

THE MONARCHY OF BRITAIN

*Quia illi dedit Deus privilegium et
monarchiam omnium sanctorum Britannia
in eternum.*

THE achievement of which St David has become the symbol and patron stands out like a mountain *massif* on a starlit night. The detail is obscure, but the patient work of historians, geographers, archæologists, philologists and the experts in place-names, church dedications and folk-lore are gradually having their effect. The main peaks are already clear and unmistakable. Furthermore, this achievement, as we consider it, serves to emphasise that truth on which wisdom has always insisted—the futility of paying attention to the *ignis fatuus* of immediate success and failure. First, however, the setting must be grasped. By the year 400 Stilicho had pacified and reorganised Britain; he then withdrew the regular legionary troops. The problem of the western hill-country, much of which had been occupied by Goidelic pirates and settlers, was left, it would appear, to Cunedda, who probably held the office of the *Dux Britanniarum*. He was, it would seem, the commander of a corps of *foederati* who had been settled beyond the Wall of Hadrian. His father, grandfather and great-grandfather all bore Roman names. His grandfather, Paternus, was surnamed *Bais rudd*, of the Red tunic, which denoted probably the official purple of Rome; and it has been suggested that his great-grandfather, Tacitus, had been a protégé of Constantine the Great. The mixture of Celtic and Roman names appears among his sons.

Cunedda's expedition was a success. In conjunction, probably, with the Ordovices of Powys, he and his sons expelled the Goidels from the greater part of Wales. Where the Goidels remained, they were Christianised and in due course brought into the comity of Christian and Cymric society. Brychan and his kindred played, indeed, a conspicuous part in the epic of Cymric monasticism. They represent the Irish elements, which consciously and effectively allied themselves with the new and yet native tradition, just as Boia and his diabolical wife represent the recalcitrant and defeated party of Goidelic paganism, vainly struggling to maintain an alien way of life in the country to which they had come.

Such was the immediate background of the society into which St David was born, for he was, if a strong and coherent tradition is to be trusted, the great grandson of Cunedda.

The military tradition of the period provides, it would seem, the best key to its comprehension. The Dragon, the *draco* of the stan-

dards of the Imperial legions, 'a huge creature of barbaric aspect, inflated with air and fastened to the top of a spear', remains, after all these centuries, the emblem of Wales and perhaps the oldest of the flags of the European nations. Maelgwn Gwynedd, Cunedda's great-grandson, was called by St Gildas, *Insularis Draco*, wielding the authority of the *Dux Britannie* with his dragon standard, and in the seventh century the Red Dragon of King Cadwaladr the Blessed asserted the Roman and Christian prerogative of the last descendant of Cunedda who was in a position to attempt its enforcement with the sword. It was under the standard of the Red Dragon, on the green and white of the great Llywelyn, that Henry VII grasped the Crown of England on the field of Bosworth. His eldest son, whom he named Arthur, could claim through his mother to be the heir to the monarchy of Cunedda. *Dis aliter visum*: there was to be no return of the monarchy of Arthur. Instead there came Henry VIII.

It was with a mobile force of *catapractarii* that Artorius, the *dux bellorum* of the British kings, operating along the Roman roads, smashed the marauding war-bands of the English, and set fast the foundations for the '*Matter of Britain*' and the Romance of the Round Table. Nor is it fanciful to notice the curious parallel between the confused story preserved in the collection of history, myth and genealogy, which was edited by Nennius, and the famous expedition of Heraclius against the Persians. In 610 Heraclius sailed from Carthage in a supreme and successful effort to save Constantinople from the Persian armies. The great fleet of battlemented ships swept away from the African coast on a full breeze with its leader at its head. At his masthead was the picture of the Mother of God, 'not made with hands'. The eighth victory which Arthur gained over the Saxons was 'at Castellum Guinion, in which Arthur bore the image of the Holy Mary, ever Virgin, on his shoulders, and the pagans were routed on that day through the power of our Lord Jesus Christ and through the power of Holy Mary the Virgin, his mother'.

Under the continued impact of war, famine, pestilence, the breakdown of communications, and the forced migration and shifting of populations and the strangulation of city life, the old order slowly went to pieces in a darkness which still hangs over the pages of history. The conversion of Ireland which had resulted from the carrying away into captivity of Patricius, the son of Calpurnius, a *decurio* either from the neighbourhood of Towcester or from the Severn valley, and the peopling and political and ecclesiastical reorganisation of the Breton peninsula, as well as the settlement and, probably, the conversion of Wales, must all be seen against a background of intermittent prosperity and of masterful and energetic

rulers who struggled, for a time not without success, to maintain the tradition of Roman citizenship.

