

Edward I and Wales

R.R. Davies

Conquest and foreign domination are the themes of this volume. They are probably the most traumatic experiences that any country can undergo. Medieval Wales is no exception. The impact of the final Edwardian conquest of Wales 1277–83 was, it is true, greatly reduced by the fact that much of eastern and southern Wales had already been conquered in a piecemeal fashion over two centuries; the inhabitants of those districts had thereby had ample opportunity to come to terms with Anglo-Norman rule over many generations. Even in the rest of Wales the prospect of foreign conquest had loomed dangerously close on several occasions in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Nevertheless the shattering impact of the events of 1277–83 on north and west Wales and on what we may call the Welsh national psyche can hardly be denied. ‘Is it the end of the world?’ (*Oes derfyn byd?*), wondered one poet in a mood of suicidal despair; ‘Ah God, that the sea would drown the land!’ (*Och hyd atat-ti, Dduw, na ddaw mor dros dir!*) yearned another. The native Welsh chronicler was more prosaic, but the telegraphic brevity of his comment could not conceal his sense of utter cataclysm: ‘And then all Wales was cast to the ground’ (*Ac yna y bwriwyd boll Gymru i’r llawr*).

It is not difficult to understand this hysterical response. Within the space of five years the three great Welsh princely dynasties of Gwynedd, Deheubarth and northern Powys were either virtually extinguished or peremptorily dispossessed or, at best, their surviving members were reduced to the status of distressed gentlefolk. Such dispossession and demotion were not only a tragedy for the families concerned; they also severed those ties of service, loyalty, patronage and reward which were the very cement of medieval social relations. A new governmental dispensation, with its centres at Caernarfon, Carmarthen and Chester, was installed; new offices and units, notably the shire and its *sheriff*, created; new surveys of financial dues compiled; and at the higher echelons of governance a new, exclusively non-Welsh administrative cadre took over the running of the conquered lands. This edifice of foreign rule was crowned by a new legal dispensation grandly proclaimed in the Statute of Wales in March 1284. There was much that was enlightened, tolerant and non-discriminating in the Statute, notably its permissive attitude towards Welsh legal procedures and inheritance customs. Nevertheless its purpose was clear: to introduce the Welsh, partly by command and partly by persuasion, to the superior habits of English law. It was ‘in defence of their laws’, as an English chronicler put it, that the Welsh had risen in revolt in 1282; part of the price of defeat was that they now had ‘the law of London’, as it came to be called contemptuously, foisted upon them. It is little wonder that a distinguished English historian should have referred to the Statute of Wales as ‘the first colonial constitution’.

Conquest also meant foreign occupation. Garrisons were posted and, above all, castles were built or rebuilt throughout Wales. The mighty walls of Harlech or Denbigh, of Conway or Chirk still proclaim today more eloquently than any

document the determination of the conquerors who built them and the irreversibility of their achievement. Within a generation or so those castles became expensive white elephants but not before they had performed a vital military and, above all, psychological function. They not only, in the words of a contemporary, 'contained and thwarted the attacks of the Welsh', but also literally petrified them into subjection. Their physical and metaphorical domination of the Welsh countryside was the most visible and, thereby, the most effective reminder of the power and permanence of English conquest. In the words of a later Welsh poet they were 'the tower of the bold conqueror' (*tŵr dewr goncwerwr*).

