

DARRYL F. ZANUCK PREPARES FOR WAR

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In 1941 the 20th Century Fox production *How Green Was My Valley* beat off opposition from *The Maltese Falcon* and *Citizen Kane* and scooped the kitty at the Oscar ceremony. It won five Oscars, three more than the same studio's *The Grapes of Wrath* in the previous year, but one less than MGM's *Mrs. Miniver* a year later. Both *How Green* and *Grapes of Wrath* were produced by Fox's vice-president in charge of production, Darryl F Zanuck.¹

The filming of *The Grapes of Wrath* had signalled a new mood in Hollywood; it had indicated that, with a war in Europe and with America being forced to consider the implications of that war, a time had come in which it would be possible to make films about some of the everyday problems faced by ordinary people. In his earlier career at Warner Bros., Zanuck had been involved with the production of critically acclaimed and successful social problem films and more than anything else he appreciated how effectively a realistic social background and authentic social tensions promoted the power of a good story set in that context.² Nunnally Johnson had been circulating galley-proofs of Steinbeck's novel around the Hollywood studios even before the book was published. There was an understandable reluctance to take up such a controversial subject and, though doubtless motivated by the urge to spite his rivals, it was Zanuck's unique genius which allowed him to appreciate immediately the power of the story.³

Zanuck's motives were as always almost entirely commercial. He was aware of the crisis facing the studios; European markets had been lost and at home there was a sharp drop in box-office receipts. More than ever before the movies had to offer quality entertainment, and for Zanuck that above all meant good subjects and good stories. In April 1940 he told his staff that Hollywood did not pay enough attention to 'good subjects' for it was the case that 'not the greatest cast in the world can make them go to see a subject that they don't like or a subject that seems slight, empty or hackneyed'. In May 1941 he advised that Fox 'should not buy any play or book regardless of how promising it seems as a popular attraction unless we feel that it also contains the ingredients of a popular moving picture'.⁴ In adopting this position Mel Gussow makes it clear that Zanuck was playing to his own company's strength: 'MGM had the stars, Fox didn't!'⁵ What Fox had was Zanuck's nose for a story, his confidence that he could depoliticise radical material and that his team of writers and directors would turn out powerful films full of human interest.

Zanuck had reacted boldly to Steinbeck's story and richly deserved his success. Both his understanding of what constituted good movie material and his readiness to

plunge in where more cautious men feared to tread were even more apparent in his decision to film *How Green Was My Valley*, a story set in a Welsh coalmining valley. Again what amazes here is the swiftness of the reaction and the confidence that backed it up. Richard Llewellyn's novel was an instant best-seller but it had only been published in 1939 and this hitherto totally unknown novelist who had never been to the States was paid a record \$300,000 (three times what had been paid for Steinbeck's novel).⁶

Fox had been committed to make a film about one of the worlds most notorious coalfields and one which in the Britain of the inter-war years had made a reputation for itself as one peopled by headstrong, bloody-minded opponents of political consensus. Until 1910 the million Welsh miners who lived in the crowded terraced streets of towns strung along deep valleys in treeless moorland scenery were chiefly known for their religious faith, their political Liberalism, their choral singing and their preference for the Welsh language. Between 1910 and 1926 the Welsh miners turned to militancy and their union, the Federation or 'Fed', not only took over the effective leadership of miners throughout Britain but became the main threat to the industrial peace of the whole nation. Suddenly in 1926, following the defeat of the General Strike, the whole buoyancy and confidence of the Fed was shattered. The Welsh coalfield was to be as badly hit by the Great Depression as any sector of the British economy. By 1930 over 27% of insured workers in Wales were unemployed and there were parts of the coalfield where over 40% were out of work. Whole towns came to a standstill. The challenge of the Fed had been halted. The union remained loyal to left-wing leaders but their job now was to fight for the union's survival rather than to eliminate capitalism. There was no great wave of protest, indeed there was much political apathy, but the Labour Party effortlessly eclipsed other political parties and even the religious denominations. For a while after 1918 it had seemed as if the Welsh miners were the cutting edge of revolution; now the Welsh seemed to be represented by leaders who were no great threat but who nevertheless remained the main dissenters and main critics of the politicians who were masterminding economic recovery. The Welsh were, for example, always identified as critics of all those political and philanthropic efforts that were being made to relieve the unemployed.⁷

