

PAUL ROBESON: HIS LEGACY FOR WALES

Hywel Francis

Hywel Francis explores the legacy left by Paul Robeson for Wales, manifested through the Welsh Anti-Apartheid Movement, and considers the lessons for Wales today.

Who is Paul Robeson?

I know from personal experience how much Paul Robeson touched the lives of many people. What I did not know until recently was how profound an impact he had on my own life and that of my father and, crucially, how our view of Wales and the world was influenced by his life and his relationship to us and to our country.

When my father and I stood in silence at the all-night vigil at Llandaff Cathedral in 1963, organised by Bishop Glyn Simon in support of the ANC leaders Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu who were under sentence of death, our awareness of their cause had been highlighted by the words and actions of Paul Robeson decades before. For this and many other reasons only a stranger to Wales would dare say 'Who is Paul Robeson?'

Memories and Movements

Banners are the 'memory of a movement' as the late Professor Gwyn Alf Williams was often fond of telling us. When Nelson Mandela visited London following his release from prison, he was welcomed to the Shadow Cabinet room by Neil Kinnock. Pride of place in that room was given to the banner of the Abercrave miners with its slogan 'Mewn Undeb mae Nerth a Heddwch' (In Unity there is Strength and Peace.) 'Why are the black and white miners shaking hands?' was the distinguished visitor's question. 'That's simple' was Neil Kinnock's reply. 'This is a South Wales miners banner!' 'Yes, of course, I understand,' was Nelson Mandela's reply. He understood because the South Wales miners had been so prominent in the long campaign for his release.

The banner was redolent with history. Indeed it was the 'memory' of many converging movements. It was made in the year after the Sharpeville Massacre, in the red, green and gold

colours of the African national Congress and within the cosmopolitan community of Abercraf which had welcomed Spanish and Portuguese miners into its midst before 1914 and after 1936 sent several of its sons to fight fascism in Spain with the International Brigades.

Heavy in symbolism it encapsulated many inter-linked movements – the miners, peace, internationalism, and at that very moment, the newly emerging anti-apartheid movements in South Africa, Wales and throughout the world.

It was at that moment too, in 1960, that I heard Paul Robeson sing live for the last time in the Royal Festival Hall, significantly with a Welsh Male Voice Choir, Côr Meibion Cwmbach, and significantly too at a concert of another vital progressive movement, the Movement for Colonial Freedom.

This international link between the South Wales miners and Paul Robeson and then in turn with Nelson Mandela is of some considerable historical significance. Indeed I would contend that the unique relationship between Paul Robeson and the mining communities of south Wales and Wales more widely forged between the 1920s and the 1950s was a major contributing factor in developing in Wales from the 1960s to the 1990s as one of the strongest and broadest anti-apartheid movements in the world. When Nelson Mandela received the freedom of the city of Cardiff in 1998 he acknowledged the vital role played by the south Wales miners in gaining his release and in the anti-apartheid struggle more generally.

The purpose of this article is to explore that Paul Robeson legacy for Wales, which manifested itself most profoundly in recent decades through the Welsh Anti-Apartheid Movement: a legacy which owed much to his awareness raising of the earlier anti-colonial struggles.

Shared Values

Paul Robeson was born the son of a runaway slave the same year as the founding of the South Wales Miners' Federation, in 1898. There are striking similarities between the life and ideals of Paul Robeson and those of the miners' union in South Wales. It is therefore not surprising that the man and the organisation became intertwined, indeed inseparable for nearly five decades.

My father, the late Dai Francis, wrote of Paul Robeson's links with the South Wales miners on his death in January 1976 shortly before they were due to meet in the United States.

My father's tribute, entitled '*Paul Robeson: Cyfaill Cymru a'r Byd*' (*Paul Robeson: Friend of Wales and the World*)' was published in the Welsh language magazine, **Y Saeth** in the Summer of 1976. What was it that drew the man to a working class community divided as they were by a great ocean and seemingly very different cultures?

