

Chapter II

Wales: A Touch of Grass

I travelled to Wales by the slowest of routes; I boarded a narrow boat at Chester and spent four days with a handful of strangers, lazily floating along the Llangollen Canal. My days fell easily into a slothful routine: after breakfast when we began the day's journey, I would get off the boat and walk on the towpath. As I could walk faster than the boat, I'd make a rendezvous to meet the boat at a bridge or a lock several hours later. That walk was a pleasure. There was peace and there was beauty and yet often the noisy old world was no more than a bridge away; if I stood still I could hear the hum of the rest of the world, scurrying about its business. The weather was dazzling; the colours were copybook autumn: greens and browns and golds. Each morning a heatless white sun would stare at the dozy countryside, a countryside all but ready for winter sleep, and bathe it in the most gentle, soothing light. The leaves, so cheerfully close to the end of their lives and with nothing to lose, would cheekily wink at the white sun, and that slight movement would make the scene glisten and sparkle. Many find September a melancholy month; I find it glorious. Of winter I expect little and can sometimes be surprised. Spring and summer are whores, they tease and tantalize and sometimes lie. September is virtuous, honest, glorious and never disappointing; it offers only what it can deliver. Mostly it just offers a last chance to step outside, breathe deeply, and walk freely. So I did.

By the fifth morning October arrived. It was dark and dank; the whole day seemed like the inside of the lock. I felt damp, and half expected my skin to be green and slimy. The towpath, instead of enticing me to walk, looked sinister, looked designed for skulduggery and murder, draped as it was in swirling mist resembling theatrical dry ice. At that point I abandoned the narrow boat, found a phone box and sought a taxi to Llangollen.

I was in Wales. I felt a little uneasy. I could not pronounce the street names or the place names. It was worse when I went into a shop. The sales assistant was speaking to another customer in Welsh. They stopped talking. I bought a newspaper and as soon as the transaction was over the two reverted to their native tongue. I felt horribly English. Wales is a foreign country. A small foreign country of some two and a half million people spread over an area that measures a mere 140 miles from north to south and at its narrowest point a mere forty miles from east to west. Most of the English think (if they think at all) that Wales is yet another province of England, like Cumbria or Devon. There's an awful story, oft repeated, of the time when the entry for Wales in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* said 'see England'. Wales is much ignored, probably more so than Scotland. Say 'Wales' to the average punter and he'll probably paint a quick sketch of the south Wales valleys. North Wales, to those too young to remember Llandudno as a flourishing seaside resort, is nothing more than a mountain called Snowdon and a castle called Caernarfon, where a prince called Charles had a dazzling investiture. Or they might just talk about the Welsh nationalists who like setting fire to country cottages owned by the English as second homes. The Welsh have been nursing a grievance against the English for some 700 years for conquering them and then for trying to smother their Welshness. The English can be unspeakable at times: during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries they punished Welsh children caught speaking their own language at school; a piece of wood with the initials WN (the Welsh Not) cut into it, was hung around the necks of pupils. Such an attitude defies belief. The Welsh have all my sympathy, not just because of the much cherished dollop of Welsh blood in me, not just because such oppression is manifestly wrong, but because of my distaste for a homogeneous world that speaks the same language, listens to the same music, watches the same films, reads the same books and drives the same cars. How dull. The dreariness of it, I think, is one reason why the folk in Bradford (and elsewhere) encourage multi-culturalism. It is intriguing to think of that newish attempt to encourage people to be different and contrast it with England's attitude, in the past, towards the Welsh. How stupid we were to try and ban their language and to strangle their customs and their culture. It amazes me that the British government did not seriously acknowledge that Wales had a separate identity until 1951, when a Ministry of Welsh Affairs was first established. That minister was elevated to Secretary of State for Wales only in 1964. Well, at least they now have Sianel Pedwar Cymru (S4C), the Welsh fourth channel that broadcasts in Welsh (but not before Gwynfor Evans, Plaid Cymru's

first MP, threatened to fast to death), Welsh studies in schools, road signs in Welsh, the right to ask for court proceedings and tax demands in the Welsh language. But it isn't enough and it's too late. The number of Welsh speakers has declined steadily this century, from around 50 per cent in 1900 to 19 per cent today. The dwindling minority feel so miserable about this that they have become all the more pugnacious. Pity we didn't see the wisdom of encouraging bilingualism centuries ago, and then perhaps the Welsh would have been a little more tolerant of English weekend cottages (only a little, because people do not want to sit by and watch the rich buying second homes at inflated prices while the newly married Welsh are unable to afford homes of their own). As it is the Welsh are not tolerant of English incomers. They still feel that every time the English buy a cottage or a business their Welshness is threatened. In north Wales they fear that they are slowly becoming an annex of Liverpool, and in south Wales they increasingly feel that they are becoming an extension of the M4 corridor. As in Scotland, Europe is seen as a potential saviour. In a united Europe, Wales could perhaps find a safe haven and the freedom to be Welsh; to be less fettered by the English. Surveys have shown that more than half those interviewed support the nationalist aims of excluding English influence and preserving Welsh culture, but the vast majority, fortunately, do not support the methods used; they are against fire bombings. Perhaps if the Welsh had not had to fight so hard to keep their Welshness, then I would not have felt such an intruder. I'm not saying that I was *made* to feel unwelcome; merely that I felt an outsider, a foreigner.

The Welsh, said Jan Morris in *The Matter of Wales*, a book that was to be my constant companion, are different. They are what is left of the original Celts who swept into these islands from Europe. They were 'Warlike, artistic, quarrelsome, ill-organized, showy, flighty, witty and headstrong'. Then the Romans came bringing a few roads and a little order. Fortunately, when England fell to the Angles and the Saxons, Wales managed to avoid that particular deadening hand, only to be harnessed once and for all by the Normans. After that there was only a brief period – ten years in fact, between 1400 and 1410 – when Owen Glendower, the national hero, had fun trying to kick the English out. For a handful of years it looked as though he might succeed in his attempt to establish Welsh statehood, but by 1413 the rising had been suppressed. Jan Morris's vision of what Wales would have been like if Owen Glendower had won the war of independence is a delightful fantasy. Wales is a republic, a perfect little neutral state, with strong ties to Europe and cordial relations with England. Property laws are

very strict, and the number of English cottage owners has been reduced. The economy thrived once the English had gone, with cooperatively owned steel mills in the south and a dozen or so coal mines providing power for the country – not a nuclear power station in sight. There are small industries, flourishing as workers' cooperatives, and the most advanced health service in the western world, financed with ease because Wales no longer has to fund English royalty, nuclear weapons and other nonsense. There is a little army which has no military parades and no uniform and is committed to 'absolute non-violence'. There is no pomp, the policemen dress in dungarees and the dear little country attracts idealists from all over the world as a 'model of a non-nuclear, neutral, un-militarist, ecological state'.

