WHEN WAS WALES?
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'The Welsh are a race for whom the insubstantial world has always been more real than the visible one': so said Bernard de Voto, an idiosyncratic but superbly evocative historian of the American continent, commenting on the legend of Madoc, that Welsh prince who was said to have discovered America in 1170 and to have fathered a tribe of Welsh Indians; a myth which proved the most potent and persistent myth of American westward expansion and whose revival in the late eighteenth century triggered the birth of the first modern nation in Wales, the Jacobin nation and its millenarian migration to the USA... 'The Welsh are a race for whom the little people have always shaken their milk-white arms in a ring by moonlight and the towers of Avalon have always glimmered in the sunset... and a people who, though they have always gone forth to battle, have always died...'

Clearly, I am one of the Little People. It is some time since I saw milk-white arms shaking in a ring by moonlight, though one lives in hope. The only white arms in a ring I recollect were those of undernourished pitch and toss gamblers on the tips during that Depression which snapped the mainspring of our people in its industrial heartland, dispersed half a million of them and precipitated those multiple crises of identity in which we now live.
I strongly suspect that Bernard de Voto may have become hopelessly confused among his Celts. He did however, pinpoint a truth. The Welsh are difficult to identify.

The frontiers of a Welsh nation have rarely coincided with the frontiers of a Welsh people. A Welsh nation has frequently been a fraction of a Welsh people, often a small one though never of course a vulgar one. Nations have not existed from Time Immemorial as the warp and woof of human experience. Nations are not born; they are made. Nations do not grow like a tree, they are manufactured. Most of the nations of modern Europe were manufactured during the nineteenth century; people manufactured nations as they did cotton shirts. The processes were intimately linked, as peoples called non-historic invented for themselves a usable past to inform an attainable future, under the twin stimuli of democratic and industrial revolutions. In the precociously unified monarchies of Britain and France, they began to manufacture nations earlier; a British nation emerges from the eighteenth century, in the union of England and Scotland around the armature of merchant capitalism, world empire and liberal oligarchy. The ongoing and increasingly revolutionary processes of capitalism are now radically restructuring and remodelling the nations they conjured into existence, eliminating some, transcending some, fragmenting some. The British nation and the British state are clearly entering a process of dissolution, into Europe or the mid-Atlantic or a post-imperial fog. Britain has begun its long march out of history.

How ironic it seems then, that in Referendum, General Election and European Election during 1979, it was the Welsh who registered their country as the most passionately and totally British of all the regions of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and about a half of Northern Ireland. We Welsh look like being the Last of the British. There is some logic in this. We were, after all, the First.

When did we begin? When was Wales? Hwn yw y gododdin. Aneirin ac cant. This is the Gododdin. Aneirin sang it. The first lines in what is generally accepted as the first Welsh poetry to survive. Written no later than the sixth century, one of the oldest literary traditions in Europe and itself the heir of an even older civilisation. Still accessible, moreover, to a modern reader of Welsh in a way that early English is not to a speaker of modern English. Historic immobility, even stagnation, perhaps? But that is what one calls a tradition, you agree?

But what tradition does it celebrate? It is a British tradition, in the British tongue. The poem is about a battle in modern Yorkshire between Northumbrians and the defenders of Romano-Celtic North Britain. It was written in what is today Scotland, as were the battle poems attributed to Taliesin. The first Welsh poetry written in Scotland about battles north of Trent? At much the same time, our patron saint, whom no other church recognises, emerged, his shrine at a hub of that complex of western sea-routes along which Celtic civilisation and the great Irish mission church pulsed. In the seventh century, a Welshman could serve as bishop in Spanish Galicia; lives of the Welsh saints were written in Brittany. St. David was possibly as Irish as St. Patrick was Welsh.

What do such words as Irish, Welsh, English mean
in that dark and dramatic time when the British Diocese of the Roman Empire shuddered apart into multiple piratical kingdoms of warring tribes? They mean nothing. When Offa of Mercia cut his great dyke in the 8th century as an agreed frontier, he drew a line between two peoples, each of whom was old and between two embryonic nations, each of whom was new.

The people to the west of that line knew where they were; they were in Rome.

