



National Liberation Literature by F.W. Brownlow

"The Devil understands Welsh."

—Shakespeare

The Old Devils by Kingsley Amis,
New York: Summit; \$17.95.

Years ago, in the North Welsh town of Llanrwst, I bought a copy of Dylan Thomas' *Collected Poems*, and a 50-year-old Welshman present, a Baptist, teetotaling, nonsmoking, nondancing insurance agent, said, "A wonderful boy and a great poet: a terrible loss to Wales." It was the first time I had heard literary judgment pronounced on a basis of shared nationality, and by someone who doubtless had never read a word of the writer in question. A few years later, an Irishman who had treated me to several orations on the beauty and wisdom of Ireland and its people slipped me a copy of O'Casey's *Inishfallen Fare Thee Well* as I was leaving his house and cut short my thanks with, "I don't want it around the house for the girls to read." Ironically, if ever there was a professional Irishman, it was O'Casey. It was also true that he offered a different view of Ireland from the one "the girls" were getting at St. Dominic's.

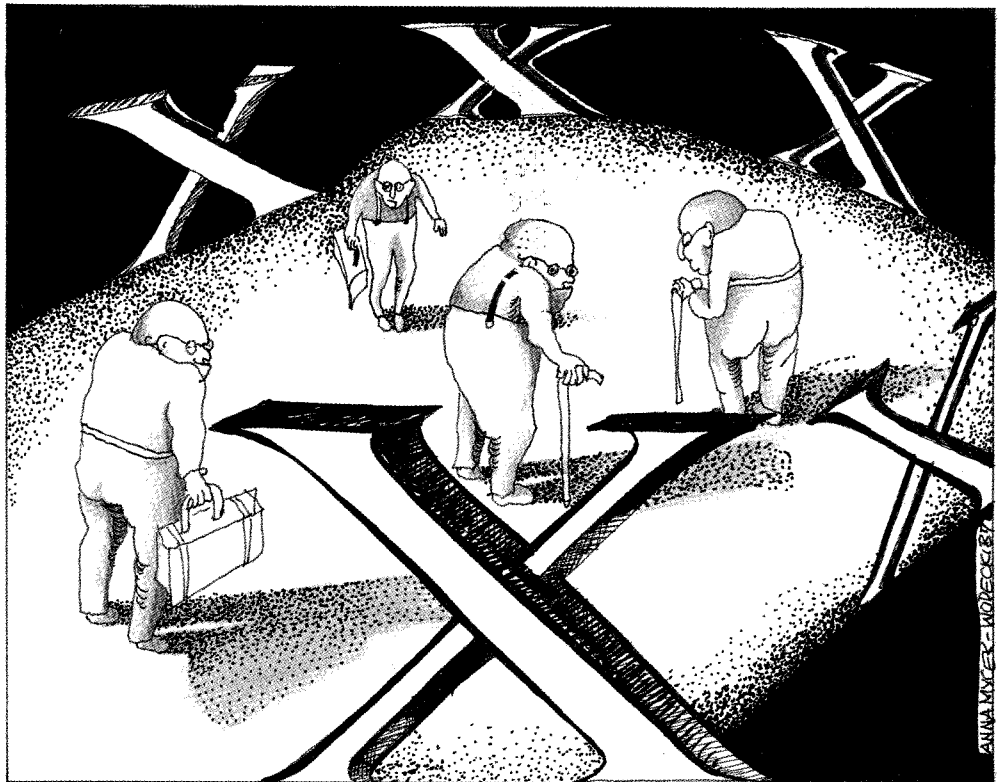
At the time, these grotesque incidents revealed an approach common enough on the margins of literacy which has since become orthodox in more central places. Whether writers can actually write tends to be less important than their claim to represent some group allegiance or other. Literary criticism is moribund, being regarded as unpleasantly demanding, intimidating, and elitist. Few things have made this clearer in recent years than the behavior of the Episcopal Church,

always a sure guide to conventional attitudes. When its grandees decided to have Cranmer's *Book of Common Prayer* rewritten in freshman English, and went on to treat resulting criticism as evidence of an incapacity for life in the modern world, they were acting on the well-founded presumption that they had nothing to fear from literary criticism.

Nonliterary judgments, however conventional, cut no ice with Kingsley Amis. His 16th novel, *The Old Devils*, presents a quartet of South Welsh sexagenarians and their wives as a case history of the havoc wrought by the notion that some things are more important about books than the way they

are written. Amis' characters have messed up their lives, more or less, not because the Welsh are more foolish or vicious than other people, but because they belong to a society that, having accepted the idea that there is some special virtue in Welshness, has created a body of myth that makes it nearly impossible for a Welshman to tell the truth about anything. As one of the characters says, "Somehow or other it's impossible to be honest in [Wales]."