The vision was so appealing that I decided to visit Machynlleth, where Glendower held court and where Jan Morris placed the capital of her fantasy republic: it is in the middle, at the head of the Dovey estuary on the west coast. That is to say, the furthest point from England. If Jan Morris's dream for Wales had come true, Machynlleth would have been easier to visit. I once again let my life be ruled by train timetables and found myself in Welshpool, attempting to catch a little train that would chug its way to the coast. The station at Welshpool was deserted. I found a sign saying 'Information' and knocked on the door. A voice answered: 'You'll have to wait two minutes. I'm doing the money.' I waited. He opened up and we tried to work out how I could spend a few hours in Machynlleth and then get back on the train and head north. It seemed impossible. The one thing that became clear was that wherever I decided to stop, I'd be spending two nights. Few trains run in Wales on Sundays. I decided for no good reason that I didn't want to spend two nights in Machynlleth, and that if I had to spend two nights anywhere I'd prefer it to be Aberystwyth. It was a daft decision; it poured with rain and all I managed to do in Aberystwyth was read the Sunday papers and go for a damp walk along the cliff tops. The Welsh have even duller Sundays than the English. The fact that there are no trains is a giveaway. John Wesley's Methodism was hugely successful in Wales in the mid-eighteenth century. In part, one could argue, the Welsh would have grabbed at anything that enabled them to reflect their disdain for the Church of England, and Wesley's rejection of the snottiness of Anglicanism, and his passionate desire to help the poor to rise above their boozing and their ignorance hit the perfect note. These non-conformist views transformed Wales. It's baffling in some ways. How could these 'showy, flighty, witty, headstrong' people take so readily to the funless, teetotal, self-improving stance of Methodism? But they did. And the

influence of the egalitarian people's church – or rather, chapel – was so entrenched that no one did anything on Sundays, not even wind the clock. Pubs were not allowed to open on Sundays until 1982 and even then there was a lot of huffing and puffing from the pulpit. It's not surprising, then, that there are no trains on Sundays.

On Monday morning I headed north. I wanted to visit the heartland of Welshness, Gwynedd. The Plaid Cymru MPs are elected in Gwynedd. Here they see the development of an east-west road, which would improve communications with Liverpool, as just another ethnic threat. Here they view south Wales as beyond the pale. South Wales is English-speaking (many of the inhabitants came from the Midlands, as well as Ireland, to work in the mines), socialist and industrial. A world away, not the real Wales at all. These attitudes are important. They help to explain why the Welsh voted against devolution in 1979 by four to one, when you'd have thought they would have jumped at the proposal. But just as in Scotland, where the Highlands and Islands were (and are) suspicious of the populous Strathclyde area, so too in Wales: the north feared (and fears) being swamped by the populous south. And in return the south feared that devolution would bring preferment for the bilingual, Druid-loving people of the north. Who needs to fear England when the people themselves do not trust each other!

As well as savouring Welsh Wales, I also wanted to visit Llanystumdwy; this was to be a David Lloyd George pilgrimage. The short distance takes a couple of hours by train; from Dovey junction there are twenty-two stops to Porthmadog. It was the most delightful journey; the train hugs the coast all the way, disappearing into the odd tunnel and emerging to display another little village or caravan site nestling close to the water's edge. I looked for a heron on the flat sands of the Dovey estuary. Dylan Thomas made much of sad, flat estuary sands where he watched 'herons walk like women poets'. I have a poor memory for snatches of appropriate poetry or prose, but this is easily recalled: what on earth made him liken a heron walking to a woman poet? Months later I saw a picture of Edith Sitwell and convinced myself that Thomas had her in mind when he wrote that line.

At Barmouth a blonde bounced in. She was an American with a large knapsack. She allowed her large knapsack to bump the smaller knapsack of another traveller and that was the signal for an animated conversation between the two of them. The conversation, which was really no more than a catalogue of the places they had visited, was punctuated by the blonde jumping up and down and taking photographs out of the window. She didn't know the word 'estuary'. She got the point when the young man likened it to a fjord.

I wasn't sure whether Llanystumdwy was closer to Porthmadog or to Criccieth, so when the ticket inspector came along, I asked him.

'Oh, I haven't a clue, love.'

I decided to get off at Porthmadog. It was by then 12.30, lunchtime, and when I finally managed to find the Tourist Office it was firmly closed. I drank coffee and waited until it opened.

'How do I get to Llanystumdwy?' I asked.

I had missed the bus. By sitting waiting for the Tourist Office to open I had missed the bus by ten minutes. The next bus, a couple of hours away, would throw my timetable out completely. And I also discovered that if I had gone to Criccieth on the train I would have been able to walk.

'How much will it cost me to take a taxi? I want to make a brief pilgrimage to Lloyd George's house and his grave.'

Her face broke into a huge smile. I had obviously said the right thing. She picked up the phone and chatted away in Welsh.

'The taxi is on its way. He said he won't charge you much. It'll take about an hour and he'll charge you £6.' It was my turn to smile. And to learn why my request had pleased her so much.

'I once worked for Lloyd George. When he came here, he'd leave his secretary in London and call on me for help. He knew me because I used to work for his brother. He would write everything out in longhand in *pencil*, you know. And his writing was hard to decipher. I used to say it was just as easy to read it upside down! And when lunch time came, we'd just sit there and eat together. He was like that, he had no problem coming down to my level or anybody's. Did you see that television series about him?'

I told her that I had and that it had just finished when I went on a visit to Albania and, since journalists are not popular in Albania, I'd used the television series as a 'cover'. I told people that I was a Welsh historian, guessing that their knowledge of Wales would be so slight that they wouldn't pester me with further questions. That story amused her; the television series did not. 'We didn't like it. I know it was made by a Welshman, but no one around here liked it much. We all know about his mistresses. His wife knew all about it too, he grew away from her and from us, but it's a pity they had to drag all that up and spend so much time on it. It's a shame.' And she of course wanted to know the reason for my interest in Lloyd George. I told her that it stemmed from my years on the *Guardian* which was, or at least had been, a Liberal newspaper. Of course my interest went deeper than that. The Liberal party attracted some great minds in the last century, and produced some great reforming governments, and I was intrigued

that the Welsh with speed and ease had become devoted to the Liberal party in much the same way as they had adopted Methodism. In my view the two displayed, above all, the strong spirit of egalitarianism in the Welsh. Just as soon as the Reform Act of 1884 had given a large number of working-class men (but by no means all) the vote, politics in Wales was transformed. What would the Liberal party have been without Wales? What would it have been without Lloyd George?