Catamannus Rex: Sapientissimus, opinatissimus, Omnium Regum: so runs a memorial pillar to a seventh-century king in Anglesey. In Glamorgan they were still Roman in the eighth century, four hundred years after the legions had left. A Welsh leader Emrys, ringed by his 'bawling bards' chanting praise in intricate word-play, his rule reaching no further than his sword could reach and his stolen gold shower, could call himself Ambrosius Aurelianus and wear the purple. The last Roman monument in the western world is in Penmachno. The longest and most fecund of Welsh traditions, running an elusive thread through Mabinogion and poetry, and given a European stature by Geoffrey of Monmouth, is the British and Arthurian complex of stories, legends, mythical history and redemptive prophecy stemming from the historic Arthur, last of the Romano-Britons. As late as the tenth century, the polemical poem, Armes Prydein, written in opposition to Hywel Dda's pro-English policy, was directing anti-Saxon minds not to a Welsh but to a British identity. It took centuries for the peoples west of Offa's Dyke even to conceive of themselves as Welsh.

What defined the Welsh in the end were the English. In the open lowlands a strong, unifying monarchy emerged early, to become almost unique in the Europe of its day and to be strengthened still further by the injection of Norman power in the eleventh century. The relatively rapid rise of a powerful England turned the Welsh, almost from birth, penned as they were in a harshly poor upland economy staked to a bony mountain spine, into a marginal people. Talented but marginal, the talent probably a function of the marginality, light of foot, light of spirit, light of plough, they lived by their wits, the Jews of the British Isles.

The Welsh as the English called them, succumbing early to their deplorable national habit of addressing natives as foreigners, the Cymry as about half of them called themselves, emerge into history from the wreck of Roman Britain as highly self-conscious heirs of the British. There was a profound divergence between the historical experience of north and south, possibly the root cause of their divergence in language. The romanised Commonwealth of the Silures generated a kingdom of Gwent-Morganwg, heavily Roman in its style and climate, living close to Celts in the south-west and Brittany, who were excluded from the Cymry who defined themselves in battle in north Britain. Ringed by immigrant kingdoms of Irish origin fusing, largely through the David evangelical style of Christianity into the ramshackle confederation of Deheubarth, Gwent-Morganwg, for centuries an extension of the civilisation of Salisbury Plain, seems to have settled relatively easily behind the Wye even as Gwynedd, under its north British dynasty of Cunedda, defined itself in the struggle for North Britain before falling apart in the eighth century as
Powys emerged as the survivor kingdom of an extensive Romano-British polity on the Severn. Hardly had these piratical little kingdoms defined themselves as British and Christian than the internal breakdown of their inherited Roman superstructure coincided with a need to reshape settlement and tenurial patterns in the teeth of a voraciously land-hungry church at the very moment when the terrible scourge of the Vikings broke on them, to drive their new High Kings of all Wales generated by this internal crisis into the shelter of the new English Crown focused on Wessex. In a battle of the traditions, the old British ideology of Nennius and *Armes Prydein* against the new Britain of Hywel Dda in which the Welsh were a junior partner, Welsh social structure and polity were shaped by Hywel’s Laws in political dependence on the English Crown, even as many Welsh princelings became half-Vikings themselves within the cultural world of the Irish Sea, that mini-Mediterranean of the north.

Hard on the heels of English and Vikings, came the Normans who ripped half the country away into a rich and hybrid Welsh-European civilisation, projected Welsh culture into Europe, thrust European modes into the semi-independent west and north and dragged the Welsh out of the Celtic-Scandinavian world into the Latin. In response, the Welsh around the survivor kingdom of Gwynedd struggled to build a miniature Welsh feudal state, to win a brief success under Llywelyn ap Gruffydd, first and last Welsh prince of Wales, who was broken by armies largely Welsh in composition and by a Welsh aristocracy in revolt against Llywelyn’s ruthless abrogation of Welsh tradition, marshalled by Edward I who revolutionised English society in order to destroy Gwynedd. The colonial centuries which followed were ended by the Rebellion of Owain Glyndŵr, a war of national liberation which like all such wars was also the greatest of Welsh civil wars, to be followed by the seminal Tudor century, when the Welsh gentry climbed to power over the ruins of principality and aristocracy alike, when the Welsh were hoisted to a temporary pinnacle of prestige, when the old British ideology of the Welsh became a new British national mythology and when Welsh society was absorbed wholesale into English. That century witnessed that characteristic Tudor contradiction, a Protestant Welsh Bible to direct and service the survival of the old language on the one hand, official discrimination against and social scorn for that language on the other. Even as the old culture stammered before the Renaissance as Protestantism rooted itself in Welsh soil, the long and rich tradition of Welsh writing in the English language was born as the Welsh language began its slow recession into a sacerdotal tongue, a sacred language, and lost contact with the fullness of modern secular living.

