

# ADRIAN MITCHELL (1932–2008) AND WALES

a memoir by Nigel Jenkins

“Timor mortis conturbat me” (fear of death disturbs me), the sobering Latin phrase\* that tolls through many a late medieval poem, was the remorseless refrain of Adrian Mitchell’s “Lament for the Welsh Makers”, which he published in the Welsh fortnightly *Arcade* on 12 December, 1980. As the magazine went to press, John Lennon was assassinated in New York, and Adrian sent me a letter shortly afterwards containing an impromptu coda to his “Lament”:

\*From a responsory of the Catholic Office of the Dead, in the third Nocturn of Matins.

Gentle-tough Lennon, where’s he gone?  
Brian only knows – but his love flies on,  
Its wings beat beatifically –  
The fear of death moves inside me.

Adrian, who had been undertaking a fellowship at Cambridge, wrote that he had been “absolutely messed up into bloody ribbons by John Lennon’s death. I have been listening to his songs every night while alone in Cambridge on this Fellowship. He was the best we had.”

As news broke of Adrian’s own unexpected death on 20 December, 2008 – from heart failure, following a bout of pneumonia from which he had seemed to be recovering – there must have been many like me, all over the world, who found themselves similarly “messed up into ribbons” and drinking away benumbed and disbelieving midnights with a book of Adrian’s poems in hand. Rereading the numerous letters he’d sent me over the years, which I’d filed haphazardly among the pages of his collections, it seemed almost unimaginable that such a huge-hearted and life-enhancing spirit had been so peremptorily snuffed – for despite his seventy-six years he had the passion, energy and unabashed “optimism of the will” of a man less than half his age. I miss him, of course, as a dear friend, but he was one of those exceptional beings – like John Lennon – whose loss may be felt with a rare intensity even by those who never knew him in person: his writings – tender, angry, clear, direct, disarmingly honest, playful, fantastical and utterly uninterested in dishing up for the critics the fashionable clever-dickery

that seems to be the *raison d'être* of too much contemporary verse – forged a conduit of mutually intimate rapport between himself and his readers and listeners, of all ages and conditions. He meant more to more people than just about any other poet in the countries of Britain, and it was gratifying to see it acknowledged in the *Guardian* that of the three substantial figures of the British left who died within days of each other – Adrian Mitchell, Harold Pinter and Bernard Crick – “in terms of spreading good values, getting people to laugh and feel angry for the right reasons, it may be that Mitchell mattered most.”\*

\*“In terms of spreading values, Mitchell mattered most”, by Jackie Ashley, in the *Guardian*, 29.12.08.

Adrian’s debut collection, *Poems* (Cape, 1964), was probably the first book of poetry I ever bought, aged about fifteen, and he has been a bedrock bardic companion ever since (although we didn’t actually meet for another fifteen years). I was buying records by the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, the Pretty Things, Bob Dylan – and Adrian Mitchell, though older and much more (then) of a jazzier than I was, appealed to me as unmistakably a part of the counter-culture that was vibrantly in the making: the exuberance, iconoclasm, irreverence, anarchic humour and angry protest that I relished in the music of the ’60s I also found abundantly active in this subversive new poetry. As Mike Horovitz would later comment, Adrian Mitchell “simply snarls for real decency, intelligence, imagination”.\* Some of his material has dated, of course, as has much of the referential political satire of, say, the eighteenth century: a young reader today would no doubt need footnotes for topics such as Suez, Lord Home and Pal Meat for Dogs. But it holds its own as a valuable record of the times, while other pieces will have work to do for as long as we have war, starvation, monarchy, greed, exploitation, -isms of all destructive shades, love, children, music, pleasure, life and death.

\*Mike Horovitz, in his introduction to *Children of Albion: Poetry of the Underground in Britain*, Penguin Books, 1969.

One notably enduring poem from that era, his most famous, is “To Whom It May Concern”, a rhythm-and-blues incantation against war and the ways in which we gladly collude with the media and consumerism to shield ourselves from its horrors. With its insistent refrain, “Tell me lies about Vietnam”, the poem was first performed at the anti-Vietnam War protest in Trafalgar Square in 1964, and it electrified thousands at the historic Poetry Olympics at the Albert Hall in 1965\*; this performance marked a major breakthrough, which ensured a popular reception for just about everything Adrian subsequently published or staged. He read the poem hundreds of times since then, often changing “Vietnam” to whatever wars may have been disfiguring the planet at the time. “Tell me lies about Iraq” he’d latterly chorus, and had he been with us in Castle Square, Swansea in January 2009 he’d have done as the reader of his poem did on that desperate occasion and intone “Tell me lies about Gaza”.

