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Not Quite White

Simon Thirsk

Extract

MY NAME IS Gwalia. I am an Island. Head of Brân. Soul of Llywelyn.

Gwalia – what possessed my Mam to call me that?

This was my mantra in those darkest days. My notes here, in my diary, are very confused. These words are written many times, sometimes gouged and sometimes scrawled: My name is Gwalia. I am an Island.

As you learned, Jon, all names have meaning here. Names of people. And of places. All our history is here. This is our language and culture. Ancient and living still.

Ramblings, dangerous with significance. Gwalia was the invader's name for Wales, long before the Normans came and it mutated. Gwalia meaning foreigners. What dull trait of character led us to let our conquerors name us strangers in our own fine land? And then accept that name! We, the Celts, we came here first. Before the Romans, even (wasn't it they who lumped us all together and named us Britons?) And wasn't Gwales the island where they took the still-living head of Brân the giant, last Celtic ruler of the whole of Britain, and feasted with him for eighty years, until they broke the spell by looking back towards the mainland? And wasn't he, the last great Celt, then taken to be buried on White Hill in London? Is that where the bones of our history lie?

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In our own language we don't call it Wales, we call it Cymru, land of the compatriots. You can call us Wales, Jon, if you must, but only for now. We are Cymry, the people of Cymru. Understand that! We are Cymry.

I don't know what possessed my Mam to call me Gwalia.

I am stranger to neb – to nobody.

I explained this to the doctors many times: but it was foreign to them. So they could not have been expected to understand.

So where to start? My notes here, in my diary, are so confused. Snatches of my agonisings over who I was and what my history had made me. Things that Mam and Anti Gwenlais said. Silly things. Jumbled up, scrawled down, crossed out. And sometimes missing where I'd ripped out pages in despair.

Keep a therapeutic journal, they said. 'Can I keep it in Welsh?' I asked them. 'Yes,' they told me, 'It doesn't matter. It's only for you to read.'

Doesn't matter indeed!

'Try to imagine how you are from the point of view of others,' they said. 'A daily diary. It'll be a way of measuring your progress.'

Progress!

As if such an entity as I was worth the measuring of!

Me, the broken-faced Gwalia.

It is really my Anti Gwenlais who starts my story – our story, Jon – so far as I can ever remember, my Anti Gwenlais was the fount of all my stories.

The smell of cigarette smoke always preceded her. She arrived in a cloud and stayed in fug. Her skin was older than her years, and her voice had that smoker's croak. Sometimes she laughed and coughed and cackled. And I loved her. And her gossip.

'Your Yncl Penhaearn says Boudiccea has written to ask them to send a man from Westminster. And I have it on good authority that they've agreed.' She winked. 'From a think tank, whatever that might be. Your Yncl Penhaearn has had a warning. The spirits have told him. A think tank, mark you. Did you know that there are think tanks now? Imagine that a tank of people thinking about us. Did you know that, Gwênfer?'

My mother, Gwênfer, just smiled.

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I said nothing. And carried on with my golchi dillad – washing the clothes – waiting for Mam to remonstrate with me: 'If I've told you once, I've told you a thousand times: you have to wash the whites and coloureds separately.'

Mainly, it was Dad's and Awena's clothes that were coloured. I rather liked to boil our things up all together, it brought us closer. My contribution. But I kept my peace when Mam and Anti Gwenlais were talking. Everything that could ever possibly be said had all been said many times before, in one form or another, in our cosy kitchen, for whatever good it did, which was less than keeping clothes white.

'What have we, in our little town, done to deserve a woman like Boudiccea?' demanded Mam. 'And why on earth would she get the idea into her head that we would want the attentions of a man from Westminster?'

As it happens, I did know what a think tank was. Like Dad, I read the English papers. And I admit it did cross my mind to wonder what he would be like, this man from Westminster.

'We have done nothing to deserve it, Gwênfer? Only that we have kept ourselves to ourselves.'

'And what reward do we get? I'll tell you now. Strangers in our midst. Preventing us from speaking our own language, in our own valley. And we have done nothing to them.'

'And we have nothing for them either. Nothing at all that they would want. But still they come. And then when they get here, they complain there is nothing here for them.'

'It's the colonial instincts, you see. They have to colonise, don't they? They cannot bear to see other people happy and leave them be. They cannot stand that. We're like an itchy sore they must keep on scratching.'

