

*The Uses of Literacy*  
**Candy Flossing the  
Celtic Fringe**  
*Gwyn Illtyd Lewis*

**Much** of Mr. Hoggart's thesis about working-class culture has a regional stamp which, he would probably be the first to admit, cannot of necessity be taken beyond the geographical limits of his field of study, much less universalized to represent the workers' reactions in the whole of Britain.

Welsh social conditions have variously been described as classless or as totally working-class by observers outside Wales who take what is known of the English provincial class structure as the norm. The clue to this, and there is some truth in it, can be found as far back as the Renaissance when Wales lost what remained of its indigenous institutions and was assimilated to England, Henry Tudor's Act of Union, 1536, being the political instrument. The social results were that London became the new focus and anglicisation the aim of the gentry. Unlike Scotland, where the laird shared the culture of his tenants, the Welsh peasantry lost their leaders either by absence at or

near the Tudor court, or by the barrier of language. The gentry gradually ceased to be the natural patrons of Welsh poetry, music and letters and became an alien class whose special distinguishing marks, apart from their rapacity as landlords, was their English tongue and official status. The peasantry became a class enjoying something like colonial status with an unofficial language and an unofficial or "native" culture with no definitive institutions to sustain it, with few civil rights except what the common law (administered in a strange tongue) secured them, and no i privileges.

### **Peasant into worker**

The 19th Century in Wales saw the victory of the peasant ] class (*Gwerin*) which by this time had become class-conscious and had found its own leaders. It had too its industrial counterpart in coalminers, tinplaters, steelmen

## Candy Flossing the Celtic Fringe

and a remarkably homogeneous group of rural industrial workers in the slate quarries. Two class wars proceeded at the same time, the small tenant farmer and his more abject hireling the "gwas" or farm labourer, against the landowner, and the industrial worker against the iron-master and coalowner. Aspects of this struggle took on social, political and religious forms. There was, for an example, a tithe war. The tenant farmers refused to pay tithes to the Church of England, not because they weren't religious but because they were intensely so, fervent Methodists, uncompromising Calvinists or if of the Independents tinged with liberal theology and political radicalism. The Church of England (it was disestablished and disendowed in Wales in 1918) was an agent of the "heliwyr" (the hunting class) and of the State. It had, it is true, made concessions to the Cymric tongue by the provision of a Welsh Bible and Prayer Book ever since Elizabethan times, but it was nevertheless an alien influence and propaganda office of the gentry, who went first as of right to the altar-rail to receive the sacrament.

### Classless Wales

The *Gwerin* found its own institutions in the self-governing chapels and its leaders in a number of remarkably eloquent vernacular preachers, some of them scholars, who leaned to moral puritanism and variously, according to the decade, to other-worldly aloofness or to a radicalism similar to that of Tom Paine minus his agnosticism. The *Gwerin*—a rough translation would be "Folk"—was not merely one Welsh class amongst others; it added up to all that was Welsh society. The rest of the inhabitants in Wales were either unassimilated Irish migrant workers, Scots and English stewards of the gentry, or poorly paid teachers imported from England to teach monoglot Welsh children English by the direct method, and to chastise the same luckless Dotheboyians for uttering at play the only tongue they knew!

Radicalism, a far more revolutionary and determined force in Wales than socialism has ever been, as well as the march of economic history, swept away the rural landowner. It often tamed, too, many a local industrialist before a Labour Government replaced him by a remote board or cartelization substituted for him a managerial hierarchy.

Welsh society thus shares with one or two other nations (for example Iceland and Czechoslovakia) the social phenomenon of classlessness. Changes are occurring, but it is still not possible, for someone within the Welsh milieu to read of Mr. Hoggart's workers with their "us" and "they" without a feeling that this is a case-history of some unemancipated people nearer to a feudalism of toffs and boffins than would be thought possible in the 20th century.

