

# Ancient Britons and the Republican Dream

Gwyn A. Williams reviews Neal Ascherson

**Neal Ascherson began a recent Observer column with a quotation from Martha Gellhorn, the legendary American journalist who now lives among us. She was describing the heart-breaking retreat of the small but effective Czech army from its own frontiers under the Munich diktat of 1938. It had mobilised in three hours, far more efficiently than the Nazi Moloch which was to destroy its young democracy.**

Many years after the War, Ascherson was drinking with a Czech Communist official, who vividly remembered that brave and betrayed mobilisation. To him, as a boy, it was the thunder of young men running downstairs in their new uniforms and boots. 'That', he added after a pause, 'was the last real sound I heard in my life.'

And *that* is vintage Neal Ascherson, the best political columnist in Britain. The striking anecdote which brilliantly captures not only an historical moment, but a whole historical perspective, the breadth and depth of that lightly-worn scholarship, the urbane but sharp, clear-headed, sometimes quietly ferocious style – all make this Scotsman with his deep European roots a fit successor to those eighteenth-century writers of the Scottish Enlightenment who taught British, Americans and many Europeans, including Karl Marx, how to think.

To emerge from the morass of self-serving, self-deceiving claptrap which constitutes British political culture, in which institutions degenerate, horizons shrink and liberties die, into *Games with Shadows* (Radius, Century-Hutchinson, £7.95), Neal Ascherson's collected essays, is to go under a cleansing cold shower.

If we ever revive the Summer Schools of Plaid Cymru and start to take political education seriously, we should plunge the party into total immersion in this one book.

It is in the essays grouped as *Barbaric Europe* and *Waltzing with Molotov* that Neal Ascherson takes us through the central and eastern Europe he makes his second home. Everything he touches comes to new life, no easy assumptions survive, even in themes which may seem time-worn. Read his essays on Klaus Barbie, the Berlin Wall, the Holocaust, the Prague Spring. Above all, it is the subtle and brutal, liberating and destructive realities of nationality, patriotism, nationalism, which occupy his mind, particularly among Poles, Czechs, Germans and others who have lived under the giant shadows of Hitler and Stalin.

On such matters he is brilliant, often painfully brilliant. He frequently draws parallels with his own Scots, but we are fools if we in Wales think we can escape unscathed.

*Don't be afraid – and don't steal!* – that was Thomas Masaryk's message to the Czechs on the eve of their independence. His own people understood him well enough. He was evoking the schizophrenia of the Czechs – and of the Welsh and of all other small, suppressed peoples – 'There was the sentimental side of being Czech: the love of their own history, the telling of tales, the joining in the lovely, melancholy songs everyone knew by heart. But there was also the furtive, sly, materialistic side – the Czechness of the Good Soldier Schweik – with its tendency to malice, envy and selfish greed...'

Bachan, does that ring a bell? The modern histories of Czechs and Welsh are strongly similar; outsiders think both of us are servile. This is actually an essay on the *morality* of nationalism, addressing Scots from Polish example. Read it and feel your Welsh teeth rattle.

Welsh nerves will tauten the more as this man turns his bright, burning eye on this Island where all of us are imprisoned in a geographical imperative as categorical as any which imprisons the Poles. The moral of his book he takes from J.R. Jones, writing in Welsh on exile, on leaving your country... 'I know of an experience equally agonising and more irreversible... and that is the experience of knowing, not that you are leaving your country, but that your country is leaving you, being sucked away from you, as it were by a consuming, swallowing wind into the hands and the possession of another country and civilisation...'

Ascherson cites others who say the same thing – the Gaelic poet Sorley Maclean, the Czech poet Nezval with his 'burning leaf of paper on which a poem is disappearing', which Milan Kundera takes as an image of Czech culture itself.

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**'In the dim, hallowed places where Britain worships itself, many of the bones in the reliquaries are made of celluloid or even polyester resin.'**

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It is the fear that those who will live where we now live will need a dictionary to understand what we say. This, long the experience of Welsh-speakers, is now the experience of many English-speaking Welsh people, too. Those who will live where we now live might not need a dictionary, but they will not understand a word we say.