The taxi arrived and off we went. The driver whistled and hummed as though he were about to burst into a full-throated song at any minute. Llanystumdwy is the prettiest of villages. It has all the ingredients that we town-dwellers expect to find in villages: a large church, a beautiful bridge under which flowed the purest water, a small hotel, a post office, a café and an arts-and-crafts centre. There were rows of slate-and-stone houses, several of which were being lovingly improved with new-fangled windows not exactly in keeping with the architecture. We went first to the boyhood home to which Lloyd George returned from Manchester, to live in the home of his mother's brother, the village shoemaker. In those days the village only had some seventy houses for poor labourers under the thumb of the Tory Anglican squire. Between us, the driver and I shared out fragments of history and hoped we had got the story more or less right. The story of the village-school education, and how LG spent much of his time with the blacksmith; of how he became articled to a solicitor in Porthmadog and how, later in life, when he won a libel action, he helped fund an Institute for the village. We had a little difficulty finding the grander house to which he moved, and when we did, we found that it was being painted by the present inhabitant. The museum was closed and so our final stop was the grave; a most beautiful spot in the woods, by the river, where Lloyd George played as a child.

It was an enchanting hour. The driver, whose name I didn't know, asked no questions of me, and sped efficiently from place to place, commenting mostly on the roads and how impossible and impassable they had been in summer before the by-pass had been built. The roads were not full of Lloyd George fans; the cars were *en route* to Butlin's at Pwllheli. 'The pub wasn't too happy when the by-pass came, nor was the petrol station – it had to close. It's now the arts-and-crafts centre.' The signpost to Criccieth had been daubed with paint. The place name was spelled with two 'c's in the middle. The nationalists, the taxi driver assured me, had been along and blotted out the surplus 'c'. Criccieth is Cricieth in Welsh.

I caught the 5.08 back to Aberystwyth and the following morning the first bus to Cardiff.

I viewed my visit to south Wales as a treat, something special, a welcome pause in this relentless round of unknown hotels. In Cardiff I was staying with a friend. Ann Clwyd is now the MP for Cynon Valley but we had once been colleagues on the *Guardian*. She had covered Wales for the paper and been based in Cardiff before becoming a Member of the European Parliament and then a member of the House of Commons. The thought of her warm welcome pleased me as I sat in a cold, near-empty bus, making a list of what I wanted to see and do in south Wales. The centre of my interest was the valleys: I wanted to see what was happening in the aftermath of the miners' strike. I saw the valleys as not just male, but macho, and was glad that Ann would be able to help me over the hurdle of being a female outsider. I saw the valleys as a battered and beaten area where nousey questions from an English woman might not be welcome. Such were my fears on the bus that morning. Two weeks later I was to leave south Wales with a chunk of heart left in Cynon Valley.

The miners and mining communities had fascinated me for some years; since the election of February 1974. Edward Heath's government had battled with the miners in 1972. That year was the first occasion since 1926 that the miners had taken *national* action. In 1972 they were displeased to discover that they had fallen way down the wages table, to seventeenth position, and their fight that year was straightforward enough – the miners wanted to improve their material lot. They did well: they won and their victory hinged on the battle of Saltley Gate. Saltley was a coke stockpile in Birmingham. A miners' picket had failed to stop the lorries coming and going and Arthur Scargill had made an emotional plea to other unions to support his fight. Twenty thousand of them had marched upon Saltley and the chief constable of Birmingham was forced to order the gates to close: Scargill's dream, solidarity among the workers, had stopped the supply of coke. The miners were riding high. They were riding even higher in 1974, having watched the price of oil quadruple, and once again they confronted Heath, reducing the country to a three-day week. Heath felt cornered and decided to call a single-question election, asking: who runs this country – the government or the trades unions? I was working for the *Guardian* at the time and one afternoon my then husband, Norman Fowler, rang me there to tell me that an election had been called. He asked me to take immediate leave to go to Sutton Coldfield to fight the election. There had been much talk that an election was imminent, but I did not believe that it would happen. That night I had the first political row of my life. I thought the decision to call the election was stupid and suicidal. The Tories could not win. And I did not want to

stomp the streets against the miners. I saw the miners as workers to be cherished; they did the most disgusting, unhealthy and dangerous job in order that I could live in a warm and well-lit house, using endless electric gadgets without a second thought. They deserved the highest wages for that. Of course I knew that coal was no longer king, of course I knew that many pits were uneconomical, of course I knew that it was wrong for any one group 'to hold the country to ransom'. Of course I knew all the counter arguments, but none of this eased my loathing of tramping the streets for votes against the miners, of tramping the streets for a clearly defined battle between labour and capital. It all seemed so distasteful compared to the election of 1970. Norman listened to my lengthy emotional tirade and answered in two sentences. 'I've listened to what you have to say. Now, are you coming with me or not?' I went. Heath lost the election. The miners had brought down the government.

It is hardly surprising that the Tories decided that it wouldn't happen again. The story is that they planned most carefully; they saw another battle with the miners as inevitable, and however long it took and whatever the cost, they were going to win. They would pick their moment and they would win. It came in 1984; it took a year; it cost a lot. The Chancellor of the Exchequer said it was 'worth the investment'. The great miners' strike was not about who heads league tables of wages, it was about something more fundamental. It was about the way society is ordered; it was about whether society should put profit before social need. The coal board wanted to close pits; demand for coal had been reduced and too many pits were making too great a loss. The miners knew this; Arthur Scargill knew this. But he wanted a fight; he preferred a world in which governments subsidized jobs. The miners lost because they were not of one mind and because the solidarity shown at Saltley did not reappear – other unions did not halt the movement of 'blackleg' coal and oil. The miners lost because violent scenes of police fighting miners and miners fighting police alienated potential supporters. Arthur Scargill was too confident; he miscalculated on the weather and on coal stocks and on the strength of the left. The Labour party floundered. The event was a watershed for this country; a seminal event in post-war political history.

I had never met a miner. I had never been down a coal mine, but I had been down a gold mine in Western Australia. I hated it. I hated the darkness and the damp and the wading through water. I couldn't understand why anyone wanted to do the job, let alone fight for it. Why in the fifties when many were refusing to do so-called 'dirty jobs' and were happy to see them taken up by immigrants, did the coal miners cling to the mines?