The century of turmoil which followed the Tudors decimated the lesser gentry of Wales, a product of its kindred social structure and critical to its separate identity and expelled it from public life, even as its landowners were clapped into the hot and clammy embrace of the broad, open, astute and ruthless oligarchy of the new Great Britain and its unprecedented mercantile empire of the eighteenth century.

The alternative society in Wales was born no less of that new mercantile Britain with its Atlantic dimension: an evangelical drive for literacy which
turned a majority of the adult population technically literate in Welsh for a stretch of the eighteenth century, a Calvinistic Methodist movement independent in its origins from English Methodism, stirrings of rationalist and radical movements among the Old Dissent created by embattled Puritanism and an upsurge of interest in Welsh history and antiquities powered above all by the London-Welsh, surrogate capital of an invertebrate country. The entry of this alternative society into history was explosive. From the eighteenth century, the new industrial capitalism thrust into Wales. Over a hundred years it quintupled the population, sucked most of it into the modernising and English-speaking south-east, provided the money and the power and the will for a Welsh revival and the insidious processes which cut that revival down in its prime. Over little more than two generations, the Welsh went on their Long March out of Establishment and into the spiritual world of Dissent, even as south and east began theirs into West Britain. A further surge of growth built south Wales into an imperial metropolis of the new British world economy even as, in response, a new and semi-political Welsh nation clawed its way into half-existence, displacing and dismissing into limbo the half-formed Jacobin nation of the 1790s, to form along a language line and a religious line which was also a class line, to claim a monopoly of Welshness in the late nineteenth century even as a new industrial civilisation blossomed in the imperial democracy of south Wales and there was a massive, buoyant and innovatory immigration into that south Wales second in intensity only to immigration into the USA itself. And after a Klondyke climax to this new American

Wales in the First World War, the terrible Depression of the 1920s and 1930s burned through this complex and contradictory Wales like radioactive fall-out from a distant holocaust. The Depression which plays the same social role in Welsh history, I think, as the Famine in Irish, unhinged this Welsh polity, devastated its communities, dispersed a quarter of its people and thrust a community of survivors, struggling to rebuild consensus in a precarious post-war prosperity into those crises of identity and those bankruptcies of rooted political traditions which plague our contemporary experience.

In such a people with such a history, the problem of identity has been desperate from the beginning. In recent centuries we have progressively lost our grip on our own past. Our history has been a history to induce schizophrenia and to enforce loss of memory. Professional history, history as a craft, is even more recent a phenomenon in Wales than in England. Half-memories, folklore, traditions, myths, fantasy are rampant. We are a people with plenty of traditions but no historical memory. We have no historical autonomy. We live in the interstices of other people’s history.

Our survival has been a kind of miracle. What is immediately clear, from even a cursory survey of our broken-backed history, is that the tiny Welsh people, for we were always very thin on the ground, have survived by being British. Welsh identity has constantly renewed itself by anchoring itself in variant forms of Britishness. The phrase British Empire was invented in 1580 and by a Welshman, Dr John Dee, mathematician and magician, navigator and scientist of European reputation like Robert Recorde of
Pembrokeshire before him, enchanter and dabbler in the occult and intellectual mentor to the exploration, colonial and piratical enterprises of the age of Drake, chief scientific adviser to that 'red headed Welsh harridan' Queen Elizabeth I. It was in British empire that a Welsh intellectual could find fulfilment in the sixteenth century. That pattern has proved recurrent.

