

A Light Outwith

Last night I saw a television newsclip I did not see when it was transmitted years ago. In that sequence Margaret Thatcher said she offered “the proudest word in our language: Freeholder”.

This greatly puzzled me. I have more reason than many to savor the word. Yet somehow, though the word is undoubtedly proud, or even vainglorious, it seemed to me she intended no literality.

I love my country, though I have never said a good word about it.

For it is the country of Langland and Mallory, of Shakespeare and Marlowe, Milton and Bunyan, Locke, Newton, Blake and Faraday, Mill, Russell, Ruskin and Arnold. And yes: Even of Darwin, Huxley, Hobbes and Spencer.

Lastly, because most memorably, it is the country of Martin, Wilberforce, Clarkson, Cooper and Fry.

We may disown the atheism of Darwin and Marlowe, the cold cynicism of Hobbes and denounce the condescending snobbery of Arnold. But these are our teachers. They have informed a modern world in which father and son have blazoned light and liberty across a planet.

And let us not forget teachers who chose not our tongue but our land. Our friend Voltaire, his compatriot Rousseau who penned his *Confessions* in Wootton Lodge, and that spent promethean and other anglophobe who wrote his three volumes of *Das Kapital* in Maitland Park.

Today a Catholic lit a candle in our midst and our chief elder, in a moving ministry on Holocaust Sunday, reminded us that our taper was not shrouded in barbed wire, for we enjoy amnesty denied elsewhere. But three hundred and thirty and more Quakers died captive, and it is because of such as she that the Light burns Free.

I am minded to dispute the choice of The Iron Lady. Should I choose “freedom” or “justice” as the proudest words in my language? Why should I parrot words I do not understand and cannot define? No. I nominate “candle”.

For I remember that this gentle and luminous word was the parting gift of Latimer to his friend The Bishop of London as the flames enveloped them both:-

“Be of good comfort, Master Ridley, and play the man; we shall this day light such a candle by God’s Grace in England as I trust never shall be put out”¹.

Reference

- 1 “Foxe’s Book of Martyrs” (page 307)
John Foxe 1563
Ambassador Publications Limited of Belfast
ISBN 1-898787-50-6