The area known as The Valleys lies in the hinterland between Newport and Swansea. In all, there are some twenty valleys, and Cynon lies squeezed between the more famous valleys of Rhondda and Merthyr. The collapse of coal and steel has had a devastating effect on the lives of the half a million people who live in this area. None the less, they have to be coaxed to speak with one voice. The allegiance of each valley is to its own; this encourages narrowness, parochialism and a large degree of jealousy between them. Their economic problems are hardly new and certainly not caused by the miners' strike. As far back as 1936, when unemployment in Merthyr was 51 per cent, a report said that 'there might be a case for systematic evacuation wholly or in part of such a derelict area as Merthyr'. After all, mines have a finite life and when that life is over it is time to pack up and move on, in just the same way as people packed up and moved in all those years ago. Well, the valley dwellers don't want to move, that much is clear, and it's not just because there is nowhere else to go. Many did leave, but the drift is now over; indeed, some who moved away are coming back. At first glance it is hard to understand why. The statistics alone are not enticing. The valleys are beyond doubt Wales's 'inner city' with all the problems with which I was now familiar. Cynon Valley has some of the worst housing conditions in western Europe. It might have a high percentage of home ownership, 68 per cent, but 19 per cent of the houses are classified as unfit, with no inside lavatories and sometimes no hot water. Unemployment in Cynon Valley is 21 per cent; 24 per cent of school-leavers have no formal qualifications; there is a large number of people with long-term sickness and disability, and perhaps as many as 60 per cent of the people live on incomes of £80 a week or less.

On my first morning in south Wales Ann drove me right through Cynon Valley, from Cardiff to the Heads of the Valleys Road, which as its name suggests runs along the top of the valleys within sight of the Brecon Beacons. The journey takes forty-five minutes. I was expecting, I suppose, a landscape of menacing slagheaps. My mind was conditioned by images of the Aberfan disaster, when in October 1966 a slag tip, disturbed by heavy rain, engulfed a school, a row of cottages and a farm. The disaster killed 144 people, of whom 116 were children. I did not find menacing slag heaps. They have not been removed completely, but, since Aberfan, millions of pounds have been spent scaling them down in size and grassing them over to resemble natural hills. My first impression was of almost claustrophobic narrowness; the sides of the valley are steep but not particularly high. There are one or two expansive sections, but for the most part I felt hemmed in as we drove along a winding road with houses rising on either side for no more

than a handful of rows, sometimes running at right angles to the valley bed, sometimes in parallel. Occasionally the landscape became green and pleasant but on the whole, having come from north Wales, I would not call the valleys picturesque. They could be, now that the pits have gone (there is but one working in Cynon Valley). When the land is reclaimed; when the pit heads are removed; when the slag heaps are camouflaged with grass; when the land is levelled and planted with trees or new industries; then the valleys could be attractive. This is the worst stage. The drama of the industrial landscape has ended; the scenery is still partly in place, partly falling down and partly removed, leaving gaping holes, hollow reminders of what was and no clear view of what is to be. Ironically, it is where the industrial scenery is still in place that it is most hideous. At Abercwmboi, British Coal has a plant making smokeless fuel. In order that some parts of the country can have clean air, this little place is made filthy. There's a wretched old plant that has been operating since the early forties, before nationalization; it uses some German process which seems to work well in Germany but has never worked well in Cynon Valley. Its chimneys belch muck, soot and sulphurous yellow fumes all over the neighbourhood. Cars parked nearby collect a film of black dust; God knows what goes into people's lungs. When the valley was wedded to coal, nobody much minded if their daffodils had black spots. When coal began to leave the valley, people clung to the phurnacite plant. It meant jobs, and they were defensive when it was described as a dirty old eyesore and labelled the worst polluting plant in Europe. After much nagging the company has promised to do something to clean the place up. But some in Cynon Valley have come to realize that the plant is bad for their image; they'd like to see it go. Potential investors, they argue, driving up the road as I did on that day, would look aghast and decide that this was not a suitable environment to house a hi-tech future.

Aberdare is the valley's main town – that means it houses the civic centre and has one and a bit High Streets, shaped like a Y; other towns have only one. It's a gutsy little place, forever popping up in history books for being in the vanguard of radicalism. It was one of the first areas enthusiastically to embrace non-conformist religion, one of the first places to turn from the Liberal party to the Labour party after the coal stoppage of 1898 (along with the Trades Council of Merthyr it invited Keir Hardie to become Labour parliamentary candidate in 1900); it was from the first a home for militant trades unionism – that is, trades unionism that allows the ordinary member to have a decent say – and in later years it has been a pocket of strength for Plaid

Cymru. Strolling through its main street you wouldn't guess at any of this. It's sleepy now. It's lost out to Merthyr. But it still has its council chambers and a cinema that plays Bingo, little cafés smelling of chips, shops offering delightful service – a transaction as brief as buying a newspaper invites a conversation which is invariably opened by a reference to the weather. How English can you get! But then in north Wales they describe the south as Anglicized, and it is at least Anglicized in the sense that I ceased to feel aware of my Englishness. A school has been turned into a delightful restaurant and there is a leisure centre and an arts centre. The town's only statue commemorates Griffith Rhys Jones, a conductor famed for his choir of choral singers. He trained as a blacksmith and said that the tones of both hammer and anvil developed his musical ear, enabling him to become a violinist and conductor. There are also shops that are boarded up, shops that are tatty, with broken windows and grubby curtains; there are sad-looking men sitting on benches talking and not talking; badly dressed women slowly climbing the steps to Bingo; and a grim-looking bus queue where women stand ankle deep in the weekly shopping, their faces weary and worn.

Penrihiwceiber is a one-street village. It's the poorest part of the valley, the most deprived area. There is no sports complex, nothing for youth. Tuesdays and Thursdays there is Bingo at the battered Miners Institute. The Miners Institutes are the valleys' equivalent of stately homes, but no one knows what to do with them now. And if they have ideas, they do not have money. The main street is truly dreary; again there are boarded up shops, but those that are open ooze the atmosphere of southern Irish towns of today, or of England in the 1950s: stores that sell a wide variety of inexpensive goods and clothes; the sort of draper's shop where in the 1950s you could buy elastic and thread, vests and stockings and knitting wool. There's a chapel, and, opposite the Lee Hotel, there's a paddling pool for children, which was without water. It takes no more than fifteen minutes to stroll the length of the village. The pit head stood at one end. It's gone now; it went in October 1985 within six months of the ending of the miners' strike. It's been levelled and left, levelled in a desultory way and left awaiting the next stage of reclamation.

The rows of terraced houses look surprisingly perky. Money has been found to 'envelop' them: to pretty them up outside with new roofs and windows, and fresh paint. They may have no bathrooms inside, but the 'envelope' at least makes them wind and weatherproof and it also cheers up the look of the valley. Most of the houses were built in the 1880s and are privately owned. They are of course tiny:

two rooms and a tiny kitchen downstairs. Many miners have added a bathroom beyond the kitchen, and many have made the two small rooms into one. More often than not they are beautifully looked after.