So far, Jon (as you would soon discover), we had succeeded in keeping our town to itself and virtually a hundred per cent Welsh-speaking. English people had started to move in. Each year more came creeping in up the valley, into the old farm houses vacated as the old farmers died and more of our young people moved away to fill their lungs with the air of prosperity and opportunities of elsewhere. Those who came – retired couples mainly – who could sell their now-expensive houses in the Midlands to buy cheap houses here and live off investment income from the difference. We all knew it was only a matter of time before they started buying houses in the town – and that that would mark the end of our Welshness. It takes only one English person in a room for a whole community to feel awkward and defensive talking Welsh. That is how the English speakers over generations had taught us to feel about ourselves, our culture.

'They complain they are being pushed out of their own land by the hoards of immigrants and different coloured faces and strange clothes. Then they come and settle here. With no thought that they are doing the same to us.'

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'Quite right, Gwênfer! They complain about the curry smells where they used to live. And then complain when they get here that we have no Chinese or Indian takeaways. They are never happy, the English. They can never settle.'

'And what do you think a man from a think tank is going to do about it?'

'Nothing I shouldn't have thought, though Boudiccea has it in her head to change everything. She wants us to have mains electricity. Running water. All to be paid for through tourism. With Curry Shops on every corner, I shouldn't wonder.'

'Paned arall?'

'Os gwelwch yn dda.'

'A man from a think tank is sure to look like a frog, I should think,' said Mam. And they both sniggered.

'With big glasses and a green pin-striped suit.'

'You must mobilise your forces, Gwalia,' Anti Gwenlais winked at me.

She meant that it was time for Dewi and I to go out felling the signposts again, cutting out English names and posting our warning slogans, as occupied nations have always done. Why lead the enemy to your door? Always deter them in subtle ways.

'Does she have to, Gwenlais? I'd be so much happier if you didn't encourage her in such activities.' Mam always worried about me.

'It does her very much good, Gwênfer. You know that. It's good for her to go out with Dewi, I'm sure.'

They didn't ask for my opinion.

So I continued washing clothes and Mam and my Anti Gwenlais leaned across the kitchen table sipping their tea and twt-twt-twting their tongues endlessly about Saeson – almost spitting out the word. We knew that you would be a Sais, Jon. A typical Englishman. We were sure of that. They thought they knew exactly what you would be like.

'They come here wanting to improve us and modernise us. When will they learn? And now here they are, sending another. Well, if they do, we shall send him packing, too, like all the others.'

'All the Saeson have ever done is deface our landscape, plunder our coal and slate and cover our hillsides with their ugly tree plantations. We need independence. That's what we really need. We need to go in the same direction as Ireland and Scotland.'

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'It's colonialism,' Mam nodded, always anxious to prove to her elder sister that she was completely up to date with her understanding of international matters.

'It's in their genes, you know, Gwenlais. Capitalists is what they are. And look where it's got us all.'

'You're not wrong there, Gwênfer. Not wrong at all. They plundered our country for their fleeting pomp and self-aggrandisement, stole all our coal and slate.'

'And burned the coal all far too quickly for a quick profit and greed. To build big houses for themselves in London.'

'And now all that heat has warmed the planet and melted the ice caps.'

Mam had a way of thinking about things.

'And you know what? If you went to look at those big houses today you'd find them all looking very shabby. Rented out to immigrants the lot of them. And practically falling down.'

'Oh yes, I have heard they are over-run by immigrants. Lorry drivers are bringing them in by the container-load through the Channel tunnel, you know. And they have camps for them in France, I heard.'

'The Saeson will soon be finding themselves foreigners in their own country, if they don't look out.'

I took the clothes to ring out through the mangle in the scullery, hung them out on the line, and fetched, and took, and changed the water in the big old kettle on the Aga, ready to put the next load in to boil.

And still they drank their endless cups of tea. And talked out cigarette smoke. And twt-twt-twted.

'The English have colonialism in their genes, Gwênfer. They're unable to help themselves.'

'Quite right, Gwenlais. They think they have all the answers in the world, they do. But they have none. Would the Irish have been so successful without their independence?' She glanced at me: 'I hope you're remembering to keep the coloureds separate from the whites.'

'Of course, Mam.'

'Well, that just goes to show then, doesn't it now?'

'Exactly. The English take control of other people's lives, countries, whole continents. All in the name of God. Their arrogant Protestant God, of course, invented by Henry VIII, in his exact own image. Then take whatever they want. Neglect us for

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generations. And then behave as if we were a part of them and should be grateful for it! Wales – their first great conquest and colony – the most neglected colony of all. They don't think twice about us. And still they call us foreigners. And they don't even know it.'

'But, in some ways, Gwenlais, that is to the good because we want them to leave us alone, we do. They bring us only harm.'