In 1936 Dr. Thomas Jones, a former civil servant and now organiser-in-chief of philanthropy in Wales, wrote an essay in which he brilliantly satirised the way in which the rest of the country had come to perceive Wales. Wales was now a nation of wringers and moaners, forever calling for help, forever demanding government action and government cash.⁸ Reading official reports and documents one does indeed sense that the authorities increasingly found the Welsh tiresome. At the end of this period the great comic novelist Evelyn Waugh has one of his fashionable characters refer to the Welsh miners as 'feckless and unemployable'.⁹ All of this was in stark contrast to the period before 1910 when the Welsh had been thought of as an adornment of the British Empire and the Welsh miners had been praised both for their loyalty to the great Liberal Party

and for their hard work which made their coalfield the most dynamic element in the whole British economy. The Victorians had come to be proud of Wales and were happy to award it a quasi-national status. Wales had been given nearly all the dignity owed a historic nation; it had its own national museum, library and university and its supporting teams competed internationally in their own right. But within a generation Wales had changed from being an adornment of national life to being either a headache or a bore.

Once again, however, the wheel of fortune was to turn and Wales was to come out of the cold. With war approaching and then becoming a reality the Welsh miners were once more needed to dig coal and furthermore the political loyalty of the Welsh as a whole had to be secured by the British state. In 1940 when the minority Labour Party and its associated trade union leaders were taken into the government it was also made clear that the Welsh miners were once again very much part of the national consensus. Throughout the war their efforts were praised and it was no accident that in the post-war world former Welsh miners now found themselves amongst the most powerful and best loved political leaders in the land. In this whole process of rehabilitation, one which really clinched the emergence of the Welfare State, newsreels, documentaries and feature films were to play a crucial part. Prior to 1938 only the occasional documentary film-maker had strayed into the Welsh mining valleys; the onset of war, however, made the movie camera a far more common sight. Most dramatically the Welsh coalfield for a moment became the subject of major feature films and nothing so fully testifies to the new status of these previously despised workers. In 1938 MGM brought noted social problem director King Vidor to London to film *The Citadel*, and in 1939 the talented director Carol Reed made *The Stars Look Down*, a film about County Durham miners which was given something of a Welsh feel so that in America it was thought of as a Welsh film. These films, both adaptations of novels by A J Cronin, were critically acclaimed as constituting a breakthrough in terms of their realistic depictions of social conditions in Britain. Similarly, Ealing Studios' *The Proud Valley*, directed in 1939 by Pen Tennyson, was thought of as being remarkably sympathetic to miners protesting about conditions on the very eve of war.¹⁰

The time was ripe for these films as both the American and British owned studios in London appreciated. The time was ripe too for a novelist who could prove that Welsh miners were not all bad, that they were in fact just ordinary people who had been asked to do a very dangerous job, that they were not naturally wringers but rather people who would be reasonably content to be hard-working given the chance and the right incentives. As war became inevitable the need was overwhelmingly for a novel that reminded both politicians and the masses that working-class communities could be an attractive, rewarding, stable and culturally fulfilling phenomenon given the right conditions of full employment and growth, and that indeed all these conditions had existed a mere generation ago. In short the time was ripe for Richard Llewellyn and *How Green Was My Valley*.

With conditions so conducive and the signs so clear it might reasonably be expected that the novelist of the hour, the man whose first novel would be 'the first and probably the most famous best-seller of the war years' would be from the Welsh mainstream. But far from it: the author of this story, which sold more than a quarter of a million copies in its original British high-priced edition, which then went on to break records overseas in translation and in paperback and which has never been out of print, was in almost every respect an outsider. In the Wales of the 1930s Welsh intellectuals, many of them schoolteachers, had made valiant efforts to establish the novel as an indigenous form. In both the Welsh language and in what was described as the Anglo-Welsh tradition of writing in English, poetry and short stories came naturally but it was more difficult to sustain novel-writing in overwhelmingly peasant and proletarian communities. In both traditions the tone was set by small literary magazines and it was certain that the clutch of Welsh novels praised in those pages were never best-sellers in Wales let alone the wider world. Then suddenly here was Richard Llewellyn, a man whom nobody in Wales had heard of, scooping every financial reward London and New York had to offer as well as some of the major prizes from Los Angeles. There was considerable jealousy in common rooms, editorial offices and literary bars and cafes and there was an eagerness to denounce the romantic, sentimental, middle-brow and, worst of all, commercial and popular prose of a writer who could only be an adventurer and opportunist.