Jim Evans lives in such a house, which runs steeply away at right angles from the main street, around the corner from the British Legion. He used to be secretary of the Penrihiwceiber Miners Lodge. Jim made me feel that Penrihiwceiber had suffered a bereavement and was still grieving. It *had* suffered a bereavement: it had lost its pit and with it the jobs of most of the men, and when the jobs had gone so too had a well established lifestyle. The period of mourning was not yet over. People were still empty and confused. Ann had already told me that her mail bag contained letters from men who were suicidal because they couldn't see a way out of their dilemma.

When the pit closed, the men were offered the option of moving to other pits or of being made redundant. The offer of a job in another pit did not necessarily mean the offer of the same job; most of the men would have to accept lesser jobs cushioned by the same pay for three years, and then that pay would be reduced to the level of the job. 'The public generally didn't understand this. They were told that all miners would be offered jobs if they wanted them. They didn't understand the loss of face and pride which went with taking a job that was below the one they had. Beyond that the whole concept of men working away from their villages was wrong. Penrihiwceiber was a family pit, father and son worked together. In the morning you'd just tumble out of bed and stroll down the street. Transferring meant getting up earlier, catching a bus that wouldn't wait if you were late and then at end of day, waiting for the last and slowest person to clean up before the bus left to come back. Many of those who chose to go to other pits regret it now. You don't fit in that easily and it isn't the same.'

It isn't the same because Penrihiwceiber was special; everyone says so. It was known as the Bolshie pit, but it was not Communist; indeed, for many years it was under the thumb of a Catholic attached to the right wing of the Labour party. The union was very, very strong and prided itself on putting the men's safety before productivity. Some say they went by the rule book and downed tools too easily if they found something out of line, that they were not flexible enough. No one denies that productivity was low; they merely argue over the reasons. The Coal Board says it was because of the men's attitude; the unions say it was because low investment had made the pit difficult to work. Anyway, before the strike the pit was known for poor results. The Coal Board came up with the idea of linking it by a tunnel to the neighbouring pit of Deep Navigation. The coal would then be brought

to the surface there and save on costs. It was part of their policy of combining small pits. The men said *no*. They feared that their pit would be subsumed. The Coal Board abandoned the plan and invested £1 million in a new coal face at Penrihiwceiber, with a new productivity deal. The strike came. Six months after the strike the pit was closed. The Coal Board says that the men got nowhere near the target. The men say they were doing their best.

Jim was offered a job in Tower pit, in the washery, which was nothing to do with the pit itself, but a mile away where the coal was washed and graded. He had been an electrician, taking care of the winders, working in the pulse of the pit, and working regular day shifts. If he had accepted the job he would have had to work nights as well. Travelling would have added one and a half hours on to his working day and he said no. He was forty-seven at the time. He accepted a cheque for £31,000. The dole stopped after a year. He'll get a Coal Board pension when he's sixty-five.

'I'll get another job in the end. I haven't looked far, to be honest. I'm happy for the moment using my electrician's skills in the community. I wouldn't rewire a whole house, that's too much to take on, but I'll fix the odd point, like. I'm luckier than most. I have two children, a son working for British Rail who is married and lives up the road, and my daughter who lives at home and who works, alongside my wife, at the local textile factory. Both are machinists. I'm the housewife now. Everything is the other way. I get my wife up at 6.30 and I get the car started - it needs a bit of choking in the cold. I get it all ready for them to step into. Then I do a bit of housework and shopping. My wife does the main shopping on a Friday, but I top up each day with bread and potatoes or a bit of ham, odds and ends. I do the cooking: I have their dinner on the table when they come in just before five. They only have a half-hour break and a sandwich midday.'

My views on the macho coal miner were fast disappearing. Jim said he's happy enough with his new life. He'd been the breadwinner for years; he'd worked hard, often seven days a week, and he'd be content not to work again if that meant that young men, those who have never worked, could have jobs. He still resents the colliery closure and fervently believes that the miners' strike was right.

'We could have won that strike, you know. If all the miners had stuck together, we could have won. It was Nottingham that finished us by not coming out. I haven't got a good word to say for Nottingham. Yes, our pit was losing money, but there were reasons for that. We needed a new face to make it viable and we got that in return for new production targets, but we could never meet these targets because

everything was so antiquated. The board would say, well, we can't invest any more until you prove yourselves with increased productivity, but we couldn't prove ourselves without the investment – it was putting the cart before the horse. It was a hopeless situation. Bad management and poor investment is what ruined our pit. Not the men. The men were second to none. I tell you, that pit could have been economical with the right management making the right decisions. After the strike, it was farcical. The costs at the colliery had started to come down and yet they closed us. We tried to fight it; we said no at first, but then they put rumours around that the redundancy payments would be cut back and we got running scared, which is what they wanted. We were blackmailed by rumours into accepting the closure.

'During the miners' strike there was a tremendous sense of unity in this community; everyone was helping everyone else. We were all in the same boat. South Wales was solid. There were no scabs at our pit.'

'But south Wales said no to the strike in the first place. They voted eighteen to ten not to strike,' I reminded him.

'Yes, that's because it seemed like Yorkshire's problem at first. We didn't understand. A year before, we had had a strike here over the closing of a Merthyr pit, and we couldn't get the other regions to support us. We ran around the country explaining things but we couldn't get support for south Wales. So when we thought it was Yorkshire's problem we thought they could stew.'

To get the mines closed, the pits that had agreed to strike picketed the other pits. At times there was only one lone picket. But that was enough. South Wales was out. We talked then of broader things, of the Labour party and of the Tories.

'I wish anyone who is thinking of voting Tory would come and live here for a while. The only salvation for people like myself, working people, is a Labour government.'

'But the Wilson government closed many mines, and Kinnock was not that supportive.'

'I know, and I'm not over-enamoured by his behaviour, but he was and is under pressure to be more central in his policies in order to get elected. Look, don't take that away from me. Don't take the Labour party away, or I'll have nothing. I know mines closed under Labour, but they make a greater effort to create new jobs. The Tories live in a different world. In the *Mirror* today there's a story about Edwina Currie spending £15 on a meal! What is natural and everyday to them is a slap-up party to us. We can't afford wine at Christmas in this street. And as for those who spend £20 on a bottle of champagne – they ought to be kicked up the arse.'

