

A oes heddwch?

Mike Joseph

at the
Temple of Peace, Cardiff

Dedication of the Welsh national memorial
to the Armenian Genocide
November 3 2007

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A talk for the dedication of the
Welsh national memorial to the Armenian Genocide
delivered by Mike Joseph on November 3rd 2007
at the Temple of Peace, Cardiff ¹

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A oes heddwch?

Y Gwir yn erbyn y Byd. The truth against the world. These words are declaimed by the Archdruid every year at the climax of the Gorsedd ritual in Wales' National Eisteddfod. But in order for true words to be expressed, there must be peace. So the Archdruid demands to know from the assembly, *A oes heddwch?* Is there peace?

There is more than an echo of this combination of truth and peace in the uniting of truth and reconciliation that has enabled South Africa to start to heal itself after the Apartheid years. For peace to break out, the truth must be faced, it must be spoken, and it must be shared between former antagonists. Unless this occurs, the pain can not be resolved, and coexistence is impossible.

Is this not Armenia's double tragedy? First the catastrophe of 1915, then nearly a century of denial of catastrophe. Is this the best the world can do? Has an event like today's made a difference? Is the world ready to hear the truth when plainly, does dim heddwch, there is no peace?

I will attempt an answer by asking another question today: why Wales? Why has the pain of this particular catastrophe echoed across a century and across this continent to reverberate in our small land?

92 years ago this month, a Welsh MP stood up in Westminster to introduce the first House of Commons debate about the Ottoman assault on the Armenians. The word **genocide** would not be coined for a further 29 years, but listen now to Aneurin Williams addressing Parliament on November 16th 1915²: it will be perfectly clear what he was describing to the House for the first time.

“We are in the presence of the greatest massacre probably that the world has ever known. Therefore it behoves us ... to make every sacrifice and put forward every effort to relieve ... suffering, and to save some thousands from death that must still occur ...”

That is the first shock. Aneurin Williams is not speaking of a distant tragedy from the past, or urging parliament to acknowledge the truth of history. He is calling on the government to intervene to save lives threatened by massacres still to come.

“The Turkish authorities within the little time of five months proceeded systematically to exterminate a whole race out of their dominions ... details have come in from many sources, from German and Swiss missionaries, from escaped refugees, from Europeans in Asiatic Turkey ... and all supporting one another in the most astonishing way ... they are not general statements, but are statements from different quarters, describing what happened at particular places at particular

times, with the names of the people who suffered and with the names of the people who inflicted those horrors.”

This is the speech of a man who is, rightly, confident of the quality and variety of his sources. He then summarises the events, starting in May –

“Armenians ... were collected together at short notice, sometimes within a few hours ... Armenians of military age were already serving Turkey as soldiers in the ranks ... men from 15 to 70 who had not been taken as soldiers ... for the most part shot. The older men, women and children, were ordered to prepare to go away to a great distance. This did not take place simply in one town, but in practically every town where there was an Armenian population ... It did not occur owing to the fanaticism of one particular magistrate or one particular population. It is what took place in obedience to the orders send round from the central authorities.

“These people were marched away under the control of gendarmes [and] criminals who had been taken out of the gaols for the express purpose ... allowed to take very little money ... very little food ... Sometimes when they had gone a few days’ journey, they were abandoned by their guards ... then ... Kurds or other brigands fell upon them, robbed and murdered them, violated the women, took the children, and committed every kind of outrage and horror upon them ... When they came to towns they sold women and girls to the harems, sold the children to Turkish families ... so they went

on, driving them along, the people dropping by the way from hunger, women ... having been robbed of their clothes; babes were born by the roadside, and the mothers were told to get up and go on, until they died .. finally when they reached the River Euphrates, the women in many cases threw themselves into the river in order that they might escape by death from man's inhumanity."

I find this account doubly shocking. Not only because of what it relates, but because the account that Aneurin Williams gave Parliament in 1915 could serve perfectly well as a summary of our historical knowledge today, after nearly a century of historiography. Put another way, we find that the British parliament was as well informed about the genocide in the year of its perpetration as it is today.

But now Mr Deputy Speaker interrupts Aneurin Williams, and insists that members must address "something which the Government have left undone or could have done". Aneurin Williams is ready for this:

"I have to suggest that our Government ... should rescue these people wherever it is possible. For instance, a ship of the French Fleet saw a great red cross, and ... discovered that there were 4,000 Armenians who had taken refuge in the mountains between Antioch and the sea. There with a few old guns they were fighting a much superior force who were attacking them with a view to extermination. That French

ship was able to take off those 4,000 people and land them in Egypt.”