In the flood of publicity Richard Llewellyn began to develop his Welsh credentials. In time he came to stress that he was born in Wales, that various grandparents had been Welsh-speaking, chapel-going and engaged in coalmining, that he had spent many childhood holidays in Wales and that for a while, whilst researching the novel, he had actually worked underground himself. What really caught the eye, however, were the more exotic aspects of his CV: he had grown up in London, had worked there as a kitchen-hand at Claridge's and had then gone to Italy to learn hotel-catering; he had spent most of the 1920s either in Italy or in the British Army in India; and he had worked in film production first in Italy and then in London. For many decades after the appearance of his first novel there was a tendency for Wales to take Richard Llewellyn (or Richard Lloyd, to give him his real name) at face value. He was an exile, an international traveller who nonetheless had undergone authentic Welsh experiences at crucial moments in his career. More recently the suspicion has developed that he might well have invented many of his Welsh credentials, which had been quite limited in the first place. It seems certain that he was born in London, the son of a hotel manager who had served in the First World War and who was once invited to play Lloyd George in a silent movie. Certainly there were holidays in Welsh-speaking Wales but it was doubtful if those were taken in the mining valleys. There is no evidence that he worked as a miner but every indication that his great novel was first drafted in India and then completed first as he struggled to succeed as a West End dramatist and then at the stately

home of a North Wales patron of the arts. There have been continuous rumours that the novel was based on a diary handed down by a relative or friend. Changes were made by the publisher, Michael Joseph, including the substitution of the familiar marvelously evocative title for Llewellyn's original choice of *Slag*.¹¹

What angered many contemporary Welsh critics was that Llewellyn had chosen to centre his story not in the decade of unemployment but in the years of full employment and working class prosperity that had existed in the late Victorian and Edwardian periods. Quite simply he was a Tory who believed that successful working-class communities were dependent on entrepreneurial inspired growth and that the disastrous militancy of the 1920s and depression of the 1930s had been caused as much by the greed of unions as by that of employers. His novel, though, was no political tract but rather a romance celebrating the family and the states of childhood and adolescence. It brilliantly traces the way the clever child encounters language, education, love and bittersweet challenge of leaving aspects of family behind as he discovers an individual destiny. Nostalgia is combined with tough social and psychological realism. Here were themes for Hollywood and it is tempting to speculate that a writer who had worked in film production and film journalism was perfectly aware of the social qualities and those middlebrow novels, like Pearl Buck's *The Good Earth*, which had sold well and appealed to Hollywood. The war years meant that Llewellyn was back in the army and unable to get to an America that had fallen in love with his book and the film of it; but it is interesting to note that after the war he was to live in Hollywood where he worked as a writer.

I love the movie that Hollywood made of Llewellyn's novel and I am quite happy that the most successful and famous novel about Wales should live on in the memory of so many people largely because of an American film. In 1991, to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the film, I went to Hollywood to look more closely at why this Welsh novel had been so quickly snapped up by Fox and to investigate the interplay of personalities that had ensured the film's quite considerable charm. My main contact was the film's writer, Philip Dunne, who in 1990 published his screenplay along with a fascinating essay on the background to the film.¹² It was Zanuck, of course, who had spotted the potential of the story, who could see that the emphasis had to be on the family rather than the community or its mine, who chose to tell the story entirely from the young boy's point of view and who decided to stick with one child actor rather than following the hero into early manhood. There was an early script from Ernest Pascal, script-work and important casting and location decisions from the initial director, William Wyler, then a final script taken from the novel itself by Philip Dunne and eventual direction by John Ford, the man who had made *The Grapes of Wrath*. Like all Hollywood professionals Dunne has always been amused by the 'auteur' theory and he delights in stressing the various contributions. It is a John Ford movie in its lyrical celebration of the family, of the tribe, of rich peasant characters and troubled heroes forced into action

but he had to be rescued from making it too Irish a tale and he had played little part in setting it up or in post-production.¹³ Dunne himself stresses that Llewellyn was the true "auteur". What was filmed was his story and his values. He has high praise too for Roddy McDowall, the 12 year old English actor who played Huw Morgan and whose face and bright eyes had to sustain so much love and wonder.

The faces, the interiors of the Morgan home and the Californian hillside which had to make do for Wales were all brilliantly photographed by Arthur Miller but perhaps in retrospect the most crucial contribution came from the composer Alfred Newman who arranged a score based on Welsh melodies and who recruited a Welsh choir from a Los Angeles church to sing Welsh hymns at every critical moment in the film.¹⁴ Ford had kept dialogue to a minimum and a narrator was left to carry much of the story; but throughout the music does its work and finally clinches both the Welshness of the film and the solidarity of the mining community. At first Welsh audiences mocked many of Hollywood's absurdities, but they all joined in the singing and throughout the world audiences left the cinema humming an opera chorus written by Wales' most famous nineteenth-century composer who had, incidentally, grown up in Pennsylvania. Joseph Parry's *Myfanwy* was henceforth to be the best-loved of all Welsh choral pieces. Newman's magical use of it was recalled forty years on by Roddy Dowall who in mid-interview paused and hummed it perfectly in his light tenor voice. The glow of the movie lives on; Roddy McDowall and Anna Lee retain the love and friendship that developed on set and still call each other Huw and Bronwen, the names of their characters; Maureen O'Hara, still a star after fifty years, named her daughter Bronwen. Richard Llewellyn's family is very much with us.