The borough was the civilian arm of this military rule. Indeed, in the long run the boroughs founded by Edward I and his magnates in Wales proved to be more effective and more offensive emblems of conquest and privilege than the castles. Built in the shadows of those castles, defended by their own strong walls, peopled by immigrant English *burgesses* and endowed with the most extensive commercial monopolies over their hinterlands, they quickly became the epitome of privileged exclusiveness and the most bitterly resented bastions of English rule. At the time of the conquest itself, the king had been advised that herding the Welsh into towns would be the quickest way to civilize them; but the reverse happened. Formally, though much less so in practice, Welshmen were excluded from the newly founded towns and, thereby, from the rich commercial privileges enjoyed by the *burgesses*. So it was that Welshmen came to feel outsiders in their own country. Their sense of exclusion was compounded by the stories and mythology of a new dispossession. By the standards of medieval, let alone modern, conquest, Edward I's victory in Wales was not followed by a massive campaign of expropriation. Nevertheless every conquest leaves its scars and memories; that of Wales was no exception. The most flourishing borough of native Wales, Llan-faes in Anglesey, and one of the premier abbeys of Wales, Aberconwy, were both demolished to suit Edward's strategic convenience; in Denbigh, more than ten thousand acres of the most fertile lands of the Clwyd basin were bestowed on settlers from Lancashire and Yorkshire, while the original Welsh holders of the land were forcibly resettled in distant and often poor parts of the lordship, just as a royal official in Glamorgan was later encouraged to remove the Welsh from the lowlands so that they could be replaced by English immigrants. Incidents such as these may have been few in number; but they are easily magnified in the folk memory and are the very stuff from which national paranoia and resentment are manufactured.

Yet it might be argued that Wales for generations had lived on the edge of conquest and had become familiar with, and indeed hardened to, the experiences that came in the wake of conquest. Should not Welshmen therefore have adjusted fairly rapidly and smoothly to the final conquest when it came? There is, of course, a considerable element of truth in these comments; but they also overlook the dramatic changes which had taken place within Wales in the two or three generations before the Edwardian conquest. It is on this issue that historians of medieval Wales have advanced important reinterpretations of late. They now emphasize that the prospect of creating a united native Welsh polity under a single prince was no longer an idealist dream but a practical proposition. Indeed, during the decade

1267–77, it was briefly, if prematurely, realized. The shattering of that prospect — so recently glimpsed and even briefly realized — was thereby proportionately more traumatic. The Edwardian conquest was not just another and, as it proved, final onslaught against Wales; it involved the demolition of a new political vision. It was that which made it a national conquest and a national disaster.

The evidence for this reinterpretation comes from various directions. It has become increasingly clear that *Llywelyn ab Iorwerth*, Prince of Gwynedd, c. 1199–1240, and his grandson, Llywelyn ap Gruffudd, 1247–82, strove with remarkable determination, clarity of objective and considerable success to convert the primacy of Gwynedd among the native dynasties into the leadership of a united native Wales whose status as a separate and unitary principality would be acknowledged by the English Crown (as indeed it was in the Treaty of Montgomery, 1267). They seized every opportunity to bring the other native rulers of Wales under their firm control and to weld *pura Wallia* — as the unconquered parts of Wales were called in contemporary documents — into an effective political unit. The obstacles that faced them were wellnigh insuperable, the time at their disposal short and their success only provisional and limited; but the tenacity with which they pursued their aims — in their own words to secure ‘unity’ and ‘one peace and one war’, to defend ‘our principality’ and its ‘rights’ and to reduce other native rulers to the status of ‘Welsh barons of Wales’ — was remarkable and revolutionary. It is no wonder that Llywelyn ap Gruffudd was addressed by the poets as ‘the true king of Wales’ (*gwir frenin Cymru*) and ‘as the man who was for Wales’ (*gŵr oedd tros Gymru*). Such compliments were not mere poetic extravagance; they indicated that the nature of political ambitions, arguments and relationships within Wales and between Wales and England was changing profoundly.

A growing sense of the potential unity of Wales was, however, not merely a by-product of princely ambition; it drew also upon a heightened awareness of a common nationhood within Wales itself. Such an awareness expressed itself negatively in hatred for the English and for English settlers in Wales, ‘the foreign alien-tongued people’ (*estron genedl anghyfiaith*) as one poet contemptuously called it. Even official documents were driven to concede that ‘the peoples of England and Wales have been at loggerheads for a long time’; in other words the tension between them was seen as national and popular, not merely as the result of the intransigence of individual princes. National pride and a sense of identity as a single people also had to them a positive dimension: the Welsh came to exult in their ‘liberty’ (as the Scots were to do later), their customs, their language and, above all, their laws. On the eve of the final catastrophe of December 1282 one of their spokesmen declared defiantly that the Welsh would never ‘do *homage* to a stranger with whose language, customs and laws they are unfamiliar’. It is a statement which can be placed beside the Irish Remonstrance of 1317 and the Scottish Declaration of Arbroath of 1320 as one of the most dignified and eloquent defences of national self-determination in the Middle Ages. Nor were these mere words. Many Welshmen, it is true, fought in Edward I’s armies in 1282–3 as they had done in those of other English kings and lords within and without Wales for generations; but what is truly astonishing is the wide degree of support — in geographical, social and regional terms — which the great revolt of 1282

