Cymru am Byth! Wales for Ever!

‘Morning, John. Letter for you. Cor, not ’alf peculiar, it’s got foreign writing on it, it has, with a Luton postmark too ’n’ all!’ My landlady pointed to a letter leaning against my plate of egg, bacon and fried bread.

So it had. The envelope looked official with ‘Cymdeithas Cymraeg Luton A’r Cylch’ stamped across the top left hand corner. Ah, my name had been written in handwriting that I recognised. It was that of my Welsh friend and colleague, John Yockney. I thought I’d better be careful not to let dear old Mrs. Postlethwaite see it. Scatology was in the offing.

The letterhead on the letter inside translated in little letters underneath what that jumble of letters meant. It meant ‘Luton & District Welsh Association’.

29 November, 1957

Dear Mr. Biggs,

It has come to our notice that, without the authorization of heredity, you are in the habit of using the watchword of all Welshmen – ‘Tyll dyn pob Saes’¹.

Admirable though this sentiment is, we feel that National reservation must be exercised.

However, we can offer to register you as an honorary Welshman. There is a Welshman at your school who, should you so desire, will acquaint you with the Inauguration Ceremony, which involves a ragman’s trumpet (wide-end first).

Sut mae dy gerrig?²

(Sgd). Caradog

John Yockney and I had been teaching at Challney Secondary Modern Boys’ School in Luton, Bedfordshire, for less than a term, each of us recently graduated and in our first teaching post. We were both exiles from our home countries and we had homesickness in common, he far more than I did. I thought this odd, because he could and did return to his home in Aberdare, a town in the heart of the coal-mining Valleys in South Wales, several times a year, whereas my home in Tasmania was rather too remote to allow such periodic balm to a yearning soul.

Like many Welshmen, he had a fierce, animal longing for home that was much more passionate than the homesickness of Everyman, a depth of feeling caught in Huw Llewellyn’s How Green was my Valley. John used the rallying cry of the Welsh Nationalists at every opportunity, appropriate and inappropriate: ‘Cymru am byth! Twll dyn pob Saís!’ (‘Wales for ever! Arseholes to the English!’), he would shout when entering a crowded bus. I noted the grins of recognition as any expatriate Welsh heard their beloved password. I, copy-cat, also started shouting ‘Tyll dyn pob Saís’.

¹ Arseholes to the English.
² How are your balls?
Then I received the above letter, whereupon Yockney and I formed the Tasman-Cymric League without the trumpet ceremony.

After school, we usually met in the Red Lion, where Yockney poured his heart out. He hated Luton, Challney School, Hamilton Fox the headmaster, most teachers, those fucking retarded oafs he had to teach, and to make sure his hatred embraced all, the English in general. How he longed to be back in the valleys, fishing in the Cynon River, which I was amazed to learn was how he spent all his spare time.

He and his friend Jonnah used to stand all day, teeth chattering, on the banks of the river Cynon, or beside small artificial lakes formed out of mine tailings that had miraculously become stocked with fish, in order to make the lives of tiny trout and perch ever more miserable. Each time one of them caught a fish, he would place it in his own keep-net in the water. At day’s end, each would count his catch, and having entered their respective scores in a damp and tattered exercise book that John kept, they released their aching-mouthed tallies to be recaught another day. John’s obsession was to catch more than Jonnah. His damp and tattered exercise book contained records of all the fish each had caught since they started fishing. John, to his immense satisfaction, was regularly ahead of Jonnah: the last time he mentioned it to me, his latest average score, which he gleefully recalculated after each brass-cold session, was 3.1 fish.

University was an inconvenient interlude in John’s fishing career. British universities then had only two sets of exams in the three year Bachelor’s degree; attending lectures between exams was not crucial. This left a clear two years in which John got on with his fishing – and to be fair, with other games dear to his heart. And still he obtained First Class Honours. In fact, his professor offered him a scholarship to do a Ph.D., to which he claims he replied:

‘Canaf bant.’

I visited Aberdare first in Christmas 1957. It was like walking back to Llewellyn’s Valleys of the previous century. In the suburb of Tre cynon, where John lived, each side of the street was like one elongated house, with individual front doors opening onto the footpath, a room’s width apart.

