

## THE WALL OF BRASS

**I**RON CURTAIN' is a term well understood today, but long before that had ever been heard of, I had learnt the meaning of the Wall of Brass. It was in the course of a conversation with a friend—a Welshman and a countryman. He was speaking of the squire of a certain neighbourhood not far from his own home. A man who had been popular with his tenants at a time when certain others of his class in Wales decidedly had not. But he had never mastered the Welsh tongue although he was of Welsh stock and it had been the language of his forbears. 'And do you know', said my informant, 'the language was like a wall of brass between him and his neighbours'.

Mr Saunders Lewis, in one of his collected essays, 'Tragedy', refers to a similar instance and one having peculiar pathos. It concerns George Powell of Nanteos, the scion of an old Welsh family that had become anglicised by the middle of last century as had so many others. This young man's natural tastes were literary and artistic and all round him there grew and throve a living culture, soon to break forth into the Welsh literary renaissance initiated by Sir John Morris Jones and carried forward into our own day. Yet of that life and that culture he knew nothing. Seeking that fulfilment which he could have found at his door he fled to London to consort with those of like tastes and was wont to speak of Nanteos as 'my beautiful but unhappy home'—Nanteos, which not so long before his day had been faithful to tradition and the native culture and had welcomed to its hearth the 'sweet language of the common folk, their song and their laughter'.

Alien and barren without the talk of the countryside  
 Bereft of its secret and its hope  
 The Manor without the gentle tongue  
 Withered as an oak tree under a wound.

It was the fate of the Welsh squirearchy to become islanded amid the sea of Welsh life. 'There was a sort of Offa's dyke between them and the stream of Welsh life', says Mr Saunders Lewis, changing only slightly the metaphor of the brazen wall. They finished and the loss was not only theirs but their country's. Wales looked to them once for leadership and, not finding it, turned away, just as she turned away from the Established Church which they had supported. If there is one thing creditable to the Welsh people it is this: that they clung by a sure instinct to their native tongue, unmoved by the desertion of those who should have been the leaders; if there is another, it is that in spite of the change of religion forced upon them at the 'Reformation', their spirit was not and never has been a con-

forming one. Thus they have preserved their identity and a culture which is essentially traditional and Christian.

It is that aspect of their struggle that should command the respect and intelligent interest of Catholics. There are few societies today that are not in some way faced with the threat of dissolution. One cannot, therefore, afford to ignore a society which, in this very island, still looks instinctively to its Christian past, though it is one which today faces a supreme and particular danger.

Transference, the flight from the land, conscription, the buying up of farmlands by strangers seeking a safe investment for their money, the taking over of wide tracts of the country as military training areas, these things affect Wales in a very special manner for they strike at the roots of her nationhood. They are a few of the new elements undermining the life, already weakened, of a small nation that cannot for long support such a strain and continue to exist. That dislocation which the industrial revolution began these events are completing and, in the midst of all this, the present system of education and the false outlook it engenders have placed the language itself in greater jeopardy than at any time in its history. The battle for the language is still a losing battle. Let *that* be lost and the tradition and Christian culture of fifteen hundred years will perish with it.

That is why the 'wall of brass' must be jealously guarded. The 'iron curtain' is important to Russia so that she can enforce her conscriptions the more readily behind it and, ultimately, on the world. Just so, the 'wall of brass' is important to Wales so that she can work within it to strengthen the defences of her civilisation and ours.

How then are Catholics in Wales affected by the neighbourhood of the Welsh language and Welsh culture and what, if any, impression are they making on Welsh life? The answer to the first question is 'not at all' and the answer to the second is 'none'. I do not refer to the Welsh Catholics, for they are a very tiny minority, but to those with affiliations with the country solely by reason that they live there and who, in contrast with the Catholics of England and Scotland, are totally unassimilated into the life of the nation.

It may be argued that they form a very small proportion indeed of the total population of Wales and that they are for the most part located in urban centres that are far from being predominantly Welsh in speech and outlook. That is true, as true as it is that Catholics in Wales, like the squirearchy of yore, though through no deliberate choice, find themselves on the hither side of a dyke that separates them from Welsh life.

At the same time, the hierarchy in Wales have long realised the

responsibility that rests with Catholics of showing open sympathy with the Welsh people in their struggle to maintain their language and their traditions. In Cardiff, Welsh is taught in every Catholic school in the city, and the only school in Cardiff where Welsh is a compulsory subject is the upper grade Catholic school, Heathfield House. Similarly, in Wrexham the convent school is the only school in the town where Welsh forms a regular part of the curriculum. Welsh is an essential subject also at the Carmelite college for late vocations at Aberystwyth and their junior school for boys at Llandeilo. Clergy and laity have banded together to form 'Y Cylch Catholig' (Catholic Circle) which aims at bringing Welsh-speaking Catholics together, which organises yearly Retreats in the vernacular and which undertakes the regular publication of a theological and literary Review in Welsh, besides prayer-books and manuals of devotion. To this venture the Welsh bishops have given not only their approval but also their active co-operation.

Yet in spite of this lead it remains true that of the hundred thousand Catholics and upward that there are in the country, only a very small handful have any share in the life of Welsh Wales. It is indeed probable that Catholics are further withdrawn from Welsh life than any other section of the community. It is certain that they know very little about the current of Welsh affairs and take very little interest in it.

