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Dai Francis, People's Remembrancer

Gwyn A. Williams

Comrades and friends, nearly two hundred years ago now, when the people of Wales started on their long, hard march towards justice and freedom, in the year 1792, Iolo Morganwg, a stonemason from the Vale of Glamorgan, who called himself the Bard of Liberty, launched the first *Gorsedd* or Order of Bards of the Island of Britain.

Iolo had perceived that the old Welsh poets had not been poets as the English used the term. They had been the rib-cage of the body politic, keepers of the flame. They had been a collective memory honed for historic action. Their function had been to enable a Welsh present to construct a usable Welsh past to service the building of a Welsh future. They had been remembrancers.

The English court had its King Remembrancer and its Lord Treasurer's Remembrancer. Welsh poets had been remembrancers, to princes, to aristocrats, to the gentry. Iolo wanted to create a cadre of People's Remembrancers, to restore to the Welsh people the history, the memory, of which they had been robbed, to use that history to equip a renaissance Welsh people to build a free and democratic future.

Iolo built his *Gorsedd* out of legends of remote and misty Druids. He invented ceremonies, ritual and robes that Wales had never seen. Having created his Bards out of fantasy and forgery, he then gave them the watchword: *Y gwir yn erbyn y byd*: truth against the world.

Iolo's *Gorsedd* had never been and it never was to be. From 1819, a version of it lodged in the national eisteddfod, where it has remained to the present day. I doubt whether Iolo would have recognised it.

Until 1974, that is, when Dai Francis was admitted to the *Gorsedd* under the bardic title of *Dai o'r Onllwyn*. In Dai Francis, Iolo's dream of worker-intellectuals serving as people's remembrancers became flesh.

We all know of Dai's incomparable services to his great union and the people they served, our bravest and our best, that commonwealth of the miners, whose numerical decline has seen the Welsh lose a whole cubitt in their stature. We know of the Miners' Eisteddfod, unique in Britain and perhaps Europe; we know of the Miners' Gala and all his other achievements.

In the long perspectives of our history, it is possible that Dai's service as a modern representative of Iolo's Order of People's Remembrancers may weigh as heavily in the balance.

He was a mover in that remarkable enterprise which rescued what was left of the celebrated Miners' Libraries, which recorded the memories of that community without a peer and which created a living institution, the South Wales Miners' Library, presided over in proper apostolic succession by his son Hywel, again unique in Britain and perhaps Europe, to serve as the vital, creative link between our present, our past and our future.

Dai Francis was a moving spirit in *Llafur*, of which he was a Vice-Chairman and in which

he was an innovator, establishing the first local branch of the movement. Again, *Llafur* is unique in Britain and perhaps Europe, marrying academics and workers, creating with and through the people a past which is meaningful to that people. *Llafur* stands for history of the people, for the people, by the people. Dai Francis and his union were at its heart.

Iolo Morganwg, looking down from that rationalist Heaven he no doubt shares with Tom Paine and Tom Jefferson and the rest of those cloud-compellers who first launched democracy upon this earth, would surely approve.

For what Dai did was precisely what Iolo called for. He helped to restore to the working people of Wales the history, the memory, of which they had been robbed. He gave their history back to the working people of Wales, he restored the working people of Wales to history. This time, he built not on fantasy, but on fact, on history as it had truly been, history felt along the veins and on the muscles and in the guts, history as lived by people who carry the rest of the world on their backs. *Y gwir yn erbyn y byd*. Truth against the world. Dai Francis devoted his energies to ensuring that the working people of Wales should know the truth and that the truth should set them free.

To that job, he brought all those qualities we so vividly remember: dedication, powers of organisation, discipline and self-discipline, laced with his salty humour, his wicked wit, his cultured and cultivated personality, his warm humanity and his supreme capacity for comradeship. To it, too, he brought all the power of a convinced, intelligent, experienced and open-minded Communist. For this particular task is the peculiar duty of a Communist, more especially a Welsh Communist.

I bring a personal salute, from a friend, an apprentice people's remembrancer, and from an apprentice Communist. I salute Dai Francis.

I bring the salute of *Llafur* to our colleague who has been taken from us. The best memorial we can raise to Dai Francis is to fulfil the duty he laid upon us. We must go on restoring to the working people of Wales that history, that memory, of which they have been robbed, and of which capitalism will always rob them. We must restore the working people of Wales to history.

We must go on building a past which we can use to build a future. We must proclaim truth against the world. The duty is urgent. If capitalism in Britain lives another generation, Wales and the working people of Wales will die. If we are to live, capitalism in Britain must die.

If we want a Wales fit for working people to live in, we must build it ourselves. We will have to fight against the odds. If we want a Wales fit to live in, we must start building it now, in the face of those odds. We must know the truth that sets us free. We must be people's remembrancers.

After a life of struggle, a lifetime of battles, some lost, more won, of some defeats and greater triumphs, of some disappointments but of abiding achievement, our brother Dai Francis has gone now to man's long home.

We will remember him. We will remember him for many things. Let us also remember this: this man was a fulcrum of the history of the people of Wales in every sense of the word.

Let us remember that as we pay him the traditional salute:

Fear no more the heat of the sun

Nor the furious winter's rages.

Home art gone and taken thy wages.

Though, mark you, if I know Dai Francis, he is probably negotiating a 40% increase at this moment.

(This address was given at the memorial meeting in Onllwyn Miners' Hall, Sunday 5 April 1982.)