The bitter hatred which was felt for the barbarians was a principal factor in the history of the age, and played a part in the history of Christianity in the island for some centuries afterwards. The intensity of this hatred bursts like a white-hot flame from the pages of Gildas. Though he was a saint who may not unfairly be described as having a talent for hostility, yet there is no reason to suppose that in his hatred for the barbarians he was in any way unrepresentative of his generation. On the contrary, the probability is that his opinion of them was comparatively charitable. To Saint Gildas the English were 'a race hateful to God and man', 'whelps from the kennel of the barbarian lioness', 'a bastard-born and wolfish brood', principally conspicuous for their 'red, dog-like and savage mouths'. With these bestial pagans neither the princes nor the prelates of Britannia were willing to negotiate. Gildas in particular had received a thorough training in secular learning in the school of St Illtud and, to quote Sir John Lloyd, 'the literary culture of Rome, ere it faded from Britain, cast over the young Gildas a spell which bound him firmly to the end'. He remained 'a Roman to his finger-tips'. His tongue is Latin, he is familiar in particular with Virgil, his countrymen are the *cives* and the only ruler in Britain of whom he was able to approve, Ambrosius Aurelianus (Emrys Wledig) is significantly rewarded with the description of 'the last of the Romans'.

Over in the far west St David had set his monastery at the strategic centre of the coastal and sea traffic. There he and his 'watermen' embraced the full rigour of the Egyptian desert, struggled with recalcitrant Irish pagans like Boia, faced the yellow pestilence and sent out missions to Brittany and the Cornish peninsula. With these men St Gildas had, it would seem, little in common. 'More abstemious than Christian' was his biting epigram. St Gildas, one feels, was a die-hard; and he was to die, like most die-hards, in exile.

The pagan barbarians repaid the contempt of the *cives* with an implacable resentment, which was subsequently to be a principal factor in the Paschal controversy. Indeed for a Welshman there is a special delight to be found in the splendid pages of St Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*: it is that of watching a great ecclesiastic and a great scholar trying, and failing, to be impartial when the enemies of the English nation are concerned.

St Gildas was not an historian: he was in the right line of the rhetoricians; and his *De Excidio* emphasises, while it illustrates, the gloom and misery of a period which was finally brought to an end by pestilence and military disaster. And yet, as one looks back

over the centuries, the disaster, real enough as it was, seems less impressive than the vast achievement of the dying Romano-British world. To begin with there was the vast and vigorous movement of monasticism: the effective basis of it all. From thence sprang the conversion of the Irish, and the maintenance and nourishment of that conversion. From the conversion of Ireland sprang in due time the conversion of the Scots, and from Iona the conversion of the northern English; and, through St Chad, the conversion of Mercia. To that must be added the foundation and organisation of Christian Brittany. Without Celtic scholarship and missionary zeal, without Ireland, without Brittany, the whole history of Europe would be different. Take, again, the great armed defence of the eastern plains and the Roman roads of which we know little beyond the lists of battles and heroic legends of the siege of Mons Badonicus. In the end that stand was broken: yet it is difficult to think of a Europe without the epic of Arthur. The men who stood firm in the gap against the pagan onslaught, and left their bones to rot in half-remembered graves and *tumuli*, won a Roman victory which was to be more enduring than bronze. For the world of European literature Mons Badonicus and the battle of Camlan are decisive battles. From the same struggle, but in the North Country, came the beginnings of the Welsh literary tradition: and, in the words of Sir Idris Bell, 'the stream of Welsh poetry, which began long ago in the dim regions of Rheged and Cattraeth, is still flowing clear and strong'. It was not in vain that the young men of the war-band of Mynyddog Mwynfawr went to Cattraeth and left to their countrymen a memory and a tradition as splendid and lasting as that of Leonidas and his Spartans.

Finally it was in that age of which St David is so apt a representative, and which his life and death so admirably symbolise, that the enduring tradition of a Christian Wales was forged, subtle and strong as steel, in the western mountains.

As the sixth century wore on, the time came for the saint to die; and of this, it would seem, he had warning. The appearances must have been sordid enough: the outcry and the turmoil around the wattle-and-daub church, with the winter rain driving in from the Irish sea and dripping from the rough stone huts of the brethren. For this son of kings was to die with royal deliberation in the presence of his people.

The story was handed down in the monastery and in the countryside of Dyfed and Ceredigion, and was set down in 1346 by the Anchorite in his book in a prose of solemn and sustained splendour which has become part of the heritage of the literate Welshman. Of this a little, perhaps, remains even in translation.