He always acknowledged that it was in Wales where he 'first understood the struggle of white and Negro together'. In the crucial decades of his life from the 1920s and the 1950s he shared the same world vision as the miners' union in South Wales. They were both rooted in their people and in their communities and they always acknowledged their history. They both believed in the universal struggle for social justice and world peace. They both celebrated the cultures of humankind by emphasizing the inseparability of politics, culture and life that came together so dramatically in the 1930s and the 1950s.

They both recognized the right of every citizen throughout the world to have what Paul Robeson called in 1957 'dignified and abundant lives'. And perhaps most important of all they both attached great value in recognizing that our struggles at home and abroad were indivisible.

When Paul Robeson spoke to Australian workers in 1960 he referred to the Welsh miners he had met on hunger marches in the 1930s. He said he had learnt so much from their spirited principled struggles for justice and their fine sense of solidarity. 'You are on our side, Paul' he recalled them saying. That sense of identity and identification is very important from the moment he met unemployed Welsh miners singing in Trafalgar Square in 1929 and then visited them in the Rhondda and the Talygarn Miners' Rest Home and throughout the 1930s their cause became his cause. In the early 1930s he also sang at Caernarfon, Wrexham, Neath and many other smaller towns. And then there were the two defining moments at Mountain Ash in 1938 and the Rhondda in 1939.

At the Mountain Ash Memorial Concert to the Welshmen who died fighting fascism in Spain he said, '*I have waited a long time to come down to Wales – because I know there are friends*

here.....I am here tonight because as I have said many times before, I feel that in the struggle we are waging for a better life an artist must do his part. I am here because I know that these fellows not only died for Spain but for me and the whole world. I feel it is my duty to be here.'

And then in 1939 he starred in **Proud Valley** which depicted graphically the struggles of South Wales miners. It was the film that approximated best his own values and his own views. These two 'public statements' in the valleys of South Wales defined the man and his ideals. He identified himself with our cause. One of the great artists of the world was saying that the besieged mining communities of South Wales were not alone.

Nearly twenty years later, my father's speech at a 'Let Paul Robeson sing!' conference in London's St Pancras Town Hall referred to the Mountain Ash gathering in 1938 and was reported in this way: '*...his [my fathers'] was one of the first organisations to raise the issue of Robeson's denial of a passport. He recalled Robeson surrounded by children welcoming the returning International Brigades home from Spain. He could never forget that, but he had no children then, and now he wanted his son to have the chance to see and hear Robeson*'. I read that document alongside letters of solidarity and support from President Nkrumah of Ghana, Charlie Chaplin and the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda in the Robeson archives at Howard University in Washington.

And wider struggles beyond Europe

In associating himself with the mining communities of South Wales, Paul Robeson also inevitably raised awareness in those communities of the injustice elsewhere in the world, from America's Deep South to the persecution of Jews in Nazi Germany, and the plight of colonial peoples in Africa and Asia, even before there were anti-colonial movements.

It is acknowledged that when he lived in London in the 1930s he became acquainted with and learnt much from black African and Afro-Caribbean thinkers and political activists. He of course met Jomo Kenyatta but there were many others who in turn often spoke and campaigned in the South Wales valleys in this period.

The West Indian Marxists C.L.R. James and George Padmore visited Briton Ferry and the Dulais Valley in the late 1930s. Indeed James reputedly completed his masterpiece **Black Jacobins** in the house of the Crynant Headteacher Brinley Griffiths, whilst future Indian Foreign Minister Krishna Menon spoke at Onllwyn in the 1940s for the India League and British Guyana's first Prime Minister Cheddi Jagan spoke at Ystradgynlais in the early 1950s. The Russian-American Anarchist Emma Goldman married James Colton, the Amman Valley miner whose correspondences are located in the National Library. She was a frequent speaker in South Wales in the inter-war period on many radical and revolutionary topics including anti-colonialism.

Paul Robeson was part of the group of talented black political thinkers and activists who from the late 1930s broadened the political horizons of Welsh miners beyond these mythical 'barricades from Tonypanyd to Madrid.' The South Wales Miners became aware of these anti-colonial perspectives which became movements in the early 1940s and 1950s and reached a crisis point in 1960s with the beginnings of the armed struggle against Apartheid in the 1960s.

