

Tudor Wales

Gareth Elwyn Jones

This topic has always held the imagination of the Welsh. For example, it has always dominated advanced studies in history in the schools of Wales. It is not difficult to think of reasons. Perhaps the most potent is that, for just over a century, England as well as Wales was ruled over by a dynasty sprung from a Welshman, Henry VII. No matter that the pure Welsh blood of his grandfather, Owen Tudor, mingled in his veins with French and English blood. To important Welshmen of his time Henry VII was Welsh — it suited them well that he should be so. The Venetian ambassador caught contemporary stress on Henry's nationality: 'The Welsh may be said to have recovered their former independence, the most wise and fortunate Henry VII is a Welshman.'

The significance of Henry's descent lay not in sentimental national pride — a regal variety of rugby-international enthusiasm. Henry was heir to a vital historical tradition which had succoured influential Welshmen through long years of defeat. To the Welsh poets, honoured recounters of tradition, Henry was the long-promised heir to Brutus the Trojan who, according to Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, had originally ruled over the island of Britain. He was the new *Arthur*, that *Arthur* who was the legendary leader of the Britons against the Saxons. The potency of this mythology was enormous in late medieval Wales — and shows how significant mythology can be as a historical force. With Geoffrey of Monmouth, it was easy to picture a once-united Britain ruled over by the ancestors of the Welsh. The story had it that they had been defeated, certainly, but only by treachery. After intricate and deep-laid plots running the gamut of conquest and love-interest, Saxon leader Hengist and his men had treacherously murdered British leader Vortigern's nobles at a banquet, after which Vortigern had no option but to yield up much of eastern Britain to the Saxons. The significance of this legend in Welsh history is well attested — it was readily understood as late as the nineteenth century. Being vanquished by treachery endowed the Welsh with a moral right to the throne of Britain (England and Wales). A new leader would come. Unfortunately in the real world leaders tended to disappoint. The achievements of Llywelyn the Great and Llywelyn the Last in the thirteenth century culminated in massive, decisive defeat in 1282–3 by Edward I. Welsh independence was at an end. Another folk hero did once emerge. In the years after 1400 *Owain Glyndŵr* transformed a feudal quarrel into a crusade for Welsh independence. Here, indeed, was the new leader foretold. Sadly, he too was vanquished, though his mysterious disappearance in the wake of defeat (no-one knows where or when he died) allowed the idea to prevail that he would return.

The intermittent civil wars of the fifteenth century, the *Wars of the Roses*, had a Welsh dimension in the prophetic poetry of the Welsh *bards*. They fastened on to a succession of claimants to the throne as being fit repositories for the pent-up emotional frustrations of centuries of defeat and humiliation. But the Welsh (British) claims of Henry Tudor were tailor-made. By an unlikely series

of events the grandson of a minor Anglesey gentleman who had been taken on at court and married the French-born widow of English King Henry V, found himself king after the *Battle of Bosworth*. The prophecy was fulfilled. The *bardic* sentiment which fastened on to Henry Tudor as heir to tradition and legend has never been entirely dissipated. For many students the Tudor dynasty remains the Welsh dynasty. 'Tudor Wales' remains a popular and nicely-packaged period, and merely by giving it this traditional label some seminal questions relating to the study of history have been brought up. The relationship between myth and history is a fascinating one. The prophetic tradition which accumulated around Henry Tudor is one of those 'organic' myths which actually had an impact in moulding opinion and contributing to Henry's success in his bid for the throne. Not that its effects should be overestimated. The historical moment was apt. Henry Tudor's hard-headed, even ambivalent, supporters, were not seduced by historical tradition but attracted by solid self-interest. Yet there is no gainsaying that in this significant episode the main guardians of the Welsh cultural heritage, the *bards*, provide evidence that they felt a prophecy to have been fulfilled and a new era to have dawned for the Welsh.

Llyna feirdd yn llawenach
Llwyddo'r byd a lladd
R. Bach . . .
Harri fu, harry a fo,
Harri sydd, hir oes iddo.

'Here are bards much happier, the world is all the better for killing little R. . . . Harry was, will be and now is; long life to him.'

(Quoted in Glanmor Williams, *Henry Tudor and Wales*, Cardiff, 1985, p.61.)

The role of mythology and tradition is particularly fascinating in Welsh history. This has been because they have had to compensate so often for defeat and disillusionment. Investigating their impact is particularly difficult because all the evidence is literary. Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* was invention masquerading as history. Its impact, which as we have seen was considerable, has to be assessed in what may seem an unlikely historical source, poetry. Considerable specialist knowledge is involved, since this poetry is replete with symbolism. More than this, the historian using such sources has to be immersed in the period before being able to judge accurately their nuances of historical meaning. Yet such sources are absolutely vital for the medieval and Tudor periods in gauging reaction to political and religious developments in particular.