'They should hang their heads in shame. And we will make them. One day we will make them hang their heads in shame. You mark my words.'

They twt-twt-twted in chorus.

'As if we don't know for ourselves what's best for us.'

And they half-giggled, half-cackled, and twt-twted in that way that Welsh women who are no longer girls have cackled and twt-twted since before the days when they wore black hats and dresses and white lace – if they ever did – and certainly before they ever started going to chapels.

I had chores enough, without troubling myself with Mam's useless gossip politics. Chores would be the key to my personal salvation. That had been agreed by everyone. 'Work hard, Gwalia, and put your nightmares behind you.'

'Another fat, middle-aged Englishman, coming here thinking he knows everything that's good for us?' Mam said. 'Think of that now, Gwalia.'

'What if he isn't fat?' I piped up, suddenly, surprising myself with my own voice. 'What if he is young?'

Anti Gwenlais turned to me, 'Oooh. Now there's a thought. Isn't that a thought, now, Gwênfer? You could befriend him, Gwalia.'

Mam tensed on my behalf. I sensed her maternal hackles rising. She was very maternal was my Mam. I saw her glancing to see if I had slipped Gethin's black socks or Awena's red bib into the boil.

'Gwalia should have nothing to do with him, Gwenlais. He will only corrupt her. Corrupt us. Only by keeping ourselves to ourselves and having nothing to do with them can we survive.'

'There'd be no harm in befriending him, though, just for a few days. To know what he is planning. And – if he were to be young – then Gwalia would be ideally placed, wouldn't she? Surely, you wouldn't mind her keeping a little eye on him while he was here? To see what he was up to? That would do no harm, now, would it?'

'I suppose,' Mam agreed begrudgingly.

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'There's more than enough in this town who would do us down, you know, Gwênfer. Some of them our own.' She looked at Mam with the stern, controlling eye of the older sister.

'I know that very nicely.'

Mam reached out from where she was sitting and slipped her arm around me as I wriggled behind her chair to reach the cord for the pulley to let the airing frame down from the ceiling, ready to haul the clothes up to dry above the Aga.

'Look what the English have done in South Wales. The hwntws are virtually clones of the English themselves. Vast areas of our country where the Welshness has been all but bred out of them. We don't want that happening here in the North, now, do we?'

'Mind you, the hwntws practically invite enemies in. Romans, Vikings, Normans, Irish, English, it matters not a jot to them. Even the Italians with their ice cream. They don't have the sense of nation that we Welsh in the Gogledd have.'

My Anti Gwenlais had a lovely way of talking.

As a child it was always Anti Gwenlais who would sit me down by the fireside in the evenings and recite the old Welsh stories. How all animals all over the world would always understand if you spoke to them in Welsh. Even a charging lion. How Welsh was the language of heaven, just as the Welsh harp was the chosen instrument of angels and cupids and fairies.

Perhaps because she had never married herself, it was Anti Gwenlais who was always first to suggest summer picnics to secret waterfalls and lakes in hidden valleys, and who always knew where the best caves were and what mythical creatures and legends lived there. She knew about dragons and unicorns and the tylwyth teg – the Welsh fairies.

And she had a great stock of ghost stories she could tell us. Because she went ghost hunting with my Yncl Penhaearn. And one day, she had told us, they were going to meet the ghost of Wales's last prince and learn his secrets.

She never tired of telling us (and we never tired of listening) how Wales had once been a great and magical kingdom, full of princes and heroes and real dragons. And how – even now – it had the greatest poets and the finest singers.

And how King Arthur – Wales's greatest hero (except for Llywelyn and Owain Glyndŵr, and, possibly, Lloyd George) – was not really dead but only sleeping with his knights in caves around these mountains, waiting to rise up again against the English when the moment was right. And how the armies of Glyndŵr and Llywelyn had melted into the landscape and were still, even now, lying in wait.

'And you know, Gwalia,' she would lean forward and say it in a whisper, 'we here in Llanchwaraetegdanygelyn are here for a reason.'

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Even when I grew up and read the stories for myself, and realised how fanciful Anti Gwenlais's versions had been, the romance stayed with me, beguiling me as it beguiles all true Cymry, especially in the Gogledd.

I delighted in reading the Mabinogion for myself, with its poetic codifying of all-but-forgotten struggles between the Welsh and Irish warrior kings and ancient rivalries and betrayals. The tragic history of the ancient Welsh Princes. Stories of Llywelyn and Owain Glyndŵr only deepened my sense of tragedy as it must for all true Welshmen, leaving a deep vexation in our very souls for the anguish of our country and her people – and our own lost selves – to be called Welsh, foreigners in our own land.

