

Poetry and the 99%: an extract from work about the poetry of Dai George

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Dai George's debut collection *The Claims Office* (Bridgend: Seren, 2013) undoubtedly shows its debts to south Wales: 'Jah',¹ for example, recalls the visit of Haile Selassie to the Swansea area in 1939,² and 'St Fagan's [*sic*], for the first and last time' recalls a somewhat unsuccessful visit to the eponymous museum.³ However, the volume seems perhaps more sharply concerned, not with the idea of nation – which is perhaps what the back-cover blurb means by suggesting that the volume shows a 'reluctance to conform to nationalist cliché' – but with ideas broadly to do with social justice. Thus, for example, 'Boys of leisure'⁴ starts with the speaker's memory of the Bob Bank at Cardiff City's Ninian Park football stadium,⁵ providing the boyhood pleasures of 'Saturdays with men' and their '*You are my Cardiff* chants'. The discovery of this life is allied, in the following stanza, with the riches to which the speaker's boyhood self was admitted by virtue of a library card. However, both of these experiences seem to let him down, as their promise that 'all doors would allow / my passage' gives way to a sense of the 'failed vows of stadiums, books and railcards' – presumably, the sense that their suggestions of ready access to pleasure, knowledge and experience do not become a fundamental truth of later life. The rest of the poem then turns to leisure centres – specifically, swimming baths – with the assertion that they might be the speaker's 'last pastoral', as well as the sense that they provide places where the speaker finds that 'we are boys again', even as 'lost and

¹ George, *Claims Office*, p. 21.

² For a brief reference to Haile Selassie's 1939 visit to Penllergaer, at the invitation of Rees Howells ('missionary and founder of the Bible College, Swansea'), see, Huw Walters, 'Howells, Rees', *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*, undated, <<http://yba.llgc.org.uk/en/s2-HOWE-REE-1879.html>>, accessed 24 February 2015.

³ George, *Claims Office*, p. 42.

⁴ George, *Claims Office*, pp. 18-19.

⁵ For memories of the 'Bob Bank' stand at Ninian Park, see 'Fans bid farewell to Ninian Park', BBC online, 5 May 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/local/southeastwales/hi/people_and_places/history/newsid_7976000/7976628.stm>, accessed 24 February 2015. The Bob Bank was also notable for being home to 'the longest-serving advert on a stand roof in the football league': Kevin Leonard, 'Stadium roof's piece of history', BBC online, 4 May 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/wales/south_east/8010254.stm>, accessed 24 February 2015.

compromised' adults. But what this gives way to, as the poem concludes, is the notion that swimming pools – George specifically cites Hatch End in Greater London (in the London Borough of Harrow) and Pentwyn Leisure Centre in Cardiff – are 'Shrines' to what he calls 'a vanishing, turnstile Britain, open to any jack, joke, / chump who had the change, or no'. For the poem, in other words, public swimming pools are symbolic of a society that is defined by accessible civic amenities – crucially, ones that are open to anyone, irrespective of their achievements, for the payment of a very small fee ('change'). Of course, the poem's lament is precisely that what it sees as a social virtue that benefits any 'jack, joke, / chump' – a social virtue that is, in other words, to do with social levelling – is now in decline. Indeed, it is interesting that the poem identifies this particular virtue with Britain ('a vanishing, turnstile Britain'): 'Boys of Leisure' may start with the pleasures of boyhood Wales (at Ninian Park), but it ends by constructing a lament for what it sees (correctly or not) as a *British* social virtue. What is most important, however, is its attachment to a notion of social equity – a level field on which all may play, irrespective of social status (the ordinary *jack*) or achievement (it is open to everyone, even the *joke* or *chump*).

Given this sort of sensibility, it is entirely congruent to find the poem 'Claimant'⁶ which pits a 'Commoner' and 'Groundling' – as the poem's opening words put it – against a social elite, with the relatively simple hope of the Claimant himself 'being heard' by those in power. The primary imagery of the poem, then, gestures towards social exclusion, as the Claimant is portrayed as being outside a 'property' in which 'your worships feast indoors'. Notwithstanding such exclusion, however, the Claimant is a determined social participant: he is 'Voter'; he is 'Entrant / in the world's competition'; he is, the poem suggests, emphatically not asking for charity ('Mistake him for beggar / at your peril'). Most importantly, he is unrealised power – but power that the social elite hopes will remain unrealised ('Some are banking on the sheer // luck of him not fathoming his power'). He seems to function, in other words, as an everyman "ordinary voter"; but he is crucially an everyman who is waking up to the fact that he needs to 'reassess / his options', given that the levers of socio-

⁶ George, *Claims Office*, p. 25.