During the laughter which followed that remark, Jim caught sight of his watch. We'd been talking and gossiping for a couple of hours and although the chicken was in the oven we had forgotten about the rest of the meal. We hastily washed up cups, peeled potatoes and set the table. With everything ready to welcome home the workers I left, having agreed to meet again on Sunday. Jim was going to take me to the British Legion Club for a drink so that I could meet some of the miners who had moved to other pits.

On the bus down the valley, I mulled over Jim's loyalty to the Labour party. The Labour party he joined, the party of Nye Bevan, with its clear socialist programme and its clear views on public ownership, no longer exists. Ann Clwyd belongs to the so called 'soft' left, but she admits that it is in a state of confusion, lacking a discernible ideology. Ann is unwavering in her commitment to certain basic tenets, to universal benefits, to equality, to public ownership of some utilities, particularly gas, coal, electricity, water – not old style nationalization, but nationalization with local decision-making and an enhanced role for the workforce. And of course she remains a loyal unilateralist. Indeed, Neil Kinnock sacked her from the shadow cabinet for voting against the Tory's defence estimates because they included increased nuclear expenditure. For some bizarre reason, the Labour party's wishy-washy attitude was to ask members to *abstain*. When a party flounders around like that, it is hard to think it deserves Jim Evans's loyalty. By the next election, when all the policy reviews are in place, when the new model Labour party is revealed, it won't be the Labour party he first joined, but none the less it may well be worthy of his loyalty once more.

The next morning I was on the bus back up the valley to Penrhiw-ceiber. I wanted to meet Mary Davies. Much has been written about the effect of the strike on the miners' wives: how they became politicized; how their actions ate away at the chauvinist attitudes of the miners; how in one year they had achieved more for themselves than in twenty years of so-called women's liberation. Ann and I had discussed this. She believes much of it to be myth-making. After the strike the women retreated into their homes, they didn't rush to join the Labour party or any other group. If they had won the battle it might have been a different story.

Mary and Lyndhurst – 'Lyn' – Davies live close to Jim Evans, in an identical house on the other side of the main street. Mary was delighted to have the chance to relive that year.

'I was niggly at the beginning of the strike. I was behind the strike in the seventies because it was about money, and I hadn't realized that

a factory girl got more than my husband did for working underground. But this time I kept thinking, what is this strike *for*? It isn't for money, and as we were getting older I wondered whether it was wise to use our savings. But my husband and my son and my son-in-law were very committed. At first I didn't get involved; they didn't want us to get into it. But as I watched the battles between the police and the miners on television, I thought, what *is* going on? So I joined a support group, which at first was just for collecting food. Then the women at the Point of Ayr pit in north Wales asked us to come and picket and I thought it was an ideal opportunity to go and see for myself what was happening. Lyn was away, so I left a note, telling him and saying we'd discuss it when I got back.

'At Ayr our busload of women had a police escort. We couldn't stop the men from going into the pit, but for us the visit was successful because the police were so vile to us that it pushed us into wanting to do more. In the morning it wasn't too bad, the police were local men, but in the afternoon they were not. I think they were from the Metropolitan police, because of their badges. The things they said to us! I'd been brought up to respect the police, but once I was on the picket line and heard how abusive they were to women, it didn't stretch my imagination to see how they could behave towards men. I always thought the police were there to keep the peace, not to incite things . . . Never in my wildest dreams did I expect to hear them talk to us like that.'

'What did they say to you?'

'Oh, some mild things like, "You should be at home cleaning up your dirty house"; and nasty remarks like, "Come behind the bushes and I'll show you what a real man is like." Or, "Tell your husband I've carpeted my house from top to bottom on the overtime I've had from this strike."'

'That all sounds rather juvenile to me.'

'I suppose it does now, but it shocked us at the time. And the worst thing was the threats. I had a rolled-up newspaper in my hand and a policeman said to me that he would run me in for having an offensive weapon. I tried to say it was only a newspaper and he said: "I know that and you know that, but I'll *say* that there was a weapon inside."

'I came home determined to get more involved. Lyn said, "What on earth got into your head? If I had been home you wouldn't have gone through that door!" I told him that times had changed.'

My Davies got so involved that she travelled abroad to explain the miners' case. She got so involved she regularly went picketing with her husband. She got so involved and so bold that she rang the *Daily*

Mirror, reversing the charge, and asked for Robert Maxwell's office. She told his staff about the kids in her valley who had nothing except a dirty paddling pool and suggested that the *Mirror* might like to provide some money to take them for a day at the seaside.

'The *Mirror* decided that there was great publicity to be had if they could find a way of taking kids to the seaside for a day, and they told me that I'd be first in the queue, but they forgot. Others went to the seaside. When I tried to remind them of the promise, they said that they were winding up the seaside trips. Oh, no you're not, I said. If you don't keep your promise I'll go to the *Sun* and tell them how the *Daily Mirror* broke the hearts of the kids in my valley. That did it! Three busloads went to Butlin's at Barry Island, and all the kids got great bags of things to take home.'

Lyn Davies had by this time returned with the morning shopping, and, having dumped several plastic bags in the kitchen, he sat down beside his wife and nodded and smiled as she told her story. He is transparently proud of her.

'If you had told me all this was going to happen to me I would not have believed it. We women never got involved. If Lyn went to the club first of an evening, he'd have to come out later to fetch me in because I wouldn't go through the door alone. That's how I was before the strike. By the end of the strike this "dumpy mum from the valleys" was sharing a platform with Tony Benn. And instead of just explaining what the support groups were all about, collecting food and tins and money, I found myself explaining why we were on strike; what would happen if our pit went and why our pit wasn't making a profit. I told them that if you buy a house and you don't keep it in good repair then it will get dilapidated and that was what our pit was like, full of stuff our fathers used. No wonder we couldn't make a profit.'

Lyn remained silent no longer. 'I've been down that pit thirty-nine years. And I'm telling you that if they had looked after it, we'd have had another twenty years left. We never had anything new, it was always make-do-and-mend, bit of machinery from here, patching up there. Bad management ruined the pits, they made bad decisions all the time. They had men coming from outside to tell us what to do, but they never asked local men; they would never consult us and we *knew* the pit; we knew what would work and what would not. Under private enterprise it would have been no worse. We had to fight the management tooth and nail. If they said good morning, we'd go outside to check. That was the nature of our relationship. I didn't ask for another job. I'd had enough. There's no contentment, no peace in the mines now.'

