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'THE END OF HISTORY AS WE KNOW IT': GWYN A. WILLIAMS AS A TELEVISION HISTORIAN ¹

Colin Thomas

'When I first went up to Oxford in 1927, my college tutor said to me 'Ah, my dear fellow, so you are going to read history, fascinating subject. After all, what is history ? Divine gossip about the past amongst gentlemen.' (Wynford Vaughan Thomas)

'History is more than a page in a book. History is the buckle that bites your back, history is the sweat you can't keep out of your eyes, history is the fear crawling in your belly.' (Gwyn Alf Williams)

That was the beginning of programme 1 of 'The Dragon has Two Tongues' and the first time I filmed Gwyn. At that stage the Dragon only had one tongue - that of Wynford Vaughan Thomas - but that speech in the pouring rain on the steps of Merthyr library commemorating the 150th anniversary of the Merthyr Rising changed the nature of the series and - dare I claim it? - changed the way in which history is presented on television.

It was Gwyn who was the transformer, not me. I did not discover Gwyn for television. He had appeared in two films for BBC Wales in 1977, one directed by Wil Aaron and the other by Merfyn Williams, and when I viewed them recently I was startled by how bold and innovative they were, especially Merfyn's programme on the Merthyr Rising, in which Gwyn appears as an angry guest at Crawshay's dinner table, filmed in this very room. Towards the end of the programme is one of Gwyn's brilliant pieces to camera.

'What's Dowlais but Wales in miniature - Wales caught here in a tear drop, in a sweat drop, in a rain drop. Wales is a thousand Dowlaises - and are we all to be dust in the wind? Working people here in Dowlais, in Wales, in Britain, in Europe, working people have been simply the raw material for other people's history. It's time we made our own history, its time we built our own city. But its now nearly a hundred and fifty years since they hanged Dic Penderyn - it's getting late !'

But despite the power of that piece by a man who was obviously a television natural, there was then an extraordinary gap of six years before before Gwyn made a television programme again. John Davies's history of Welsh broadcasting may offer us a clue as to why. Apparently there were complaints to the BBC's Welsh Broadcasting Council about the Merthyr Rising programme on the grounds that the BBC had given a platform to a nationalist; the then Controller of Programmes in Wales, Geraint Stanley Jones, is quoted as rejecting the complaint on the grounds that Gwyn wasn't a nationalist, that basically he was a Maoist!² Many labels were attached to Gwyn in his time but that is the one and only time I have heard him called a Maoist. Anyway Maoist, Titoist or Nationalist, he only appeared on television for brief interviews from 1977 to 1985.

I came across Gwyn initially through History Workshop, that hugely influential movement originated by Raphael Samuel. I had attended one of the first History Workshop conferences at Oxford, had read

¹ This paper was first given as a lecture at the dayschool to commemorate the lives of Gwyn A. Williams and David Jones at Cyfarthfa Castle, Merthyr, April 26th 1997.

² John Davies, *Broadcasting and the BBC in Wales*, (Cardiff, 1994) p. 361.



Colin Thomas directing Gwyn Alf Williams and Wynford Vaughan Thomas
in 'The Dragon has Two Tounges'.

Gwyn's article on Madoc in the *History Workshop Journal* and had heard him speak on Goya at a History Workshop dayschool in London.

Like almost everyone else who heard him lecture, I was fired but, when I was given the opportunity to produce and direct a history of Wales which HTV was to make for Channel 4, he was not the first person I thought of as the tongue to challenge that of Wynford Vaughan Thomas. Wynford was a given, already contracted when I was brought in. Very early on I decided that Wynford's view of Welsh history and mine were not compatible and I suggested to him a two presenter series, with an outstanding feminist historian - Angela John - as the other presenter. He was totally opposed to this and soon made it clear that he would not work with her. Not because it was Angela; I suspect he would have taken the same attitude to any woman historian, but especially to a feminist.

I had been influenced in suggesting a two presenter approach by a BFI pamphlet *Television and History*, sharply critical of the way in which tele-history helped to sustain the status quo, and, when Wynford eventually conceded that Gwyn could come on board, I passed on a copy both to him and to Wynford. Gwyn was as impressed by the Colin MacArthur pamphlet as I was and passed on to me in turn a copy of E. H. Carr's *What is History?* Those two publications, together with the work of History Workshop were key influences on Gwyn's television work, especially on 'The Dragon has Two Tongues'.