### Break-up of the Gwerin

The *Gwerin* were radicals, some of them were nationalists, but not until recently, politically so. They differed from the Irish in that they were strongly Protestant and thus in hot rejection of anything short of a free society, and opposed to obscurantism in politics or religious ritual. They were a self-taught class progressing by trial and error in the way recommended in John Stuart Mill's *Representative Government*. They abjured paternalism and maintained freedom from it by what some regard as an excessive

sectarianism and by quarrelling peacefully in a thousand committees of their own creation. The great public educator was the adult Sunday School which proceeded on a broader curriculum than many own, in much the same style as a Socratic forum and with the same respect for ideas. All this made for a responsible, self-regulating attitude to life, to a large amount of highmindedness and to the practice of equality, for the village smith or a coal-miner were esteemed as those in the more genteel callings. It was often the manual worker who led the group in the Sunday School.

The victory of the *Gwerin* is manifest in two main ways. First, by an official recognition of distinct national character by the founding of institutions such as a thorough system of secondary schools, a chartered federal university, and departments of various Ministries such as Education, Health and Local Government. Secondly, an eclipse of the older privileged classes and the appointment to public offices and entry into the professions of the humble, or their sons. As in England the universal grammar school has become both the leaven of the under-privileged and the levelling machine, but in Wales the process is more complete and has gone on for a longer period.

There are, however, parts of Mr. Hoggart's intriguing study which apply to the Wales of today. This is partly because of the march of the "all-conquering English language", which means, on the popular level, regular doses of *The News of the World* and Anglo-American films. The truth is that the *Gwerin* is breaking up. Anglicization or even Americanization is the inevitable legacy of growing and diversified industrialization so that fewer are left in the circle of the traditional culture which was spontaneous, perhaps narrow, insular and unsophisticated, but of rare good quality and dependent neither on patronage nor on patricians in the form of an ivory tower elite.

### Skill, status, culture

My own experience in WEA and tutorial groups suggests that the graduate teacher, coalminer, local authority clerical worker, bank manager and free church minister can discuss *The Republic* together quite unconscious of any class difference. A recent research project on social class and popular esteem revealed that a manual worker who is also a branch trade union voluntary officer, a JP or local civic activist were bracketed in the highest social category with a medical doctor, whilst cinema managers and prosperous garage proprietors occupied the lowest rung in a table of twenty, with a chapel pastor and Anglican vicar placed second and third respectively.

There is, however, more than a suggestion that a new barrier is beginning to appear and despite common origin owing to prevailing classlessness, equality of educational opportunity takes some into the higher occupations, a large number into the intermediate category and many more into the nondescript occupations which mechanization has robbed of skill and status. Here the new position in Wales echoes much of Mr. Hoggart's findings for however difficult it may be to speak with exactness, the opinion that the last-named category is the great consumer of the cheapest cultural fare, is hard to escape. Together with this it is equally hard not to believe that the standard is declining as commercial firms discover that it is good business to stimulate the taste for the worst. Full employment, high wages, overtime on advantageous terms and perhaps a run of luck on the pools (not necessarily the spectacular jackpot amounts) have made this group of workers well-off

## Gwyn Ilyd Lewis

judged by the income of the others and the latter's position in terms of real wages. That this numerous class has a powerful collective purchasing power is significant. For nowadays it is an important and growing market which many commercial purveyors of the printed word are trying to capture, often by employing the device of changing their old standards for new. The intimate instance of this is the sudden change in the contents of the local "weekly" which emerges wearing a much-vaunted new-look in imitation of the mass dailies of the most popular sort. The weekly cannot any longer afford space for anything as 'dead' as a lively report of the local literary society, the column being reserved for a racy, clipped piece of unreality headed *Down-Town Way*. Such a change-over is accompanied by the myth that the same local weekly is now the people's paper; that it is in short "yours", specially written for "you"—the small man. If the small man responds by devouring its synthetic contents he will know that his own tastes are for American film previews, pictures of women with a "primitive" appeal; for sport, local and national; the more salacious kind of police court story as well as all kinds of newsy trivia written in a laconic style. He will know too that his loyalty is towards the seemingly unpolitical councillor who is just another "small man", a champion of all the other small men who wants to keep down the rates which the small men, in fact, do not pay, and increase the council-house rents, which they do. Does the small man resent it? As the sales increase and there is no audible protest, must it be supposed that he does not? Or perhaps it is a case of the smarter format and the Umbrian beauties being the jam which

makes the intrinsic nastiness of this journalistic pill easy and even enjoyable to swallow. The colloquial term for the over-time and bonus-happy state is "being hit hard by prosperity—almost senseless!"