Paul Robeson re-entered the global stage after World War Two to speak out against colonialism abroad and the lack of civil rights at home. And that is why he was feared by some and admired by many on so many continents. Recently released Home Office files show that his linking of domestic and international politics and his specific championing of anti-colonialism meant that the secret services in Britain and the US became alarmed by his unique ability to help build a bridge between the emerging American Civil Rights Movement and the black anti-colonial politicians of the West Indies and Africa with whom he had been associated for over a decade. More than that, he was raising a wider awareness by linking these struggles with the Trade Union and Labour movement, over a decade before Martin Luther King made that important link, ultimately a fatal link for him.

In May 1945 Paul Robeson appealed for 40,000 dollars as Chairman of the American Council for African Affairs. The Home Office files reveal that the Head of MI5 was complaining that Paul Robeson's organization had communist links and was making 'ill-informed' complaints about British colonial administration. In 1949 and 1950 he was 'tracked' by MI5 when he visited Britain and in 1951, by which time his passport had been withdrawn, a report of MI5 stated:

'Robeson when last over here was a security nuisance. He is convinced he has a mission to heed oppressed negroes and colonial peoples everywhere. He is a fanatical communist and intensely ambitious....we think you will agree this is a case where it would be advisable on security grounds to refuse leave to land should he attempt to enter the UK'.

There is no doubt that his uncompromising views shook both the US **and** the British Governments. This is illustrated in a speech he prepared for broadcast on September 23rd 1946. He said: *'I stand here ashamed.....Ashamed that it is necessary...eighty-four years after Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, it is necessary to rebuild the democratic spirit that brought that document into being.....I speak of the wave of lynch terror, and mob assault against Negro Americans. Since V. J. Day, scores have been victims, most of whom were veterans, and even women and children. But I am not ashamed to stand here as a servant of my people, as a citizen of America, to defend and fight for the dignity and democratic rights of Negro Americans.....to fight for their right to live.'*

For such speeches in the coming four years, he was banned from theatres and radio broadcasts and ultimately from traveling abroad in 1950s. The campaign for the return of his passport, which lasted for almost a decade and extended across the world, involving old friends and now world statesmen like Nehru of India and Nkrumah of Ghana, had as one of its main centres the South Wales coalfield. This was only to be expected. The transatlantic link between New York and the South Wales miners Eisteddfod in 1957 has become part of Welsh popular memory. I was there when Paul Robeson sang to us and I was there again when Paul Robeson finally arrived in 1958 having already visited the National Eisteddfod in Ebbw Vale as the guest of the local MP Aneurin Bevan.

His welcome to the Eisteddfodau indicated the breadth of his popular support in Wales. Whilst his links were specific to the valleys of the south over a period of nearly three decades his appeal as an artist, civil rights campaigner and humanitarian extended across the whole of Wales. This was summed up by his request for a Welsh hymn book at Ebbw Vale because its music reminded him so much of his own people.

He had of course his strong personal contacts and friendships with the black community in Cardiff's Butetown, as indicated by the telegram to wish him well before his first night at Stratford in 1958:

*'Cardiff Coloured send best wishes for success,
A. Shepherd 213 Bute Street'*.

And a fan letter long before he returned to Wales from Aberystwyth which read:

'I am eager to arrange a concert here where you have so many admirers....I can assure you that your visit to Aberystwyth would be looked forward to more eagerly than I could ever let you know.'

Yours most sincerely and in great admiration

Horace G. Thomas, Terminus Hotel, Terrace Road, Aberystwyth.'

1981: A defining moment for Wales and Apartheid

The spring of 1981 was a poignant and painful time for me on a personal level. My father died on 30th March and shortly afterwards Côr Meibion Cwmbach decided to visit Apartheid South Africa. My father was President of the Choir and of the Wales Anti-Apartheid Movement. I participated in the ultimately successful campaign to prevent the visit and in that campaign Paul Robeson's enduring memory was evoked many times along with a powerful message from his son, Paul Robeson Jr. The campaign, embracing political parties, unions, churches and indeed choristers was summed up by the human rights activist, the Bishop of Namibia - in-exile, Dr Colin Waite, whose powerful letter to the Choir was distributed throughout the campaign.