I dug out that copy of *What is History?* whilst preparing this talk. I find that I heavily underlined - in green biro! - huge chunks of it and one section even gets a green biro star. That section reads:

...the historian who is most conscious of his own situation is also more capable of transcending it, and more capable of appreciating the essential nature of the differences between his own society and outlook and those of other periods and other countries, than the historian who loudly protests that he is an individual and not a social phenomenon. Man's capacity to rise above his social and historical situation seems to be conditioned by the sensitivity with which he recognises the extent of his involvement in it. ... Before you study the history, study the historian.³

Carr assumes throughout that all historians are male but his words helped to fire Gwyn and I with an ambition to make a series that not only told the history of Wales but also raised some of the key issues of historiography, a series that asked the question 'What is History?'

Gwyn: (walking into the gardens of Erddig country house) '... I think that public life was remorselessly emptied of any specifically Welsh content. It was into that vacuum that people like Methodists, dissenters, Welsh radicals came. By 1800 they were offering Wales an alternative society to that of the gentry. That's the way I see it.'

Wynford: 'Well that's how I don't see it. I take a more kindly view of the gentry - I know it's unfashionable at this time. They were part of the whole structure of European society. Agreed they became anglicised - it was inevitable because the power all lay in England. But they didn't pull up their roots completely in Wales. A lot of them were proud to claim descent from the Welsh princes. They weren't a planted aristocracy as they were in Ireland. No Captain Boycott ever appeared in Wales, even in the most troubled times.'

³ E. H. Carr, *What is History*, (1961, Penguin ed. 1964) p. 44.

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Gwyn: 'Wynford, you are talking to me as if I were a vulgar Marxist. A Marxist I may be, vulgar never. I am not concerned to make moral judgements...'

Wynford: 'What !'

Gwyn: '...on these prancing popinjays.'

Wynford: 'You've just made one surely. That's the extraordinary thing. Here you are calling them 'fat cats' 'prancing popinjays' as if they were a lot of oil millionaires from the Middle East who sucked Wales dry. Nothing of the sort !'

Gwyn: 'They were the equivalent of that. And just regard my comments as yet one more of the contradictions of capitalism Wynford! I'm not concerned whether they beat their wives or were cruel to their mothers or threw peasants on the fire before supper.'

Wynford: 'They did not !'

Gwyn: 'They obviously didn't - they didn't have any peasants to throw anyway ! But they served as agencies of a merchant capitalism which kept anything from a third to a half of the Welsh on the poverty line, on the starvation line and bred new classes...'

Wynford: 'Look, there's no question that the aristocrats ruled. It was the Gentry Century. But they were not grinding the people down, they were helping to lift them up.'

Gwyn: 'You keep erecting these Aunt Sallys - I don't deny they were part of a European system. I don't deny that merchant capitalism brought some measure of wealth to Wales. As a result that helped to create newer classes which in time rebelled against the gentry and ultimately threw them off. As you know, in the end the gentry were expelled more or less from Welsh society and our historians wrote them out of the history of Wales, which is a kind of judgement on them. Not a moral one, in my view, it's the judgement of history.'

Wynford: 'But...'

Gwyn: 'In fulfilling their modernisation, if you like, they emptied Wales of Welshness, no matter what they were like personally...'

Wynford: 'Whoa! whoa! whoa! Boy, it's eloquence isn't it but what's it got to do with history? What has judgement got to do with history? Is it the historian's task to put the gentry up before the bar of history and condemn them because they weren't Marxists?'

Gwyn: 'I'm not doing that.'

Wynford: 'What are you doing?'

Gwyn: 'I'm outlining the process of history. It's you who is making a judgement by defending them. No one's attacking them.'

Wynford: 'I sometimes feel that you assume, because you read back into history and pick up the Dissenters, the Baptists and the Independents above all, that here are the revolutionaries of the future. Soon, with a bit of luck, they'll be creating a Marxist state - if the gentry hadn't ground down their faces to the lowest level.'

Gwyn: 'Come, come !'

Wynford: 'I think history proceeds in odd directions, sometimes in jerks, in unexpected corners, and that there's no such thing as inevitability and that there's no such thing as a historian's judgement on the actions of the people of the past.'

