

Got him on, to show I was young & foolish. As opposed to today, when I'm old & stupid.

Gwyn

## Defending the USSR

### Gwyn A. Williams on growing up in Dowlais

In the half-light, the brazier glowered at the tall water coolers of the power station like a bloodshot brown eye. Three men stared at me, two young and hostile in bright red plastic jerkins, the other as old and unfashionable as his donkey jacket and blue scars.

I had come looking for Comrade Miller, the secretary of this Yorkshire pit served by Scotsmen. My car had disgorged its quota of students, with their newspapers and pamphlets, their learned, puritanical and insensitive questions. I felt that they had carried me into the West Riding, as an ancient, possibly wonder-working relic, a stray horse-shoe from the Red Cavalry of the Civil War of 1920, perhaps.

As I parked the Saab, which was the academic car that year, a high official of the watching police approached. I think he was an inspector. He was all medals and helmet visor and seemed seven feet tall: a walking war memorial.

"You would be from the university, sir?" he asked. I saw no reason to deny the charge. "From a department of sociology, sir?" he suggested. Clearly, we were dealing with one of the newer breed, trained to social awareness. It was with a re-assuringly Welsh malice that I watched his fleshy face dissolve into uncertainty when I replied, with as much assurance as I could muster, that I was a historian.

Such self-indulgence did not long survive Comrade Miller. After my companions, whom I had disingenuously introduced as young people anxious to help, had been despatched to remote and harmless occupations, he turned on me an eye which, though small, was uncomfortably brilliant. "Why," he said, "is a man like you not in the Party?" In a resonant tone, I replied, "The Party stinks."

"Of course, the Party stinks," he answered in a voice which sounded like whisky strained through gravel, "Come in and stink with it".

After that, there was no choice but the picket at its brazier.

At that brazier, nothing happened. Out there somewhere, beyond the range of our eyes and ears, something was happening. The radio, the television, the newspapers, were loud. Government was splintering. The lights were going out. Back in my own country of south Wales they were shouting, "This time, we'll win!" We all knew what last time they meant. Out there, it might be 1926 again.

But here, at the foot of those blank and pallid towers, rearing up like some dumb, stupid, big-bottomed zombies, there was nothing but shuffling feet and now and then a cough, an hour's desultory talk dribbling into night and silence.

The brazier burned my front and the night froze my back. I might as well have been in the endless south Wales kitchens of my childhood. I could smell the old man's belt like the pew leather of the chapel back home. I was staring in a stupor of boredom, half-remembering, staring at his buckle blazing in the brazier's light, at his blue scars carried like an out-of-date identity card; I was smelling his smell of chapel leather, when some of his words came nosing through a fog...

"...under the old Welsh law, chastity among girls before marriage was by no means strictly observed nor was it demanded..."

I looked up in surprise. He was reading out of a little buff-coloured pamphlet. The young ones had been talking about women, talk I'd missed. The words felt, rather than sounded, familiar. The old miner went remorselessly on...

"...The Welsh regulations governing this subject are of an extremely frivolous nature and run counter to all bourgeois morals...."

"Good God!" I said, "that's Frederick Engels!" I recalled, with a spasm of irritation, a rising of the hackles many years since, over some correspondence between him and his companion, *The General* and *Dr Cranky* chortling (I sought for a suitably demeaning expression) over the marriage laws of Hywel Dda.

"Yes," said the old man, "and bloody good stuff it still is."

Burning at the front and freezing at the back, I stared at him and his old scars, smelled him and his old smell, strained at him and his old words, as we had strained at them years ago. I was in another time and another place, where a chapel gang of us had been much concerned with Frederick Engels and his women...

"You're a communist, aren't you?" she said, even as he was tentatively inching his knee further between her thighs. He jumped as if she'd kicked him.