'I'm not a Scargill man. South Wales went back first because we have got more bloody brains in south Wales than in Yorkshire! A good general takes his men in if he sees them getting slaughtered. He'll retreat and fight another day. With our general we were just cannon fodder. We were slaughtered. We were sold down the river, first by Nacods and then the other unions left us to it; those leaders will get knighthoods. They were bought; we were slaughtered. You wouldn't believe half the things I could tell you. The Coal Board were using a small port near Preston to get the coal in, and we went up there to picket, just ten of us in a van. Seventeen miles away we were stopped by the police, hundreds of them. "The first one out of that van, spends a couple of days in the nick", they said. What could we do? It was that well planned. I'll tell you, I went up to Durham and I saw this coal stockpile and it looked like a mountain that would last for ever, but I'm convinced it was hollow and wouldn't have lasted for two weeks. Now I saw that with my own eyes. Makes you wonder about the other stockpiles, doesn't it? What propaganda! Clever woman that prime minister. Clever woman.

'I'm sorry to see the pit go, but we've had enough. I'd like nothing better than to see my grandchildren work in God's fresh air. But there's a problem: why should new industry want to come to the valleys? What's special about us, when so many places, Newcastle and Liverpool, need new jobs? That's why we fought so long and so hard. We knew that if the pit went there would be nothing. There would be an empty village. My daughter has gone. She and her husband have gone to Brighton. But not everyone can do that; they get caught with the house prices. You can't get more than £4,000 for these, and it cost my daughter £27,000 for a bungalow.'

'Lyn's lucky,' said Mary. 'He's fifty-six and had nothing to lose. The older you get in the colliery the less pay you get because you get an easier but downgraded job as you get older. So he's fine. But what about our children? It's causing such tension. Marriages are breaking up; some youngsters are hopelessly in debt. While that strike was on, we had a purpose. It might seem strange to you to hear me say this, but I enjoyed the strike. It changed the country and it changed my life. We had no money, but we had a sense of belonging again, of thinking about our neighbours and the community. The children had the best Christmas of their lives. It's tragic in a way that the women gave up after the strike. We should have stayed together and gone to help those who had supported us, but it didn't happen. Transport is such a problem. In the strike the Lodge provided transport, but there's no transport now; it's hard to get to meetings in Cardiff.'

It didn't surprise me at all that Mary had enjoyed the strike; all tales of 'war' emphasize the 'spirit' that existed between men and women, interdependent and bound together by common ideals and goals. And it didn't surprise me that once the common purpose was removed the women used transport as an excuse for not staying together. What they had lost was a focus, a sense of direction, not transport provided by the Lodge. At the bus stop, by the empty pool, I was once more engulfed by images of bereavement, of loss; of a lost pit and, above all, a lost fight. It would take some time before this village got back its breath; got back its sense of purpose and the will to fight. Lyn asked why anyone should bring industry to the valley when they can go elsewhere. That's the talk of a defeated man. Such feelings will diminish in time. The end of the mines has got to be a good thing, I wrote in my notebook, and I underlined the word good.

The mood among the men at the British Legion on Sunday morning was one of disillusionment. Jim Evans had brought together a group of three men who were happy to talk, and in time others joined us, pausing long enough to add their comments before retreating from the anteroom, where women were welcome, into the men-only bar, which was their Sunday-morning habitat. The message was simple: the 'ceiber' pit was special. I could carry out a house-to-house survey if I wished, and everyone would say the same. It was home from home to hundreds of men who knew each other by name and who worked together to help each other. If one man needed to get away early for a funeral or whatever, everyone worked that much faster to achieve the aim; if someone died, they could rely on a whip-round to help their family through. Moving to another pit destroyed this feeling and without this feeling, this camaraderie, pit life was pointless.

'We are a load of gypsies now. Thirteen buses arrive at Taff Merthyr pit each morning; the men come from all over the place. For the first few days it was bloody frightening, and the atmosphere was ridiculous. After a year it got easier, we got to know the pit, but we still don't know the names of the men who work there, and the attitude is so different. If we go against the management we are threatened with the prospect of a downgraded job. If we are seen going to the Lodge (the union) with a complaint we are told we will be downgraded and we are afraid of losing money. They say to us: "Don't bring your 'ceiber' ways in here. You lost and *your* pit is closed."'

I asked them why they didn't put themselves forward for Lodge membership and change things to their liking, the way they had at Penrhwceiber. John and Norman said they already had to get up an hour earlier and get home an hour later, without getting involved. In

other words, their sense of commitment was not that easily transferred. Norman was in Yorkshire when he heard that his pit was to be closed. 'I came off the phone with tears in my eyes and said, "They've shut my bastard pit!" I'm still emotional about it. I can't look at the site; I can't look at that nothingness.' He refused redundancy through fear. He was forty and had children of twelve and nine, and he looked at the houses on either side of his and saw that each contained unemployed youngsters. 'I said to myself, if they can't get work, what chance have I got at forty? I'd have got £23,000 which is a lot of money. My wife wanted me to leave. But you've got to be man enough to make your own decisions. What was I going to do all day - sit in the club here? I work regular and I drink regular and my wife knows that. I still don't know if I made the right decision. I sometimes wish I'd taken the money rather than work in this shit-hole. I sometimes wish I could turn the clock back. It cuts me to the quick.'

John feels much the same: 'I thought hard about it and discussed it at home, but I'd be in the club all day and that's no life. Sometimes I wish I had taken redundancy. All they care about is keeping the Black River flowing. We can take the risks, we have to. If we want a bonus, we have to take chances. If we went by the book there wouldn't be a profitable pit left.'

Stan had no doubts: 'I hate it. I'm at Penallta and the atmosphere is bad. The boys made me feel welcome, but we have so many troubles with the management. They just tell us to get on with it, or get out. The quicker the place closes the better. With a bit of luck I'll have a phone call tomorrow ...'

'You won't find many who'd say different,' said Jim, who sat beside me and had said little. 'The government intended to break the unions, the only place where the working man can make his grievances known. Well, they've done it, or the Coal Board has done it for them. They have broken the strength of the Lodge and destroyed the affinity. The Board can do what they like now.'

Jim walked me to the bus stop. People were going to chapel. I said that I'd like to take a handful of pictures to remind me of the village. I wanted one of the pit-head and asked him to walk with me. He said nothing and walked alongside me, past the shelter daubed with the words: 'Nacods scabs', and past the Lodge. When we got to the site he pointed out where the gates had been and the position of the pit-head baths. Suddenly his voice tailed off and he fought to control the tears. 'I don't normally come down here ... I can't ...' It was my turn to fight back the tears. It had been insensitive of me to ask him to come with me, but I treasure the moment when we stood there in silence,

our eyes roaming over the forlorn, grey, pitiful scene. He was no doubt lamenting the loss of his pit. To me the scene symbolized the limitations of human nature. My mind raced back to Northern Ireland, where I had experienced the same feelings of profound despair for a world in which men were set against one another for no good reason. A world in which bosses fight workers and workers fight bosses might, in the name of ideology, think itself noble. For a moment it is noble, for an hour, for a month, for a year, but in the end it comes down to what I saw before me: rubble. Rubble and blighted lives. We were right to shed our tears. Before us was an ideal gone sour; before us, the socialist dream of nationalization, of a better deal, of a world in which men worked together, lay amid rubble, razed. British Coal is to be privatized.