Gwyn: 'I do not judge the action of the people of the past. I do not accept any inevitability - there's no such word...'

Wynford: 'Popinjays?'

Gwyn: 'That was a joke.'

Wynford: 'Has the historian the right to make jokes?!'

Gwyn: 'I'm looking at what has happened. You want a kind word for the gentry - farewell !'

This talk aims to look at Gwyn Alf 's work as a television historian not about me but I cannot possibly be objective about that – indeed looking back at the films we made together I sometimes find it very difficult to make a clear separation between he and I. We became close friends and had a considerable influence on each other to the point where it is sometimes very difficult to disentangle whose concept it was. I therefore have to be very careful not to claim credit for a particular idea or approach - and also not to disown aspects of Gwyn's presentation that have been criticised.

Some aspects of the Dragon were sharply criticised. *Y Faner Goch* had the headline (in Welsh, of course) 'The Dragon has two tongues - and neither of them are Welsh.' Mea not culpa - had we been asked to do so and had the budget been slightly increased to cover a bilingual version we could have done so without too much difficulty.

The review by Carole Harwood in *Spare Rib* hurt more.

While mouthing the usual rhetoric of a curiously old fashioned Left/Right divide, it is ultimately their political, sexual and class similarities that are striking. Programme after programme has concentrated on a deliberately male-centred view of Welsh History. Wynford Vaughan Thomas effectively ignores women while Gwyn A. Williams invents the nervous

Liberals' equivalent of Simone de Beauvoir's 'otherness'... 'ANDISM!' ... 'Our Grandfathers (pause) and mothers,' Men (hesitation) and women.' Women as 'afterthought' has become historical reality.⁴

That last line Gwyn found especially hurtful - the pause and the hesitation (as Carole Harwood must have known) were a consequence of his stammer. But she did, of course, have a point - it was one of the reasons I had asked Angela in the first place. Yet would the series have had the same impact if Gwyn had not been there? C4 were surprised and delighted by the size of the audience and no other Channel 4 series had the same educational take up - 130 viewing groups followed the series through. It's not always possible to assess the success or failure of a television series by rational analysis - television is not the best medium for rational analysis - but it seems to me that the audience picked up on the chemistry between Wynford and Gwyn, the real tension and real affection between them.

Wynford: (entering dubbing studio where Gwyn has just recorded commentary over film of Wales from 1975 to 1985) 'Gwyn, did I hear you aright - "a last ditch stand", "the death of Wales?" I deny it completely. Look, I know we're in a crisis. There's a nightmare period that we're entering now. But I think that Wales is going to come through. And for why? Because we have this inner secret of survival - my theme about continuity.'

Gwyn.: 'You are the optimist. And if the Welsh people think like you they will die. I am the pessimist. If they think like me they will live. I am the real optimist.'

Wynford: 'How can you possibly say that? You're already consigning us to the death rattle - you're celebrating it! I heard you do it now.'

Gwyn: 'Ah, but I'm a Calvinist Marxist, Wynford.'

Wynford: 'Oh!'

Gwyn: 'Calvinism starts from cosmic despair. Out of despair comes action, comes life. The life will come if we act. We will live if we act!'

Professor Kenneth Morgan, writing in the *Times Educational Supplement*, was sharply critical of the series and had some harsh words for the person or persons responsible for the making of 'The Dragon has Two Tongues.' Gwyn Williams '...and the series, were handicapped by a decision taken elsewhere to transform him from the delightful, learned, generous, human being he is in real life into a ranting demagogue, capable of moderate utterance only with some difficulty.' And later. 'Williams is led to introduce terms like 'colonialism', 'apartheid' or 'people's war', anachronistically, into the distant past.'⁵

I suppose I must have been the puppet master he had in mind. Anyone who has ever worked with Gwyn would know what a preposterous charge that was. I do recall asking him occasionally to simplify his vocabulary, or to explain a word like 'feudalism' - which he did, brilliantly, in a phrase. I recall, too,

⁴ Carole Harwood, 'The Dragon has one Gender' *Spare Rib*, Issue 154, May 1985, pp.33-4.

