

# *Ned Thomas and the Condition of Wales*

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WHEN NED THOMAS returned to live in Wales in 1969, he had lectured at universities in Moscow and in Salamanca (Spain) and worked for a time as a reporter in London. He had also published his first book, *Orwell* (1965), a study of George Orwell. Although of Welsh parentage, and educated for a time at a Welsh school, he had also spent much of his childhood on the continent of Europe, mainly in Germany. It would be hard to imagine anyone more internationalist in background or in outlook. When, therefore, he came with his family to a small village in West Wales with the intention of writing a novel it might be imagined that he would be unlikely to remain very long after the novel was written. In fact it was never written and he is still here.

Although he has come no great distance physically from that retreat where a novel might be written, he has undertaken what could be described as an ontological journey of some magnitude. Bibliographically, it is a journey from the English novelist and essayist George Orwell to the Welsh poet Waldo Williams. Those two poles of his academic work also represent a journey of return to a home that needed to be fully possessed in a far more profound sense than the purchase of a house and land. Coming to terms with Waldo Williams can be seen as the completion of that return which was notionally undertaken in 1969. By the time his book on the poet was published, he was at the centre of the cultural life of the Welsh nation. For, whether or not Wales can be regarded as a nation politically, there is no doubt that it is possible to live a life here in the Welsh language which constitutes inhabiting a nation in the cultural sense.

The process of integration into such a cultural life is not to be achieved overnight, even for those with the basic equipment of language and family connections. It is possible to live in Wales and be completely outside that life, as, I suppose, is the case in many minority nations which exist within the orbit of a dominant culture. This was certainly an issue which Ned Thomas had to address on his return. He began to tackle the task by writing a very different book from the novel he had intended to produce. *The Welsh Extremist* (1971) is a series of essays on some essential figures in the modern Welsh literary canon. These are framed by chapters which introduce the reader to the arguments for Welsh nationalism and the different bodies such as Plaid Cymru and the Welsh Language Society which make up the spectrum that constitutes the nationalist cause. The aim of the book was to inform radical English readers what their counterparts in Wales were thinking and feeling. Raymond Williams's endorsement of the book as "specially recommended to young English socialists" might be thought to prove the success of this aim. But Raymond Williams was himself a Welshman living apart from the Welsh-language culture of Wales. Generally, the book was not received as a major revelation by the English socialists who were its imagined audience.

It was in Wales itself that the book proved to be influential, with the paperback rights being picked up by the small, mainly Welsh-language press *Y Lolfa* in 1973. It has proved a steady enough seller for them to re-issue a new edition this year (1992). So why has a book aimed primarily at outsiders and written as much as a process of self-education by the author been an influential work among insiders and those on the periphery of Welsh cultural life? To understand this it is necessary to have some idea of the condition of Wales at the time of Ned Thomas's return. It is also necessary to see his journey from Orwell to Waldo Williams, if in some respects extraordinary, as a necessary one which reflects the choices confronting the Welsh people in the late twentieth century, whether they are Welsh-speaking or not.

During the 1960s and the early 1970s, there was a resurgence in the idea of Welshness. The Welsh Language Society was formed in 1963 following a radio talk by the poet and playwright

Saunders Lewis during which he called for revolutionary methods to be used to save the Welsh language. The Society soon embarked on a series of campaigns of non-violent civil disobedience, which are still going on today. One of these campaigns is credited with having gained Welsh-speakers a television channel. Ned Thomas himself took part in this campaign, occupying and switching off a television transmitter with two other older and respectable figures in Welsh life to support the actions—often resulting in imprisonment—of young radical members of the Society.

