



CHOICE WORDS

Points Of View

Dafydd Elis Thomas, Plaid Cymru MP, for Merionnydd Nant Conway, talks to **Chris Granlund** about his life and his reading

I was only three when I first went to school - precociousness set in early. The first things I read were in Welsh of course. It was in Welsh until we were seven and then suddenly it was all mixed - there wasn't a very coherent language policy in those days. I was already quite bilingual at that stage. I read a lot of comics, the *Eagle* made a strong impression, it had all the right macho images, Dan Dare and the rest. I also remember the *South Wales Echo* had a comic strip called *Tomsion Chei*, who was like the Welsh Robin Hood. It's funny, I haven't thought ab-

out that in over 20 years.

I was brought up in the Presbyterian church and my father was a minister so the other place where reading went on was in chapel. Some school books would be smuggled in to keep me quiet during the service, comics wouldn't have been allowed there. We weren't encouraged to play in public on Sundays, although we could play in the privacy of the house. My father was quite liberal in his theology and left-nationalist in his politics. He was always encouraging us to do things but not letting the more conservative chapel members know about it. That was certainly the case when I started reading books that were regarded as unacceptable... *Lady Chatterly*, for example. That was very exciting. I used to take it out and read it on the school playing fields with a plain brown cover. I followed the whole debate about censorship and the trial. It was something that I was begin-

ning to feel strongly about.

My first political awakenings were Hungary and the Suez Crisis. Hatred of Eden built the foundation of my anti-imperialism. I think that one of the problems with many English people is that they seem to think that the world is monolingual and that's a very serious disability. That's why they don't understand the world... about English imperialism, about coping with the European Community, Thatcher's attitude towards the rest of Europe. A lot of that is to do with an assumption that monolingualism is a norm and that anything else is somehow abnormal. It's a big problem. Working in more than one language and more than one culture does give you a certain understanding of other people's point of view. That's why we should teach Welsh in all the schools in England!

The *Financial Times* is my required morning reading because it covers everything that I meet in my work. I enjoy reading *Farmer's Weekly* to find out what's going on in the farming industry. I also have to confess that I enjoy that magazine called *Country Living*. Raymond Williams would have loved it, it's selling an image of country life to people in the southeast of England. But it is doing a bit more than that, there are some interesting things in there and if I'm on a train or something I enjoy it. I absolutely love the *Sunday Telegraph*. It's quintessentially English right-wing. I know I'll always disagree with it but there's more material there to react to than in any other of the Sundays.

I still think that *Ulysses* is the greatest thing ever written. I have always been obsessed by the narrative form and I try to read some fiction each month, whether it's short stories or plays. I also read political theory and theology. I've come to terms now with my religious background in the sense that theology is a form of metaphor which is as useful a way of understanding life as any other. I've felt a lot of

energy coming out of liberation theology, it has certainly influenced me as have the writings of Raymond Williams. He was the most influential major writer because he encompassed literature, political theory and also the Welsh problem. The most influential was probably *Culture And Society* but then I always go back to that little *Keywords* book.

One of the most entertaining things I read last year was Tom Nairn's *The Enchanted Glass* it's probably the best account of the British Constitution because it shows the cultural dimension of the system. Scotland is a long way ahead of us. We've maintained the linguistic side more strongly but the cultural identity is stronger in Scotland. I often think to myself that being in the UK is bad enough but to be in the UK without Scotland would be hell.

I was strongly challenged by the literature that came out of the 60s movements. Feminism was a real challenge. My generation is very much a transitional one where you've got men who have reached positions of power but have been challenged by feminism. I was challenged by friends and people in relationships... and also of course Michele Barrett's *The Anti-Social Family*. And I have failed, I have failed on a number of occasions in the idea of having an equal relationship with a woman, with my separated wife and now in my new relationship. It's difficult with the demands of work. I would like to spend more time with the kids and share more in bringing them up. But if I say I can't come to a meeting because I'm at home with the children, it is just not accepted. And these things won't change until we can get to a situation where people will share work and pleasure in different ways. The irony is that first we have to win greater power for a movement which thinks like that so that we can start interfering with the existing structures... this is a problem that I have still not resolved. •