⁵ Kenneth O. Morgan, 'Welsh Dialectic' *Times Educational Supplement*, 1 February 1985. Note Professor Morgan's more recent view of the series in 'Consensus and Conflict in Modern Welsh History' in David W. Howell and Kenneth O. Morgan (eds) *Crime, Protest and Police in Modern British Society: Essays in Memory of David Jones*, (Cardiff, 1999) pp. 20-1

Wynford once asking me what position he wanted me to adopt; did I want him to be for or against the Roman invasion of Wales ? But Gwyn, never. Professor Morgan goes on: 'It may be hoped that this temporary metamorphosis of two master communicators into Welsh windbags of the 'roaring boy' school will not have an enduring effect. Otherwise that really will be the end of History as we know it.'

Our response was - a good thing too! We wanted to see the end of bland television history that concealed its centrist prejudices under a guise of objectivity, we wanted to see the Marxist arguments, that the BBC had not up till then permitted, at last allowed a voice on British television. Above all, we wanted to get history out of the confines of journals like the *Times Educational Supplement* and conferences attended only by historians and into the homes of ordinary people so that they too could join in the debate.

Thanks to Geraint Talfan Davies, then at HTV and the Executive Producer of the series, there was a debate. Programme 8 ended with Gwyn and Wynford discussing the impact of the French revolution on Wales; Gwyn argued that Wales was in a ferment, that you had only to look at the evidence of the court records of the period and the evidence would leap off the page and hit you in the face. Wynford replied 'I've looked at the court records and it certainly didn't leap off the page and hit me in the face.' Right, we said, we'll let viewers decide for themselves. HTV then had an Education Officer, the energetic Bethan Eames, and she, together with the Gwynedd Archives, put together a four part set of document packs so that viewers and viewing groups were able to go back to primary material and decide not just whether they were on Gwyn's side or Wynford's but also, if they so wished, that neither was right. To round it all off, we organised a weekend debate, packed to the doors, to discuss the series as a whole.

There was no mention of this in Professor Morgan's review. Gwyn felt sore about it at the time but that phrase 'the end of History as we know it ' (History with a capital H at that) became something of an inspiration. He often said to me over the next ten years 'This has never been done before, has it ?' I don't want to make inflated claims on his behalf but there are many ways in which Gwyn did something, if not unique, then very special in the brief history of television history. 'The Dragon has Two Tongues' approach could not be repeated - apart from anything else Wynford died shortly after it was transmitted - but it helped to formulate characteristics of Gwyn's style that were apparent in all the work he did for television.

One could be expressed in the phrase 'the personal is political', a rubric we picked up from the women's movement in spite of our drubbing from *Spare Rib*. Gwyn's own history was apparent in every history programme he made, especially those dealing with the recent past. 'Lest Who Forgets?' was made in 1985 for S4C and BBC Wales and every word was fired by the anger he felt about the exclusion of the then Soviet Union from the 40th anniversary of the ending of the Second World War - and the huge impact that fighting in that war had made on the young Gwyn.

Gwyn (over slow movement of Mozart's 23rd Piano Concerto played over loudspeakers at Piskarevsky cemetery, Leningrad - as it then was. Gwyn walks through the cemetery and puts a bunch of daffodils on the memorial) 'Solemn music without end. And not only Russian music; they make a particular point of playing German music - Beethoven, Mozart. 630 thousand people died in the seige of Leningrad - that's the official total. Some say it was a million. 630 thousand! More people died in this one Russian city than in the whole of Britain

and America put together throughout the entire war. They come with their children; they want them to know what that terrible war meant - what any war means !'

In that extract Ray Orton, the cameraman, and I were able to find pictures that matched the passion of Gwyn's words. But, even when we couldn't, television's insistence on pictures to illuminate words was never allowed to get in the way of the history. In the *Television and History* pamphlet, Gwyn and I had both been shocked by a quote that Colin McArthur had found from Jerry Kuehl, the producer of Thames Television's 'World at War'.

Relations between Church and State were very important to the leaders of the Third Reich, and, it goes without saying, to ordinary Germans too. But very little film was ever made which even showed National Socialist leaders and churchmen together, let alone doing anything significant. So considerations of Church and State were virtually omitted from our films on Nazi Germany - and from our commentary.

We determined that if anything was important to the history then we would just have to find a way of conveying it pictorially, that we would never rewrite the history for the convenience of the pictures. Sometimes that proved extremely difficult to stick to; occasionally my heart sank when one of his scripts would arrive with a huge chunk of words in the right hand, the sound column and in the left hand, the picture column, simply the words 'appropriate images'.