The historic British nation was generated in Anglo-Scottish mercantile capitalism in the eighteenth century, to assume quasi-permanent ideal form and to persist until the third quarter of the twentieth century. There are nationalists among Scots and Welsh who deny the existence of this British nation. Their organic conception of nationality and nationalism requires them so to do. They are taking as an axiom what in fact they have to create. It is necessary for them to do this; in their own terms it is proper for them to do it. When they deny the historical existence of a British nation, however, what they are actually doing is asserting the power of the human will against objective historical reality. This is not to create a historic will, such as Antonio Gramsci, the Italian marxist who was the most creative marxist since Marx himself, called for, himself pre-occupied with the problem of nation-making. They are erecting human will into an anti-historic force and therefore into a myth. They are trying to shout down history to its face; they are spitting in the winds of the world.

The existence of a historic British nation, dominated by but qualitatively distinct from the English polity, is a central fact in the modern history of these islands. The history of the Scots and of the Ulster Protestants is inconceivable without it. The history of the Welsh is totally incomprehensible without it. The Welsh, the original British, have survived by finding a distinctive place for themselves within a British nation.

This is what makes the present predicament of Welsh people who wish to be Welsh so painful. The form which Welsh nationality assumed in the nineteenth century, the pseudo-nation of a 'Nonconformist people', has proven to be, historically, an instrument of middle-class modernisation. Its limited objectives attained through Liberalism, the husk fell away, leaving Labour to inherit. The residual and tougher nationalism which has today displaced it, reverted to the standard European form which the first Welsh nationalism had assumed in the 1790s. In essence, it was a form of linguistic nationalism which, in Europe, grew into a species of modern tribalism and exclusivism. The application of a strict Welsh linguistic nationalism today, of course, would mean instant death to the Welsh people as a distinct people. Some individuals have followed the logic of this predicament into an historic bunker under permanent siege which would require massive invasions of civil liberty to sustain itself. On the other hand, the form of Welsh personality which historically and genuinely has existed within a British identity seems to carry all the stigmata of the historically transient; it becomes a question of style, of accent, of historically acquired manners, of half understood hymns sung on ritual occasions, a question of trivialities. It may simply prove a station on the road to historical extinction. Central to this predicament is precisely that British nation which hegemonic British capitalism created and of which modern south Wales was not merely an element, but a central directive force.

I do not think such a history can be interpreted
effectively in terms of the currently fashionable concept of internal colonialism. This, while it has now created a school of historiography in its own right, derives ultimately from one marxist interpretation of history, that first seriously applied by Andre Gunder Frank in a study of South America and the relationship between metropolis and satellite in the Third World, extending within state frontiers. It has been erected into a global analysis by Immanuel Wallerstein and has recently come under attack from Robert Brenner in a sustained controversy in both academic and marxist journals. The thesis locates explanation in the extension of a market and the transfer of a surplus from satellite to metropolis with all the relations of production, social relations, ideological, intellectual and spiritual forms which follow. It is very often perceptive in terms of its analyses of the social and psychological consequences of the rapid advance of capitalism over the globe; this is precisely its strength in Wales, but in truth it derives from Adam Smith rather than Marx, it misses the centrality of a mode of production in all its social complexity. It singles out one element only, the market, from that mode of production, which embodies the transformation of human attributes and human creations into commodities in the complex class relations which derive from that process; it mishandles the central reality of uneven development and it therefore often reads consequences as causes.

The industrial development of Wales was imperial from birth. Copper around Swansea and Anglesey was a world monopoly, directed in particular at the West Indies; the rise of the massive iron, steel, coal, later tinplate industries was geared directly to the mushroom growth of British commercial empire based on Atlantic slave power during the long French wars and riveted to British industrialisation in the free labour epoch which ensued. From the 1840s Welsh industry secured another world empire in railways, incorporating the Welsh working class as a junior partner in the process, after the storms of the frontier years. The incredible world empire of south Wales coal is familiar. But this was much more than a simple matter of coal export. South Wales capital, south Wales technology, south Wales enterprise, south Wales labour not only fertilised whole tracts of the world from Pennsylvania to the Donetz basin; they were a critical factor in world economic development. The growth of Spain was completely distorted by the power of south Wales, which wrenched its natural heavy industry base from the Asturias to the Basque provinces; south Wales merchants bought up the shipping companies of French ports and of Hamburg; Italy, Argentina, Brazil worked to the rhythms of south Wales trade. In consequence a whole new industrial civilisation grew up in the south; the Welsh Outlook Press could compare the Welsh to the Japanese as an old people finding a new role; the most creative editor of the Western Mail was one of Cecil Rhodes's men. At the height of World War I, Stanley Jevons, professor of economics, could envisage a post-war British global hegemony centred entirely on south Wales. That this metropolis was characterised by mass poverty and exploitation and working class struggle is nothing unusual. This is par for the course for capitalism. Indeed the mushroom growth of south Wales into a major centre of the British labour movement from the 1890s, its transformation into a
seemnal power in that movement, followed a natural American and Atlantic pattern. The nickname American Wales in fact identifies a structural truth; the nearest and most obvious comparison is with Catalonia, another region of distinctive personality which experienced an American and Atlantic pattern of growth and slump to become a metropolis of the wider homeland of Spain.