It is, of course, the story of the siege and evacuation of Musa Dagh. Aneurin Williams now reaches his conclusion:

“I wish distinctly to say that I am not appealing to His Majesty’s Government in this matter as a matter of race or of religion. It is not only the Armenians who have suffered in this way ... the Greeks ... the Syrian Christians ... it is not only Christians. Apparently this process of exterminating all the progressive elements of the country ... extends far beyond the range of the Christians.”

This was 1915. In fact Aneurin Williams' work in the Armenian interest goes back at least to 1912, when he established the British Armenia Committee, which he continued to chair until shortly before his death in 1924. The Committee’s parliamentary members kept the issue alive in both Houses of Parliament, and consistently lobbied the wartime Coalition government. Through its members with "first-hand knowledge of Armenia and the East", as Williams wrote to *The Times* in July 1913, it was a clearing-house of personal witness and testimony, a means for the truth to reach the west, to be published and understood.

After the war and the genocide, he continued to press governments to honour commitments made in the heat of battle. And in June 1922, faced with the collapse of hopes for

a new order of self-determination for ethnic minorities, Aneurin Williams made one of his last interventions on the Armenian issue:

"The main danger, as I foresee it, is that the Armenian question should be regarded as an unimportant aspect of the whole problem, and that the Armenian nation, having no Government represented at the Conference table to defend its interests, should be sacrificed again as in 1878. But surely the Powers cannot allow that to happen in face of their express pledges and the suffering of those who trusted them."³

His death in 1924 was marked by a joint memorial service for Aneurin and ex-US President Wilson, at the Armenian Church in London; and by this newspaper tribute: "Aneurin Williams ... a fine and disinterested spirit ... he ground many axes in his time, but never his own".

Indeed so. He had campaigned for Home Rule for Ireland – and for Wales and Scotland; he campaigned for women's suffrage; he chaired the International Cooperative Alliance; the Land Nationalisation Society; the First Garden City movement; the Proportional Representation Society; on the outbreak of war he called for a League of Nations, and formed a society to bring it about. This Temple of Peace was built as the Welsh home of the League of Nations and remains home to the League's successor international

organisations. But of all his many concerns, none took more of his time and energy than Armenia.

And yet, a self-effacing campaigner who has fallen into unjustified obscurity, even here in his native Wales. To be able to talk about him today I have drawn heavily on the work of historian Barry Dackombe, who as Aneurin's biographer⁴ was inspired to marry into Aneurin's family (or perhaps it was the other way round). We are delighted to welcome both Barry and Aneurin's granddaughter Elizabeth here today.

Aneurin Williams' pioneering career deserves to be remembered as much in Wales as in Armenia. *Y gwir yn erbyn y byd* – the truth against the world – that might have made a fine slogan for this radical campaigner, not least because it was coined by Aneurin's great-grandfather, Edward Williams – Iolo Morgannwg.

Iolo – stonemason, poet, folklorist, romantic visionary and inventive genius. An antiquarian who researched Wales' rich cultural origins, to set a new Wales proudly on its feet in the coming age of nations – and whatever he could not discover he created. He invented a tradition for Wales, created the Gorsedd ritual for the Eisteddfod; called for a Welsh national library, a national museum, and national eisteddfod. Iolo the political radical, inspired by the French Revolution, founder of the Unitarian movement in Wales, pacifist, a prime mover in the crucible of ideas centred on Merthyr Tydfil, out of which came the world's first working class movement. Iolo

called for attention and respect for all things Welsh. At the critical moment when the world's first industrial revolution was sweeping aside traditional society in the islands of Britain, and Wales might easily have ceased to be an identifiable place, Iolo was a poet who created the nation around him.⁵

And so Iolo stands at the head of both traditions that made modern Wales: a rural, Welsh-speaking land where bards and poets are the people's remembrancers; and industrial, socialist, communitarian, republican Wales, the Wales of the Valleys. The brotherhood of the bards, and the brotherhood of the workplace.⁶ How ironic that Aneurin, Iolo's great-grandson, born in Merthyr, should have had his political career as a radical Liberal swept away in 1922 by a wave of socialism.