At the Oscar ceremony *How Green Was My Valley* was quite correctly identified as a Darryl Zanuck film. This, of course, was the Darryl Zanuck who could not wait for America's entry into the war and who as Colonel Zanuck led a column of his extras to an interventionist rally at the Hollywood Bowl.¹⁵ Soon, of course, he was to launch a whole spate of war movies. It is fascinating to reflect that *How Green Was My Valley*, the most famous and satisfying film made about the South Wales coalfield, was made by the two Hollywood personalities who were to feel at their happiest and most fulfilled in the Second World War. Clearly both Zanuck and Ford, products of small towns in Nebraska and Maine, outsiders for different ethnic, religious and above all, perhaps, physical reasons, needed the psychological fulfilment of being in American uniform just as much as they needed to make films. But equally clearly this would-be general and would-be admiral knew what the war was all about; that was very apparent in *How Green Was My Valley*. Ford, of course, was very happy to have his chance to express universal themes through the idiom of a Celtic family, but Zanuck must take the main credit for seeing that the time was ripe for a film stressing the heroic qualities of British workers, a theme that was a new one for Hollywood.¹⁶ Meanwhile, as the world hailed the film of his novel, Richard Llewellyn, a former soldier, was back in a guard's uniform. It had

been very much a coming together of Tory and Republican values that has produced this lyrical and pastoral vision of working-class community. At first Zanuck had worried about the emphasis the novel had placed on industrial tension, but in fact Llewellyn himself had ensured that family and industrial values always transcended those of any organisation and in the film labour protests are handled honestly and in a balanced way. What impresses in both novel and film is the way in which a mythical view of community and history is combined with an utterly realistic view of individual integrity and aspiration.¹⁷ What mattered most in 1941 was that the story of *How Green Was My Valley* magnificently celebrated the virtues of working-class community at a time of crisis for Western democracy. In the long term one should not underestimate the extent to which Llewellyn, Zanuck and Ford ensured that the war would not be fought in vain. Their point was clear: the aspirations of individuals and community alike depended on jobs and prosperity.¹⁸

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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- (3) Leonard MOSLEY, *Zanuck*. London, 1984.
- (4) Mel GUSSOW, *Don't Say Yes Until I Finish Talking*. New York, 1971, pp. 90 et seq.
- (5) *Ibid.*, p. 91.
- (6) MOSLEY, *Op. cit.*, p. 266.
- (7) For this Wales see K O MORGAN, *The Rebirth of a Nation: Wales 1880-1980*. Oxford, 1981, and Hywel FRANCIS and Dai SMITH, *The Fed*. London, 1980.
- (8) Thomas JONES, «What's Wrong with South Wales?», in *Leeks and Daffodils*. Newtown, 1942.
- (9) Evelyn WAUGHN, *Put Out More Flags*. London, 1942, p. 47.
- (10) Peter STEAD, *Film and the Working Class*. London, 1989. See also Peter STEAD, «Wales in the Movies» in Tony CURTIS (Ed), *Wales: The Imagined Nation*. Bridgend, 1986, and «Wales and Film» in Trevor HERBERT and Gareth Elwyn JONES, *Wales between the Wars*. Cardiff, 1988.
- (11) For Llewellyn see Dai SMITH, *Wales! Wales?*. London, 1984, and Mick FELTON's essay in Bernard OLDSEY (Ed.), *British Novelists 1930-1959*. Dictionary of Literary Biography, vol. 15, Detroit, 1983.
- (12) Philip DUNNE, *How Green Was My Valley*. Santa Barbara, 1990. See also DUNNE's memoirs, *Take Two - A Life in Movies and Politics*. New York, 1980.
- (13) Andrew SINCLAIR, *John Ford: A Biography*. New York, 1979. John BAXER, *The Cinema of John Ford*. London and New York, 1971, and Tag GALLGHER, *John Ford: The Man and His Films*.
- (14) The very detailed press books and publicity material drew attention to the music and the choir and managers were urged to contact choral groups.

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- (15) Clayton R KOPPES and Gregory D. BLACK, **Hollywood Goes to War**. London, 1987, p. 40.
- (16) *Ibid.*, p. 225.
- (17) Cf. Francis R WALSH, «The Films We Never Saw: American Movies View Organised Labor, 1934-54», in **Labor History**, Vol. 27, No. 4, New York, 1986.
- (18) Peter STEAD's film on the novel and film of **How Green Was My Valley**, directed by John Osmond, was shown on BBC Wales Television in March 1992.
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