The use of the term internal colonialism to describe this historical conjuncture precisely reverses the reality; it is the contradictions of an imperial capitalism we are dealing with, not those of one of its satellites.

In our modern history, it is possible to detect three central characteristics. The first is marginality. The original marginality, of course, was that of poverty, a cramped and pinched community of small commodity producers unable to generate capital, living in bleak and back-breaking poverty and in unremitting colonial dependence, its most vivid symptoms the great droves of skinny cattle and skinny people seasonally tramping into England to be fattened. That marginality was ended and ended decisively by the establishment of industrial capitalism. Towns, a middle class, a proletariat were created, the population was forcibly relocated; by the 1870s the marriage rate even in Merioneth was dependent on the price of coal. American Wales had emerged and the rest of Wales had to adjust; rural Wales lost over 800,000 people. The economy, however, remained marginal in one fundamental sense. The south Wales economy which enabled the country to sustain its phenomenal population increase and to retain it within its borders, was geared almost wholly to export. It worked to exactly the opposite, inverse rhythm to every other industrial region in Britain. In the first decade of the twentieth century as British industrial decline registered visibly everywhere else, south Wales reached a climax of frenetic expansion and drew in migrants at a rate second only to the USA. The Depression therefore was all the more catastrophic. What remained was a derelict society of survivors. In our own day, the continuing elaboration of capitalism has multiplied professions and white collar industries; most of us work for multinational corporations or in the tertiary sector of bureaucracy and services; a precarious prosperity is slithering into crisis as all life is sucked away to those coasts which are becoming a coastal fringe of Europe, draining Wales' hollow heart to the point of vacuum.

A second factor has been diversity often amounting to division, itself a product of this type of capitalism, a diversity which has been able to find co-existence only within a British identity. Apart from the familiar divisions between Welsh and English speakers which, despite heroic efforts, seem to be getting worse, Wales has always been a patchwork of cultures and industry at first intensified the divergences. The massive re-stabilisation of the middle years of the century, after Chartism and Rebecca, which incorporated both a working class and the new Nonconformist populism around its preacher-journalists, achieved a kind of synthesis in radicalism, which masked deep divisions and which served in historical terms as an instrument, what Gramsci would have called a gastric juice of modernisation; this synthesis fell apart with the rise of Labour out of the brash new civilisation of the south during the boom years of an imperial democracy.
These variant forms of Welshness all required the power and the presence of the new Britain to be effective. This was as true of those standard hero movements of our textbooks, the builders of colleges and schools and eisteddfodau, their efforts increasingly directed as rescue enterprises to a rural Wales in permanent crisis, as of the new plutocracy of the American boom towns of the south, the new professional classes and of the new and abruptly politicised working class cadres who to combat capitalism looked for international and in practice British muscle. Two phenomena characterise the situation, I think: the emergence of Welsh rugby as a simultaneously Welsh, populist and British imperialist force and the catapulting of David Lloyd George and his Welsh populism into an imperial power.

The Depression, killer of nations, destroyed the integument which held this complexity precariously together. The massive growth of Labour, despite the fervour of a religiose ILP and the challenge of a Communist minority, was essentially a tribal defence mechanism against the slump, a warm rough blanket against the winds of the world. It could not restore that integument, by its nature it could not. Its social democracy was essentially British. And today, of course, its social democracy is as bankrupt as the parliamentary democracy which was its instrument.