'When David, on the last Tuesday in February, was listening to his monks serving God, he heard an angel speaking unto him: "David", said the angel, "that which thou hast long sought of the Lord thy God is now prepared for thee and to be had at thy will". And straightway he lifted up his eyes with joy, and said: "Even now, Lord, take thy servant into thy peace". And the monks who had heard these utterances were overcome with awe, and fell on their faces as dead men. And straightway they heard a voice speaking, and the fairest perfumes filled the city. And David spoke for the second time with a loud voice: "Lord Jesus Christ", said he, "receive my soul! Let me no longer dwell in the midst of these evils". And then they heard once more the angel speaking to David: "Saint David, get thee ready. On the first day of March shall come thy Lord, Jesus Christ, and with him the nine orders of Heaven and the tenth from the Earth to receive thee. . . ."

'On Sunday David sang Mass and preached to the people; and the like of that preaching was never before heard nor shall it be heard after him. . . . And when the sermon and the Mass were ended, David pronounced his blessing. And when he had given his blessing to them all, he uttered these words: "Lords, brethren and sisters, rejoice; and hold fast your faith and your belief, and do the little things which you have heard and seen in me. As for me, I shall walk the way that our fathers have trod. And fare you well; and may you be strong in this world for never more shall we meet on the earth". And then was heard a universal cry of lamentation, and of wailing and of weeping, and of men saying: "Oh that the earth would swallow us! Oh that the fire would devour us! Oh that the sea would overflow the land! Oh that the mountains would fall and cover us! . . ."

'And on the morning of Tuesday, about cock-crow, behold a host of angels filled the city, and the city was full of all manner of song and mirth. And at the morning-hour, behold, the Lord Jesus Christ came, and with him, as he had promised of his mighty power, the nine orders of Heaven: and the sun shone clear upon all the hosts.

'And on Tuesday, the first day of the Calends of March, Jesus Christ took to himself the soul of David the Saint with great victory and joy and honour. Thus, after all his hunger and thirst, his fevers and labours, his fastings and alms deeds, after all his affliction, his sorrow and his trials, and his anxiety for the world, the angels took his soul and led it into the place where there is light without end, and rest without labour and joy without sorrow, and abundance of all good things, and victory and the clarity of beauty, the place where is sung the praise of the soldiers of Christ and the wicked rich are passed by; where there is health without pain, and youth

without old-age, and peace without discord, and glory without vanity, and songs without weariness and rewards without end: where Abel is with the martyrs, and Enoch with the living, and Noe with the sailors, and Abraham with the patriarchs, and Melchisedech with the priests, and Job with the long-suffering, and Moses with the princes, and Aaron with the bishops, and David with the kings, Esaias with the prophets, and Mary with the virgins, and Peter with the apostles, and Paul with the men of Greece, and Thomas with the men of India, and John with the men of Asia, and Matthew with the men of Judea, and Luke with the men of Achaia, and Mark with the men of Alexandria, and Andrew with the men of Scythia; and where the angels are and the archangels, and the cherubim and seraphim, and the King of Kings, for ever and ever. Amen.'

T. CHARLES EDWARDS

PENAL TIMES AND AFTER

SPEAKING last year at the centenary celebrations of St David's church, Swansea (which was also about the 150th anniversary of the beginning of the Swansea mission), the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster remarked on the fact that 'so little has been written of the history of Catholicism in Wales'. Having undertaken some years ago to write a popular account of the Church in Wales, the present writer knows from very practical experience how little that little is; and he hopes that the few pages that follow—to say nothing of all the other pages in this issue of BLACKFRIARS—may perhaps encourage others, better qualified than himself, to put their hands to the work of filling this deficiency in the religious and ecclesiastical history of these islands, a deficiency which may be partly due to the fact that for a century and more the overwhelming majority of Catholics in Wales have not themselves been Welsh.¹

It is well known that the Protestant Reformation was not well received in Wales, and that up to the end of the Civil War no other part of Great Britain, not even Lancashire, was more openly Catholic. 'The Welsh counties tell [the Earl of] Pembroke', wrote the Duke of Feria to Philip of Spain, 'to send no preachers across the border or they will not get back alive'; recusant-rolls and other records are full of the names of Welsh gentry; and the views of the common people were voiced in the writings of poets, of whom the Wrexham schoolmaster, Bd Richard Gwyn, martyred there in 1584,

¹ These notes are mostly taken from my *Catholic Church in Modern Wales* (London, 1935), by kind permission of the publishers, Messrs Burns, Oates and Washbourne.