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Meg Elis

I’r Gad (1975), Carchar (1978) and Cyn Daw’r Gaeaf (1985)

Mae ‘na fwy na barrau a waliau yn carcharu pobl. Gall rhy-wun gael ei gaethiwo gan gonfensiwn, gan henaint a chan bobl eraill – yn ogystal â chan yr hyn sy’n gyffredin iawn i Gymry y dyddiau hyn – carchardai a deddfau Lloegr. // Tarddu o brofi-adau mewn carchar a wnaeth y storïau hyn, ond fe’u hysgrifen-wyd, a’u cyhoeddi, mewn carchar ac fe’u darllenir hefyd mewn carchar ‘agored’ – sef Cymru o dan y drefn sydd ohoni heddiw’ (Carchar, 1978: back cover)

[There are things other than bars and walls that imprison people. Someone could be imprisoned by convention, by old age and by other people – as well as by that which is very common amongst the Welsh these days – the prisons and laws of England. // These stories arise from experiences in prison, but they were written, and published, in a prison and they are also read in an ‘open’ prison – namely Wales under the system that exists today]

Introduction

Meg Elis was sent to HMP Moor Court, an open prison for women located at Oakamoor, Staffordshire, for 6 months in 1975. This was the result of her part in an exercise in direct action taken by Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg against the television transmitter at Holme Moss, south Pennines in England in 1973. In the subsequent court case she was given a six month suspended sentence. This was re-imposed when she took part in further similar such direct action event at Aberystwyth Post Office in 1974. During 1973 and 1974 Elis was a full-time secretary
of Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg and, as such, political activism was not an ephemeral venture but a job, a professional occupation and perhaps a way of life too. In many ways Elis was typical of the generation of Welsh language activists whose version of radicalism was at least partly informed by the dramatic social and protest movements of the 1960s. The linguistic and performative alterity of her personal name (she is also known as Marged Dafydd, Marged Elis, Meg Ellis) signals the influence of Owain Owain, a foundational activist of Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg who advertised in ‘Tafod y Ddraig’ the fact of his Cymricising his name in changing it from /Owen Owen/ and encouraged others to do the same.¹ Elis’s use of the notion of Wales as a prison concides with the development of the concept of the carceral state in French philosophical literature while at the same time echoing Owain’s novel Y Dydd Olaf (1976) [The Last Day] that situates the gradual development of a totalitarian state in the Welsh context. But Elis is no mere Ekho. Aaron rightly notes of Elis, among others, that her creative writings in the cause of Welsh language activism led her to discover her own original literary voice: ‘A few women [...] discovered their literary voices in the urge to proselytise the language movement’s cause. Meg Elis’s first two novels, I’r Gad [To Battle] (1975) and Carchar [Prison] (1978), constitute fictional accounts of Cymdeithas activities, based on autobiographical experience’ (Aaron, 1997: 10). Not only that but Elis’s engagement with political activism broadened throughout the course of the 1970s and 1980s and came to include the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, the Peace Camp at Greenham Common and the politics of anti-Thatcherism more generally. Her creative writing co-evolved with this development in her activist sensibility. Her fictional diary Cyn Daw’r Gaeaf was awarded the National Eisteddfod Prose Medal in 1985. It is this sense of the unfolding of both the activist and the artist that is of primary interest here. As both individual and society change, as if held in some Socratic dialogue or Hegelian dialectic, our reading of their relationship to each other ought to enrich our understanding of the activist sensibility. Elis and her three works of creative writing offer a critical insight on that interstice.

‘tydi merthyron / gweithredwyr / arwyrt ddim i fod yn anniolchgar’: The total activist in the carceral society

According to Gramich (2007), the generation of language activists to which Elis belongs is remarkable in that these young females were janus-like figures to the extent that they were contributing to a rather