came to enjoy. In the words of one distinguished historian it was truly 'a widespread popular rising of the Welsh'; its collapse, therefore, was a national defeat.

There was another sense in which the events of 1277–83 were different from earlier raids and conquests of parts of Wales. This was, and was meant to be, a final and complete conquest. The public statements of Edward I were suffused with an altogether new venom against the Welsh: they were 'a faithless people'; their rulers were 'a family of traitors'; it was time 'to put an end finally . . . to their malice'. In spite of the claim of one contemporary chronicler that the King was 'determined to exterminate the whole people of that nation', Edward I was bent not on genocide but on an irreversible conquest. His determination became obvious in the uncompromising position he adopted in final negotiations with Llywelyn in October to November 1282. Those negotiations, undertaken in spite of Edward I's better judgement, were conducted by John Pecham, Archbishop of Canterbury. Their failure served to convince Pecham that more than a military conquest was necessary in Wales; nothing less than a sustained campaign of clerical reform, moral regeneration and political re-education could achieve the integration of the Welsh fully into the Christian and civilized world of western Europe. It was in pursuit of that ambitious and unattainable programme that Pecham embarked on a great visitation of Welsh dioceses in the summer of 1284 and issued a battery of ecclesiastical recommendations.

Later in the year Edward I himself went on a great triumphal progress through Wales, leaving Chester in late September and arriving at Chepstow on 17 December. Edward was intent not on moral crusade but on demonstrating to all and sundry — *Marcher lords* as well as native Welsh — that his victory was complete and utter and that ultimately his authority brooked no challenge in any part of Wales. He had already taken several notable steps to communicate that message clearly. He had held a great victory celebration, to which knights from Europe and England were invited, at Nefyn, one of the favourite residences of the princes of Gwynedd, in July 1284; he had commandeered Llywelyn's halls to his own use or had dismantled them; he appropriated the most valuable and potent symbols of Welsh princely independence — Llywelyn's coronet, the matrix of his seal, the jewel or crown of Arthur and, above all, the most cherished relic in Wales, the piece of the True Cross known as *Y Groes Naid* (just as he removed the Stone of Scone from Scotland in 1296). In the Statute of Wales he had annexed the conquered lands in Wales to his crown, though without integrating them fully into the body of the English state; and simultaneously he demoted the status of the country from a 'principality' to a mere 'land' (*terra*). Such were the acts of a king bent on the destruction of the identity of Wales. Henceforth a chasm had been officially opened in the memory and history of Wales between the period 'before' and 'after our peace proclaimed in Wales', as the royal documents put it. In that sense the Edwardian conquest of Wales was as definitive, complete, irreversible and traumatic as the Norman conquest of England.

Henceforth Welshmen had to learn to live with that reality. For some the process of adjustment proved to be a painful one. A serious revolt in west Wales in 1287 showed that even Welsh leaders who had welcomed and co-

operated with Edward I did not find it easy to live in the harsh and aggressive world of Edwardian governance. But it was the great revolt of 1294–5, sweeping the country from Anglesey to Glamorgan, which manifested the depth of resentment generated by the experience of conquest. The Welsh, like so many colonial peoples, had discovered a new unity under the experience of foreign rule. The revolt drew upon many individual and specific grievances — notably recent heavy taxation and the heavy-handed and arbitrary behaviour of English officials — but it was also nourished by two deeper and more generalized sentiments which run as a profound undercurrent throughout the history of post-conquest Wales. The one was a sense of being discriminated against in their own country, of being second-class, underprivileged citizens. Such a sentiment was explained by the attitudes of English officials and settlers in Wales — ranging from an arrogant and nervous condescension ('the Welsh' as one of them remarked in 1296, 'are Welsh, and you need to understand them properly') — to an aggressive cultivation of their legal position and commercial privileges, especially by the 'English *burgesses* of the English boroughs in Wales'. Such attitudes were officially entrenched by the fiercely discriminating measures introduced by Edward I in response to the revolt of 1294. The other sentiment which characterized Welsh attitudes in the post-conquest period drew not on recent feelings of defeat and alienation but on a centuries-old mythology. It was their belief that a Messianic deliverer, a second Arthur, *y mab darogan* as he was called in Welsh, would come one day to rescue them from the yoke of Saxon servitude.