He was a bit ashamed of her anyway. Fifteen she was, Willie's cousin from Twyn. He'd tried not to be seen with her outside *The Palace*. The sixth-form girls upstairs had been making cracks already. But she had a lovely wide mouth and she'd come after him like a long-

dog. In the double back seats they had at *The Palace*, she'd been wrestling around so much he got scared.

"Well, yes," he said, standing back mulish and morose. "What's that got to do with it?"

"I thought so," she said, "Most boys only neck during The News. The News is the only place you don't neck."

He walked home cock of the world. He'd been dreading it, the long drag up through Town in the blackout, three miles of it, along the dreary drudge of the New Road past the ruins of the steelworks, up into the black, shuttered hulk of Dowlais, with odd, fleeting noises and shadows flitting out of the corner of your eye all the way. And at the end of it, Mam rattling the poker in the grate and going on about turning the house into a hotel.

Now, he strode home in triumph, the demon lover. But, hell's bells, by Saturday, he was out on his ear.

Oh Lord, yet another flop! He groaned to himself at the memory, twisting in embarrassment on the hard train seat. A long sequence of girls gone wrong drifted sly and relentless through his brain. He swivelled impatiently to look at himself in the murky window of the compartment, to find the customary consolations of defeat there. "That's what I do whenever doubt sets in," Willie used to pronounce whenever the Pope-of-the-Upper-Sixth mantle descended on him. "Look in the mirror every morning and say to yourself — Williams, you're bloody good!"

"When you know you've been a liar all your life?" they used to sing back at him. Even less use when you can't see a bloody thing, he said aloud to the dark and empty compartment, rubbing in a futile fury at the window.

Something which might have been dawn, a lighter grey than the others, was crawling up over the hunchback-huddled sprawl of Dowlais spilling out from the old works wall. On that grey upon grey, his unseeing eye could imprint its own map, a six-inch Ordnance of memory. A sudden panic at losing it stopped his breath.

And a miserable going it was, too, with Mam in tears and Dad with 'flu and Mamgu going out of her mind. He'd been living with his grandmother in the big house on the edge of Ivor Tip the last few months. What months they'd been, endless, tongue-tied hours in cafés, all the boys and most of the girls gone, the ritual traverse of Merthyr High Street narrowed to Smiths' and the Library.

The day before he left, when Bopa Rach brought the New Testament which the Chapel gave all the boys when they went, Mamgu had pressed a half-crown into his hand. "What's that for, Mamgu?" he said. (He always spoke to her in English even when she used Welsh.) "Poor dab," she said, speaking English for once. "You look as though you could do with half-a-crown."

He laughed at the faint outline he could now see in the window, like a face approaching in a horror film. Daft. No dafter than he, though, volunteering for the Navy and now with a travel warrant to the Durham Light Infantry in his pocket.

He was the last of the Chapel gang to go. Not that there was much left of it by now. It was Matric which did it, he thought learnedly, allocating them all to their proper stations. The moment he'd passed Matric, he'd been taken over.

He remembered Beynon at the door. Only two streets down, but with his domed forehead and his intimidating prose, the Leader of the Upper Sixth. "Look here, Williams," he'd said (they used surnames in the Upper Sixth). "I hear you go to pictures on a Saturday and in Dowlais, too. This must now cease."

And goodbye it was to the Oddfellows' Hall, with Pegleg shaking his stick on the steps and the monkey nuts flicked up into the beam to spatter like ack-ack. It was *The Castle* in Merthyr now, red carpet and Gene Lynn's right leg on the ascending organ and talk about Yeats and Baudelaire and clandestine Top Score cigarettes, with no cards.

Good Lord, he thought, his nose jammed against the glass as he tried to see Penywern where he'd been born, it's been three years.

Griffie had been the first of the Chapel boys to go, into the Engineers. You could expect that, I suppose; he was always putting his inventions into *The Magazine*. "It's a kind of piston arrangement," he would explain to a half-dozen stupefied faces. Glyn had gone into the RAF, naturally, a Brylcreem Boy born, he thought with a snarl as he remembered how Glyn, the cynical one, the backslider, had tried to slope him with Joan Owen. Davy William was in a reserved job and Joe had gone into the Navy.

