

# A Quiet Republicanism

## Gwyn A. Williams reviews Tom Nairn's latest book

**A third of the population of this island regularly dream about the Queen. They are usually sharing a cup of tea, either at her place or theirs.**

Three middle-aged women in the middle of The Queen's Highway burst into spontaneous tears of joy when they read of the engagement of *Andy* and *Fergie*. Prince Charles's bald patch assumes national, not to say mystical, significance. . . 'Are we all mad?' asks one observer. 'What if we are?' he responds, 'it's all 'harmless' '- a code-word, Tom Nairn notes, for 'Hands off!'.

In the first serious analytical study for a century, Tom Nairn's *The Enchanted Glass: Britain and its Monarchy* (Radius, Century Hutchinson, 1988) begins with a brilliant dissection of the *Mystery*, caustic, painfully perceptive, densely textured, with a Scottish bite to it; his account of a Royal Progress through his own East Fife is a masterpiece of Black Farce.

Running it a close second is his treatment of the Investiture of the Prince of Wales. That was part of the 1969 re-launch of monarchy heralded by Richard Cawston's celebrated television film of *The Family* and the arrival of a publicity-conscious Australian (a species we have become even more familiar with since) as H.M.'s Private Secretary. Its projection of monarchy as something at once infinitely remote ('I try to imagine them on the loo' is apparently the new English Disease) and yet re-assuringly ordinary and human has proved a stunning success—though the advent of Vulgar and Brutish Toryism, serviced by a press which some years ago would have been burned in the street by the Public Hangman, is subjecting it to strain.

(After all, *chware teg*, to have been displaced as queen by the Grocer's Daughter and to have lived through George Thomas only to confront Norman Tebbit, would qualify most ordinary people for Industrial Compensation.)

The circumstances of the Investiture recall those of Lloyd George's original circus of 1911: a nominally radical government bankrupt of ideas and shut out of Europe by the beastly Frogs, workers mutinous, and natives restless in the Fringe. . . 'It was time for a dose of symbolism.'

The show was managed by that characteristic sixties figure, Lord Snowdon, the trendy outsider who had married the Bad Sister. He was determined not to copy 1911, when hardly anybody had been able to see Prince Charming in his crusader's tent. Charisma was to get the projection proper to the age of television, complete with a space-age perspex canopy built by ICI and wind-tunnel tested

against gusts of sixty miles an hour (demonstrating a masterly grasp of Welsh political rhetoric even before the advent of Neil Kinnock). Apparently the whole shoot was to have been suspended from balloons, until some-one pointed out that a single Welsh Nationalist marksman might cause sensational havoc.

The Queen and the Government were very agitated by the spectre of the Welsh Extremist. Into the breach came galloping that paladin of chivalry, George Thomas, then Secretary of State for Wales. You will remember that George and his Mam, rushing out to wave to the passing Queen and lacking a flag, waved a dishcloth instead. Out he came now, full cry, in the plebeian Loyalist ecstasy natural to a Welsh Labour leader ('That smile was worth all the rest of it!' laughed Mr. Kinnock at the wedding of the Duchess of York)—'There should be no part of the United Kingdom where the Royal Family cannot go!'

During the Investiture, there were two deaths, preventive arrests, the odd bang, a massive police presence, crowds of only 'Third Division' size and a legion of heart-broken landladies with unrented window seats. But by the next day, it was a huge success; it didn't even rain.

The young man played his part. . . 'As long as I don't get covered too much in egg and tomato, I'll be all right. . . I don't blame people demonstrating like that. . . you can't expect people to be overzealous about the fact of having a so-called English prince come amongst them. . . ' A thoroughly decent bloke, in short, to quote his own words in another context (as in fairness, he does appear to be) who had gone dutifully through his purgatory in Aberystwyth. He was duly transmuted. Unlike his precursor, he managed at least three hundred words in Welsh before the Urdd and used the Ancient Celtic Tongue in his reply to the Loyal Address.

Lord Dishcloth, it seems, was perturbed. . . was this young man going to be so misguided as to take his ridiculous job seriously? After all, as Nesta Roberts reported in the *Guardian*—'The double-l, reputedly impossible to the English tongue, was perfectly negotiated, the vowels were broad and clear, the guttural "ch" genuinely Welsh. . . ' (That, no doubt, would be the genuinely guttural 'ch' of such Ancient Celtic Expressions as. . . 'a chadw dy blydi chips'?).

The Secretary of State need not have feared. Ardent Welsh nationalists went around threatening to clobber anybody who touched 'our Prince'. The moderates of Plaid Cymru who would welcome independence 'under the Crown' gained strength. It was an assertion of England's continuing domina-





tion over the Welsh which 'took the form of a non-ethnic parade from which 'England' was entirely and mysteriously absent', an 'endorsement of a deeply conservative British nationalism which appeared to have nothing to do with nationality'. It was yet another triumph for civilisation, decency and Mam, for that elusive but all too real state-nation of *Britain*, which Tom Nairn calls *Ukania*.