Powerful as are mythologies and prophecies, men cannot live everyday lives by them; they have to live in the present, not in the past or the future. So it was that the Welsh gradually came to terms with the experience of conquest. Some doubtless did so with more enthusiasm, good grace and success than others. The path to accommodation was eased when the English government and governors of Wales recognized that in the running of a conquered country, working with the grain of native society, winning over its leaders, listening to its grievances and forging ties of service and reward with it are ultimately more successful routes to contentment than military control and alien governance. It was this process of mutual adjustment and the appreciation by the Welsh of their own powerlessness against the might of the English kingdom which eventually ensured that, in spite of periodic scares and continuing suspicion of what contemporaries called the 'lightheadedness' (that is, the unreliability and volatility) of the Welsh, the Edwardian conquest of Wales remained virtually unchallenged for more than a century after the great revolt of 1294–5.

A momentous episode such as Edward I's conquest of Wales presents many problems to the historian. Two may be briefly broached here. The first is that of the nature of the sources at the historian's command. Our interpretation of the past is considerably shaped by the documentation through which our knowledge of the past is filtered to us. It is overwhelmingly through English administrative sources — that is, through the records of English kings and lords, composed according to contemporary formulae and written in Latin — that we study the impact of conquest on Wales. They give a limiting, even a distorting, view of the past. This is the common experience of conquered

societies, for it is one of the consequences of conquest that the conqueror becomes the keeper of official record and authorized memory. One of the major redactions of the native Welsh chronicle, *Brut y Tywysogyon* ends in 1282 and the others become highly episodic; it is as if the historiographical memory of the Welsh was snuffed out by the trauma of conquest. Likewise — and not surprisingly — the native court poetry tradition in Wales suffered a devastating blow with the conquest; it was only later in the fourteenth century that a revived and transformed poetic tradition took its place. This dearth of vernacular, native sources makes the individual and communal petitions submitted by Welshmen to the king and his lords all the more valuable to the historian, for they help to articulate the anxieties, frustrations and grievances of the Welsh in the years after the conquest. Just as it takes particular skills and insight to try to write recent history ‘from below’ (in other words to get at the outlook and aspirations of ordinary people), so it is only by the most sensitive and controlled use of historical imagination as well as documentation that we come to appreciate what the experience of conquest meant to the Welsh in the time of Edward I and how much it affected them.

The second challenge presented by the topic — as by any major historical issue, medieval or modern — is that of interpretation. Conflicting views are as much a part of history as they are a part of everyday life. Contemporary opinions of the conquest of Wales were as diverse as are modern ones. To one contemporary obituarist, Llywelyn ap Gruffudd was nothing less than the law and light of his people, ‘a model for those of the future’; but it comes as no surprise that English commentators saw matters differently, characterizing Llywelyn as the epitome of perfidy and his brother as full of treason. Contemporary views of Edward I likewise were widely at variance with each other: one commentator saw him as treacherous and inconstant, while another referred to his ‘never failing righteousness’; one impugned his motives by calling him ‘the covetous king’, but his victory in Wales earned him, from another later writer, the sobriquet, ‘good King Edward, the Conqueror’. In modern memory likewise the reputation of both men varies widely: in Wales, especially from the nineteenth century, Llywelyn has been accorded the status of a national hero as *Y Llyw Olaf*, the Last Leader; but in England Edward I’s reputation as one of the more effective and successful of medieval English kings remains unchallenged.

