

REVIEW: WELSH EUROPEANS

Christopher Harvie

John Osmond, **Welsh Europeans**, Bridgend: Seren, £6.95, pb, ISBN 1854111566, pp.195.

I first met John Osmond nineteen years ago at a lecture theatre in Cardiff, lining up with Gwyn Alf Williams and Dai Smith, at the height of that parabola of Welsh devolution which would hit the ground on St David's Day, 1979. Gwyn Alf is dead, Dai has been gathered to the BBC (of which more anon) but Osmond has stuck to his decentralised, intermediate-technology Wales, and our Celtic alliance has operated, particularly over the last decade, to our mutual benefit.

Osmond compares intriguingly with another activist, Paul Scott. Equally adept as a networker and committee-man, Scott's preoccupations have been historic and literary - no bad thing in an imaginatively-fecund decade - and as SNP cultural spokesman, more party-orientated. There isn't a lot of history in Osmond's Wales, and he's always kept his distance from Plaid Cymru. The circumstances of the politics which **Welsh Europeans** persuasively describes have more to do with the economic repositioning of the Principality.

'Repositioning' rather than 'revival', because economic development based on low wages and office work, with continuing high unemployment, must always be Janus-faced. But the implication of Wales's proto-diplomacy, represented not just by Osmond but by Professor Phil Cooke's Centre for Advanced Studies at University College Cardiff, or the efforts of the former Tory Minister of State Sir Wyn Roberts MP, has been to foreground the European identity of the country in a way that the Scots haven't so far managed. In 1990 there were few contrasts more painful than that between

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Review: Welsh Europeans

Peter Walker - the George Melly of the Tory party - strutting his stuff in Stuttgart and Ian Lang ruefully resisting the regionalist embraces of Bavarians even further to the right than he was.

That Bevan's country has inserted itself into bourgeois regionalism is remarkable, given the unpromising career of Welsh devolution. Callaghan's act gained a narrow majority from the Scots in 1979 - though bigger than the ones by which the Danes and later the French ratified the Maastricht Treaties! - but it was a turkey in Wales, with even Blaid-minded Gwynedd voting overwhelmingly against. So why has home rule managed to reverse these figures in the 1995 polls?

Asked why he chose the upbeat title **Rebirth of a Nation, 1880-1980** for his volume in the **Oxford History of Wales**, Kenneth O Morgan said that, even counting 1979, Wales had remade itself, while the notion of Britain was in secular decline. Not least because the rules of the old Tory game, like allowing provincial elites to manage their bailiwicks themselves, were scrapped by an interventionist, undemocratic, and metropolitan incompetent elite. Wales now has about 100 quangos, and the basic qualification for getting on to them is membership of the Tory party. Wales lacks the 'estates' - kirk, law, etc. - as a 'mezzanine' level which has some sort of autonomy, while after 1979 any 'nationalist threat' was discounted. The result is corrupt not just in the cerebral Adam Ferguson sense of private influence moulding the public weal, but through regular 'hands-in-the-till' scandals, and Tory support is down from 29% in 1992 to 12% in late 1995 - a fall even more spectacular than in Scotland.

Osmond cites the subordination of local government to the Welsh Office as propelling Labour towards home rule. Thatcherite blinkeredness and brute force aggregated powers to Cardiff, from London as well as from Carnarfon and Welshpool. This mobilised the 'municipal Peter the Greats' (in Gwyn Thomas's fine phrase) who were once devolution's deadly enemies, and the survivors of the miners' unions with their Bevanite international socialism. At the same time the Tories strengthened the Welsh level, while Walker's 'Valleys Initiative' inevitably drew Wales into the Brussels purview and co-operation with the 'Four Motors' of Europe (Baden-Württemberg, Rhône-Alpes, Lombardy, and Catalunya).

Why then was there no 'bourgeois-regionalist' Tory devolution movement, as once-upon-a-time in Scotland? But, just as there's a 'Rhenish' integrative capitalism in Stuttgart, Milan, Lyons and Barcelona, operating a type of

economic subsidiarity, with local banks and businesses conserved, Wales like Scotland had been subjected, from the dawn of industrialisation, to Atlanticist structures of joint stock-shareholding and speculation which effectively exported the owners of capital, leaving the collectivism which appalled Wokingham Man. John Redwood may have gone down in Wales, in Dafydd Wigley's words, 'like a rat sandwich', but in making a cultural-nationalist approach to his subjects through the Welsh-language press, he was perhaps aligning himself with that Jonathan Clark-Maurice Cowling rightism which views Celtic independence as a means of getting socialist Celts off the back of authoritarian-individualist Anglo-Saxons.

So, what about the socialist Celts? Osmond thinks that Labour has made the transition to a qualified Welsh nationalism. His star is Ron Davies, ex-valleys unionist turned Welsh-speaking republican, but his appraisal of Tony Blair is as sidelong and mistrustful as Blair's evident distaste for Davies. We have been here before? Welsh Labour fancied devolution in the 1970s, while Scottish Labour girded about his shotgun marriage. To use Dr Dennis Balsom's 'Three-Wales-Model', the referendum then left Plaid alone in *Y Fro Gymraeg*, the Welsh-speaking heartland, with Labour unchallenged in a crumbling 'Welsh Wales' and the Tories controlling the growing 'British Wales' of the border country, the suburbs and Costa Geriatrica. The sort of West Central Scottish breakthrough that the SNP might manage is only a dream to Plaid, and yet the Green-Nationalist alliance which took my own seat of Ceredigion in 1992 is surely capable of extension. In order to forestall this, Davies' strategy is logically pre-emptive, in a situation in which (as in Scotland) ideological barriers between socialism and nationalism are much frailer than they look.

Regionalism has been the name of Osmond's game - and mine. Wales would fit snugly into a Land or Canton role in a balanced UK or European federation, but unbalanced, in every sense, is the only appropriate word for Britain in the near future. For Redwood to liken greens to 'European neo-Nazis' will surprise no-one, but for Kim Howel, supposedly co-ordinating Labour's devolution policy, to say that nationalism of any sort was along the road to fascism suggests a Roy Jenkins makeover for that Depardieu-figure who stood solid with the miners against the charging police in Karl Francis's film **Miss Rhymney Valley**, 1985. Thin ideologies mean thinner skins.

Blairism is seen in Wales only as a means to an end. But to what end? If a revolt of nation-states over the single currency stymies moves towards Eurofederalism, then a pattern other than regionalism beckons. The Irish

Review: Welsh Europeans

Republic has come up from 56% of UK GNP in the 1970s, to 87% in 1995. With a PR-assisted social partnership at home, and the Brussels ball at their feet, the Irish are at the front of the Celtic field. Here, the national question looks more and more like the national answer.

Osmond grew up, like Raymond Williams and John Barnie, in the border country of Abergavenny. He opted for Wales against all the comfortably heroic symbols which drew him to Britain: Nelson and Wellington above the sideboard, Churchill and the Royals on the telly. One of his sub-plots is the continuing hegemony of the London media, a collective Cheshire Cat leer of talentless semi-literacy hovering where once Reith radiated imperial menace. Despite S4C, Welsh, Scots and Northern Irish have to fight for the present 3% of 'regional' programming. Based on share of licence-fee, we should get 14%. Redwood and Howells may think this is no bad thing, but the puffball quality of Westminster politics doesn't just sanction the logic of the Osmond line; it emphasises the improbability of such a technologically-literate, wide-ranging, grown-up book ever coming from our London masters, left or right.

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