He couldn't remember where the others had gone. But he could see their faces all right. They were in the Chapel schoolroom on the Bont. They were sitting there helpless, absolutely stuck over that bit on the Dialectic in Emile Burns. "We can ask Noah," Davy William said. "He'll be all right if we go in a gang."

"Look," he himself had said, tapping firmly on the rickety old table under the painting of *The Lamp of the World*, "We are not a gang. We are a Group."

The gang were there in force. They filled the front row of the men's gallery. They were members now. Only last week, they had voted down their parents' Porthcawl and plumped for their own Barry Island for the Sunday School Trip.

You looked along the row with satisfaction. The pew was firm and friendly, the Chapel warm. The Minister's Welsh boomed and billowed around the painted woodwork. There was a rustle of cigarette cards.

Davy William was lining up the bubble-gum wrappers and flicking them down into the Big Seat. Suddenly Dad looked up and you froze.

You held his eyes even as Griffie nudged your shoulder and pushed the latest Players' card at you. It was a Japanese Zero. You felt a chill. Why were all ours such awful old biplanes? Thank God for the Spitfire. You had six already and not one was going to go in any swap.

It was then that she came in, as Miss Lloyd began to pump the organ. She came in with Glenys who had a squiffy eye and was always with her. Your eyes followed her all the way to her front seat until you felt the flush going over your whole face. Everyone must be watching!

Mam was. She was down in the family seat, next to Mamgu all in black, as usual, who had led them all into it, as usual. Mam was staring at you. You stared back. Suddenly she smiled and held up a packet of sweets. In an agony of confusion, you half-grimaced back and turned away to meet Glyn's eyes sneering at you.

The hymn-book was to hand. On the inside page were some messages in pencil — "Sophie Morris goes with Johnny Jones. No she don't. He goes with me." You drew a firm line through them and wrote in big capital letters — "You are late with your thing for *The Magazine*." "Pass this to Glyn," you said to Griffie and leaned back against the pew.

It was a good day. Not long now and, after the last prayer, there'd be the disciplined rush down the stairs, a handshake from the Minister and then out, out, into Pant Road for the monkey parade, girls in front, boys behind. She might look at you. And then, after, back to Mamgu's for cold meat and pickles and Moscow Radio, with that woman who sounded as though she had adenoids and the *Internationale* on the xylophone.

It had been a good afternoon, too. Up in the schoolroom on the Bont they'd been stuck again over the Dialectic in Emile Burns's book.

"I just don't get it," Griffie had said.

"It's a contradiction," Davy William said. "You know, you start something and it comes out the opposite, like."

"Griffie," you'd said, leaning forward, "It's a kind of piston arrangement." And they'd all laughed...

"We had something like that magazine," the old miner said. "They made you write out your work experience, then they collected them and everybody criticised everybody else."

"Ah!" I said. "Yes, I know. But our magazine wasn't like that." I could see the exercise books in the drawer in my old bedroom, underneath the *Amazing* and *Astounding* magazines, the scribbled sheets, the crossings-out, Griffie's drawing of his vacuum-driven car. "No." I said. "It wasn't like that at all."

I took a turn around the brazier, to roast my other side.

"We kept it secret," I said. "We never actually finished it, but we were determined that nobody else should see it. We kept it secret even after *Modern Wonder* came out."

When I closed my eyes, I could still see the *Skippers* and *Rovers* being hurriedly thrust into their hiding places, a huddle of the gang guiltily passing around a pocket-sized paperback with pictures in it under the street-lamp by Joe's the Fish Shop.

"Do you ever feel," I turned on a sudden impulse to the old man, "that when you look back at what you were as a boy and look at what you are now, you can see no connection at all between the two, except that you happen to be the same person?"

