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CARDIFF BETWEEN CHICAGO AND BALTIMORE: REFLECTIONS ON CULTURAL DEVELOPMENTS



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When Cardiff City Council sent a delegation to Baltimore in the 1980's to investigate its waterfront development it was heavily criticised in the press; yet, as John Wilson reminds us in his essay, 'The Chicago of Wales' (Planet, 115, February/March 1996), it was in a sense only repeating what had happened a hundred years earlier. The editor of the local daily paper, The Western Mail, Lascelles Carr, attended the Chicago (International) Exposition of 1893, one of that series of great industrial and cultural jamborees which a dynamic capitalism mobilised to accelerate the process of modernization. These expositions, in their displays of technology and art, commodities and entertainment, laid the foundation for what would increasingly become the society of the spectacle, in which the real and its representations would become profoundly compounded.

Cardiff was to organise its own international exposition in Cathays Park in 1896, an event and setting which were to be crucial to the sociocultural development of the city, major contributions to its claims to be recognised as the 'real Capital of Wales', as the 'Welsh Metropolis'. The development of the site on which the exposition was held, Cathays Park, was to affect Cardiff. It was, importantly to shift the focus of the city (only granted city status in 1905) from its own docklands and waterfront to this more inland site, a move which is now to some degree being ironically reversed - Cardiff one hundred years on is taking off again.



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But what has happened in between that initial moment of energized civic pride and the subsequent realization of that pride in the impressive architectural structures the National Museum, University College, City Hall and other buildings - now standing on the former exposition site, and the present project of renovation at the waterfront?. How has cultural life in Cardiff measured up to the expectations of those late 19th Century improvers who contributed to Britain's 'first planned and integrated civic centre' (Wilson), of its visionary architect Edwin Seward who presented in 1884 a full-blown scheme for the transformation of the Cardiff town centre upon the model of the Parisian boulevards (Wilson)? It does have a boulevard today, Boulevard de Nantes, fronting the civic centre, but it is a somewhat anonymous conduit for traffic.



To what extent has a vibrant culture been generated adequate to inhabiting the spaces provided, as articulated in a 1912 magazine article; 'The Chicago of Wales: Cardiff's Municipal and Cultural Life: 'there is probably no modern city....which has brought to greater perfection the many sided projects that go to make up the corporate life of a great city....Nothing adds more to the beauty of a city than its public buildings. Judged by this standard, Cardiff's beauty is beyond question' (quoted Wilson). But were these buildings, with the exception of the National Museum, with its most impressive collection of late 19th Century French painting, the bequest of the Davies sisters, only a type of stage set, a kind of Potemkin village? Where in Cardiff was there that dense production of culture that

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one associates with, expects from an urban centre with claims to Metropolitan status? To attempt a cultural mapping of Cardiff from that initial moment through the decades to the present is hightech problematic, as preparation of this brief essay demonstrated; sources, apart from the brief guide to the paintings in the National Museum, are scarce. A cultural history of Cardiff has yet to be written.

The strategy deployed here will be that suggested by the historian of France, Theodore Zelden, after the completion of his major work: his next history would be written like a cubist painting, faceted, moving between positive and negative spaces, juxtaposing, suggesting, maybe as much about absence as presence, indications, a sense of ghosts that might, given the expectations of urban culture, have stalked Cardiff.

One might list the near misses between the earlier and later periods. Alfred Sisley painted on the coast, at Penarth on the bay headland, now very much part of the new development of the area, a cultural moment and memory celebrated later by the contemporary painter Terry Setch. There is also the ghostly presence of the journal, *The Welsh Outlook*, which was promoting contemporary radical European art before the First World War, more particularly that of Belgian artists like Meunier and Verhaeren, innovators and sympathetic to the working class movement.



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Shortly after the outbreak of war the major poet Emile Verhaeren, the sculptor Georges Minne and the painter Emile Claus, among a number of other artists and writers, were evacuated to Wales, through the offices of the Davies sisters, who were to endow the National Museum with their collection of French art. Their presence caused something of an aesthetic stir, as Wilson documents in 'Memorialising History' (1996). The Welsh Outlook was optimistic: 'One of the chief blessings to Wales of the war should be the intellectual and artistic stimulus we may derive from the presence in our midst of foreign poets, artists and musicians'.

Appreciative of this 'brilliant group in our midst' the journal was fearful that full advantage might not be taken of their presence. The writer asks 'What will the Art Academies do? and the Art Schools? The opportunity is unique but we may be too parochial to seize it'. There was some hope that the figure work on the National Museum might bear traces of the shaping influence of Meunier or Minne but this was not to be. The presence of these internationally recognised artists has vanished without trace.

Then there are the absences, what or who were in other places or went to other places, but not Cardiff. Samuel Beckett, James Knowlson informs us in his recent masterly biography, was informed by his Trinity College, Dublin, tutor of a lectureship in French coming up at Cardiff University College - Beckett held out for Paris. Cathays Park does



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not seem his milieu. In a book on arcades, sparked off by Benjamin's work on Paris and Aragon's 'Paris Peasant', one finds Cardiff's arcades sharing the same space as the Parisian ones traversed dream-like by the Parisian surrealists. What ghosts haunt Cardiff? Might anyone have discovered in their windows, as did the Parisian surrealists in theirs, the recent relics of the origins of modernity and raised to cultural significance the flotsam and jetsam of that industrializing process to which Cardiff was also central. No such record remains. Too much to expect maybe, Paris and Cardiff. But nearer home? At one level cafe society seems to have existed more in Swansea, its competitor city westward along the coast, often perceived as being both more Welsh and more artistic. There in the 1930's, Dylan Thomas, Welsh and metropolitan poet, and fellow artists frequented the Kardomah Coffee house, an avantgardist outpost. No such energy seemed to inform Cardiff's cultural life during the period.

Maybe we are now entering a moment when the promise of the late 19th Century and pre-World War One era might come to be realised. Since the early 1980s new energies have developed - Cardiff as a media city for instance. There has been the consolidation of the arts centre Chapter, now flourishing. Artists trained in the Cardiff School of Art have stayed to establish studio collectives, establish group contacts with artists in other cities, including the former socialist states of Eastern Europe. The Cardiff Bay

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development with its commissioning programme has contributed significantly to enhancing the presence and visibility of contemporary art in the city. There is still some leeway to be made up - the city at present lacks a major gallery site to secure important international exhibitions.

There is a sense, however, that, unlike the fallow period



referred to above, structures are now in place which will guarantee that the City's profile as being culturally productive in a national and international dimension will be confirmed, that the aspirations of a century ago will be realised.