

WALES—A FOREIGN LAND?

THERE is no more deceptive key to a country than its popular seaside resort. For the pursuit of pleasure is curiously the same, whether it be in Brighton or Boulogne. One has to penetrate beyond the promenades and smart hotels to reach the heart of a nation. Of no country is this so true as of Wales. The English visitor, spending his fortnight at Llandudno or Rhyl, is aware of little that distinguishes these places from their English counterparts. There are probably more chapels, the Sunday restrictions are more puzzling, odd snatches of a barbaric tongue may be heard on country 'buses. And there are the inevitable comic postcards, depicting tourists battling with unpronounceable names. But these are the most incidental of features. The charabanc tour of the countryside, with its well-worn round of beauty spots, does little to impart the true spirit of the land. The country is but a convenient and picturesque hinterland to the seaside town.

To Catholics, recognition of the individual character of Wales is of special importance. Wales may, in the practice of government, seem little more than an extended England. But it is a fatal mistake to suppose that the accidents of history have wrought a complete and unquestioning submission. This is not to suggest that there is any want of loyalty among the Welsh. Political nationalism is never likely to be a major issue. But there is a loyalty—of culture and of language—that overrides the artificial bonds of a constitution. The survival of this intense regard for national expression is sufficient proof of how deep-rooted are the things of the spirit. Conquest, economic exploitation and an alien bureaucracy have done their worst, and yet there remains a completely Welsh *ethos*.

Nowhere is this so apparent as in the religion of Wales. An Englishman, however sympathetic, can never completely understand that hymn-singing frenzy lying latent in every Welsh heart. The religion may seem to be hysterical (witness the orgiastic ecstasies of a revival) but it is foolish to suppose

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that there is no more to it than that. Anglo-Welsh novelists, such as Mr. Caradoc Evans, have laid what may seem an excessive stress on the extent to which the whole life of Wales has been dominated by the Nonconformist chapel. The aspects such novelists have seen fit to depict are often repellent and ludicrously distorted. Even so, there has been no exaggeration as to the extent of the chapel influence. Until the War, Welsh culture was entirely dependent on Nonconformity. The vernacular press dealt almost exclusively with the affairs of the various denominations. Every poet was a minister or a chapel elder. And from the chapels innumerable communal activities—educational, literary and even political—took their origin.

Latterly, numerous alternatives have arisen to challenge the domination of Nonconformity. Women's Institutes, a widespread amateur dramatic movement and—in the towns at least—the Cinema, are beginning to make their influence felt. Most significant of all is the disintegration of Nonconformity itself.

The results of the popular education for which Wales has sacrificed so nobly in the past have been very different from what its supporters anticipated. A new generation of ministers has arisen, much more cultured than the pulpit orators of the nineteenth century, but bearing the inevitable marks of a secular education. Traditionalists are often heard complaining that the pulpit has become an intellectual debating ground. A few years ago, the Calvinistic Methodist church (the largest denominational body in Wales) obtained the consent of Parliament to modify its constitution in order to allow for a greater divergence of belief. Belief in the Incarnation, for example, is becoming the exception rather than the rule. A prominent Welshman (Professor Gruffydd of Cardiff) caused much controversy recently by declaring that the Welsh University was a hotbed of paganism. He pointed out that the University was founded, for the most part, by the contributions of loyal nonconformists who could not have foreseen that their benefactions would make it possible for professed agnostics to hold University chairs and sneer at religion with impunity. As yet, this disintegra-

tion has not had much influence in the country as a whole. But the teachers and preachers of the future are being taught in an atmosphere of scepticism and the final result is quite certain.

Catholics will see in all this the inevitable nemesis consequent on the doctrine of private judgment. Compromise with the facile doctrines of the day and a broadening of the basis of belief until it amounts to little more than an ethical system—they are to be expected and will continue.

Herein lies the opportunity for the Catholic Church in Wales. The Welsh countryside, with its bleak, whitewashed conventicles, suggests little of a Catholic environment. But there are everywhere echoes of a Catholic past. The tragic story of the loss of Wales to the Church is too well known to require repetition. But it can serve to remind us that the sixteenth century reformers made little impression on Wales, and that the Faith in Wales was Welsh. With the failure of Welsh priests went the decline of the Catholic religion. Survivals of the past are still plentiful. Country fairs, such as *Gwyl y grôg* (recalling the feast of the Immaculate Conception, and still held in a Cardiganshire village in the first week of December); customs such as that of the *Plygain* (a prayer-meeting held in the early hours of Christmas Day, and to be found in many villages to this day) or traditional plays of the *Mari Lwyd* kind (a lineal descendant of the mediæval morality)—all these may be but interesting anachronisms now. Nevertheless, they suggest that there may not be so great a gap between yesterday and to-day as might at first appear.