The cultural problem is not so acute in Wales owing to the strength of the traditions sketched here. But the advance of commercial devitalization in the field of reading and almost every other leisure pursuit is already well beyond the Welsh border. Its most rapid victories are in the anglicized areas because the strong verbal culture which allowed shepherds and colliers to compose poems of a peculiarly intricate metre—the *Cynghanedd* form so beloved of Manley Hopkins—relied on the Welsh language as the common tongue, of pit, pub, Rugby pitch, hearth and chapel pew alike. As the general use of Welsh recedes and becomes more and more the preserve of the new clerisy, a small often-vigorous academic off-shoot of the *Gwerin*, so the old common culture evaporates into the past and makes way for the cultural candy-floss and with it the deceptive "democratic"-appeal which Mr. Hoggart exposes. All this appears to be of little concern to Left politicians in Wales. Perhaps they are too busy governing the thirteen counties to spare the time for it, perhaps they have long since seen the socialist remedy in more public ownership and the equalitarian touch of the comprehensive school universalized, or perhaps it has even escaped their notice?

Less powerful, but quite articulate minorities do, however, concern themselves with the uses of literacy. Oddly enough few of them are of the Left.

## LITERATURE OF THE LEFT

*We specialise in this field and buy libraries or collections of books and pamphlets on economics, politics, socialist movements, China, Russia, Comintern, etc. Write for our wants list.*

**THE HAMMERSMITH  
BOOKSHOP**  
William Morris House  
Beadon Rd. London W6

## is there room

for **THE NEW REASONER**  
as well as Universities and Left Review?

**The New Reasoner** is a committed journal of the left. In it you will find extended theoretical analysis, creative writing, discussion material, all from marxist and left socialist standpoints. The Summer Number contains 150 pages of articles, poems and a short story. Hyman Levy on *Soviet Socialism*; E. P. Thompson on *Socialist Humanism*; Peter Worsley on *Mau Mau*; Sartre asks *Is This the Time?* John Saville has *A Note on Dogmatism*, and Bernard Stevens has *An Open Letter to Shostakovich*. And there is much more, including a story by Tibor Dery which takes one Behind the Brick Wall into a Hungarian factory.

The Autumn Number will include a story by Doris Lessing, *The Day Stalin Died*, drawings by Paul Hogarth, and an article by K. Alexander on *Workers' Control and British Socialism*.

The Editors of **The New Reasoner** are John Saville and E. P. Thompson. They have launched the journal because they believe that not only is there room for it, but that there is a real need for such a journal in which left socialist thinking can be developed.

**The New Reasoner** appears quarterly. Annual subscription 15/-, single copies 4/-, from E. P. Thompson, Holly Bank, Whitegate, Halifax, Yorks.

## NOT recommended by

*John Foster Dulles*

## MONTHLY REVIEW

**An independent socialist magazine edited by  
LEO HUBERMAN and PAUL M. SWEETZ**

Here is an American voice which does not go in for diatribe, slogans or jargon. Since its founding in 1949, *Monthly Review* has been dedicated to the practice of honest, objective analysis of world events. *Monthly Review's* editors believe that the best way to reach their socialist goal is to tell the unvarnished truth about friend and foe alike. For lively reading, free from partisan or political control, subscribe to *Monthly Review*, 25s. a year.

*Latest books from Monthly Review Press*

**The Political Economy of American Radicals: Some  
Growth Problems and Personalities**  
By Paul A. Baran Edited by Harvey Goldberg

35s for each book; one book and a magazine subscription, 50s

*Order from our English representative:*

Miss Branson Price 48 Balcombe Street London NW1