

Michael Wilding

Down-underdog: Revolution Lost

Revoll was in a white shirt and a crested tie and what looked like an off the peg dark grey suit. There was nothing well cut or elegant about it. Hair cut short back and sides, but some time ago. Black Oxford shoes, scuffed and unpolished. It was all so conformist Plant knew he couldn't possibly be straight. It was the flat, undemonstrative, conventional look, except conventions had changed and no one looked like that anymore. His teeth had a yellowish tinge, which could have been the stain of tannin from tea, or the stain from smoking. Being English he was probably a heavy tea-drinker. Plant picked out the yellow-brown tinge on the second and third fingers. A smoker. Again, it might just be tobacco. He spotted the tell-tale hash burn on the tie, a neat little hole in one of the quarters of a university crest. When it had got to that stage it was hard to be sure whether the signs were deliberately there, or whether Revill had gone way beyond caring. He could have been pretending conventionality. Or he could have been parodying it, the deliberate proclamation of the straight that let the cognoscenti know he was totally bent, the cognoscenti being the dope smokers and substance abusers and doubters of the socio-political consensus. The non-believers. The ones who had no faith in the system, and who spent their energies avoiding its demands and no longer had any aspiration to its rewards. They might not any longer be active addicts. They might be ex-alcoholics. They might simply have thought their way through to the periphery of things and preferred it out there. It was the William Burroughs dress code. And there was no way of telling where they were at, indeed there was often nothing to be told, they had departed and were simply marking time. Ambiguity had become a way of life, which made things easier if you were so out of it that you no longer cared. Not even necessarily out of it stoned. Just out of it in terms of any social norms. Off at a tangent years ago and now lost in space. Ground Control to Major Tom. As for the manner, academia was a good cover, or used to be, every serious academic absent-minded or eccentric or off with the fairies, oblique, introverted, ironic, monomaniacal, catatonic, pretty well impossible to tell which, all you knew was communicating was a



problem. Were they talking to you or holding some other conversation in their mind? Those years of lecturing had left them habituated to droning on in some private world, gazing into space above the students' heads, avoiding eye contact, disregarding the boredom and inattention and people eating and groping and sleeping and reading newspapers. How would you ever know if they were stoned or drunk or not? And with the spread of prescription drugs, Valium and Serapax and Prozac and anti-inflammatories and antihistamines, even the ones who imagined they were straight were spaced out beyond recovery. They were like burned out satellites, systems on the blink, still up there in orbit but communicating erratically and randomly or not communicating at all, and the cost of retrieving them too great to be worth it, left to just sit up there till an asteroid collided with them.

They walked across the lawns and through the quadrangle and the vice-chancellor's quadrangle and across to the footbridge and off campus, though the buildings immediately off campus were still university buildings, creeping into the adjacent suburb. Revill led the way down a street of old terraced houses and into a pub. It was pretty well empty. A couple of people played pool in the back.

'It used to be called the British Lion, but in presumable deference to Republican sentiment, they changed its name,' said Revill.

'Does that worry you?' Plant asked.

'I can't say it does,' said Revill.

'But you still remark on it.'

'Ah well,' said Revill, 'then perhaps it does.'

He ordered a schooner of Kilkenny ale.

'Irish,' he said. 'I'll leave you to puzzle out the implications of that.'

Plant ordered a light beer and puzzled.

'Time was,' said Revill, 'the pubs round here would be full of students. Now they're all working to pay the fees for their degrees. They call it part-time but they're working full-time and fitting their classes in to suit the job. We spent the seventies fighting for options to give them a chance to choose their courses. And now they choose the options that fit in with the time that the hospitality industry lets them off work. Still, it means the pubs are quiet. In the end you've seen enough students to last a lifetime and more. Nice just to have a quiet drink. And you can't have one on campus because they closed the staff club down. Can't have staff getting together sitting around getting pissed. Or even not getting pissed. They might plot things. Of course they could always walk off campus and get pissed and plot things, but they're all too demoralized and institutionalized to think of it, so they just sit in their offices drinking spring water out of plastic bottles until it's time to go home and nod off in front of the television.'

He took a long swig of ale and stretched out and smiled with satis-

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faction.

'It isn't the life you thought it would be,' said Plant.

'It was for a while. We had the good years. The best years ever, probably. The only time universities were universities. It may all be finished now, but it was good while it lasted. You look back to the 1920s, 1930s, you read any of the memoirs of those times, the universities were terrible, anybody with any talent couldn't wait to leave. Lots of them didn't bother to finish their degrees. They were getting nothing out of it. Go back to the nineteenth century, things were even worse. Barbaric. Before that they barely existed. Just centres of reaction. Good wine-cellars, sinecures for younger sons, like the church. Any real thinking was going on outside the universities. So if it's like that again now, that's just getting back to how it always was. But the sixties and seventies were different. Just that brief while. Bright kids. Kids from backgrounds that could never have conceived of university before. And a sense of excitement. That there were things to be learned.'

'And Vietnam,' said Plant.

'Vietnam, sure. But it wasn't only the war. The war was part of it, it got people thinking. But there are always wars. It's been a continuous war for the last century, two centuries, some of them get media notice, some don't. But sure, Vietnam got people thinking about the nature of the society that wanted the war. They started thinking about issues. The implications of what they were taught. The nature of power. The possibilities of change. People got involved. They talked to each other, for heaven's sake. Look at this.'

He gestured at the empty pub.

'A place like this would've been full. People talking, arguing. There'd be staff and students here. They learned more sit-ting around places like this than they ever learned in a classroom. They'd talk to people from different subjects. Now no one knows anyone. Historians only know historians, physicists only know physicists. But all that war protest meant people got together from different disciplines. It was a university for the first time ever. Biologists talked to classicists, literary critics talked to economists. That was the revolution. It was like the English revolution, the civil war. The troops never did that much fighting. Most of the time they sat around guarding bridges and fords and crossroads. And this was when people had never been outside their own villages before. For the first time ever, ordinary people met other ordinary people from other districts, not just the handful they'd grown up with. They started talking to each other, sharing life experiences, comparing notes. That was the revolution. That's what started the political ferment. The levellers and the diggers. Of course,' he reflected, 'it all came to nothing. Repression set in. Just like now. But that moment existed. As it did for us. I feel privileged to have known it. Certainly can't