Early on in the book, Alun—writer, TV personality, professional Welshman—is returning to Wales to live. The train steward recognizes him, and tells him, "Everybody is delighted to learn that you and Mrs. Weaver have determined to come and live among us here in Wales. Proud too. Honoured." Alun talks in the



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same strain to a radio interviewer on the station: “. . . Heart is where the home is, and the heart of a Welshman . . .” Where did this kind of talk, which another character calls “pissartistry,” originate? It makes very little sense: To call Wales “land of river and hill,” as Alun does, is not to differentiate it sharply from any other place. The Scots in Boswell’s *Life of Johnson* have a touch of it, but its development into a universal habit is more recent. Publicists and advertisers may earn large sums for it, but they did not invent it. Writers must have done that.

This is why the focus of Amis’ theme is the life and work of fictional Welsh poet Brydan (1913-60), who lived at the end of his life in Birdarthur, a small Welsh seaside town, now the center of a fair-sized culture and tourist industry. Brydan’s best known work is something called *Tales From the Undergrowth*, based on local characters whom he treated, according to Charlie Norris, a retired alcoholic caterer, as “quaint objects in a souvenir shop.” He also had a passion for Jack Daniel’s Tennessee Whiskey, not mentioned in the official literature, but apparently no great secret. Put the details together, and thoughts of Dylan Thomas are inevitable. Although Amis denies referring to real people and places, no one who knows the broad outline of Thomas’ life, *Under Milk Wood*, and the countryside around Swansea and the Gower peninsula will really believe him. In fact, most of the novel’s best comedy emanates from the running mockery of the Thomas legend. There is an unveiling of a £98,000 monument to Brydan at the deconsecrated church of St. Dogmael’s (“Well, it hasn’t got any holes in it”) that, for old Amis readers, will bring back memories of Jim Dixon’s sufferings at his professor’s madrigal parties. The novel’s climax, too, happens in Birdarthur, brought on by conversations at Brydan’s grave and in his old pub.

Amis has always been as much a satirist as a novelist. Probably more interested in the object of attack than in the aesthetics of the novel, he leaves the form pretty much as he found it. His favorite objects are pretension and hypocrisy, and he has a mimic’s ear for the sounds they make. In *Lucky Jim*, Bertrand Welsh, snob and bully, in-

furiated Jim Dixon by saying “yousam” and “hostelram” instead of “you see” and “hostelry,” while in *I Want It Now*, there is a Southerner whose “I can’t stand it” comes out as “Arcane standard.” In *The Old Devils*, Amis has picked up the habit of a certain kind of Welshman who, unable to speak Welsh, sprinkles his speech with a few common words to give the impression he can. Alun, “the second-rate bloody ersatz Brydan,” as Tarc Jones, landlord of The Bible pub calls him, does this, especially when talking to his wife, to whom he lies a lot. This is a sign that Alun’s otherwise rather genial charlatanism is really offensive. He can be trusted in nothing. At the book’s end, when Peter Thomas’ son rather carelessly condemns Alun, and Peter says, “I suppose so. The longer I go on the harder it gets to say that about anybody. . . . Of course he did leave a certain amount to be desired in the way of friendship, Alun,” Peter’s measured charity condemns more severely.

For despite all the knockabout fun (“They went outside and stood where a sign used to say Taxi and now said Taxi/Tacsi for the benefit of Welsh people who had never seen a letter X before”), this is a serious, sometimes rather harrowing book about aging people caught in a set of lies that have shaped their lives. As is often the pattern in an Amis novel, the young people escape to a different life, but the old have to put up with the people they have become. Amis’ attack on ethnic and national sentimentality as a real moral killer seems to be perfectly serious.

It would surely be a mistake, however, to think that this is an anti-Welsh book or that the thing it attacks is peculiar to Wales. Because Amis really knows and likes Wales he can diagnose the disease in its Welsh form very effectively, the implication being that no country and few institutions are free from it. Like the alcohol drunk in such extraordinary quantities in his book, a little ethnic and national pride, Amis says, seems at first to do nothing but good, enhancing self-esteem and so forth—but only, says Amis, by suppressing reason and common sense. Taken in large doses, it can be fatal.