It proved especially difficult in his programme on Pushkin, part of a series entitled 'Writing on the Line' which we made for Gwynn Pritchard at Channel Four. Trying to bring to life the story of the poet's life and times with only a single actor was already proving a problem and then it became clear from Gwyn's script that the programme would also have to include the influence of the Polish poet Adam Mickievitz and the impact on Pushkin of the Polish rising of 1830.

Gwyn: 'In the 1830s, every reactionary in the country rose to hail their new hero. This disconcerted Pushkin even more. Escape then? Once again escape?' But there was no escape, for he ran into the greatest shock of all. A friend brought him news of the Polish exile, Adam Mickievitz, who had been his companion. He had been worried about his fate. And he brought Mickievitz's latest poem. In it the poet of the Polish nation launched a titanic onslaught on Czarism and the Russian Empire, savaged the city of St. Petersburg as a citadel of imperialism, cruelty, mediocrity, conjured the flood of 1824 as a herald of its destruction and hammered at the statue of Peter the Great.'

Mickievitz's voice: 'From the West, a wind will warm the land.
Will the cascade of tyranny then stand?'

Gwyn: 'Pushkin was shaken.'

Pushkin's voice: 'He lived among us. He spoke of future times when nations, having forgotten their quarrels, unite in one great family.'

Gwyn: 'He fled to Bordino and to another of his creative autumns. And, his brain wrestling with the writhing mess of contradictions which his life had become, he wrote one of his finest poems, one of the finest poems in the Russian language - in any language. He wrote 'The Bronze Horseman'

To say that Gwyn and I agreed that television priorities must never override historical discipline doesn't, of course, mean we never argued about it. We argued a great deal and those arguments were often on the theme of history versus pictures; he would insist that the information he had given me was essential content for a programme on that theme and I would try to persuade him that we had to provide visual and musical breathing spaces so that the audience could take that information in.

But he was very aware of the importance of pictures. Gwyn had none of that literary snobbery described by Raphael Samuel's last book, *Theatres of Memory*. Samuel refers to the attitude that sees: 'Artefacts - whether they appear as images on the television screens, in costume drama, or as 'living history' displays in the museums and the theme parks - as not only inferior to the written word but, being by their nature concerned with surface appearance only, irredeemably shallow. ' Later Samuel says the training of historians 'predisposes us to give a privileged place to the written word, to hold the visual (and the verbal) in comparatively low esteem, and to regard imagery as a kind of trap.'⁶ That was never Gwyn's attitude. Long before he had been 'seduced by television', as I know some see it, he had written a well illustrated book on Goya and another on the imagery of trade union banners and when I first worked with him he was getting a huge buzz out of choosing photographs for *When was Wales?*

Reaching a wider audience really mattered to Gwyn - I remember once meeting him in the 'Kings Castle' pub in Cardiff to find him sunk in gloom because the barmaid had told him that she had switched off one of our programmes half way through. He was always aware that visual interest was one of the ways of reaching that wider audience and over the years we worked together increasingly suggested ways of achieving that. Michele Ryan, who also frequently directed Gwyn, had a similarly fruitful relationship with him and he valued her political as well as her directorial judgement.

I vividly recall the glee with which, on one occasion, he invented new Gilray cartoons. Our programme on Gilray of course included Gilray's own cartoons but we didn't want to make a programme confined to the cognoscenti, confined to those to whom Gilray was already a familiar name. So we not only put our Gilray (an up and coming actor called Tim Roth) on to the terraces at Chelsea football club, we also devised some new cartoons for him and we animated them. Animation, conceived partly as a way of getting away from the convention of rostrum filming of contemporary pictures that characterise so many historical programmes and partly as a way of conveying ideas for which no pictures were available, became a feature of Gwyn's television work.

Gwyn: 'In the end, locked into Mrs Humphreys's attic, he disintegrated.
(To Gilray) James Gilray I...'

Gilray: 'My name is not Gilray, it's Rubens. My name is not Gilray, it's Rubens. My name is not Gilray, it's Rubens.' (he sweeps the content of his desk on to the floor and rushes out)

⁶ Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*, (London, 1994) pp.266-7

Nid yw'r hawliau gennym i
arddangos y deunydd hwn.