\*A clip of Adrian Mitchell reading the poem at the Albert Hall, and more recently, may be seen on the Bloodaxe website, <http://www.bloodaxebooks.com/titlepage.asp?isbn=1852248432>

It's difficult to think of a more captivating performer of poetry than Adrian. I saw him "live" for the first time c.1970 in the hangar-like gymnasium of Lanchester Polytechnic in Coventry, where a day-long poetry marathon was being held, as part of the Lanchester Arts Festival. The event attracted thousands, and all of the poets involved – among them Seamus Heaney, John Montague, Brian Patten, Roger McGough, Christopher Logue – relied gratefully on the PA system to deliver their words. But not Adrian, who strode to the microphone – and switched it off, confident that his unamplified voice, its music in league with his body's movement, would communicate the message, and trusting that having established aural parity with his audience he would be more receptive to their responses, even to the extent, as he used to say, of hearing something of what they were thinking. Never losing sight of poetry's origins in music and dance, he tried in his readings to reunite these elements, using all the rhythms, intonations and physical gestures that were available to him, and improvising wherever possible. He was skilled at varying the pace and tone of a reading, alternating, for instance, the high seriousness of an angry celebration of the Chilean folk-singer Victor Jara, murdered by the fascist junta in 1973, with, say, the absurd knockabout of a poem such as "Ten ways to avoid lending your wheelbarrow to anyone" (i.e. the lecherous gambit: "May I borrow your wheelbarrow?" "Only if I can fuck your wife in it."). There were, of course, many occasions on which he was obliged to use the microphone, such as large peace rallies or the huge antimonarchist People's Jubilee organised by the Communist Party at the Alexandra Palace in north London in 1977. But whether addressing a roomful of school children or 90,000 people in Hyde Park, his readings were invariably an irresistible combination of energy and intimacy, the primal "hear me talkin to ya" cry of blues and jazz.

Adrian's "Welsh connection" begins with his wife Celia, who stars – sometimes lustily – in many of his poems. Born Celia Hewitt in Hawarden, Flintshire, in 1933, she was an actor working for Kenneth Tynan on the ITV arts programme *Tempo* when she and Adrian met in the early 1960s. "My wife is Welsh," he wrote to me in the early days of our correspondence, "she sings it though she doesn't speak it." For the five decades that followed, Celia was Adrian's anchor and inspiration.

Between 1974 and 1975, Adrian was writer-in-residence at the Sherman Theatre, Cardiff. It was, I think, around this time that the Welfare State Theatre Company asked Adrian to write some song lyrics for a show to be staged in Caerffili Castle; the project ran into funding difficulties and was abandoned, but not before Adrian had researched and written a fair amount of material. I first caught wind of this project in

a letter he sent me in 1980:

\*Swansea Poetry Workshop, a now defunct poetry publishing cooperative of which I was secretary.

*Best wishes to Gweithdŷ Barddoniaeth Abertawe\* in the names of Aneirin, Taliesin, Llywarch and his 24 sons, Myrddin, Gwalchmai, Hywel, Dafydd ap Gwilym, Gwerful Mechain, Gruffudd Gryg, Llywelyn Goch, Gwerful Madog, Dafydd ab Edwmnd, Lewys Môn, Siôn Tudur, Dic Huws and Dylan Thomas. When I come to Swansea I'll read my "Lament for the Welsh Makers" – or better still my Welsh wife will.*

Intrigued that this London-based poet, strongly associated with the English Left, had immersed himself to this extent in the barddas\* of Wales, I asked to see the poem, imagining that it would be likely to appeal to the readers of *Arcade*, which I was helping to edit. Along came the "Lament", with a letter explaining more of the background:

\*Bardic lore.

*The plot involved finding out a lot about Welsh literature, particularly poetry. Although my wife is Welsh [ ... ] my knowledge is very slight. So I read the books, or as many as I could in the brief time I had, I read the poets in translation and read the stories of their lives and, for all my ignorance, I was moved.*

*How to live your life as a poet, and how to die your death – these are very particular problems. I decided to borrow the structure of William Dunbar's great Lament for the Makars and to set into it hints of the lives of the Welsh bards. I felt and still feel tentative. Would this be seen as yet another example of the crushing colonial Brit on the steal, the white man making another take-over bid for jazz? I hope not. It is meant to be, in the main, a homage. I do love Wales and I wanted to express some of that love.*

The poem, comprising twenty-seven four-line line stanza, is a dignified danse macabre in the emotionally stark register of the Scottish model. It begins:

WILLIAM DUNBAR sang piteously  
When he mourned for the Makers of poetry.  
He engraved their names with this commentary –  
Timor mortis conturbat me.