Mam (as Dad would delight in saying) typically decided to be decisive and asserted herself by changing her mind.

'No, I'm sorry Gwenlais, you cannot ask Gwalia to spy on the man from Westminster.'

'I'm only suggesting she keep her eyes open, Gwênfer. And if she happened to find out a thing or two about him...' She winked at me.

'We don't know definitely that he'll be coming yet. Boudiccea has only written to ask them to send someone, unless I've misunderstood.'

'No, no, that's right, Gwênfer. But he is coming. I can tell you that.'

'And if all the signs are taken down, he might get lost and never find us. Like so many over the centuries, so they say.' They were the great authority in Mam's world, though she had never explained who they were. Or what authority they had.

I wondered if Mam had any idea about satellite navigation or internet route finders. Like most in the town, she had never used a computer and never read anything which wasn't in Welsh. There were no daily Welsh-language newspapers, and we saw only our own, very local, paper, written by whoever submitted a story or took a picture, and without a reporter or any real news. Nor were there any women's magazines in Welsh – or men's magazines or computer magazines, though there was a weekly national paper, but very few took it.

There was no television reception in our valley either. What with the absence of mains electricity and the cost of generators, we didn't want it. Only the English agitated for such things. We had our families and our gossiping and more than enough committees and choirs and events to keep us more than busy. Who wanted to see moving pictures of other people's lives, anyway; were their own lives not sufficient for them?

Anti Gwenlais wagged her finger. 'Penhaearn thinks that they will send a strategist from the think tank. And your Yncl Penhaearn usually isn't wrong about such things.'

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Mam glanced between us. She sensed that Anti Gwenlais and I were up to something she couldn't quite understand.

Sometimes I wanted to scream at Mam. I wasn't stupid! I didn't need protecting all my life! I was fed up with everyone always worrying about me, making me think inwards at myself, instead of outwards to the world.

As I later came to understand, it was Mam who had slowed the pace of my recovery: underrated me; mis-understood the damage my awful trauma had done to my self-confidence and taken my damaged self at its face value. Her sister, my Anti Gwenlais, understood how Mam had over-protected me, allowed me to exaggerate my misshapen nose, and my own self-loathing, my hand always going up to cover it whenever anyone looked at me. She somehow sensed, with that great wisdom some old spinsters in traditional communities have, that Mam had taken what the doctors called my post-traumatic stress and kept it as a fact, static and frozen for a whole seven summers, and she knew that the time had come for my soul to be thawed.

Perhaps we all sensed in that moment, that this might be the catalyst I needed to turn my thinking outward again – and to my future.

'I could spy on him.' I ventured. And I was thinking: he might be young and handsome.

Mam read my thoughts. And panicked.

'He won't be young, you know. Planners and town developers are never young. And they are always bald.'

But Anti Gwenlais was warming to the idea.

'He'd be bound to take you into his confidence if he was young, Gwalia. A man away from home. A pretty girl like you.'

Twt-twt-twt-twt-twt. Mam jumped up, clicking her tongue and shaking her head in a most disapproving manner and scrutinised the washing for the faintest smudge of grey or pink.

'What are you suggesting! It is unthinkable after all that she has been through. Heaven forbid that such a thing should even cross your mind, Gwenlais.'

'Oh no. Of course not, Gwênfer. But you wouldn't mind being civil to him, would you, Gwalia? Picking his brains a little. Especially if it did turn out he was handsome? You'd be ideally placed for that, working at Y Ddwy Ddraig.'

Y Ddwy Ddraig – The Two Dragons – was our hotel, handed down from riches to rags through five generations. Little more than a public bar now, it seemed to have fallen to me to pull the pints, wipe the tables and change the sheets for the occasional misguided visitor. And they dignified those chores with the title rheolwraig – manageress.

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Mam shook her head emphatically.

'I will not hear of it.'

'It might do her good.'

Good old Anti Gwenlais. Always trying to 'do me good'. As if the great trauma that had ruined everything might magically vanish from my mind if only something magical could happen. The kiss of a prince perhaps.

Only three months before she had put my name forward to take the minutes at Council meetings, not in any official position, you understand, but to assist the Clerk. 'For your own good,' she assured me. 'To help you get better.' But I knew quite nicely that she wanted to avoid the job herself and use me as her understudy to sniff out gossip. Especially about the English. Or disloyal Welsh people.

She reached out her hand to mine, winked at Mam and said: 'She could bring him here for supper. Then you could get the information out of him yourself. You could be the Mata Hari then, Gwênfer. It wouldn't matter, then.'

She cackled at her own joke. Her smoker's laugh.