The Old Devils has an interesting

sub- or counter-theme, too. American readers with a taste for satire will enjoy the guying of the Thomas legend, but if they pick up the metaphorical tendency of the story, they will notice something else: If nationalism is like alcohol, then like alcohol it is a substitute for something else—and that something else is religion. Amis once wrote an essay about the shortcomings of the modern church; one does not have to be particularly religious to detect the church’s failures of faith, intelligence, taste, and morality, and to expect ensuing severe social consequences. In this novel, besides the church of St. Dogmael’s, deconsecrated into an art center, there is St. Paul’s, turned into a sex cinema, replete with the memories of its last vicar, the fornicating Joe Craddock. The clearest delineation of a standard underlying Amis’ satire, however, is a description, certainly evocative, of the locked-up, deserted little church of St. Mary, occupying a remote promontory, and last used in 1959:

“It’s still a church,” said Malcolm, having let the matter rest for quite a long time. “That’s to say it hasn’t been deconsecrated. . . . At the moment it’s too far for anybody to come, you see. Too far by car, that is. How many years would it be since it wasn’t too far to come on foot, with that climb for most of them to face after? Eighty-four in congregation the nave held, according to what I read.”

Too far, indeed. Yet even if deconsecration is the only thing the modern church does with conviction, people have a way of taking things into their own hands. At the end of the book, Charlie Norris, whose fear and alcoholism seem proportionate to his efforts at truth-telling, sings again at the wedding of his friends’ children. At the same ceremony, Peter Thomas takes the first steps toward putting what is left of his life in order. It would be hard to say whether Amis intends these very small, personal victories to have a religious overtone to them. Nonetheless, given the religious theme running through the book, even the title acquires another dimension.

Greek Jive by Peter Laurie

"He fell with a thud to the ground and his armor clattered around him."

—Homer

War Music: An Account of Books 16-19 of Homer's Iliad by Christopher Logue, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux; \$12.95.

War Music, called by its author, Christopher Logue, an "account" of four books of the *Iliad* of Homer, is not a minor event. Its reception both in its native England, and now here, has been enthusiastic. For, English writing, especially in verse, may not generally be said to have overcome its mortal challenge from the likes of Yeats, Eliot, and Pound, either to assimilate or displace, and Mr. Logue looks, at least here, like he means business. It is fair to say that—compared with the virtual armies of English-speaking poets of both sexes around the world who have developed drab ways of saying less than nothing but no will to stop saying it—Logue looms. He has a voice, he has technique, his audacity is immense, and he manages to say something.

Yet, it was impolitic on his part to label what he has done even an *account*—a maneuver intended to get him off the hook as a *translator* (mere or otherwise)—as *War Music* must simply be judged a new work. Now, I (for one) tend to like this sort of thing. Twenty-five years of rereading have not yet dimmed the luster of Pound's audacities with respect to Li Tai Po and Propertius, precursors to what Logue does here. But more than to Pound, Logue has apprenticed himself to the Chaucer and Shakespeare of *Troilus* (who both derive not so much from Homer as from the mediievally extant "account" of Troy attributed to one Diktys, "of Crete," a self-claimed eyewitness)—and even more than to any of these, to the Marlow of *Tamburlane*, *Edward II*, and *Faustus*. And,

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alas, more than to even these, to the whole modern medley of movies, TV, causes, tics, and ads.

If *War Music* must be denied its almost universal accorded encomium of authenticity with respect to Homer (and it must, for reasons I hope to touch upon, however briefly), nevertheless it remains all too true to this time. Mr. Logue and his well-wishers may feel this is all to the good, that they are satirizing modern life. If it were only that simple. Not knowing any more about Mr. Logue than this one volume tells me, I find his purposes murky, twisted, and self-defeating. But in the long war of the fashionable intelligentsia of the West against the West, this volume is a monument no serious reader can afford not to take seriously.

They call it Deconstruction, and it infests our higher life, using our universities as a base and oozing bogus revolution, conformism, pseudopacifism, revisionism, inversion, and in-

competence, dedicated to convincing the immature and the unformed there is something better beyond the limits of traditional civilizations that traditional restraints (called "hypocrisies") are blocking everyone's way to, everyone's *right* to. So the past is not taught but "tried" in the light of our superior understandings. The victims end by convicting not the past but their own soul—of revolting nullity. For there is, of course, something "beyond" civility, only it's called savagery. In this race, I fear Achilles will never catch up with Mr. Logue.

Item: the willful transformation of Achilles and Patroclus into overt and active lovers—as Aeschylus did in the *Myrmidons*. The shrewd assumption is that for close on three millennia Homer has been hiding something only our superior powers of sleuthhood have found out. Unconsidered are the thousands upon thousands of living, ungay buddies who became and stayed fast friends from having withstood a barrage or taken a machine-gun nest side by side, or the physical demonstrations of affection among, specifically, Mediterranean men (even Mafiosi) who have never