At the same time, many non-Welsh-speaking Welsh people were also beginning to take an interest in the Welsh language and culture of the Welsh speakers, and many made serious attempts to claim it as their own. Anglo-Welsh literature was beginning to move back towards the older literature of Wales instead of away from it, as had previously been the case. The pages of the magazine *Poetry Wales*, founded in 1965 by Meic Stephens, who had himself learnt Welsh, contained a high density of translations, articles about Welsh-language writers, and a general aura of rediscovery. It was in this atmosphere that Ned Thomas wrote his series of sketches of the major figures in Welsh cultural life. And it was the readers of magazines like *Poetry Wales* that took the fare he offered with gratitude and formed part of the core audience for the work. It was part of the rediscovery of their nationhood for many young Welsh people. For them it offered a canon, in many ways created a canon, of essential figures whom they must get to know if they were to possess fully that nationhood.

But the book was also read and appreciated by many Welsh speakers who presumably did not need to be told these things. Ned Thomas has suggested that the “book is best seen as a moment in a social process, which if fully described would include my own background and upbringing and those of all the people who reacted to the book” (*Planet* 20). This social process, while it affected the English speakers of Wales in a way that forced them to address the question of their social identity, also caused Welsh speakers to evaluate their culture in the wider context of minority cultures elsewhere in the world. If minorities

are often defensive and inward-looking, intellectuals in those cultures are always faced with the task of setting their pronouncements in the context of developments in ideas elsewhere in the larger culture-complexes of which they are a part. For internationalists in Wales like Emrys ap Iwan and Saunders Lewis, this had meant seeing their culture take its place among the cultures of Europe rather than simply as a part of Britain. Ned Thomas's achievement is that he has kept internationalism on the agenda of Welsh nationalism and given Welsh speakers a view of themselves in a vocabulary they had not previously employed:

The case [for Welsh-speaking Wales] was put to England, but it had the effect for Welsh-speakers (who had heard much better cases for their survival put in Welsh) of legitimizing their claims in the progressive English terminology of the times. (*Planet* 20)

Ned Thomas was, he suggests, by his mixed Welsh and European background, particularly well-equipped for the task of "intercession and legitimization" which he undertook.

But it was his own need to be able to move between cultures, to make something cohesive out of his own bilingualism, that drove him to write the book and to found the magazine *Planet* with its descriptive subtitle, "The Welsh Internationalist." Such intersections of individual need and cultural movement are the necessary conditions for significant initiatives in the social life of a nation.

*Planet* was begun in 1970, during which year Ned Thomas was appointed to a post in the English department of University College of Wales, Aberystwyth. Throughout the 1970s, *Planet* continued the work of *The Welsh Extremist* in setting up a dialogue between the two language groups in Wales. By the middle of the decade, English undergraduates at Aberystwyth were able to take a course in "Twentieth Century Literature in Wales" as part of their degree scheme. While students inevitably concentrated on Anglo-Welsh writers, the teaching programme included Welsh-language literature in translation. Within ten years of his return, then, Ned Thomas had found himself an influential position in Welsh life. But, while he had built bridges to Welsh-speaking Wales, he was regarded at this time as more of an expert on Anglo-Welsh literature who had, in common with others who had

by now come to prominence in the public life of Wales, built an Anglo-Welsh identity firmly on Welsh foundations. It was a time of consensus politics in Britain, and this is reflected in the tendency for Welsh speakers to read English-language magazines like *Planet* and for English speakers to support campaigns to save the Welsh language.

But in 1979 things changed. The referendum on devolution held that year resulted in a decisive rejection of the idea as consensus broke down. Welsh speakers in the North did not want to be governed by English speakers in the South, and the latter appeared to fear the domination of their lives by speakers of a language they could not understand. So the nation was divided. The following year, *Planet* ceased publication and the first series came to an end.<sup>1</sup> This was not the result of the negative outcome of the referendum, though it had been decided before the event with half an eye on it. In the editorial to the final issue, Ned Thomas called for a "closing of ranks between North and South, English- and Welsh-speaking, Socialist and Nationalist" (*Planet* 4). If there has been such a closing of ranks among small sections of the intelligentsia of both language groups, the general trend has not been in this direction. Even in the 1970s one can see in retrospect the signs of a rift. A typical Anglo-Welsh poem of the 1960s tried to act as if it were written in Welsh. More typical of the 1970s were parodies of these, exemplified by John Davies's "How to Write Anglo-Welsh Poetry." The combined influences in the 1980s of a rightward drift in British politics, a rejection of the idea by the Anglo-Welsh that the Welsh language is an essential definer of Welshness, and the transformation of the Welsh-speaking areas by an influx from the big cities of England have all had their effect.