Tom Paine called monarchy a peepshow and whenever his *Rights of Man* touches on royalty, the prose chokes with theatrical metaphors. But this is no mere ornament: monarchy so engulfs our culture that the Windsorers are Holy Ghosts present at every family table.

It is of crucial significance politically. Tom Nairn mercilessly exposes the nineteenth-century guru Walter Bagehot whose book has been the bible of a British Left with its 'Pseudo-Feudal Socialism'. Bagehot called the monarchy the 'dignified' part of the constitution, which masked the 'hidden republic' of an oligarchy operating through an all-powerful Cabinet riding a theoretically omnipotent Westminster Parliament which nested at the heart of a complex, extensive, secretive and authoritarian Establishment—today more powerful than ever (witness the TV series *A Very British Coup*, crude but pertinent). It is the delusion of the 'hidden republic' which has seduced and finally emasculated the British left.

Tom Nairn demonstrates, as no-one else has done, the centrality of the Crown to that British state which has so easily absorbed, stifled or strangled serious dissidence. It is no less central to that peculiar entity the *British Nation* (partly Welsh in its early formation) which today holds his ramshackle *Ukania* together, at the price of a crippling backwardness, social, political and spiritual.



Its remote origin was the *Glorious Revolution* of 1688, whose tercentenary we are this year required to celebrate. The English, having killed one king, threw out another; absolute power passed to a parliament of landlords willing to embrace capitalism, which hired kings from the Dutch and Germans. They had to make do with a pretty grisly bunch of Hanoverians at first and the real breakthrough for the *British Nation* came in the generation-long struggle against the French Revolution and the Republicans it spawned on these islands.

It was in those years that a street political song *God Save Great George Our King* overtook *The Roast Beef of Old England* and even the cunningly-titled *Rule, Britannia!* During the 1790s, theatres in Britain became cockpits with rival crowds bawling rival versions of the same tune at each other—

Facts are seditious things,  
When they touch courts and kings,  
Armies are raised.  
Barracks and bastilles built,  
Innocence charged with guilt,  
Blood most unjustly spilt,  
God stands amazed . . .

with a suitable chorus (designed presumably for consumption only on the bigger island)

. . . Lord, hear the people say,  
If there's no other way,  
Give us one glorious day  
Of Cromwell's time.

We all know which version won—and it won at a critical moment, as Britain drew away into world empire as the Workshop of the World. Today it has lost the empire, failed to find a role and shrunk back into an off-shore island of Europe, sending out gunboats no more, but armies of the Children of Thatcher to ravage Wog Cities in a Great Brutish Patriotism.

The British state has never been based on the sovereignty of the people. It has doled out the vote in carefully rationed packages. It has been an almost perfect specimen of a Gramscian hegemony, knowing how and when to make compromises which leave the inner reality of oligarchical power untouched. This *Ukania* has tamed and muted the Labour Party which, in its acceptance of this *British state*, has degenerated into a licensed clown at the court of the Queen-in-Parliament, without even a King Lear to play the Fool to.

To create any kind of civilised life for the peoples of this island, we with our friends will have to dismantle its Gothic structure of governance. We can no longer dodge the central issue of the monarchy. How can we cut free from its tentacles?

Tom Nairn is acutely aware of how those tentacles grip the popular imagination. He is impatient with the pipsqueak 'republicanism' of such as Willie Hamilton and our own home-bred variants of the same species. He foresees a long and painful process of exorcism and advocates a *Quiet Republicanism* to think ourselves out of it.

True, but some action would help. Tom Nairn seems to have lost some of the combative optimism of his earlier book *The Break-up of Britain*. In one desperately bleak passage he paints a future in which Republicanism will fail to forge a new identity for the Island of Britain, in which the Southern Heartland will dissolve into a Europe acceptable to the Crown as a substitute for the Globe; our own Countries . . . 'will no doubt go their own way at last: discarded provinces beyond a 'divide' past any economic or political cure. I hope at least they are Republics'

His fellow-Republican Neal Ascherson, with his profound understanding of the nationalities of Europe, is more optimistic. From 1992, under the Single European Act, the British state should begin to become redundant. If Europe is to start painfully to write a constitution for itself, we should get a chance to bring Welsh needs into congruence with those of a Europe of the Peoples and start to write the constitution we need.

These two Scotsmen are the only seriously Republican thinkers on this Island. Their books should be compulsory reading for every member of Plaid Cymru, for every Welsh Socialist and for everyone in Wales who wants the people of Wales at last to *take possession* of their own country.

We need to bring our peculiarly Welsh experience hard up against the arguments of these books. If we can think them through, we might begin to see the outlines of an answer to that question which has echoed hollowly through our century: what is to be done?

*Professor Gwyn A. Williams will be presenting a documentary, 'Llais y Werin', on T.E. Nicholas (Niclas y Glais) on S4C this autumn.*

## PLAID CYMRU, WOMEN'S SECTION

Saturday 3rd September

CARDIFF

10.30 coffee; 11.00 start

plus

Social in Clwb Ifor Bach

at 8.00



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