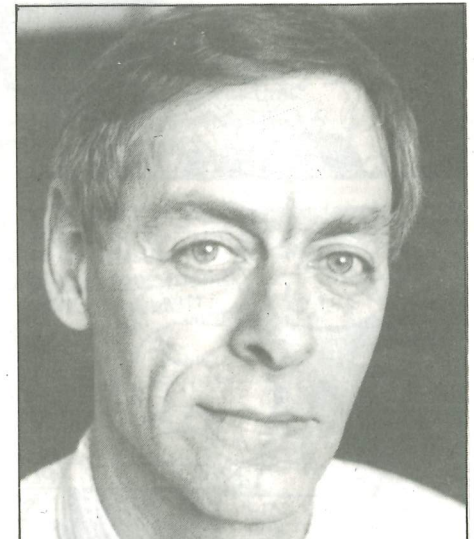
As Raymond Williams argued, this confusion and loss of identity is now deeply affecting the English – 'Many of the things that happened, over centuries, to the Welsh are now happening, in decades, to the English.' And it is the English, fulcrum of all change in this Island, who are the target of Neal Ascherson's book. Far from railing at English nationalism, he calls for its liberation. What he calls for is a genuine English nationalism, clear-sighted, based on a true picture of the national past and a democratic ethos in the present: the lost English democratic nationalism of G.K. Chesterton's *The Silent People*, of that Edward Thompson who has at last realised that his England can live only in a liberated Europe. With his England, we could all live.

What English nationalism has to be liberated from is the ubiquitous, intrusive, distorting and suffocating presence of a *Britain* which is an imaginary country imprisoning its real inhabitants in a crippling fantasy.

The most powerful theme running through this whole book is the crime which turns *History* into the lie of *Heritage*. When they raised the *Mary Rose*, one man said it was the first time 'we' had seen her for hundreds of years. 'We' had never seen her; 'they' saw her. This is a disease which cripples us more than the English; it has afflicted me from time to time. It is what Marx called 'the corpses of the dead generations which press like an Alp on the brains of the living'.

It is the living lie of a false continuity. And it is the hardest burden we have to jettison, if we are to stand erect as free men and women. 'We' did not fight at Irfon Bridge, 'we' did not storm Harlech castle, 'we' did not sweep into the Methodist Revival. 'They' did.

Neal Ascherson delivers a formidable indictment of that 'British' history which sees



Neal Ascherson

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itself as a seamless robe. This embodiment of a Burkean continuity of the dead-the-living-the yet unborn is an historic lie. It is a lie which locks into nearly every mind, to abort fundamental change and to serve an unscrupulous oligarchy. It is a lie which is choking us to death.

He brilliantly compares the sense of the past among the Poles (no less strong, I should add, among the people they consider their oppressors – the Russians) and the British. He likens the latter to a country-house garden –

‘Here, time is linear to a perfectly oppressive degree. We are gazing from the terrace of a country house down carefully-landscaped perspectives of barbered lawns and positioned trees. The eye is masterfully led down a vista of elements (this battle, that cabinet) chosen to combine with one another into a single artistic experience. You could say “Prune back that Reform bush and make the Tolpuddlia bed twice as big”. But you would feel a bit of a vandal!’

This is the Wynford Vaughan Thomas interpretation of history. When Ascherson dubbed this mythical country the Ancient Britain of the Druids, he raised a hornet’s nest among some of the Welsh, as he had done in citing the role of Iolo Morganwg and his ilk in the quite literal ‘forging’ of a nation. He devotes a whole essay *Druids* to explanation. Druids had no more to do with Stonehenge, of course, than they had with the English. This did not stop the English cheerfully commandeering them in the name of a single continuum of ‘British’ history, broadening down, as they said, from precedent to precedent. To quote Blake’s mystical incantation (fuelled by William Owen, Iolo Morganwg and his other London-Welsh friends) ‘All things Begin and End in Albion’s Ancient Druid Rocky Shore.’

‘We are still living in a Druid country’, says Neal Ascherson . . . ‘Everything in England, in order to be good, has to be ancient . . . what is ancient is therefore good . . . institutions invented rather recently are part of the Ancient British Fabric. In the dim, hallowed places where Britain worships itself, many of the bones in the reliquaries are made of celluloid or even polyester resin.’