Mam relented and joined in. And I laughed, too, wondering if there was a hint of a cackle already in my laugh too.

'What is it that you will be wanting to know so badly, then?' I asked her.

'His plans, of course. They want to change the town. Beyond all recognition, so your Yncl Penhaearn says. Change our way of life forever.'

I didn't yet have the courage to say it out loud, but as young people always do, I knew that there were many things in Llanchwaraetegdanygelyn that needed modernising. Urgently.

It was just that Yncl Penhaearn was so powerful. And so opposed to any change at all, unless his spirits, as he called them, approved. Which they never did.

He couldn't see that ghosts are from long past ages, and therefore, by definition, extremely old-fashioned and outdated in their ideas, or that the rest of the world had developed more sophisticated methods of making decisions. Which is one reason most young people left. And nothing changed.

'I think you quite fancy the idea of spying on him, Gwalia. Don't you now?'

'Maybe.'

They cackled again.

'You could be the Mata Hari of Gwrthsafiad.'

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I doubted if Anti Gwenlais knew anything about the hapless Mata Hari except the name. And I wasn't sure she knew much about Gwrthsafiad – the Welsh Resistance – either. But, at that moment, I suppose, the seeds of my mission were sewn.

'I expect I could try if my country required it of me,' I smiled.

They looked at each other, and I knew what they were thinking. Perhaps she is starting to snap out of it, coming back to being the Gwalia she ought to be.

'Your Yncl Penhaearn would be more than grateful, I'm sure.'

'You'll see, one of these days, it will all come right.'

How could things come right for me? You can't go back and change what has happened to you? Change your culture. The rich know very well what has to be done to pick up stinking excrement and dispose of it, but they cannot bring themselves to do it, can they? Some people can't touch spiders and they scream at the thought of mice or rats. And no amount of logic will persuade them. Dad, for instance, cannot pick up and kill a wounded animal, something at which I am particularly adept, wounded or not. But none of us are perfect. In my case, my unmentionable horror was not some minor, incidental phobia, it was central to my life, a part of me. Something deep inside of me was frozen.

So I was an island, severed from myself like the head of Brân in the old Welsh myth, surrounded, trapped and constantly dismayed, not by stinking excrement or mice or spiders or wounded rats (they would be easy for me), but my own revolting history and self.

'You need to behave as if you are normal,' the doctor said. 'You can do that, can't you? Behave normally and before you know it, you will have forgotten your trauma.'

So that is what I had been trying to do. And my notes of that time are not entirely pessimistic: 'Being busy is better than those long, long months of sitting in my room, thinking only that none of it was my doing, none of it my fault.'

'Time doesn't wait for you to catch up; lives flow on.'

'The problem is that people have learned to make allowances for me, and my aberrations have become normal to them, their expectations of me are so low.'

'I am Gwalia – stranger to myself. Sum of all the stories told by Gwenlais. Head of Brân, severed from my body, kept alive until his followers turn to England, land of the conquering Angles. And then they took it to be buried in London. On the White Hill. Gwales. Looking for her lost causeway.'

Was I waiting, Jon, for you, without even knowing it?

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'ERRM...YES. Okay. Right.'

They are looking at me expectantly.

'Hello.' I nod.

There is an awful silence.

So I blunder into it with my mind shut.

'The main point is, you see, that this ripple effect – well, really successive waves – of immigrants moving outwards from the poorer areas, to more affluent areas, as they establish themselves, creates a number of tensions right across the spectrum of the different communities.'

It had sounded so much better last night, in the early hours, when I was tapping it into my laptop in my room, at home. It isn't easy trying to spin a tangle of complicated issues into a coherent strand of argument. My grandfather calls all talking 'spinning yarns' and does it well. Obviously that gene eluded me.

Now they are looking at me blankly.

I smile and nod.

Smiling and nodding gets listeners on your side. (Communication theory says so.)

'I mean the communities they impact upon.'

'I think we are aware of the principles, old boy.' The man in a loud bow-tie and chalk-striped suit is getting impatient. 'What we really want to know is whether this will be replicated with the East Europeans?'

(Communications theory is not infallible.)

He is Freddy Morgan, senior adviser on immigration to the Home Office, and chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Leyburn Institute, my employers. His body gives off ambition like a pheromone.

I glance at my boss, Professor Angela Lain, who has been standing to the side of the platform area. She smiles encouragingly. I am also aware of my friend Nisha, sitting at the control desk above the video wall behind me, waiting for me to cue her to start running the graphs and statistics sequence she has helped me prepare. Nisha is a goddess, from India, come to protect me.

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