But it must be frankly recognized that the Church is considered alien in Wales. Except for such families as the Mostyns and the Vaughans, there are few evidences of continuity between the Church before the Reformation and the Church of to-day. The great majority of Catholics in Wales have no knowledge of Welsh and they are, for the most part, to be found in the industrial valleys of the South or in the coastal resorts. They have thus little contact with the Welsh of the country side. A glance at the *Catholic Directory* map will show that the counties of Cardigan,

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Merioneth, Caernarvon and Anglesey (which are all purely Welsh in race and language) are as yet scarcely touched by Catholic contacts. It is therefore not surprising that Catholics are considered foreign or, should they happen to be of Welsh birth, eccentric.

A tremendous amount has been done by the Welsh bishops in the last few years to help to dispel the idea that the Catholic Church has no relation to the soil. To some, the printing of pastorals in Welsh and English may mean little. It is certain that very few of the faithful can read the Welsh! But it is indicative of the right method of approach. If the Welsh people can be shown that there is nothing inherently "foreign" in the Church, a great advance will have been made. The usual hoary libels about the Pope and the Spanish Inquisition are of less importance. If contacts can be made with the Welsh people, the lies—which are born of ignorance and not of malice—will automatically vanish. In this connection, Mr. Donald Attwater's account of the results of establishing a Carmel in Dolgelly are illuminating.¹

To the majority of Welshmen, rightly or wrongly, religion is necessarily Welsh. It is quite mistaken to suppose that the Welsh language will soon become obsolete. A large and enthusiastic youth movement, a school of brilliant Welsh poets and an increasing interest in Celtic studies (apart from the innumerable literary societies and *eisteddfodau*) would seem to show that never has the language been more vigorous. The conversion of Wales will therefore demand Welsh-speaking priests. The appointment of Mgr. McGrath to Menevia is a recognition of the importance of this matter. But a knowledge of Welsh is not all. Catholics must appreciate and make use of the great store of Welsh tradition. The enthusiasm for hymns is well known and the Welsh pride in them justified, for there are few vernacular hymns to compare with those of William Williams of Pantecelyn and Ann Griffiths. Again, there is a legacy of pulpit eloquence that demands respect. Perhaps a congregation

¹ *The Catholic Church in Modern Wales*, by Donald Attwater. (B. O. & W., 1935.)

may no longer be held spell-bound by "the blessed word 'Mesopotamia,' " yet there is a very lively interest in the art of exposition. These features, although they have hitherto been characteristic of Nonconformity, are in no sense incompatible with the presentation of the Catholic religion. To an Englishman, it may seem odd to hear the rival merits of preachers discussed with a seriousness that is in England usually only applied to professional footballers. It need not be doubted that Catholics will be listened to with respect, more especially since the "intellectuals" are increasingly given to academic disquisitions. Catholic speakers have found that they are dealing with a critical audience (particularly on biblical matters) and this serious interest in religion is certainly a valuable point of departure for instruction.

The appeal to tradition is likely to have an increasing effect. Already there are signs of discontent at the arid and defeatist tendencies of protestantism. Thus a writer of the distinction of Mr. Ambrose Bebb draws a significant parallel between Brittany and Wales—Brittany so Catholic and Wales so lost in a sea of warring sects. The same nostalgia for the Catholic past of Wales, when religion, life and art were one, is apparent in the work of several other Welsh men of letters. They are not for the most part Catholics, and yet they feel that if Wales is to recover her dignity and strength as a nation, it is the Church that will provide the bond of unity that she needs. The president of the Welsh National Party is himself a Catholic and commands the enthusiastic support of a body that can have but very few Catholics in its ranks. If Welshmen can be shown that the Church respects the traditions of a nation and is indeed the only means by which those traditions can become again a living force, the greater part of the battle will be won.

Lately an interesting correspondence has been taking place in the columns of the *Goleuad* (the official organ of the Calvinistic Methodist body) on the subject of Catholic progress in Wales. A translation of some passages from a letter signed "Protestant" may give some indication of the change that is unquestionably taking place in the nonconformist conscience.

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Much will be heard during the next months of the Protestant Reformation. . . . Let us, as Welshmen, remember that it had a very cold reception in Wales, and one reason for that was its excessively foreign hue; it did not suit the Welsh temperament. . .

We have many things to learn from Catholics. They are hard-working and zealous, and if Protestants worked with their earnestness, we should have a far greater influence. Very few of our ministers know anything of the Catholic Church—its customs and rites. We should seek to know each other better and we shall thereby bear with one another in love. A letter in last week's issue spoke disrespectfully of the Pope. To do this in a religious periodical shows a want of Christian charity.

It would be foolish to overestimate the importance of these words. They are yet exceptional. But they have been given considerable publicity, which in itself is remarkable. There is a vast amount of prejudice and suspicion still to be removed. But it ought to be recognized with gratitude that Protestants are, however indirectly, paying tribute to the Church for its true devotion or its sane discipline.

Wales gave to the Church in the past a loyal and affectionate devotion. Since then exploitation and strife have laid a heavy hand upon her. And now that distress is synonymous with her valleys and the depopulation of the countryside has thrust from her a large part of her young men and women, may not Wales again turn to the Church that stands foursquare to the world, offering a certain and abiding challenge to the legions of Mammon?

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