economic power are being kept securely away from him ('the account's been moved offshore, / the enquiry parked forever in the long grass'). The poem, in this sense, offers a vision in which the worker, the voter, the everyday social participant whom 'your worships chose // to ignore until this evening' begins to assert his significance. Thus, as the poem ends, the 'Groundling' who has been previously ignored by the powerful is now outside the gates of their 'property' and 'occupies the lawn'. More importantly, perhaps, in the very last words of the piece – words which, like the poem as a whole, are addressed to the powerful, inside and at least – the Claimant stands outside the property of the mighty, 'Where his ballast / at the base was the condition of your height'. In other words, what this poem seeks to acknowledge is the importance of the worker, the voter, the ordinary 'Entrant / in the word's competition'; and the social injustice that the poem thus seeks to redress is the failure of the powerful to acknowledge the notion that it is only on the backs of such individuals that their own power, wealth and privilege are constructed.

It is, I suppose, possible to see such social concern as being in dialogue *with* or even the product of a Welsh post-devolution society that, from the top at least, has announced a desire for 'Clear Red Water' – i.e. an identifiably left-wing distance – between its citizens and what Richard Wyn Jones and Roger Scully call 'their fellow Britons'.⁷ However, as Jones and Scully point out, in social attitudes testing about 'economic left-right opinions, and [. . .] libertarian-authoritarian stances', post-devolution Wales 'actually appears as the least "radical" of [Scotland, Wales and England] on both measures'⁸ – although its population is 'significantly more likely' to self-identify as 'working class' (69.9%) than that of England (59.2%).⁹ As such, the emotional sympathies of post-devolution Wales might, like those of the poem, be with the 'Commoner' Claimant, rather than with those 'worships' who have ignored him – even if, in terms of opinions on actual policy, its

⁷ Richard Wyn Jones and Roger Scully, *Devolution in Wales: What Does the Public Think?*, Devolution Briefings, 7 (Birmingham: ESRC Devolution Programme, 2004), p. 6.

⁸ Jones and Scully, *Devolution in Wales*, pp. 6 and 7.

⁹ Jones and Scully, *Devolution in Wales*, p. 7. The same study indicates that 'an objective (occupation-related) measure of those fitting into the working class (and other manual workers) category' is far closer between the two countries: 29.4% for Wales, 28.0% for England (p. 7).

sympathies might be rather more ambiguous. However, rather than this being a poem of clearly Welsh radical sympathy, I want to suggest that it is far more rooted in a concern for what has been popularly called – since the birth of the Occupy Movement in September 2011 – the “99%”, a notion which echoes the work of the economist Joseph E. Stiglitz, who wrote in a 2011 article for *Vanity Fair*:

The top 1 percent have the best houses, the best educations, the best doctors, and the best lifestyles, but there is one thing that money doesn't seem to have bought: an understanding that their fate is bound up with how the other 99 percent live.¹⁰

Indeed, the desire for the poem's eponymous Claimant to be heard ('consoled by nothing // so much as the thought of being heard') is a sentiment that is very much in tune with that of one 2011 Occupy protester in Chicago who is reported as saying that '99 percent of this country is disenfranchised and not being heard [. . .] that is irresponsible and awful, but it can be changed and we can change it'.¹¹ Of course, I do not wish to argue that this poem is, in some simplistic way, an Occupy poem; it may, indeed, have been written prior to late 2011 when the Occupy movement sprang up. But it does seem to suggest the particular attitudes of anger towards institutions of (especially financial) power that have followed the financial crisis of 2008.¹² Or, to put it another way, there is a social justice agenda in this poem that is not comfortably reducible to the arena of one particular country or its developing political identity. To use Katie Gramich's terminology, this is not a poetic which is seemingly in pursuit of a Welsh 'autonomous agency';¹³ rather, it is in pursuit of

¹⁰ Joseph E. Stiglitz, 'Of the 1%, by the 1%, for the 1%', *Vanity Fair*, May 2011, <<http://www.vanityfair.com/news/2011/05/top-one-percent-201105>>, accessed 24 February 2015.

¹¹ Karl Singer, 'From Boston to Wichita to Denver: thousands around the country join the 99 percent movement', *ThinkProgress*, 6 October 2011, <<http://thinkprogress.org/economy/2011/10/06/336668/thousands-join-99-percent-movement/>>, accessed 24 February 2014.

¹² Such attitudes were a key generator of the Occupy movement itself, as an early commentary piece on Occupy argues: see 'Occupational therapy: making sense of the Wall Street protests', *Chicago Tribune*, 9 October 2011, <http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2011-10-09/opinion/ct-edit-occupy-20111009_1_protests-occupational-therapy-financial-crisis>, accessed 24 February 2015.

¹³ Katie Gramich, *Twentieth-Century Women's Writing in Wales: Land, Gender, Belonging* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007), p. 183.

agency for citizens outside Stiglitz's 'top 1 percent' – irrespective of nationhood and its possible claims.