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Cartoon of Gilray by Arril Johnson

Gwyn: 'And, in July 1811, he cracked. He threw himself out of his attic window - and got his head stuck in the bars. Only a Gilray could have captured that moment !'⁷

That extract began with Gwyn meeting Gilray face-to-face. That too became a feature. I remember filming Gwyn outside a church in the Vale of Glamorgan a couple of years after 'The Dragon has Two Tongues' had been transmitted. Camera and sound were ready on the other side of the road opposite the church; Gwyn stood poised in the porch like a greyhound in a trap, waiting to do one of his walking/talking pieces to camera. I was about to say 'Action' when I noticed an old man about to cycle through the middle of the frame. I didn't say 'Cut' because I expected him to pedal on. Instead of which he spotted Gwyn, braked, leant his bike against the church wall and shouted to Gwyn 'Where's your booty?'

We missed Wynford too. And we missed the dialectic. Making a film about David Ivon Jones in Red Square we half expected his head to pop up over the Kremlin Wall and shout 'Don't give us that Marxist clap trap!' So Gwyn wrote the dialectic into our C4 and S4C programmes. Iolo Morganwg was allowed to object to Gwyn's pigeonholing - and when, in the middle of Iolo's tirade, Gwyn pointed out to him that he, Gwyn, had written those words for him, Iolo disappeared.

He confronted too - as too many Welsh nationalists failed to do - Saunders Lewis's anti semitism. 'Voices at the Door', an anthology of favourite poems published in 1995 includes Saunders Lewis's pernicious 'Y Dilyw', selected and defended by composer and academic Lyn Davies; it is that poem which became a focus for Gwyn's anger in 'Alien Face in the Mirror'.

Voice of Saunders Lewis:

'Then, on Olympus, in Wall Street, nineteen-twenty nine....
...The gods decreed with their feet in the Aubusson carpets,
And their Hebrew snouts in the in the quarter's statistics,
That the day had come to restrict credit in the universe of gold.'

Gwyn: 'Hebrew snouts! Why Hebrew for God's sake?! Many of those snouts were Methodist, not to mention Catholic. But the consequence?'

Voice of Saunders Lewis:

'...We cannot bleed like the men that have been...
Let our feet be shattered by a fall, and all we'll do is grovel to a clinic,
And raise our caps to a wooden leg and insurance and a Mond pension;
We have neither language nor dialect, we feel no insult,
And the masterpiece that we gave to history is our country's MPs.'

Gwyn: 'I could and still can recognize insult. The last line about the MPs is about the only line in the poem I can read without wanting to vomit!

Hebrew snouts appear elsewhere in his writing, notably the one stuck on the face of Sir Alfred Mond, the Swansea industrialist.'

Saunders Lewis: 'Mond is the character closest to Lenin Britain has hitherto seen - Jews the pair of them.'

Gwyn: 'Lenin a Jew! That will be news to his mother - and to history.'

⁷ From 'Freeborn Englishman', one of C4's 'Cracking Up' series.

Saunders Lewis: 'Russia was nothing but a pawn to Lenin and Britain nothing but a corner of his world empire to Mond. These are Napoleonic Jews who inherited not a single tradition of homeland or country and not a single Christian tradition.'

Gwyn: 'What is this? The communist/capitalist world conspiracy of the Jews so beloved by Hitler?...'

Saunders Lewis: 'It is the Jewishness of Mond that explains his objective.'

Gwyn: 'How can a man of your stature write such muck?!'⁸

Saunders Lewis's words in that extract and, throughout the programme, were his own.

Gwyn was a nationalist as well as being an internationalist and knowing him helped me - and our audience - to understand that there is no necessary contradiction between those two positions. He made films in Spain, Czechoslovakia, South Africa, Russia and the Ukraine and fulminated when S4C didn't want Welsh language versions of programmes on Pushkin and Milena Jesenska. He never pretended to a position of objectivity. Like the Anti Corruption MP for Tatton, he saw the notion of objectivity as an illusion. Like Martin Bell's journalism, Gwyn's history was a history of attachment: 'that cares as well as knows, that is aware of its responsibilities and will not stand neutrally between good and evil, right and wrong, victim and oppressor.'

That does not mean that he would bend the facts to suit his position. In the last discussion we had on possible future programmes, he talked about making a programme on Churchill and the Tonyandy riots; he was coming to the conclusion that, on that occasion, Churchill acted as a moderating influence. That didn't fit left wing demonology about Churchill but, if it proved to be true, that is what the programme would have to say.