DUNBAR, I'm Scot-begotten too,  
But I would celebrate a few  
Welsh masters of the wizardry –  
The fear of death moves inside me.

"After the feasting, silence fell."  
ANEIRIN knew how the dead smell.  
Now he has joined their company –

The fear of death moves inside me.

And it concludes:

The black lungs swell, the black harp sighs,  
Whenever a Welsh maker dies.  
Forgive my nervous balladry –  
Timor mortis conturbat me.

I had asked him to comment, for *Arcade's* readers, on his own sense of nationhood. "I don't have a nation," he wrote:

My father was a Scot but he moved to England for the War and the work. I feel no more alien in Wales than I do in England or Scotland or the USA. What am I getting defensive about? Because I'm aware of the Nationalist movement in Wales and support its aims – as a stage along the devolutionary road away from nationhood, towards something on a much smaller and more human scale.

(Adrian felt passionately – and nowhere more so than in the field of education – that "small is beautiful". He argued at every opportunity that if the number of pupils per class could be reduced radically to around a dozen, life in these islands would be transformed.)

Well known in and familiar with Cardiff from 1974 onwards, Adrian did not read in Swansea until 1981. Once or twice a year, I'd be asked by Pontardawe Folk Club to book them a poet. Agreeing to perform at Pontardawe, Adrian asked me to fix him up with a school reading as well – to make the journey from London worthwhile. "How many kids do you want to read to?" I asked him. "As many as you like," he said, "fill the hall." I took him at his word and made the necessary arrangements at Olchfa Comprehensive School in "posh" Swansea west. The event is remembered in a horror poem entitled "The Olchfa Reading" and beginning "I had told Nigel Jenkins/the bard of Mumbles, who was my friend,/that I wanted to read to a large audience..." (note that "was"). The poem goes on to describe his encounter "in a hall the size of/a Jumbo Jet hanger" with a crowd "as multitudinous/as the armies of Genghis Khan/but they were larger and hairier/and less interested in poetry". Well, at least Adrian got a poem out of it – one of his comic masterpieces, indeed. A packed and appreciative house at the Dynevor Arms in Pontardawe that night more than made up for his Olchfa nightmare.

It was probably on the occasion of this visit that I took him down to Laugharne for the first time, to see Dylan Thomas's grave and his writing shed, and to visit the Boathouse and Brown's Hotel. Long before his

appointment as Dylan Thomas Fellow in the UK Year of Literature and Writing 1995, Adrian was a huge fan of Swansea's self-declared "Rimbaud of Cwmdonkin Drive". In June 1982, he phoned to ask if he and his friend Jeremy Brooks – who, as literary manager of the Royal Shakespeare Company in the 1960s, had worked with Adrian on a renowned adaptation of Peter Weiss's *Marat/Sade* (1964) and the collectively authored *US* (1966) – could come and stay for a few days, as they had been commissioned to devise a stage version of Dylan Thomas's autobiographical story "A Child's Christmas in Wales", and wanted to get seriously to grips with "the matter of Swansea".

So over they came, to the leaky asbestos shack in Mumbles, with its expansive view of Swansea Bay, which I shared with my then partner, the harpist and actress Delyth Evans (who would later perform in the British premiere of *A Child's Christmas*). Their stay amounted to one long, delightful party, but we managed, nevertheless, to get some purposeful research done: Dylan Thomas's birthplace at 5 Cwmdonkin Drive; Cwmdonkin Park; the Uplands Hotel (now Tavern), just before (I think) its grotesque make-over as The Street; the No Sign wine-bar in Wind Street; sewin and chips in the Queen's Hotel in Gloucester Place; Pantycelyn Road in Townhill, to get a sense of the lie of Swansea's land, and to explore the possibility for their play of some class warfare, in the park below, between the Townhill boys and the Uplands boys. I spouted forth, the playwrights took copious notes, and Adrian the (very) amateur photographer snapped away with his 'camera for fools'.