The task of reviving the valleys is enormous, so enormous that it may never be achieved without ruining the sense of community, of belonging, that I had come to appreciate. In the valleys thousands of men worked underground, in inverted skyscrapers. There is simply no room for them to be employed above ground, together in the same spot. Some of them will inevitably have to travel to one of the drab-looking - architecturally pathetic - trading estates which are fighting hard to attract new industries. They may have to go to Hirwaun at the head of the valley or to Cardiff, and the villages may become dormitories. The railway, cut by Beeching, has been reinstated. But there will be new jobs. Lyn's sad comment that he couldn't see why people would choose the valleys when they could go to Liverpool or Newcastle is unnecessarily pessimistic. Much is happening; much needs to happen. For too long people have assumed that the fortunes of coal are cyclical; that the bad times are to be tolerated because the good times will come again. They thought that the Chernobyl disaster would turn men's minds away from nuclear power back to coal. It isn't so. The south Wales mines passed their peak in the second decade of this century; the coal that is needed now will be extracted from modern mines needing fewer men. Never again will the valleys be dependent on one massive employer holding their very lives in the palm of his hand. Diversification should have been pursued with vigour years ago; it is being pursued now. Wales already competes with the north-east for the boast of having the largest concentration of Japanese manufacturing investment in Britain. Indeed, Wales received the first Japanese plant in the early seventies, when Sony went to Bridgend. Cynon Valley received the second when Hitachi went to Hirwaun to make television sets. That site is now also making microwave ovens. The Japanese tend to

employ women, the cheaper sex and mostly young women who, coming straight from school, have no bad work habits and can be easily moulded to the Japanese style. This feminization of the workforce – the trend is for seven jobs for women to every three for men – is radically altering the structure of the economy and is not without critics. To many it is galling to see the Japanese come in and kill the remains of British endeavour to make such items as television sets and cars. It raises xenophobic hackles, it causes anxiety. But for the moment at any rate Japanese investment is only about 5 per cent of total foreign investment and is way behind American investment. From the publicity it attracts one would be forgiven for thinking it was much larger. In any event, at 5 per cent it is welcome; if the consumer is going to buy Japanese products, it is better they buy them assembled here with at least some input from local component makers, rather than add to our balance of payments problem. Furthermore, since the Japanese are intent on setting up in Europe, then it is better that they set up in Britain than in France and Germany. They do so, it is said, because it is quite hard enough for the Japanese to find engineers who speak English, impossible for them to find those who speak German and French. For the moment at least, we are reaping the benefit of language.

The Japanese are working well within Wales. It is no surprise to find that their egalitarian approach to the workplace – shared uniforms, car parks, lavatories and canteens – is particularly acceptable. But the Japanese alone are not going to revive the valleys. British Coal Enterprise is doing its bit to assist new ventures. The extent of its success is often questioned, and the miners in Penrhynceiber are scathing; they won't touch anything with a 'British Coal' label. British Coal are not fussed; they don't expect mining men to have entrepreneurial zap, and their brief, they argue, is to help provide jobs, not jobs for ex-miners. However, the real key to the future of employment provision lies within the principality's boundaries. It has become fashionable for leading Welsh figures to talk of the Welsh finding their own solutions rather than holding out a begging bowl to London or waiting for solutions to be imposed from outside. In January 1988 an Institute of Welsh Affairs was set up. Its founders were much influenced by Glasgow's ability to haul itself out of an economic trough. Its first report was a plan to revitalize the valleys, a detailed plan that covered improvements to housing, roads and railways, land reclamation, town-centre renewal, a major boost for tourism, as well as arguing for more fundamental changes to education and training to raise the qualifications of the workforce to meet modern needs and to introduce the

ideas of self-employment and entrepreneurship. The valleys, just like Newcastle and other areas of heavy industry where father followed son without a second thought into musclebound jobs, have no history of self-employment. Peter Walker, Secretary of State for Wales, adopted some of these recommendations in his plan for the valleys. The money that came with the package has caused many an argument. Peter Walker claims to have provided £500 million over three years from 1988; others accuse him of making a pretty package out of grants that were already in existence and that the amount of 'new' money was half his boastful figure. Anyway, it's not enough. But the people of the valleys are not slow to appreciate that at last a Conservative government is paying some attention to their needs. And Peter Walker is not slow to spot a chink in Labour's armour, and wishes to capitalize on it. In 1966 the Labour party won thirty-two of the thirty-six seats in Wales. In 1983 the Conservative party won fourteen of the thirty-eight seats. Perhaps this inspired the setting-up of the Cardiff Bay Development Corporation, which aims to transform the city's docklands in the manner of London and Liverpool. It's a mammoth project, reclaiming 3,000 acres of waste land and transforming it into a lakeside city with waterfront shops, offices, restaurants, leisure and marina developments, a centre for the performing arts and thousands of new homes. The bulk of the money is coming from the private sector, and maybe 30,000 jobs will be created in the ten years or more that it will take to create this imaginative vision. The scheme has plenty of critics. The centrepiece, a barrage across the mouth of Cardiff Bay to create a freshwater lake, has upset conservationists, which is a pity and a genuine problem. The bay, with its 2.5 square kilometres of mudflats, is a site of special scientific interest because it is the habitat of thousands of birds. The developers propose a new lagoon several miles to the east as compensation, but it is only a fraction of the size of the bay, and conservationists argue that some birds die if they are relocated. Aside from this serious conflict of interests, there are endless niggles: residents fear the new homes will be too expensive for first-time buyers; local industry fears dislocation; the valleys fear that the construction work will go to outsiders, not ex-miners. But all these problems are solvable; I'd ban outside labour and encourage every ex-miner and school-leaver to get building skills. The train journey down the valley is very pleasant.

The Conservative party's gains in 1983 were not sustained; how could they be after the miners' strike? In 1987 they won only seven of the thirty-eight seats. And as in Scotland, the Welsh nationalists, Plaid Cymru, are gaining ground. None the less, the Tory party cling firmly

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to the belief that Labour strongholds, the 'inner cities', could with effort turn blue. Whether social concern or political cynicism and opportunism motivate that effort and the signing of the cheques is a matter of much debate, but in the end it is of secondary concern. Penrhwceiber needs hope; the valleys need a future.