The response to this among those who were between the language groups was to feel the need to move either one way or the other. Ned Thomas continued his move into the Welsh-language identity, which he must have originally hoped to reclaim. This did not imply a rejection of internationalism. In 1980, he published a study of the Caribbean poet Derek Walcott, who had won the Welsh Arts Council's International Writers Prize. This was published in a bilingual edition, which could be

read from one end in Welsh and from the other in English. He also wrote a story in Welsh set in Italy, which won the short story prize in the 1981 National Eisteddfod competition. He had said in *The Welsh Extremist* that he would find it difficult to write an academic essay in Welsh. He also discussed in a note to the paperback edition (1973) the absence of Waldo Williams and the philosopher J. R. Jones from the book: "Both, in their different ways, relate to questions which are crucial for national feeling: to whom does the land belong? Who are 'the people' in any discussion of nationhood? I am not ready to write about these things" (138).

Ten years later, this was no longer true. Following the Walcott essay, he began work on a study of Waldo Williams in Welsh. In *The Welsh Extremist*, those fundamental questions had not been addressed because the need of the time was for consensus and dialogue, a process in which, as far as it happened, Ned Thomas was a key player. He came to the writing of *The Welsh Extremist* from his study of Orwell, from which he had considered beginning work on a study of Conrad's political novels. The Orwellian separation of politics and literature was one which may have made sense in the culture Orwell inhabited, though Ned Thomas finds some difficulties with it even here. When he came to write *The Welsh Extremist*, he "began to realise that writing a book is not just a matter of self-expression, but a social act, with possibly social consequences" (*Planet* 20).

This is not something that one would expect Orwell to disagree with, his point being that there is no place for propaganda in literary works. In the wider sense of "political," one must regard *Animal Farm* and 1984 as profoundly political works. If Ned Thomas had an ideal reader in mind when he wrote *The Welsh Extremist* it would, I think, have been George Orwell. In this sense, we can regard the book as being addressed to him, allowing, thereby, its author not only to define a position for himself within the Wales to which he had returned, but to do so with one eye on certain Orwellian concepts which might have to be accommodated or addressed in the process.

Orwell's view, in Ned Thomas's formulation, was that the writer "should be prepared to take part in the corrupting busi-

ness of politics [but] as a writer he must reserve the right to stand back and tell the whole truth" (67). This, according to Orwell, must make the writer an outsider, which, suggests Ned Thomas, is no resolution at all to the tensions Orwell identifies, serving only to establish a double standard with which to judge any issue. Wales offered an example that provided a more concrete denial of Orwell's dichotomy than this logical objection. Welsh-language writers invariably write from a committed position within rather than outside the society to which they belong, as *The Welsh Extremist* makes clear. The poet and critic Tony Conran has written recently of the essentially Rationalist basis of Welsh thought as opposed to the Empiricism of the English. And we might say that for any culture that is to survive the "common sense" objections from dominant neighbours to its demands for status and self-respect, it is essential that certain things are given and not open to question. Orwell was confident that whatever happened to England it would be "always changing and yet felt to be mystically the same" (63).