The great ‘moderniser’ Thatcher has enormously strengthened this mystifying conception of British history and has set her Ministers of Education to fix it as the Authorised Version in the minds of future generations. ‘That’ says Neal Ascherson, ‘is what I mean by Druidism!’

He is being too kind to the Welsh. He is perhaps too tactful to point out that we have been active co-partners in this criminal enter-

prise. The Welsh invented the very idea of *Britain*. The very phrase *British Empire* was coined by a London-Welshman passionately immersed in our Arthurian mythology. When the Tudors took us over into England, we retaliated by colonising the English mind with our *British* traditions. It is going to be even more difficult for us to prise ourselves loose. Since we were active accessories before, during and after the act, it is doubly our duty to make the effort.

For this mythology is simply the superstructure of a brute reality. Neal Ascherson, like Tom Nairn (reviewed here in our last issue) and indeed anyone with sense, locates the origin of this reality in the failure of the first modern revolution, the English Republic. The compromise of 1688 shackled upon us that hard, totally hegemonic regime, of which *Druidic Britain* is the glutinous, all-absorbing dream. It is a regime which has gulped up opposition. To this day, the Labour Party persists in the patently false belief that it can use this British State to effect radical reform. Neal Ascherson has the appropriate word . . . ‘Labour appear still to believe that the British Parliament under George III could have composed the American Constitution and applied it to the Thirteen Colonies!’

He, like his fellow-Scot Tom Nairn, sees no answer save the republican regeneration of this Island. When he wrote the key essay in this book – *Ancient Britons and the Republican Dream* – he apparently saw a regenerated Labour Party as the vehicle. We could do with our own version of Owain Glyn Dŵr’s Tripartite Indenture – independent but conjoined socialist movements in Scotland, England and Wales. Perhaps he is right about the Labour Party in England, but in Wales, no Welsh Labour Party even exists.

Where he is right is in his call for us to develop the notion of a ‘people’, free of

British national mythology, free of an inherited and irredeemably corrupt notion of a Welsh ‘nation’ (our variant of the Heritage lie) and free of a merely religious incantation of ‘class’.

‘A war against the State is waiting to be fought by a mass “freedom party” of the Left’, he asserts, ‘Its battles should be for a written constitution, for the doctrine of popular sovereignty, for a just electoral law based on proportional representation, for a code of administrative law and a constitutional court, for a sweeping reform of Parliament and its proceedings, for the option of federal status for those parts of the United Kingdom that wish it, for an entrenched grant of far greater competence to local authorities including the power to levy variable rates of taxation, for the demolition of the English legal professions and their replacement by a judicial system in which justice is affordable and judges come from all classes and age groups. . .’

Within such a context, a mobilised Welsh people could move towards the making of a Welsh nation.

This, says the Labour Party, is mere constitutional tinkering; social and economic regeneration must come first. They have taken a dive Through the Looking Glass. We are in precisely the same predicament as the Soviets. There can be no social and economic regeneration without immediate, drastic and republican constitutional change.

For those of us who are Welsh Nationalists, Neal Ascherson’s sympathetic but penetrating critique of the idea of a ‘nation’ bites deeper. To use language which might be familiar – frodyr a chwirydd, if you wish to cultivate a vineyard, you have first to plant it.

Games with Shadows. Neal Ascherson, *Radius, Century-Hutchinson*, £7.95.

### Welsh Love Spoon.

A cervit hert – for the hert that is aucht bi you.  
Linkit chains – till Deith pairs us twa.  
A dinnlin bell – dings for a waddin-tryst  
Raxin vines – for oor kythin love.  
A handfu o keys – for the hame we big.  
A Birlin wheel – for the wark we dae.  
A twinin knot – aybidin thegither.

Nae langer alane, ti live as ane,  
It taks an unco lang spoon  
Ti sup a’ the brose they ca Love.

Cervit = carved, Aucht = owned,  
Raxin = growing, Kything = Rising, Big =  
build, Birlin = Spinning, Aybiding thegither = always staying  
together, Alane = alone, Ane = One, Unco = awful, Brose = a dish of  
oatmeal (also, one’s livelihood).

William Hershaw.

