

One of the main differences between Welsh nationalism and Irish nationalism is their relationship to their respective language movements. Plaid Cymru, from the beginning, was part and parcel of the language movement and was founded by native-speakers. This is not true of Irish nationalism, which began in the late eighteenth century as a separatist movement, inspired by the American and French revolutions. Its leaders were of Anglo-Irish stock and made no mention of language. The language element, in the case of Irish nationalism, came in later, with Thomas Davis and the young Irishmen.

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## Language and Nationalism in Wales

The adoption of language as an essential element of nationhood reflects the influence of German romantic nationalism. Its inspiration was Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803). Herder's thinking was a response to the fact that the German language was under threat from French, which was fast becoming the language of the German bourgeoisie. French propaganda, that the "new universal man" of the French revolution could only express himself in the "universal" language, French, had not contented itself with

attempts to exterminate Breton, Occitan and other languages within the Hexagon. It was threatening to take over the rest of Europe.

This idea of "tír gan teanga, tír gan anam" struck a chord with other emerging European national movements. Among them, as I mentioned in an earlier article, was "Cymru Fydd", founded in the late nineteenth century, the forerunner of Plaid Cymru. (Carn 76)

This interest in the national language and culture occurred at a time of great industrial expansion, in south and north-east Wales. Welsh-speaking migrants from rural Wales moved into these industrial

areas, bringing with them the Welsh chapel and eisteddfod culture and temporarily halting and even reversing the language-shift. Welsh was the language of three quarters of the population. Out of this economic boom arose a new, middle-class, urban culture in the Welsh language, a new expansion in Welsh literature and publishing.

Cymru Fydd envisioned a political future for Wales, still within the British Empire (whose wealth and technological know-how was, to a great extent, being created by Wales,) but with its own parliament and institutions. Nationalist feeling was so high that the response of the mainstream Liberal Party was to set up a Parnellite Welsh Liberal Party, a grouping of all the Welsh Liberal MPs, to forestall the "extremist" demands of Cymru Fydd.

This combination of economic expansion, self-conscious national identity and nationalist political pressure meant that, by the end of the nineteenth century Wales has acquired a National University, Museum and National Library, Welsh scholarship was established.

It was in this self-confident Welsh-speaking climate that the founders of Plaid Cymru were born and reared. Liverpool, the home of Saunders Lewis was virtually an urban extension of North Wales. His father was a Welsh Methodist minister there. Growing up, he and the other founders of the Plaid witnessed the rapid anglicisation of the culture they loved.

The founding of Plaid Cymru in 1925 was a merger of two groups which had been formed during the previous year. These were Byddin Ymroolwyr Cymru (the Welsh Home-Rule Army) and a pressure-group of academics on behalf of the Welsh language - Y Mudiad Cymreig. From the start, however, the middle-class academic background of the the Plaid alienated it from the Welsh of the industrial south-east, both economically and ideologically. The original policy of Plaid Cymru was not specifically about self-government, rather it was about the preservation of the Welsh language and Welsh Christian society. Despite his charismatic personality which appealed to all who came in direct personal contact with him, even those of the radical liberal non-conformist persuasion, Saunders Lewis, whose thinking dominated the party while he was President from 1926 to 1939, was a convert to Catholicism and had an abhorrence of socialism. The culture-gap was indeed enormous.

The changes to the south-eastern valleys during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century had been traumatic. Prior to the war, during the time of rapid industrial expansion, Labour and trade-unionism were taking over from the old Liberal ascendancy. Nonconformist religious practice, while it underwent a temporary revival in 1904-5 was in decline,

South-east Wales after the war was to all intents and purposes a secular society where only ministers with socialist sympathies could fill their chapels. The coal-pits and the trade union had replaced the chapel as a social focus. Union meeting minutes and reports in the Rhondda, were written in Welsh and English in 1901. Gradually this practice declined until by 1928 they were monoglot English. The workforce was a mini-American cosmopolitan melting pot, including immigrants, not only from England, Scotland and Ireland but also Italians, Spaniards, West Indians, Africans and Asians. The pressure to use English as a lingua franca was virtually unstoppable. Therefore, although Welsh continued to be spoken in the family, (and there are native speakers of Welsh in these valleys to this very day) it no longer had a strong public domain. This is not to say that all sense of Welsh identity had disappeared with the decline of the language. There was an articulate Welsh-speaking devolutionist minority within the labour movement, the communist, Niclas Glais and S.O. Davies of the ILP, for example.

With the decline of the coal-trade in the post-war years, however, and the onset of the grinding poverty of the depression, South-east Waleans could perhaps be forgiven for having matters other than language maintenance on their agenda. Strikes and hunger marches took every ounce of militancy available. Against this background Plaid Cymru appeared to south-east Waleans as a bunch of eccentric right-wing academics.

Even in the thirties' and forties' climate subsequent to the Pen-y-Berth incident, Plaid Cymru was still a very small minority which was unable to attract members from the industrial valleys of the south-east. Here hundreds went to Spain to fight for the Republic in the Spanish civil wars (interestingly to the POUM, the independent Marxist party of Catalunya rather than the Communist International Brigade, as in Ireland). There was even an element in Plaid Cymru which was pro Franco and seemed ignorant of the part played by Basque and Catalan nationalists in the defence of the Republic

Further alienation came about when many Plaid Cymru members refused to fight in World War 2. To the workers of South Wales this position was equivalent to being pro-facist. I myself grew up in an environment where "Welsh Nash" was synonymous with "conshee" (conscientious objector) and a dirty word. It is not until the past two decades, with the decimation of the South Wales coalfield and the collapse of the Labour Party ascendancy that any inroads have been made into this area.

Whether we like it or not, language and nationalist movements arise where there is a reasonably wealthy middle-class with

enough spare time and money to indulge in such pre-occupations! There is usually less enthusiasm for these things among the class which pays for this wealth through hard labour for minimal wages. These are the hard economic facts behind the cultural divide between industrial south-east Wales and the northern and western Welsh-speaking heartland. Both Cymru Fydd and Conradh na Gaeilge were founded around the same time by groups of middle-class intellectuals during the period of British imperial expansion.

Successful nationalism culminating in political autonomy and emancipation of the national language has taken place where the nationalist vision can be made relevant to all classes of society. It must show itself capable of creating a better life for its citizens than that which they know at present. Thomas Davis and the young Irishmen failed to do this for Ireland. While Davis was championing the Irish language, the people who actually spoke it were dying of famine. In the words of James Connolly:

"While the people perished the Young Irishmen talked, and their talk was very beautiful... but still the people perished."

Much the same could be said about the founders of Plaid Cymru. One wonders how things might have turned out if the thinking of Dr. Noelle Davies (founder member and former Treasurer of Plaid Cymru) and her husband Dr. D.J. Davies had had more impact in the early days. Their economic thinking was based on that of the Danish co-operative movement and the folk High School movement. They felt strongly that more effort should be made to win over the industrial anglicised south-easterners whom the majority of Plaid members dismissed as "Saeson". A study of their work and writings would no doubt be of great interest. Do any readers know if such a study exists? If not perhaps someone should do something about it.

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