This insistence on honesty with the audience meant that over the years we were able to see him change his positions. Gwyn did, of course, change his positions - only a fool remains consistent. In particular he changed his attitude to the Soviet Union; from the almost starry eyed optimism of 'Lest Who Forgets', filmed soon after Gorbachev came to power, to the near disillusionment of 'Hughesovka and the New Russia'. While filming in the former Hughesovka, now Donetsk, we were on our way to a miner's homes to which we were invited when he noticed a piece of graffiti, painted on a wall, which he was able to translate. For most of our time in Donetsk, Gwyn had been a staunch defender of the Soviet Union especially when it was attacked by our Czarist cameraman but as the miners described to us their working and living conditions and we drank one vodka toast after another, Gwyn raised his glass and quoted the graffiti, to a roar of support from the miners: 'To the Communist party of the Soviet Union - on the soil of Chernobyl!' The same spirit - the disillusion not the vodka! - imbued the last part of 'Hughesovka and the New Russia':

Gwyn: 'At the face men grovel through three foot tunnels to get at the coal. Four of my uncles and both of my grandfathers were colliers in some of the worst pits in South Wales. They never had to face this. And this was supposed to be a workers state!'

Lady admirer of Gwyn at Anglo-Russian party: 'Je cherche Professor Williams.'

Gwyn: 'Where does this leave a man like me who once supported this state and, despite everything, still understands and shares the feelings that created it in the first place?'

Lady admirer: 'Where's Professor Williams?'

⁸ Extract from 'Alien Face in the Mirror' in C4's 'Writing on the Line' series. Poem translation by Gwyn Thomas.

Gwyn: (on Donetsk fairground Ferris wheel) 'Suspended in limbo, that's where it leaves me. This place is a tissue of contradictions. The pits have spotless clinics and the city hospital doesn't even have hypodermic needles. It is somehow characteristic that all those roses bloom so magnificently because disease bearing spores cannot live in the polluted air. The people here come stumbling out from under the carapace of Stalinism, they grope after freedom, sufficiency, dignity, while all around gibber black monsters out of Russia's dark past. Many now stampede after the market for their salvation.'⁹

Gwyn did not of course retreat into disillusion and cynicism - his misgivings about the market have proved all too accurate and it now looks as if the Donbass coalfield faces complete closure. But the Soviet experience led him back to one of his earlier themes - the power of myths, sometimes so powerful that they can have more of an impact on the way we see the world than historical truths.

In 1993 we began work on a series of programmes on the Arthurian myths commissioned by BBC2. Gwyn and I had frequent verbal arguments in preparing for a production, one of them - on our tactics for the Saunders Lewis programme - shared with most of the other passengers of the B compartment of the 125 from London to Cardiff. In the case of the Arthur programme, unusually - because of the physical distance between us (he was now living in Drefach) - we committed ourselves to print, so I have some sort of record of that dispute. I feel no inhibition about revealing it - I aspire to continue as far as possible his tradition of truth telling. Gwyn and I agreed about one of the precepts in Carr's *What is History?*: 'To learn about the present on the light of the past,' he wrote, 'means also to learn about the past in the light of the present.'¹⁰

For me that meant rooting our series in the present and I wanted us to look, sometimes none too seriously, at contemporary myth making around Arthurian themes and to call the series 'The Quest for the Quest'. Gwyn wrote to Teliesyn, the co-operative of which we were both members, pointing out that his concept of the series was different from mine. 'My idea was 'Island of the Mighty', tracing the ramifications of a myth through history (as in Madoc). If these approaches are pushed to extremes, they are mutually exclusive.'

His memo goes on to suggest ways in which the two approaches could be married and then continued 'But I will not accept a subjection of the past to a feeble present in the name of spurious relevance'... all that mountainous labouring to produce a contemporary mouse. 'We met for a meal in Cardiff. and had the row face-to-face. First bottle of claret - thesis; second bottle of claret - antithesis; an armingac each - synthesis. Not only did we reconcile our differences and settle on a new title - 'Excalibur - the Search for Arthur' - we also discovered (or perhaps thought we discovered) insights that I certainly would not have arrived at on my own. That the tension between the pagan and Christian Arthur is at the heart of the myth's fascination and that the importance of the myth didn't mean that our treatment of it in the series had to be po-faced throughout.