Great grandfather and great grandson, impossible visionaries, both of them. And yet how much of what they both imagined is now real: The National Museum of Wales is a short walk from here; our National Library is a great copyright library; 150,000 people attend the National Eisteddfod every year; Ireland is independent, and Wales and Scotland have a substantial measure of home rule – elected by proportional representation; we now have universal adult suffrage – even in 1923, Aneurin's 27 year old daughter was too young to vote when she herself contested his former seat. The League of Nations, created to prevent a repetition of war, failed spectacularly, but was succeeded by the United Nations.

And what of Aneurin's prime cause – Armenia? Let's return to the House of Commons on the evening of November 16th, 1915. Aneurin Williams has sat down, and the Foreign Office Minister Lord Robert Cecil is replying to the debate. What do we hear? Government excuses and prevarication? No. We hear this:⁷

“The Committee of Union and Progress ... initiated the terrible scheme of which we see the results ... no more horrible crime has been committed in the history of the world. It was not only the slaughter and destruction of this people, but it was the slaughter of them under the cruellest possible circumstances to be imagined. ... It was a long-considered, deliberate policy to destroy and wipe out of existence the Armenians in Turkey. It was systematically carried out. ... There was no provocation whatever. ... The crime was a deliberate one, not to punish insurrection but to destroy the Armenian race.” And speaking of Turkey's allies, the Germans, “They and only they are the people who can stop these massacres and can save the Armenians if they choose.”

Aneurin Williams had won complete Government acceptance of the significance of the testimony that he and the British Armenia Committee had gathered. It was a triumph of reporting and advocacy. Y gwir yn erbyn y byd.

So what has changed? What is so different between 1915 and 2007?

It is so simple. In 1915, Turkey was our enemy. In 2007 Turkey is our ally. In 1915 the British Government saw there was much to gain by focussing on the atrocity. In 2007 the British Government believes there is much to lose. They are not alone. Niall Ferguson, celebrated television historian and Harvard Professor wrote this in the Los Angeles Times last month:

“Does gratuitously bringing up the Armenian genocide increase or decrease our leverage in Ankara? The angry responses of Turkey’s president and prime minister provide the answer.”⁸

The Ankara-based Institute for Armenian Research, chaired by a former Turkish Ambassador, must have been so pleased to publish Professor Ferguson’s warning words on their website, that they seem to have overlooked what he actually writes about the Armenian question:

"Did the Armenians suffer a genocide? ... I reviewed the available evidence ... It's damning ... according to the Austrian military plenipotentiary in Constantinople, the Turks had undertaken 'the eradication of the Armenian nation on Asia Minor' ... It is absurd, then, that Turkish politicians ... insist that the issue is somehow open to debate ... And it is deplorable that writers in Turkey can still be prosecuted for describing the fate of the Armenians as genocide."

These words appear today on a Turkish website devoted to the denial of genocide. The mask is slipping. The truth will always prevail against the deceptions of the world. As this truth prevailed in 1915, so it will again. Maybe not today, but soon.
Y gwir yn erbyn y byd. A oes heddwch?

¹ This event was the dedication of the Welsh National Memorial to the Armenian Genocide at the Temple of Peace, Cardiff. The proceedings were hosted by the Welsh Centre for International Affairs.

² All parliamentary proceedings are quoted from Parliamentary Debates, Fifth Series Vol LXXV, Eighth Volume of Session 1914-15, House of Commons (Hansard)

³ Aneurin Williams MP, Armenia, British Pledges and the Near East, Contemporary Review, June 1922 p.418ff

⁴ Barry Dackombe's biography of Aneurin Williams is scheduled for publication in the Journal of Liberal History, winter 2008, no 56.

⁵ Johann Gottfried von Herder: "A poet is the creator of the nation around him, he gives them a world to see and has their souls in his hand to lead them to that world." Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johann_Gottfried_Herder , accessed November 1 2007

⁶ For commentary on Iolo and his time, see Gwyn A. Williams, When Was Wales?, Penguin Books 1985, p164ff. See also the project Iolo Morganwg and the Romantic Tradition in Wales, 1740-1918 at the Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies, <http://iolomorganwg.wales.ac.uk/index.php> , accessed November 1 2007

⁷ Parliamentary Debates, Fifth Series Vol LXXV, Eighth Volume of Session 1914-15, House of Commons (Hansard)

⁸ Niall Ferguson, Labeling Genocide won't halt it, Los Angeles Times, October 15 2007, published on the website of Center for Eurasian Strategic Studies, Institute for Armenian Research, Konrad Adenauer Cad, Ankara, <http://www.eraren.org/index.php?Page=Makaleler&MakaleNo=2704> , accessed November 1 2007