Since then I have read many critiques of what they've done; I know about the failures and the compromises and the atavistic spirits which will not be excused. They seem to have vanished from the sight of the European Left. But I do not believe they have abandoned the enterprise they were forced to undertake in 1948.

And I certainly think their experience needs to become part of the historical patrimony of the Welsh people. We in Wales have not only to build our socialist republic among our fellow-peoples on this Island of Britain and its motherland of Europe; within our own country we face the daunting task of constituting the peoples of Wales, whom history has divided, into a socialist nation. We badly need a generation of today's 'Titoists'.

I was certainly one when I returned to Aberystwyth in 1948, to encounter people who said they were of the same mind. 'We would consider ourselves Welsh Titoists', Gwilym Prys Dafis informed me. Gwilym Prys was a leading figure among the Welsh Republicans of that day. He was then, in face and figure, gaunt, tense and dramatic. His oratory was hypnotic; he was like a Welsh Kurt Schumacher. When he spoke, one felt a need for lowering skies and torchlight processions. He had slightly protruding teeth and used to shower us in a fine spray which we received as a holy benison like the waters of the Ganges. He was strong on leadership, a word pronounced

with proper reverence. 'Plaid Cymru must be disbanded!', he said, 'It is hopelessly clerical!' Flinging wide his arms and rolling his eyes heavenward, he would utter a gaunt, despairing cry - 'Gwynfor Evans!'

There seemed little more to be said. I started to distribute a few copies of the journal. My aunt Rachel used religiously to buy one and take it to Gwernllwyn Chapel Sisterhood, though to no visible effect. Gwilym Prys was worried over the circulation and asked for comments. I stand open to correction here, since I understand comrade Robert Griffiths has a superb collection of these early texts, but as I recall, it was a fiercely intransigent paper which made no concessions to any human weakness which might lurk among its potential readership.

These were the great days of **Tribune**; I tentatively suggested that we might use a little humour. 'Humour?' exploded Gwilym Prys, rolling his eyes Gwynfor-ward and spraying me with holy water, 'Do you consider the future of the Welsh people a laughing matter?' There was no answer to that.

This must have been about the time of the Great Aberystwyth Riot. Emmanuel Shinwell, then Minister for War in a Labour Government, came down to Aber to address what appeared to be an assembly of the Boys' Brigade, with a support group of doting mothers. The more frivolous elements in the student population organised a demonstration clad in motley and unorthodox uniforms and bearing banners inscribed 'Drop The Bomb Now - On The Pentagon' and similar sentiments.

The Welsh Titoists, in what

we considered an unholy alliance with the party we had come to call Stalinist, lurked in a side-street and staged a decisive historical intervention, interposing themselves at the head of the procession. So we swept into the square in front of Shiloh Methodist Chapel behind a dramatic but doctrinally incoherent array of Welsh Titoist and Stalinist banners. There was dissension in the ranks.

This was as nothing to the dissension it provoked in Emmanuel Shinwell. He seized a loud-hailer and roared at us that we were a bunch of student layabouts who were going to do our National Service whether we liked it or not. Since the majority of his audience were ex-servicemen, some of whom had spent six years in the army and most of whom looked as though they had, the remark proved counter-productive.

In the ensuing uproar, Gwilym Prys suddenly appeared over our heads clinging, I think, to a lamp-post, like Lewsyn yr Heliwr in the Merthyr Rising of 1831. 'I object to this conscientious objector of the First World War', he shouted, referring to Emmanuel Shinwell, 'coming here in his American car to recruit Welsh boys for the English army.' This precipitated chaos.

One group moved on the Boys' Brigade, to be violently assaulted by infuriated mothers wielding handbags, while another closed on the lamp-post, with the apparent intention of hanging Gwilym Prys from it. I saw a friend whose face was literally purple with rage (I had read this but had never hitherto seen it). 'Peace! Peace!' he was yelling, while with a banner bearing the same device, he was clobbering the living daylight out of the sec-

retary of Debates Union. At a critical moment, another figure appeared at the lamp-post and broke into **Hen Wlad fy Nhadau**. It produced an instant Mabon effect. Even Emmanuel Shinwell stood to attention.

I found the experience quite unHINGING. Even more unHINGING was the rumour, much later, that after the break-up of the Welsh Titoists, one or two of them had emigrated to Southern Rhodesia as it then was, to become staunch supporters of Good Old Smithy. Several certainly entered the Labour Party. It was said, with what truth I do not know, that Gwilym Prys marched imperiously into the Labour Party on St. David's Day.

This was presumably a Welsh Titoist exercise in Deep Entryism. As usual, all they managed to enter to any depth was the capacious backside of that party, up which so many good men and women have gone, never to be seen again.

It was therefore with one of those half-pleasurable stabs of pain, a poignancy worthy of Edwin Pugh the Pang, that I learned, years later, that Gwilym Prys, then passing as G.P. Davies, was the very Labour candidate whom Gwynfor Evans defeated in the celebrated Carmarthen by-election of 1966. And now, of course, in the service of Labour, he has been deported to the House of Lords.

History is full of these little ironies, isn't it? As comrade Stalin said to comrade Trotsky.

Every Communist loves the Soviet Union with all his heart and soul, but that does not mean he has to love his own country the less. Josip Broz-Tito, 1948.

M
A
F
A
L
D
A