When we arrived at his house, John opened the front door and we stepped straight into a living-dining room, a perpetual coal fire glowing in the grate. On the right, wooden stairs led up to the bedrooms. Ahead, was the door to the kitchen, where there was a table, an open grate, with an iron grid across, and a hook hanging down from the chimney on which hung a simmering kettle. Most of the cooking was done in a large frying pan, well-seasoned with the fat remaining from innumerable previous cookings, hanging over the grate. To the right was an open sink and a cold water tap. Through the door at the back was a pit-bog, which filled every fifty years, John said, after which they had to bring in the Aberdare Council to dig

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3 Fuck off.
another one beside it. This one was already one bog’s width from the fence, so they only had another fifty years to go.

But the problem was solved much earlier than that. It was only three years later that the progressive Aberdare Council built modern housing estates, each house equipped with bathroom and water closet, to relocate the residents of these old mining cottages. The people did not want to go; they fought the Council tooth and nail, but of course the Council finally won. When they were relocated, though, morale collapsed, and juvenile delinquency and mental disorder increased. A well functioning, mutually supportive community had been destroyed. It was a story to be repeated throughout the United Kingdom in the next couple of decades. In 1957, however, community spirit was still thriving, John’s intense feeling for his home being one indicator.

His family greeted me warmly for dinner. His father, like many miners, had silicosis, which forced him to work on an outdoor job with the Council. He told me they had lots of fun as kids.

‘Like once we took a couple of cats and hung them up by their tails on a clothes line, see? Der, man, they tore each other to bits!’

Was he kidding? Tall stories were his son’s forte, so like son like father: I decided that Mr. Yockney too was kidding. After dinner, he took us to his club, the hub of the social life of the community. This club was like working men’s clubs all over Great Britain at the time, except that this was Wales. Every so often someone stood up to sing a solo: ‘Trees’, ‘The Holy City’, ‘My Friend’, even just a Methodist hymn. To conclude the evening, all stood to roar a multi-layered ‘Sospan Fach’ in harmony.

John and his mates took me to The Gadlys Arms, a scruffy little tumbledown pub on the outskirts of the town, usually patronized only by a few local alcoholics. They were there for the specialty of the house, scrumpy. This, a so-called cider, was a flat apple wine of unknown alcoholic strength, made I suspect from apples that had been left rotting on the ground for a long time, the grubs still in them. Its only virtue was its price: 9d. a pint.

On our first night we ordered this rotgut. We sat around the table, and talked and sang. And sang. Scrumpy acted on my vocal chords like battery acid with an anesthetic in it, which was actually close enough to the truth. The anesthetic numbed the throat so that I could bark notes, high, loud and long without feeling the pain and the damage that was being done. Next morning, I could talk only in a painful whisper and I was struck with the worst indigestion and the foulest flatulence ever. That afternoon, we attended the wedding of a friend of John’s. To my intense embarrassment, I couldn’t prevent this putrescent effluvium from extruding. It hung like a foul purple miasma, to the extreme consternation of those in the vicinity. Finally, Boots the Chemist supplied me with a potion that fixed the problem.

‘The Parish Council decided they’d have to reconsecrate the Chapel, Biggs, I hope you realise,’ Yockney advised me afterwards.
We switched to Welsh bitter, a wild extravagance by comparison: it cost not ninepence but one shilling per pint. On the way home, John and the boys recited *Under Milk Wood*, each picking up where the other left off. We also needed to relieve ourselves.

It seems that an Aberdare Councillor had been to Paris and seen the *pissoirs*.

‘There is good,’ this worthy had said.

And so it came to pass that Aberdare Council erected stern Protestant versions of Parisian *pissoirs* on the footpaths of Aberdare. They were open to the sky but encircled by stone walls seven feet high. One of John’s many claims to fame was that by dint of withholding then suddenly releasing pressure, he could direct a jet that easily cleared those walls, a feat none of the rest of us could manage.

One night while he was thus engaged, we heard voices outside, Welsh bright and clear.

‘There is funny now, Mrs. Jones. A nice clear night, see, and rainin’ so heavy like.’

‘Oh aye, Mrs. Morgan, so it is. There’s the atomic bomb for you then, is it?’