Most of us have been browbeaten, by the time we reach adulthood, into "putting away childish things", but Adrian never lost sight of the child within. He had, as Ted Hughes observed, "the innocence of his own experience", and he brought to *A Child's Christmas in Wales* the irrepressible playfulness and inventiveness that characterise his many poems and plays for children. He loved games, and it was on this visit that he introduced us to the *High Noon* hilarity of the England's Glory "shoot-out": the two "gunmen", with their weapons – a box of matches apiece – in their trouser pockets, stand back-to-back; then, on the command "Walk!", they take six paces forward, turn, and fire, whereupon they whip out their matchboxes, fumble forth a match – and strike it, the first to strike a light being the victor. On subsequent visits, he'd whoop away many an hour playing with our small daughters, Angharad and Branwen, on their mini pinball machine, requesting yet more Chuck Berry as soundtrack for the threesome's anarchy.

Jeremy Brooks (1926–1994) too was splendid company. He'd been educated in Llandudno and had lived near Llanfrothen, Gwynedd, since 1953, with a base also in London (one of his four novels, *Jampot Smith*

[1960], was republished in Parthian's Library of Wales series in 2008). He knew the north well, but, like Adrian, was less familiar with the south, and Swansea in particular. They had a tight deadline, the world premiere of their "play with songs" having been scheduled for December 1982 – six months after their research trip to Swansea – at the Ohio Theatre, Cleveland; the company had stipulated that it wanted a first draft by the end of August and a final draft by mid October. After their departure for what Adrian called "Jeremy's garden of Eden" in Gwynedd, to work intensively on the first draft, there was a flurry of correspondence between us. They wanted more Swansea slang: I gave them things such as "wuss", "twp", "twpsin", "cowin lush" (which Adrian loved), and other ideas for "brushing colours into the script". They wanted rough recordings of "Calon Lân" and "Sospan Fach" (for a mock rugby match between Dylan and uncles, with a cushion for a ball). They wanted a general pronunciation crib, feedback on maps they'd made, and responses to certain scenes or characters they were experimenting with. There were regular progress reports:

*Jeremy and I had a good session yesterday with the aid of multitudinous photos and maps of the park and seashore which Jeremy made. We are probably going to use maps (seagull's eye view like the seashore one) as backdrops for the two outdoor scenes. Jeremy will write the park, I'll write the seashore. The hunchback will be seen but not, I think, heard.*

*We are working on the characters of uncles and aunts, deepening them, giving them more sense of social background. We are giving one of them the kind of fanaticism for socialism and rugby which I remember from long sessions in Llanelli pubs. So the dreaded word [socialism] will be heard in Cleveland, Ohio.*

....

*I think it's developing well. Trouble is, we've got far too much material and it's probably half an hour too long at the moment. You shall see it later when we do the second draft – there'll still be plenty of time to change things. I'm sure it's not Christmas-cardy or quaint. And I think it takes place in a real town of imaginative people.*

Inventive as their writing was, in order to turn Dylan Thomas's words for the page into engaging drama, they were concerned, as Adrian wrote, to "use considerable narration, direct to audience, from the original. Don't like to waste a drop of it."

In mid October, they sent me the fourth draft for checking, after which everything was in the hands of the director, Clifford Williams, and the American cast. The play was well received by audiences and critics, the

show-biz magazine *Variety* declaring “the show has the qualities to become a holiday classic”. Having somewhat muted the show’s Welshness for American audiences (and removed terms such as “sugar fags”), the dramatists were keen, in Jeremy’s words, to see it produced “Welshly in Wales”. This was realised in October/November 1984, when it was produced at the Torch Theatre, Milford Haven. This highly acclaimed British premiere established *A Child’s Christmas in Wales* as a seasonal staple on this side of the Atlantic too.

The show’s traditional and freshly minted songs were a significant presence, as music has been in most of Adrian’s plays; the influence of music – above all, jazz and blues – has also determined the form and feel of much of his poetry. He was a natural choice, therefore, as speaker and performer – in league with his sometime collaborator the composer Pete Moser – when the Welsh Union of Writers held its 1986 annual conference, at Clyne Castle, Swansea, on the theme of “Words and Music”. Other key contributors that weekend were the opera-singer Sir Geraint Evans, the folk-singer Frankie Armstrong, the poet, short-story writer Glyn Jones and the critic M. Wynn Thomas, who spoke on “Prison and Hotel – Two Images of Contemporary Wales”. “I enjoyed Wynn Thomas, mostly, and Frankie Armstrong entirely,” Adrian later wrote to me. “I have just about got over my awe of Frankie because she’s got such a sense of humour and loves a giggle... good to be among so many familiar friendly faces.” Two somewhat dour faces at Clyne belonged to a pair of sober-suited members of the Soviet Writers Union who had somehow wangled an invitation to the conference. Participants spent the weekend trying to work out whether the men from Moscow were defecting, spying – or both. But Adrian was more exercised by the unwelcome antics of a television crew who had been sent to film the proceedings. “Oh those telly fools,” he later wrote to me:

*...they couldn’t film anything that existed, they had to rearrange people and objects. I was astonished that they didn’t issue us with special clothes and bully us into putting them on. I think they deserve a beady-eyed poem from someone. The kitchen staff were darlings and if the TV people were rude to them they are even worse clods than I thought.*

While regretting having had insufficient time to prepare and present his contribution with Pete Moser, Adrian said he considered song to be “the most popular form of artistic communication and writers ought to treat it seriously.” When Tŷ Newydd, the National Writers’ Centre for Wales in Llanystumdwy near Cricieth, opened in the early 1990s, Mitchell and Moser were able to give song-writing the attention it deserved, in a week-long course – the first of many courses tutored by Adrian at Tŷ Newydd. He was, of course, an exceptionally gifted and



stimulating teacher, for learners of all ages, just as he was unusually supportive of fellow writers: you'd get a phone call out of the blue – "Loved that poem of yours in [such-and-such a publication]" – which would make your day.

His experiences as Dylan Thomas Fellow at the UK Year of Literature and Writing 1995 – the Swansea-centred and self-styled "biggest festival of literature the world has ever seen" – are crystallised in the jumbo-sized *Who Killed Dylan Thomas* which he published, with exuberantly anarchic illustrations by his friend Ralph Steadman, in 1998. The Year of Literature, one of a series of government-sponsored, year-long festivals, in which selected British cities celebrated a chosen art form, brought many of the world's greatest wordsmiths to Swansea: Allen Ginsberg, Seamus Heaney, Denise Levertov, Sorley MacLean, Yehuda Amichai, Miroslav Holub, Kenzaburo Oe, Rita Dove, Amos Oz, Irena Ratushinskaya, Michael Ondaatje, John Berger, Van Morrison, R.S. Thomas – to name only a tiny fraction. In a piece entitled "Thanks for the fellowship", Adrian wrote:

As Dylan Thomas Fellow  
I've enjoyed myself greatly.  
I've stayed in a friendly hotel with fantail doves  
eating digestive biscuits on my windowsill  
and friendly dogs for breakfast.

I've been to many readings, performances and mumbles  
by visiting writers from misunderstood countries,  
I've chatted with them, eaten with them,  
bought some of their books and showed them the delights  
of Salubrious Passage, my favourite ghostwalk,  
under which I heard the Italian Love Gods play.

The "argument" of this roller-coaster of a book is that Dylan Thomas was killed not by any individual (including himself) but by the miserliness of cultural institutions and the insouciance of home audiences who had failed to value their poet. Towards the end of the book, he urges his readers: "Put your money where your heart is":

*If you get a fine new arts centre like this one [i.e. the Dylan Thomas Centre] – hang on to it. There are always faceless businessmen lurking to plan to turn any beautiful building into a Conference Centre in which to play a faceless future. Watch out for them, fight them off, hold on to your good space, hang on Sloopy.*

*Do not let your love for Dylan Thomas and his poems overshadow or over-*

*whelm your love for the hundreds of good poets still at work in the world – the poets of Swansea and Wales both in Welsh and English – and the poets of the world.*

Several of the Swansea poems Adrian wrote during the fellowship – among them “Swansea Triplets”, “Night Thoughts in Swansea”, “In the Queen’s Hotel, Swansea” and “Night Thoughts in Treorchy” – appear in his 1996 collection *Blue Coffee*. *Who Killed Dylan Thomas* – from the Dylan Thomas Centre’s own press, Tŷ Llên Publications – was launched at the first-ever Dylan Thomas Festival in 1998. Both Adrian and Ralph were in notably festive spirits as the launch got under way, and there was much hilarity during their reading-cum-slide-show as the synchronisation of word and image became increasingly wayward. At the signing afterwards, Ralph treated each buyer of the book to a caricature of Dylan on the title page, done in biro, red wine and brandy, while Adrian cartooned for everyone what looked like a cheery cross between the Labrador’s head and the elephant which – generally singly – he would characteristically inscribe in books and letters.