He didn't answer. "Too early for me," one of the others said.

I sat on the low, ornamental wall by the power station entrance. "Sometimes," I said, "I think I'm inventing myself."

"You can't be," said the old man firmly. "That's nonsense. In some ways, you can't ever change. Otherwise you wouldn't be what you are now. Whatever that is."

"You think so?" I replied.

"What was this *Modern Wonder*?" asked one of the others.

"Oh," I said, getting up from the wall and slipping with a disconcerting facility into a seminar style. "It wasn't unlike the other boys' magazines, except that it was better produced. But it did have science in it as well as science-fiction and my father, who was a schoolteacher, didn't mind it. So we came out into the open. Except, of course, for our own magazine, which we kept on writing."

I paused, groping for the words. "I suppose we were a 'dissident youth culture'. Of course, they didn't call it that then. They called it juvenile delinquency." They laughed.

"It's senile delinquency I'm worried about," one said and we all laughed.

"Mind you," I said, "that magazine had an effect. It was running a series on youth movements of the world and we were hypnotised by the Hitler Youth."

"The what?" one of the young ones said.

"Oh! Not their ideas," I said, holding up a professorial finger. "We didn't have a clue about those. No, it was the organization, the membership cards, the rituals, the titles. We organized our gang in the same way. There weren't enough of us, so we had to double up on some of the titles."

"You're kidding," one of them said, as the old man turned away.

"Am I hell," I said. "*Übersturmbannführer* and all that, the bloody lot."

It must have been about then, I thought, flopping back on the wall, that that English hot gospeller came down...

Clever old devil, he remembered, as Morlais Castle appeared in the window. There was a terrible jerk as the engine coupled, sending the carriages shuddering back and him flying into a seat.

They'd been coming down from Morlais, from the Bryniau (which they pronounced Brinner) when Griffie had pointed with the flayed end of a cricket stump. People were moving about the desert of their Saturday afternoon wars, a rolling stretch of black dust running from the new recreation ground which Jennie Lee had opened, right up to the edge of tidy old Pant. Between the two piles of stones, which were their forts, a big tent was billowing up.

They scrambled down the tramway track and Joe sent Glyn flying at the feet of the people who were struggling with a long streamer saying Wales for Christ Crusade, only one end wouldn't stay up.

"Cut it out!" he'd yelled, slamming the cricket bat across Joe's legs.

The man walked up to them. He was tall, with a knobby face the colour of Dowlais Furnace Number Two. He had a big adam's apple which wobbled up and down. "Men!" he said.

Men! They were transfixed.

"I need you," he said. "This town must be quartered. A captain in every street." And he held out a small bundle.

Davy William took one. It had Captain on the cloth. Then they realised what it was. It was an armband.

Armbands!

The train gave another jerk and began to move, jerk by jerk. He laughed and stood up, reeling. He gave the fascist salute to the black buildings sliding past the window. "Stormtroopers for Christ!"

"That tent was a revelation," I said. "A new heaven and a new earth. Religion in English! To us, almost as blasphemous as a joke in Welsh!"

They didn't like that much.

"And the hymns!" I said. "Do you know Welsh hymns? They're very intense. But these... they were jolly jingles..."

I started to sing, vaguely to the tune of *The Old Grey Mare*...

"I will make you fishers of men, fishers of men, fishers of men; I will make you fishers of men, ...if you will follow me..."

I broke off. "*Ac felly ymlaen*," I said.

"And there were people there we would never usually have met..."

You'd been watching her all through the service. She had red hair and she was thin and she kept dancing about the Tent, showing her knickers and all. She seemed to be a prefect or something, always moving among the chairs, picking up papers and taking them to the preacher.

When the service was over, she was going about picking up the

hymn-sheets. You moved over and held out a couple to her. "Hello," you said.

She didn't say anything.

"What's your name?" you said. She looked up over her shoulder. She had green eyes, really green. "Hennessy," she said, and moved off down the row of chairs.