Could that certainty be felt about Wales? In a passage towards the end of *The Welsh Extremist*, Ned Thomas says: "The fields are greener and the sea bluer because of the unseen company of past generations" (133). He has acknowledged the probable source of this in a poem by Waldo Williams, in which he imagines a time on his mountains when

The wide sky was deeper  
And so its blue bluer.  
The unseen and the timeless house  
More solid . . . (23)<sup>2</sup>

The "company of past generations" is evoked as, indeed, it often is in Waldo Williams's poetry. So, in a sense, Waldo Williams was there in *The Welsh Extremist*, an evocative presence unseen but keeping company with its author and, like the "silent hunter" of another of his poems, casting his net around him.

If this unseen company is enough to confer belonging on an individual, in the social sphere their voices have to be made present. Without that, "mystically the same" takes on a different meaning. The silent presence becomes an absence, as in R. S. Thomas's image of King Arthur asleep under the hills and failing

to wake in the hour of need. Under such circumstances politics cannot be kept out of literature. But what does Ned Thomas eventually have to say about Waldo Williams when he is able to stand back from the political fray and collect his thoughts with this silent presence before him? *Waldo* (1985) was published in the *Llên a Llenor* series of critical studies of Welsh writers. What has changed that enables Ned Thomas to discuss this central figure in the modern Welsh ethos is that he can do so from within the community of Welsh speakers. Furthermore, he can do it in the Welsh language. Part of the problem of approaching Waldo Williams in *The Welsh Extremist* might have been translation. Some of the poems are so simple that it is difficult to translate them without producing something banal. In other poems, the complex mixture of exploratory mysticism and socialized visionary utterance is almost impossible to capture in words at all. But the greater problem would have been a philosophical one.

I have already mentioned the need to set against the Orwellian Empiricism of the English tradition, which insists on the primacy of "objective" truth, a more Rationalist approach in Welsh culture, which must take certain things as given to maintain its identity. It is significant, for instance, that Orwell criticized what he called Celtic nationalisms because they affirmed things which, in his commonsense English view, were plainly absurd. But, as we have seen, even Orwell was capable of affirming the existence of something that is "ever changing but mystically the same." For Ned Thomas in *The Welsh Extremist*, it was, on one level, simply a matter of addressing a perceived audience that held one view (Orwellian empiricists who would be opposed to nationalism) and explaining to them why another might be tenable in a different social context (the right of oppressed nations to affirm their nationhood defensively to resist oppression). While he was making a case for writers who wore their politics on their sleeves, Waldo Williams was always going to be a difficult figure to approach. The subtlety required to do him justice would have been difficult to accommodate in the tone of special pleading which was a necessary aspect of the style of *The Welsh Extremist*. It is as if he had to be able to adopt a quieter mode of address in speaking to his own people before it would be



possible to get close to an adequate analysis of Waldo Williams's significance.

Ned Thomas points out that Waldo Williams grew up in the atmosphere of late Romanticism that overtook Welsh literature during the early part of this century. But instead of either reacting against this or wholly embracing it, he went back to its original values in the ideas of the early Romantics, something no other Welsh writer had done, as Welsh literature had not had an early Romantic phase. In attempting to locate the source of Waldo's affirmation of "brotherhood," he finds it not in the individual conscience (Waldo Williams wrote in a letter that he was suspicious of the supplicant mysticism of the Welsh hymn writer, Williams Pantycelyn), or in the given reality of Providence, but in the mediation of these things in relationships with others. If there is a revealing image of ultimate oneness in Waldo Williams's poetry, it is the fountain in his poem "In Two Fields" which rises to heaven and falls back to earth "like the leaves of a tree" (*fel dail pren*; 27). If there is in this and other religious images used by the poet a lack of specific theological content, this is in the nature of his expression:

. . . the expansiveness and ambiguity seen in these examples arises from the same philosophical background [Kantianism]. In that new inner space takes place the open dialogue between the self and the Universe, with all the possible interpretations that this entails. (48)

If the verse has a visionary quality, it also has a counterbalancing homeliness to it. The poet who experiences the personal revelation of the "silent hunter" in the gap between two fields also sees him as gathering in the folk who work in the fields in an affirmation of communal life. This is going beyond defensive politics to an ontological understanding of what is being defended. The quiet inwardness of a gentle Quaker is matched by the celebratory affirmations of a public poet. The two identities become one in such lines as

Through the dream of ages, the visions of brief minutes  
*Trwy freuddwyd oesoedd, gwledigaethau munudau mân.* (100)

That is the meaning of the unseen company: the communal efforts of a people to shape a consciousness in words which are

now lost to us are the source of those brief moments of intensity when personal identity and a sense of absolute belonging fuse in a certainty that one's being is affirmed amid "a cloud of witnesses" (*cwmwl tystion*; 67).