A third determining factor, I think, is historic melodrama. Our recent history has been sheer melodrama. After centuries of slow almost imperceptible growth, a coral-growth when the Welsh were never more than 400,000 strong and frequently much fewer, industrial capitalism tore into Wales, quintupled its population, doubled the life-span of its people, powered and then neutered a Welsh revival, planted communities and uprooted them, in a breakneck pellmell growth, endlessly revolutionising everything it touched, to climax in the middle of the slaughter of the War and then to smash up in cataclysm. We are living through the morning after a night before which lasted four generations; a psychological factor, I believe, in the present equation.

No wonder we are driven to ask when was Wales? When did we begin? We are living through what may be our end. The end of Wales and the Welsh as distinct entities.

It is apparent that Wales and the Welsh, as distinctive entities, cannot survive the capitalist mode of production in its present historic phase. A tiny Welsh nation may survive in a marginal and impotent bunker; a vivid Welsh-language culture should survive if only in aspic. But the continuous reproduction of Wales and the Welsh over generations requires the elimination and the transcending of the capitalist mode of production. If capitalism in the British Isles lives, Wales will die. If Wales is to live, capitalism in the British Isles must die.

A vocabulary of structural dissidence is as widespread in Wales as in Britain; a movement of structural dissidence is as absent in Wales as in Britain. This was a predicament familiar to Antonio Gramsci and his generation in the 1920s as they tried to remake Italy and the west in socialism. The parallels are apt, for the Welsh, until the recent divergence, were in structure and spirit, a European people; all the valid comparisons are with European peoples of the Atlantic world. The Europe to which we belong is not the Europe of Saunders Lewis; the
Europe of Saunders Lewis's *Brdd* is our enemy. Our Europe is the Europe of Rosa Luxemburg and Anton Pannekoek, of Karl Korsch and Victor Serge, of Fernando Claudin and La Pasionaria; above all of that Aneurin Bevan of Italian communism, Antonio Gramsci the little hunchback who was one of the greatest creative spirits of this Europe, who was done to death in Mussolini's jails and who worked to the motto borrowed from Romain Rolland, *Pessimism of the intelligence, optimism of the will*, to make a socialist society and an Italian nation.

The human will was central to Gramsci's marxism, but it was an historic will, geared to the objective realities of history. To quote the eighteenth century, freedom is the knowledge of necessity. Such freedom is grounded in the mastery of history. No freedom is possible unless we conquer an historical autonomy, unless we can stand up among the giant cogwheels of history. History is more than a word, more than a footnote on a printed page, more than a tired smile in a shadowed study. The corpses of the dead generations do weigh like an Alp on the brains of the living. This is why we must assimilate their experience if only to get shot of them. Gramsci accurately perceived that the historic will derived from an act of choice which probably lies beyond reason.

To the question when was Wales, it is possible to return several answers. One could say, with a measure of truth within narrow limits, that Wales never was. It is equally possible to say, with equal truth within equally narrow limits, that Wales always was.

In reality, Wales is now and Wales has always been now. Wales is not an event, it is not a moment, it is not a mystical presence ubiquitous through our history like some holy ghost. Wales is none of these things. Wales does not exist and cannot exist outside the Welsh people as they exist and as they existed, on the ground, warts and all, wie es eigentlich gewesen, as it actually happened. Wales is not a thaumaturgical act, it is a process, a process of continuous and dialectical historical development, in which human mind and human will interact with objective reality. Wales is an artefact which the Welsh produce; the Welsh make and remake Wales day by day and year after year. If they want to.

It is not history which does this; it is not traditions which do this; that is Hegelian mysticism and infantilism. History does nothing, said Karl Marx, it is men who do all this. Men make their own history, but in the terms and within the limits imposed on them by the history they inherit; always provided, of course, that they master that history and make a choice. To make history, to win historical autonomy, it is necessary to make a choice in historical awareness.

There is no historical necessity for Wales; there is no historical necessity for a Welsh people or a Welsh nation. Wales will not exist unless the Welsh want it. It is not compulsory to want it. Plenty of people who are biologically Welsh choose not to be Welsh. That act of choice is beyond reason. One thing, however, is clear from our history. If we want Wales, we will have to make Wales.
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