You paused, uncertain. Did Catholics have proper Christian names? You went back to come up the next row towards her, carrying a few more hymn-sheets.

"You got a first name?"

"My own name," she said, looking at you again, "is for friends."

Your mouth felt dry. "My name..." you started... "I know your name," she said. "You're Froggy the schoolteacher's son."

You were thunderstruck. You'd never heard Dad called Froggy before.

"I seen you," she said, "in Dowlais school yard. Seen you often. Through the railings."

"Oh aye," you said, getting annoyed. "Free, was it?"

She kicked you in the balls...

"There was bound to be a disaster," I said. "On the next Sunday, we didn't go to Chapel, we went to the Tent. And it was the *cyrddau mawr*, the big meetings.

"Can you imagine the row?" I asked them, warming to the theme. "Just imagine. In a dozen little houses, standing at a dozen supper tables, we were introduced to the concept of tribal betrayal."

Griffie threw the first stone. Then they all stood up and threw them. Nothing happened. They were crouched around Fort Ticonderoga, peering through the dark at the Tent which glowed from inside.

Glyn snickered. "Missed," he said.

"Aw shut up!" The growl, to your surprise, came from Davy William. You could see his eyes shining. "Get a bit closer," he said.

Your stomach was turning over. There was an endless crawl up and down over the little hillocks with the black dust getting in your mouth.

Suddenly there were shouts and men running out of the Tent. Where were the gang? You couldn't see anything. You stood up and threw the brick as hard as you could. God knows where it went.

Running and scrabbling, you got into the Badlands by mistake and fell over some rusty old iron. Your knee was hurting like mad. You were all panting and sobbing.

Out of the dark, there were shadows coming up. They seemed all around. The old, familiar sick feeling came into your stomach. Whenever something horrible was coming, you just ran to it, to get it over.

You stood up, trembling and said in a weak, little voice, "I'm sorry."

You had to say it again before they heard you...

He strained to look through the window as they juddered through a shadowy Dowlais out towards Pant. He couldn't see the old house.

But he remembered, after The Row, hesitating at the door of what Dad called the study and the rest of them called the middle room. It was sacred. They'd gone to the pictures and he was desperate to get in. To get into the holy of holies of this strange man which his father had become.

The room was small and there wasn't much to see, except for the Freemasons' gear. On one wall was the cherished bookcase which had belonged to the uncle in north Wales who wrote novels in Welsh. There was a little key still in.

The *Tyst* was there and the Chapel reports. Labour Party stuff. Then he saw them. A whole row of bright, orange-covered books labelled Left Book Club.

He opened one at random. It was about the war in Spain. They knew that Iorri's father had gone there, but didn't know why. He began to read, propped up against the bookcase. He was still reading hours later, when he heard them at the front door and bolted.

After supper, when Dad had settled with his pipe and paper, he steeled himself. It had to be now — he'd be going to the Clarence any minute and he'd never have the nerve again.

"Dad," he said and looked into a face which had lately gone strange. "Dad, what does *Ecce Homo* mean?"

There was a long silence. Dad took the pipe out of his mouth at last and said, "You've been at my study." There was another prolonged and dreadful silence. Then he put the pipe back in his mouth.

"All right," he said. "So long as you put them back."

"It was astonishing, really," I said to the now bored and settled faces. "All around us Dowlais was in ruins, unemployed everywhere. We hardly saw them. We were burning and bleeding for our martyred comrades in the Vienna Flats and in Madrid. We were expert on the horrors of darkest Hungary. It was the books.

And there was old Noah, of course. He'd heard us arguing on the Bryniau (I pronounced it properly now) and he intervened. Intervened is the word. He was very little but very fierce. Dressed like a tramp and lived in a kind of hut near Pengarnddu, way up on the Twynau. He took us there once and we looked on horrified as he fished around in the smelly chaos of that hut and shoved out some old, yellow magazines which were falling apart. I wasn't to see magazines like that again until I did research...."