At a meeting which I addressed in Aberdare on 21st July 1981, attended by Hanif Bamji who came to personify the anti-apartheid struggle in Wales for nearly two decades, I quoted from Paul Robeson's 1953 speech at the Peace Arch on the US-Canadian border. The speech brought together all the universal values and struggles which he and progressive opinion in Wales and South Africa had come to represent. He said,

'We who Labour in the arts.....must remember that we come from the people, our strength comes from the people and we must serve the people and be part of them.

I received an invitation that could not mean more [to the Miners' Eisteddfod] from the miners in Wales....where I first understood the struggles of white and negro together....They feel me a part of that land. For many years I have been struggling for the independence of the colonial peoples of Africa....I am proud of the America in which I was born. My father was a slave reared in North Carolina. I have many friends all over the earth and rightly so.....

My people are determined in America....to be first class citizens...and that is the rock upon which I stand. From that rock I reach out...across the world to my forefathers in Africa...because I know that there is one humanity....and that all human beings can live in full human dignity and in friendship.....'

Paul Robeson was one of the few human rights campaigners of his era, long before the civil rights movement, to have such a world view, capable of highlighting injustice wherever it existed, including South Africa, long before Apartheid had been institutionalized by the South African state. His challenging words in 1950 on South Africa helped prepare the early ground for the anti-apartheid movement across the world including Wales:

'...for all their pass laws, for all their native compounds, for all their Hitler-inspired registration of natives and non-whites, the little clique that rules South Africa is baying at the moon. For it is later than they think in the procession of history, and that rich land must one day soon return to the natives on whose backs the proud skyscrapers of the Johannesburg rich were built.'

An Enduring Legacy

As Paul Robeson's political activism and artistic career were drawing to a close in the early 1960s the struggle against apartheid was only beginning. Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu and their comrades were also beginning their long prison sentences. Paul Robeson's contribution to

Wales and the world can be measured in many ways and not least in the way he broadened our horizons to prepare for the anti-racist and anti-colonial struggles which were to focus so sharply on Southern Africa. The breadth of the Wales Anti-Apartheid Movement embracing trade unions, churches and all shades of progress opinion owed much to the universal ideas of peace, dignity and abundance about which he spoke so eloquently to us through that trans-atlantic link from New York to Porthcawl in 1957.

I am reminded of the eloquent words of T. J. Davies in his moving tribute to Paul Robeson published in 1981 :

‘Pan ddisgynnodd ‘y pridd I’r pridd arno, a’r lludw I’r lludw, symboloedd o’r lluchio baw a phridd. Ni chafodd nes fwy, eto ni lwyddodd lluchio baw llywodraeth eidawelu, ac ni thawelwyd mohono gan y pridd olaf. Mae’n dal I ganu. Mae’s dal I ysbrydoli. Mae’n fwy byw heddiw nag erioed. Trechodd.’

‘When Paul Robeson finally died no Government had succeeded in silencing him. He continues to sing. He continues to inspire. He was more alive today than ever. He overcame all in the end.’

My father described Paul Robeson on his death as, ‘A friend of Wales and the World, Paul Robeson understood that dignity, peace, justice and abundance were universal values to be available to all and he uniquely helped us to understand the indivisibility of those values.

For those who question his enduring legacy I need only refer to the Manic Street Preachers hymn of praise to him ‘Let Robeson Sing!’ and its refrain ‘a voice so pure, a vision so clear’ in 2001. And of course the resonance of the wonderfully successful exhibition ‘Gadewch Paul Robeson Ganu!’ which reminds older and younger generations in Wales of our shared values and our shared sacrifices.

Fel dywedodd Paul Robeson yn 1953, mae e’n rhan o’n wlad fach ni – pa wlad arall yn y byd gall dweud shwd beth!

Hywel Francis is Member of Parliament for Aberavon and Chair of the Paul Robeson Wales Trust. This article was originally given as a lecture to the Friends of the National Library of Wales on 12th July 2003.