

Aberdaron II

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by [Theodore Dalrymple](#) (December 2024)



Dic Aberdaron, or Richard Robert Jones (William Roos)

The collapse of Protestantism in Wales has been as complete as

that of Catholicism in Ireland. A religion that once dominated and gave savour to the life of the country has evaporated almost as if it had never been. The only remains are of it the hundreds of chapels in the towns and villages, rather dismal grey brick or stucco semi-neoclassical buildings with names like Bethel or Horeb, all of rectangular plan, their size dependent on that of the local population. They are either abandoned completely or have been converted into supposedly luxury flats, or in some cases pharmacies or nightclubs.

The chapels were the focus of Welsh social life: they were examples of democratic authoritarianism. The elected elders ruled over their communities with a rod of puritanical intolerance and censoriousness. The communities over whom they presided were warm but also very oppressive. The country was poor and townspeople lived mainly in small terraced houses, in streets in which nothing escaped the malicious gossips. The oppression and hypocrisy of this way of life was the subject of a considerable literature, much of it of high quality, but I suspect that, with the passing of the way of life, that of the coalmine and the steelworks, or of smallholder sheep-farming, not many people read it now. That is a pity, for in some respects the Welsh valleys gave rise to a pure culture (I use the term in its bacteriological sense) of human nature, in the same way that isolated Western colonies in the Far East did, and were exploited in literary fashion as such by writers such as Joseph Conrad, Somerset Maugham and Stefan Zweig.

I am sure that if I had been brought up in the heyday of evangelical Welsh religion, I should have hated it and desired to do all that I could to destroy it. It was killjoy in the extreme: I remember the days when you could not drink in Wales on Sunday and it was hard enough, if you were a visitor, even to find something to eat, as if attendance to the needs of the flesh on the Lord's Day were halfway to damnation. In my hatred of this religion, I should not have seen that it had any benefits at all, that it provided some moral,

psychological and cultural structure to the lives of people for whom desperate poverty was never far away. The Wales of today seems to me savourless, merely a small country in thrall to a failed materialism. For the Wales of today, it seems, material success is all, and yet it repeatedly elects politicians who do everything possible to obstruct such success. Greed and resentment tussle for hegemony, with resentment always winning.

On my way to Aberdaron, a small village on the peninsula that sticks out from North Wales, to celebrate, or at least to mark, my seventy-fifth birthday, I noticed as before the abandoned or transformed chapels and the prevalence of Welsh but absence of British flags. The Welsh language, the native tongue of at most a quarter of the population of Wales, has been much promoted, and most public signage everywhere is in both Welsh and English (there is even some Welsh signage over the border in England and the names of Welsh towns sometimes appear only in Welsh, no doubt to the confusion and puzzlement of visitors). It is a very long time, though, since anyone in Wales was monolingual in Welsh.

However, I must add that when my wife, who is a doctor, worked in North Wales temporarily, she had sometimes to employ an interpreter when dealing with very old patients who found it easier to express themselves in Welsh than English. They were born at a time when they had to learn English when it was really a foreign language; the writer, Caradoc Evans, born in 1878, spoke no English in his childhood and had laboriously to learn it in order to write in it. He was a founder of Welsh prose literature in English—that is to say, of literature in English specifically about Wales. He was very far from flattering about the people of whom he wrote, the small farmers of Carmarthenshire among whom he grew up: indeed, his books of short stories, *My People* (1915) and *Capel Sion* (1916) were possibly the most ferocious attack on any group of people that I have ever read, depicting them as narrow, bigoted,

ignorant, superstitious, hypocritical, avaricious, uncouth, malicious, sly, dirty and stupid. He was regarded by many as a traitor to his country, and he was known for a time as 'the best-hated man in Wales,' though no one claimed that his depiction did not contain an element of truth.

The Welsh language has never been dead and has one of the oldest continuous traditions of poetry in the world. One can easily find eighteenth and nineteenth century books in Welsh in the diminishing number of second-hand bookshops in and near to Wales, and the eccentric nineteenth century writer, George Borrow, learnt the language while he was living far from Wales, in Norfolk, out of sheer linguistic interest and preparatory to writing his classic travel book, *Wild Wales*. Colonies of Welsh-speakers have survived in Patagonia and are said to number up to 70,000 souls. Publication in Welsh thrives, no doubt a great deal of it with subvention. English people when they enter a pub in which the locals are speaking Welsh are inclined to imagine that they, the locals, have just switched to Welsh merely to be awkward or difficult, or simply to show off, their natural language of expression being, as it is of all sensible and normal people, English. Presumably, this explains why the famous actor, Richard Burton, always talked to his birth family in Welsh. But the language came in handy during the war, when Welsh-speakers were used in radio communications that might be intercepted by the Germans. The number of people in Germany capable of translating Welsh to German must have been tiny, if any existed at all.