There was no response.

"If we were stuck, we'd go to him. But we always went in a gang

because we were scared of him. Sometimes I thought he was going to hit us with his stick. You're bloody useless, he'd shout. Where's your discipline? You've got to have discipline, you stupid, lazy buggers. You'll never be Soldiers of the International." (He used to pronounce it in capitals.)

I snorted out loud into their uncomprehending faces. "It was only after the war that I learned that they'd abolished the International that year."

He craned his neck as the train gathered speed, grunting and rumbling into the grey forests of Breconshire. But Dowlais was gone, lost in the rest of the blackness.

He stared into the Brecon dark and the horrible, familiar, empty fear stirred in his stomach. He'd tried to hold a pistol in the training corps armoury last week and his hands had been too small.

"Remember," Noah had said, at their awkward leave-taking outside that horrible hut, "You're not fighting the same war as them. You fight our war."

He'd find out soon enough now.

They could hardly bear to sit through the class in Sunday School. At last Mr Harris finished his explanation of the parable of the loaves and fishes. "I think," he said, after a quick glance over his shoulder, "that what he did was make the wasters bring out the food they were hiding, hoping for a free meal."

Then they were out and Iorri was waiting. They dug the banner out of its hiding place. *No Passaran*, it said. They'd argued over how many esses there should be. "Never mind that," Iorri snapped, "The fascists will have gone by the time we get there."

They nearly ran all the way to Dowlais Top. They could hear the noise long before they reached *The Antelope*. It was terrific! The fascists had an armoured car there, a lorry with plates along the side and men in black rollnecks all over it. Arthur Eyles himself was up on it, trying to speak. There was a big crowd shouting and yelling and the sergeant from the police station was just standing there. They kept rifles in that police station, Noah had said, "But don't worry, he's one of us."

They stood in a little group under their banner, feeling bewildered. Then they saw Noah. His face was all alight and he had a big grin. They could see the egg curving through the air like a hand-grenade until it exploded — pow! — right in the middle of Arthur Eyles's tie!

Everybody yelled and there was a shower of bricks. And they ran! The lorry pulled off and all the black rollnecks went scrambling on to it. It roared right down Doctor's Pitch and one of them fell off and scuttled into the tips!

They were shouting and jumping up and down. "We made them run, Iorri!" Griffie was yelling, jiggling the banner up and down.

"All right then," Iorri said, "Come on. Form up." They did. They lifted the banner and started to march. They marched past the Guest school and Crad Price's funeral parlour. They marched past the Guest Stables and the Guest Church, with little groups of Sunday afternoon people staring disapprovingly at them. They turned into Station Road, a road designed for a triumph.

Iorri started to sing... "Our engines' roar..."

Your heart sank. You found the words of the first verse very odd, though you'd have had your tongue torn out rather than admit it.

They joined in raggedly...

Our engines' roar

The frozen air is cleaving...

They strengthened into

Red Square is darkened

By our guardian shade.

And over lands and polar oceans speeding,

Our cable lines of peace are laid.

Peace, peace? What had they to do with peace, who only a few days before, had tramped North Street chanting "War, war, we want war"?

But then Iorri led them into the exhilarating staccato of the chorus...

Fly higher!

And higher!

And higher!

Our emblem the Soviet Star!

And every propeller was roaring...

They paused and then shouted at the shuttered gates of the wrecked steelworks — RED FRONT! To finish the song...

Defending the USSR!

Retribution was waiting for every one of them, they knew. In a dozen little houses, at a dozen neatly-laid tables, by a dozen wireless sets preaching war and the promise of war, retribution was waiting.

But they didn't care. The sun was on their faces and they sang as they would never sing again and they marched as they would never march again, through a Dowlais that would never be again. And in their mouths was the taste of victory, which was an unfashionable flavour that summer.