Gwyn: 'The whole Arthurian cycle had become irrelevant by the time of the great discoveries, with their wrenching of Europe's centre of gravity to the Western sea board, with the religious cleavage between Catholics and Protestants (who regarded the romances with

⁹ Extract from BBC2 and S4C's 'Hughesovka and the New Russia'.

¹⁰ Carr, *What is History* p. 68

horror), with the influx of Greek thought, rationalism, the humanism of Erasmus. The Renaissance was to look upon Arthurian romance with indifference, even detestation. To some, then as now, it had become a bit of a joke. Cervantes in Spain, whose Don Quixote had satirised the whole thing, wrote its sharpest epitaph.'

Voice of Cervantes: (over various 'out takes', with actors tripping up, becoming stuck in windows and getting the giggles during a Lancelot/Guinevere bedroom scene) 'Their style is hard, their adventures are incredible, their love affairs lewd, their travels are preposterous. And lastly, they are devoid of all art and sense and therefore deserve to be banished from a Christian commonwealth as a useless tribe.'¹¹

Gwyn became unwell during the making of 'Excalibur' and we were unable to complete the filming with him in Brittany which we had planned. When he sent me a copy of the book he had written to accompany the series, I realized why the Arthurian legend had such a resonance for Gwyn. 'Before you study the history, study the historian.' Gwyn had concluded his book, written before we made the programmes, by quoting the haunting words of Tennyson's Bedivere, who was once the old Welsh hero Bedwyr but the dot, dot, dot, indicated a section that he had omitted. I looked up *Morte D'Arthur* and realized that he had omitted Arthur's words of religious reassurance to Bedivere and that Bedivere's lament for the 'true old times' was Gwyn's too.

So we made the connection explicit in the conclusion of the television series. We painted our Avalon on a glass screen beside Llangorse lake and, as our Arthur was rowed away into the distance, Gwyn delivered his piece to camera. His cancer had not been diagnosed then but I think everyone by the lakeside on that chilly February day realized its significance.

The conclusion of 'Excalibur' also became the conclusion of 'Gwyn Alf - People's Remembrancer' with the addition, on Michele's good advice, of Gwyn's words 'We will live if we act.' It was transmitted on his birthday and he died shortly afterwards. In the queue outside the crematorium, I overheard one man, who didn't know Gwyn personally, recalling, almost shot by shot, the content of that last film and concluding 'He was the real Prince of Wales, not that rubbish we've got there now.' He may not have read Gwyn's books but he had certainly watched his television programmes.

Whatever regrets some Llafur members may have about the fact that Gwyn did not spend his retirement completing massive tomes, it seems to me all of a piece with Gwyn's politics that he should seize the opportunity offered by television to amuse, move and fire people who would not have opened those tomes. And he could do it like no other television presenter I have worked with before or since. I am proud, as were all those other producers, cameramen, co-workers in film and television, some of whom I see here today, to have helped him to find his television voice. By the time he died, the sense of loss of a loved one that we who knew him felt so acutely, was shared by thousands who knew him only through the television screen.

Voice of Sir Bedivere in Tennyson's *Morte D'Arthur*:
 'Ah! my Lord Arthur, whither shall I go?
 Where shall I hide my forehead and my eyes?

¹¹ Extract from BBC2 and S4C's 'Excalibur- the Search for Arthur'.

For now I see the true old times are dead
When every morning brought a noble chance
And every chance brought out a noble knight....
But now the whole Round Table is dissolved
Which was an image of the mighty world.'

Gwyn: 'There he goes, with over a thousand years behind him. Years of a few facts and a myriad legends, with Alpine ranges of interpretation erected upon them. Surely that's enough. But no, the process goes on and on and will never stop. So I'd prefer to say farewell to Arthur now, while he's still recognisable. As Bedevere said farewell on that desolate shore, mourning over the true old times which are dead. I remember my own youth in the Communist Movement and the War. When everything seemed possible. A time of hope, betrayed. As perhaps all such times are. So farewell Arthur, in the words of Bedevere, who was once the old Welsh hero Bedwyr.'

Voice of Bedevere:

'And I, the last, go forth companionless
And the days darken round me, and the years,
Among new men, strange faces, other minds.'

Harp lament followed by:

Gwyn:- 'We will live if we act !'