Such differences of opinion are only to be expected: after all, 1282, like 1536, is bound to be an evocative date for patriotic Welshmen as is, say, 1789 for Frenchmen. But such differences of opinion arise not only from national postures and convictions, past and present (just as other differences arise from political or ideological positions); they may also be generated, or made more acute, by genuine differences of interpretation of the historical evidence itself. Two instances of such shifts in interpretation, both of them arising out of recent scholarly work, may be mentioned here. The first relates to the character and motive of the two principal actors, Llywelyn ap Gruffudd and Edward I. Both have been the subject of considerable historical revision of late and in neither case is national animus the determinant of the historiographical shift of opinion. Thus it is Welsh, not English, historians who have recently called Llywelyn’s behaviour and motives into question, accusing him of high-handedness towards his subjects and fellow native rulers, of

overambition, or irresponsible stubbornness, and of fumbling his way to disaster. In short, was Llywelyn himself primarily responsible for bringing his own principality crashing around his ears? But simultaneously Edward I's own reputation and motivation, both in general and in particular with respect to Wales, have been seriously called into question. His protestations of good faith look unconvincing on closer inspection; his policies have been castigated for their 'masterfulness', 'moral shabbiness' and 'double dealing'; while his intervention in Wales and Scotland has been branded as 'a burst of imperialist activity'. Historians have no keys into the hearts and motives of men; but, as these revisionist interpretations of the characters and behaviour of Llywelyn and Edward suggest, they must for ever be trying to probe the springs of action and in so doing challenging existing historical interpretations.

Much the same may be said of a second area where historical emphasis has shifted of late, that of the conquest of Wales itself. On one level the conquest appears to be, and is, the most uncomplicated of events — a great military victory secured for the future by a massive programme of castle-building and by a comprehensive governmental and legal settlement. But was its impact as clear-cut and profound as the documents seem to suggest or as traumatic as the anguished cries of the poets proclaimed it to be? Above all, why did the final conquest take place in 1282–3? Was it — as has been argued regarding the First World War, for example — the result of a sequence of unforeseen accidents? Could Llywelyn and Edward have forged a tolerable *modus vivendi* in their relationships? Or were there deep structural reasons in the development of both countries and peoples and in their relationship with each other which made a denouement inevitable? Without in any way underestimating the importance of the personal and accidental, it is on these 'structural reasons' that recent historical interpretation of this period has concentrated. Welsh historians have drawn attention to the profound political and social changes which native-controlled Wales underwent in the thirteenth century and have wondered whether the pretensions of the princes of Gwynedd to the leadership of native Wales were ultimately compatible with the increasingly demanding and interventionist *feudal* subjection which the kings of England required of them. English historians for their part have underlined the important transformation which the kingdom of England experienced during the same period. Having lost most of its lands on the Continent between 1204 and 1259, the English monarchy became, for the first time since the Norman conquest, firmly England-based; it could now afford to turn its attention more closely to its other dominions (as it saw them) within Britain. This switch in direction was accompanied by a heightening of English national awareness, by a pride in the insularity and superiority of English common law, and by a remarkable growth in the maturity and efficacy of English administration and with it of concepts of metropolitan control, bureaucratic and legal uniformity, and clear lines of delegation and answerability. Such far-reaching changes prompt one to ask whether English royal government had grown to the point where not only the military conquest of Wales but also the effective governmental control of the country were possible. Was the conquest of Wales just part of the process of the growth of the English state? Was it but one chapter of the story whereby English 'super-overlordship' (as it has been called) of the British Isles was being transformed

and intensified into direct rule? And was it likely that Scotland would be the next 'case for treatment'?

Questions like these cannot be readily, nor ever conclusively, answered. In history the best we can do is to travel hopefully. But it is by travelling hopefully rather than by standing still, by asking new questions, by posing new connections, by probing our sources in different ways and by recognizing their shortcomings that we advance and enrich our historical understanding. That is as true of episodes which are as distant in time and apparently cut-and-dried in their interpretation as Edward I's conquest of Wales as it is of more recent and better-documented topics.