Nevertheless, there is little doubt that, notwithstanding official efforts to promote Welsh, it has long been on the retreat. There has been more than one reason for this, not the least of them that Welsh people themselves. Understandably enough, many of them saw English as a language more useful for getting on in the world; Dylan Thomas's parents were Welsh-speakers but never taught their son the language because they thought it was useless and might overload his brain to no good

end. Indeed, there was an attempt almost to stamp it out, that persisted into living memory. A Welsh friend of mine, a native speaker of the language, was punished if she spoke it in the school playground with any of her Welsh-speaking playmates. She was beaten by a teacher with a wooden ruler for the crime of speaking in her mother tongue. She is of my age.

The pendulum has now swung in the opposite direction: despite which the proportion of the Welsh population that can speak Welsh has fallen. Personally, I regret this (not that I have more than a few words of this notoriously difficult language). If Welsh were to die out, I would count it a loss, though I am also averse to any attempts to impose it or discriminate against people who can't speak it. To insist that that people be able to speak a language which 75 per cent of the population do not speak before they can apply for certain positions (other than those in which the ability to speak Welsh is an obvious qualification for the job) would be to create a kind of superior minority caste against which there will one day be a reaction.

If Welsh is to survive, therefore, it must or ought to be by the spontaneous will and efforts of the people, not by those of officialdom, with all the clumsiness that officialdom brings to any task. Compulsion breeds resistance; but officialdom can rarely resist the temptation to meddle. Meddling is its metier.

While there were no British flags in Bala, a small market (and now tourist) town in mid-Wales, but there were plentiful Palestinian flags festooning what looked like the best hotel there. This angered me: I wouldn't have much cared for a political demonstration even in a cause I approved of, let alone in a cause that called for the deaths of millions of people and the worldwide spread of an ideology that was the enemy to all freedom, however defined. The fools, I thought—the most charitable word I could find for them.

That very day the *Plaid Cymru*, the Welsh nationalist party, called for a boycott of Israel. Of course, such a call was of no practical effect, since *Plaid* had never even formed the government of the principality, and the latter was of little consequence anyway, but it was typical and illustrative of the extraordinarily potent mixture of moral grandiosity and exhibitionism, analytical incapacity, self-destructiveness and wilful ignorance of much of the western political intelligentsia, no doubt all with an unacknowledged undercurrent of antisemitism.

It was with relief that we arrived in Aberdaron, where there was not a flag to be seen. There are two hotels there, in one of which we had stayed before, and which was run by a remarkable man, bilingual in Welsh and English. Somewhat handicapped, with a limp and a deformity of the hands, he managed his hotel, pub and excellent restaurant with great skill and with precisely the degree of friendliness that was pleasing but not obtrusive. His aged mother lived not far up the road, and he, devoted son, popped in to see her several times a day to check that she was well and needed nothing. He was a kind of hero to me, his heroism being of the quiet and undemonstrative kind, the greatest of all heroism, chronic rather than acute, silent rather than noisy. He sought no pity for his handicap, and against the odds lived independently, providing a service to others. He was precisely the type that many modern governments fear and detest, a man who asks for nothing and therefore escapes control.

In the entrance to the hotel is a picture of a man called Dic Aberdaron, whose real name was Richard Roberts Jones. He was a kind of tramp, with a heavy, unkept beard. Born in 1780, his father was a carpenter and boatbuilder of the village. Dic Aberdaron wandered from place to place, carrying a load of books with him, and was celebrated for his supposed mastery of fourteen or fifteen languages, ancient and modern. He compiled a Welsh-Hebrew-Greek dictionary, though it was never published

for lack of interest. Certainly, his calligraphy in several scripts was remarkable. How he came by his extraordinary acquirements is not known, but a book was published London about him in 1822 with the title *Memoir of Richard Roberts Jones of Aberdaron, in the County of Carnarvon in North Wales: Exhibiting a Remarkable Instance of a Partial Power and Cultivation of Intellect*. This suggests that he might have been what is called an *idiot savant*, for he was uninterested in reading in any of the languages knowledge of which he acquired. The acquisition was all.

On the outside wall of the other of Aberdaron's hotels, perhaps more *chic* than the one in which we stayed, was inscribed, in Welsh and English, a poem by Sir Cynan, that is to say Sir Cynan Evans Jones (1895 – 1970), who is regarded as the finest poet in Welsh of the First World War, in which he served. But his best known poem is one in which he expresses a desire to retire to Aberdaron (he was the son of a café owner in the nearby town of Pwlllelhi). I give it only in English translation:

*When I am old and reverend
With money to my name
With all my judgments over
Yet basking in my fame
I'll buy a lonely cottage
With nothing 'fore its door,
But the rocks of Aberdaron
And the ocean's maddened roar.*

I will return to this *se sentiment*.

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