These affirmations are critically but sensitively teased out by Ned Thomas from their philosophical background, and set in their social context. This is what formed the positive conclusion to *The Welsh Extremist*. It was to be fifteen years before the author of that work could produce the study which fully examined the basis of the affirmation rather than argued in defence of the culture which made it possible. There are, after all, passages in his study of Waldo Williams's apocalyptic tendencies that express reservations and make qualifications that he may have preferred not to express in English. He perceives a tension in his subject between these tendencies and the affirmation of brotherhood with the past as well as the present which I have outlined above. He is also wary of a tendency to elevate the Welsh language itself to a status which separates it from those who speak it. Given his own movement from writing about Orwell's campaign to defend language (making meaning clear, implicitly in any language) to the works of a writer who wishes to defend The Language (affirm its value and that of its attendant culture), such delicacies of definition were not to be achieved overnight. Nor was *The Welsh Extremist* the place to express them. But, in the end, these tensions are what make Waldo Williams such an important figure for Ned Thomas and, indeed, for anyone thinking about the condition of Welsh culture in the late twentieth century. They express, after all, tensions that must be resolved by anyone seeking a nationalist perspective in the overall context of internationalism. George Orwell's warnings about political absolutism and his careful distinctions between negative nationalism and positive patriotism must have been points of departure for Ned Thomas. But the shift from Orwell's rather blunt Empiricism to a position where the *idea* of Wales could be accommodated was a necessary starting point on the way to the more sophisticated view advanced in the study of Waldo Williams.

Any close look at Orwell will reveal a disjunction between his inner and his outer lives. His sympathies with socialist ideas were

tempered by caution about organicist philosophies which were inappropriately imposed onto social structures. Ned Thomas was aware of this, and of the good reasons for it in Orwell's experience of Stalinist abuses of influence and power in the Spanish Civil War. But he was also aware of organic continuities which were part of the consciousness of a people rather than of a party or of the programme of a social philosophy. Waldo Williams's poetry celebrates the values of a society where there are at least some vestiges of organic continuity between the inner life of individuals and the outer life of the community. Ned Thomas is aware both of the need to defend this and of the difficulty of articulating that defence in terms which will be comprehensible to those whose experience is of disjunction.<sup>3</sup> But this is not simply an intellectual difficulty facing a particular individual. It reflects a choice between comfortable amnesia and embracing a culture which is slowly being eroded from the consciousness of whole sections of the Welsh people. The Welsh language may be undergoing something of a revival, but there are fewer communities who use it as the main medium of communication. English-speaking Welsh people who, for a time in the early part of this century, might have hoped to forge an identity of their own are fast becoming indistinguishable from other "regional" peoples of the United Kingdom. Their choice is to turn back to that "unseen company" and affirm the common voice they can still articulate with it, or to add their voices to those of their more strident neighbour and become simply "Brits." Ned Thomas's significance in the present condition of Wales is that he not only points a way but that he has enacted a movement along it.

## NOTES

- 1 *Planet* was begun again five years later with Ned Thomas as managing editor with a full-time editorial staff to assist him. This second series continues with John Barnie as editor.
- 2 All quotations from Waldo Williams's work are translated by the author.
- 3 There is a more complex problem for the Welsh intelligentsia which needs to make conscious what is, essentially, unconscious in mediating organic continuity with individual responses to it.

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