The traditional life of the people and their language cling to the rural areas, to the central hills and valleys and the western seaboard. Into these areas Catholicism has scarcely penetrated, nor will it ever take hold of the people under the aegis of a foreign tongue. Yet, save for parts of Monmouthshire, the district around Brecon and at Holywell in Flintshire, where recusant priests laboured throughout penal times, it was among these hills and along this seaboard that memories of the 'Old Faith' remained and were cherished the longest. Here, for example, is a hymn which seems to have been composed about the year 1700 and which was known to the people in the neighbourhood of Newquay (Cardigan) until quite recent times. A rendering of one verse will indicate how far English government had then been from eradicating the traces of former devotion from the minds of the people:

O Mary Mother full of grace  
 Who bare the Saviour of our race  
 Jesus exalted in high place  
 Near heaven's throne thy plea make known  
 Thy voice upraise for us, thine own.  
 O Saviour for us born,  
 Our daybreak and our morn.

It is the plea of a people groping back half-unconsciously to the older forms of devotion; hearing that call which has always had its echo in their hearts.

What then can the bulk of the Catholic population give to Wales, besides their ready prayers for her return to the Faith? To a great many, of course, the question will mean very little and others may feel that Welsh affairs are no concern of theirs. But there will be those who are not content that there should be this Offa's dyke between themselves and the nation. These will give their full sympathy and, in some cases, active support to all movements calculated to strengthen the language, the culture, the nationhood of Wales. There are many ways in which they can do this and it is only possible to enumerate some of them briefly here.

First, they will probably wish to learn something of Welsh history and they can do so through the works in English of Sir O. M. Edwards, Sir John Lloyd and others. Those who can obtain a copy of Llewellyn Williams's *Making of Modern Wales* will learn much that will interest them concerning the part played by Welsh exiles in the counter-Reformation and of the resistance of the Welsh people to the change of religion. They will learn that psychologically the religious revivals of the 18th and 19th centuries were a 'return to the older rhythm of religious life as against the static conception of an English state-Christianity'.<sup>1</sup> *The Celtic People and the Renaissance* by David Mathew will provide a fuller background to the Reformation period and *The Welsh Catholic Martyrs* and *Welsh Benedictines of the Terror* by T. P. Ellis will give a more detailed account of the 'Catholic Resistance' which is brought up to date by Donald Attwater's *The Catholic Church and Modern Wales*. A further selection of books, a fair number of which are obtainable in English, will acquaint them with Welsh social conditions and Welsh politics, past and present.

As a practical step towards learning the language they could join the Welsh classes which are to be found in a number of towns and villages, or become members of the *Urrd Gobaith Cymru* (Welsh League of Youth) which has branches in a few anglicised areas for those who, while unable to speak Welsh, are interested in the language, the culture and traditions of the country. They could also take a practical interest in such characteristic institutions as the *Eisteddfodau*, both local and national, and in all these matters they will find Welsh people ready and anxious to act as mentors. They could support such institutions as the *Undeb Cymru Fydd* (New Wales Union) set up during the war for the express purpose of safe-

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<sup>1</sup> T. Charles Edwards, *Wales and the Reformation*. Blackfriars, April, 1934.

guarding Welsh life and culture. There are others again who may have the opportunity of forwarding Welsh interests in education and in civic and administrative life and at least of voting for those whom they think will best uphold such interests. They can support the work of the Welsh Economic Development Council and all attempts to re-found for Wales a balanced industrial and agricultural economy. This then is, in short, the answer to those who may think that there is no place for them in Welsh life. The obligations of Catholics in this respect are clear and in fulfilling them they will be aware that they are helping to save a corner of Christendom from the storms that threaten to engulf it.

In respect of the language, as of all else, their support will be disinterested. A Welshman once told a priest of my acquaintance that it was useless to suppose that his people could be 'snared' into Catholicism by the bird-lime of the language. The language and culture are, to be sure, not merely things to be made play with, no matter for what end. They are things to be respected in themselves, things to be understood and appreciated for their own sake and there must be small need to labour this distinction.

The Welsh language deserves honour and respect because it enshrines the thoughts and aspirations of a society that has survived fifteen hundred years of imminent peril, because it contains the unique cultural deposit of the centuries and a literary tradition that is continuous from the sixth century to the present day and because it is itself a supple, vivid and dexterous tongue. It has proved a wall of brass to those who through ignorance or indifference have severed themselves from their spiritual and cultural heritage. Yet there is a welcome to be had within that wall and work waiting to be done.

Even now, as once of yore, 'the ramparts of civilisation are cracking. Nearer and nearer from the east there flash the torches of the barbarians from forest to forest'. Then it was the task of Wales to defend and in part save the civilisation of the west when the empire of Rome was falling; today we may be thankful that a rampart still stands for the manning of a new defence.

Let one of our modern poets speak the last word. I translate; it is Ambrosius, Ruler of the Britons. He addresses Germanus of Auxerre on the eve of a victory which drove the pagan armies back into the plain:

*A man planted a vineyard upon a fruitful hill,  
He trenched it and planted therein the choicest vines,  
He fenced it about and raised a spring of water in its midst  
And gave it to his son as an inheritance  
That his name might be kept from generation to generation.*

*But a herd of swine hath assailed the vineyard,  
 Breaking down its walls to pasture there and to trample it;  
 Is it not right for the son to stand now in the pass  
 And call his friends to him,  
 'That the gap may be closed and his inheritance be saved?  
 Germanus, Germanus,  
 A vineyard given to my care is Wales my country,  
 To be committed to my children  
 And to my children's children  
 An everlasting inheritance;  
 And lo, the swine rush in upon it to bruise it.  
 So now do I call upon my friends,  
 The common people and the scholars,  
 Come to my aid in the breach,  
 Stand by my side in the pass  
 That the beauty that was may be kept for all ages to come.  
 And this, my Lord, is the vineyard of thy beloved,  
 A bower of the faith from one shrine of Mary to another.  
 Wilt thou come with me to lead my armies to Powys yonder?*

And Germanus replies:

*In the name of the Lord of Hosts  
 I will come . . .*

(from *Buchedd Garmon*, Sounders Lewis).  
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