It was back, then, to Adrian’s “friendly hotel with fantail doves”, the Windsor Lodge, near the bottom of Mount Pleasant, where Dylan Thomas’s daughter Aeronwy, Ralph, Adrian and friends were stood a meal by festival director Dave Woolley. While the rest of us were content with the house red, Ralph – who can afford to like good wine – ordered for himself, at his own expense, a £100 bottle of the best red in the cellar. During the meal, Ralph doodled – again, in biro, red wine and brandy – a caricature of Aeronwy on his cloth napkin, an angular, if hardly flattering, likeness. Then he ordered a second £100-bottle of wine and, to the waitress’s confusion, offered to pay for it with the hotel’s own napkin on which he’d been scribbling. The owner was called, but she had no hesitation in exchanging that bottle of wine for an original Ralph Steadman.

Adrian missed out on the meal, having floated aloft on a cloud of Hippocrene. As a performer of impeccable poise and timing, he was always careful with the booze before a reading. But afterwards, like many of us, he’d often gear up into celebration mode – a tendency he acknowledges in “Poetry readings”, published in *Who Killed Dylan Thomas*:

*After a reading  
if the poet feels he has triumphed –  
and poets mostly do, whatever the evidence –  
the poet will want to celebrate by drinking himself  
off the edge of the known world*

I'm not defending this after-reading state,  
which lasts around an hour,  
I'm just describing it  
and saying that it happens  
and that it can be dangerous,  
for if this white hour is disrupted  
then the Oblivion Hunt will be on.

We read together at Theatr Hafren, Newtown during the 1996 Mid Wales May Festival. The “water” Adrian had been drinking beforehand turned miraculously into vodka as we left the stage, and it wasn't long before we two wobblers needed a taxi back to our hotel, the Elephant and Castle. I saw him safely to his room, assuming a restful night there-after would be had by all. But, as recounted at breakfast, Adrian had a nocturnal adventure. Waking after a while to take a pee, he had let himself into what he thought was his en suite bathroom, but the door he'd found was the door into the corridor – which had slammed behind him, locked fast against re-entry. The naked and toothless midnight rambler, busting for a pee, had searched on all floors for a bathroom or a toilet, getting more and more lost and more and more desperate for that waz. Eventually, he'd found his way down to the lobby where he'd been rescued from his bladder-wracked plight by a startled night-porter.

One of the many things that Adrian gave Wales (and the world) was England, or a version of England – Tom Paine's, William Blake's, Byron's, Shelley's, John Berger's, an England of peace demos, rock and pop music, subversive and wacky humour, internationalism, incipient socialism and republicanism, unabashed sexuality, resourcefulness, invention and vision – with which the non-English, especially England's frequently disdained Celtic neighbours, could feel comfortable. He may often have claimed that he had no nation, but his poetry shows him to have been an English patriot – of the most constructive and beneficial kind. The institutions and practices he attacks are attacked, generally, according to the part they play in holding England and her people back from true fulfilment. In his tongue-in-cheek poem of national origins, “Ancestors”, he describes the early English people as a “Hairy red storytelling, song-singing, dragon-fighting, fire-drinking tribe” who were subdued by rapacious invaders who grabbed their land and imposed an alien form of class society on them: “It was robbery with most bloody violence.” But elsewhere, he is confident that beneath the disfiguring scab of Capitalism and imperial decline there resides a regenerative energy capable of transforming the political landscape:

For underneath the welded Carnaby  
Spike-studded dog-collar groincrusher boots,

Blood-coloured combinations  
And the golfing socks which stink of Suez,  
Underneath the Rolls Royce heart  
Worn on a sleeve encrusted with royal snot,  
Underneath the military straitjacket  
From the Dead Meat Boutique –  
Lives  
A body  
Of incredibly green beauty.

– that last line consciously echoing the “green and pleasant land” of William Blake’s great hymn to an England re-imagined. That this patriot for all that is best and potential in England has been so popular in Wales also – not least among those poets characterised by Tony Conran as the “Idrisiaid”, namely the socialist, republican, nationalist and internationalist literary sons and daughters of the poet Idris Davies – is hardly surprising. Adrian Mitchell gives us a poetry, a politics and an England with which we can happily make common cause.

In several poems, Adrian faced unflinchingly the prospect of his own death. One of two epitaphs he wrote for himself reads simply: “I stopped living/ but kept on loving”.\* His poetry will continue to do what it has always done: making the world a better place.

\*“Alternative Selfepitaph”, *All Shook Up: Poems 1997–2000*, Bloodaxe Books, 2000.