FROM POETRY TO PERIODIZATION

It is obvious that the Tudor period runs from the accession of the first Tudor in 1485 to the death of the last, Elizabeth I in 1603. But that title 'Tudor Wales', seemingly so innocuous, so neutral, reveals a view of history, an imposed interpretation, before we even get on to any content. First it reveals a dynastic view of history, taking as its focal points the reigns of monarchs and, by implication, regarding their initiatives and policies as the motor of change. Such assumptions would have been entirely appropriate to the historiography of the nineteenth century which stressed political history above all else. Perhaps it is now making something of a comeback. But in general terms, recent historical investigation has centred on a much more widely-based analysis of economic and social change, and attempts to reconstruct the role of the mass of the people in the historical process. This is not easy. The evidence is never complete, of course, but it abounds for kings and queens, their councils and their policies, their dress and their hunting habits, their tennis and their courtly rituals. Their portraits perform a political purpose when, as with Elizabeth I, they are full of the symbolism of 'gloriana', so there tend to be a lot of them. There are no portraits of labourers or small tenant farmers and precious few documents to recall details of their lives. However since, for a variety of reasons, we rightly regard them as being as significant as their monarchs, historians are intent on rescuing them from the oblivion to which they were for so long consigned. For such groups as these, 1485 or 1603 made precious little difference. The tempo of their lives was affected by far different social and economic trends which demand a wholly different chronology in Wales as in England.

Even if we revert to a 'monarchist' view of history there are complications because historians have placed Henry VII at the centre of a 'medieval/modern' controversy, so focusing attention more starkly on these dividing lines. Such periodization is an invention. While traditionally historians have labelled the years up to 1485 'medieval' and the years between 1485 and the industrial revolution 'early modern', there is a fundamental unreality here. Such labels could have no meaning for contemporary observers. Still, it is the historian's task to impose some pattern on inordinately complex and inter-relating past events. The *nature* of that pattern is a matter of as much debate as the tale which is eventually told. We have had Whig, Marxist, main-line, conservative, and revisionist schools of historians at work on the Tudor period.

By our selection of topics for the essays which follow we, as editors, have revealed that we regard certain matters as being of central importance in the history of Tudor Wales. The focus for us is Wales, so we are less exercised as to whether Henry VII was the last of the 'medievales' or the first of the 'moderns'. Let us turn to the reign of Henry VIII. Probably it was *Thomas Cromwell*, Henry VIII's chief minister, who was responsible for inaugurating the policy which brought about the Union of England and Wales by means of two major acts in 1536 and 1543. The union of two countries, particularly when it was intended to integrate the political, legal and administrative systems, and to make English the official language of a largely monoglot Welsh-speaking nation, is obviously an event of momentous significance. It was no partnership between equals. Wales was very much a minor partner,

the conquered nation still suffering, at least by letter of the law, from penal legislation consequent on the *Glyndŵr Revolt* which made the Welsh second-class citizens in their own country. The union has been permanent. Not surprisingly it has occasioned all manner of historical controversies since. In so doing it has considerably illuminated the nature of the exercise in which the historian is engaged. In the first place it bears on the matter with which we were lately concerned, that of periodization. A view of Welsh history which concentrates on Henry VII as heir to the poetic tradition of the middle ages, the son of prophecy, a Welsh avenger of Welsh defeats, the new king of the Britons, first of a Welsh dynasty which brought order out of chaos and restored self-respect to the Welsh, would still stress the validity of the label 'Tudor Wales'. According to this view the *Acts of Union* might be seen as part of a *process* of integration of the two countries on equal terms, inaugurated by Henry's victory at *Bosworth*. According to this view Henry Tudor was the man who restored Welsh self-respect by welcoming the Welsh at court, adopting the red dragon of *Cadwaladr*, last king of the Britons, as his standard and naming his eldest son *Arthur*.

It is not now fashionable to take this view and see 1485 as a significant dividing line. A history of modern Wales would probably be more likely now to start with the first *Act of Union*, 1536 — the convenient conjunction here is that the *Acts of Union* can be seen as part of the Tudor 'revolution in government', as one of the most eminent of Tudor historians has dubbed it — that period of administrative reform masterminded by *Thomas Cromwell* which saw at least the administrative transition in England and Wales from a medieval to a more modern state. According to this view the union of Wales with England can be seen as part of a fundamental tidying up in which a country with a mixture of government, laws and authority became part of an efficient, powerful, unified and administratively coherent wider realm.

More important, to the Welsh historian *per se*, this event can assume an overriding importance since it brought about the integration of two countries in which Wales, as the weaker partner, was bound to succumb to an economically powerful and dominant state. At the extreme end of this spectrum comes the view that the *Acts of Union* were a deliberate attempt to cast Wales into oblivion — its laws, customs, society and above all, language, an act of unparalleled vandalism in attempting to destroy an ancient nation. The point is, then, that by the simple act of pinning the label 'Tudor Wales' on to this book we have opened up a controversy which encompasses the historiography of England and Wales, and arouses burning passions among Welsh historians. That simple labelling leads to many an insight into the historical discipline. It reveals a concern with evidence, with sources, certainly, but also with the role of myth in history, with patriotism and, generally, with the complexity of historical periodization, generalizations and judgements.

That wider controversy is fashioned from many minor ones. Welsh society after the *Acts of Union* was dominated by landowners — the gentry. Their economic resources were translated into dominance of local government and the local community, even if, relatively, they were considerably less prosperous than their English counterparts. They were the people who could afford an education, and, increasingly, valued it. They were the literate

members of society and the ones with some leisure time. Inevitably they are the group who have left written evidence of reactions to the Tudor dynasty and the impact of the *Acts of Union*. Until relatively recently it was their view of Tudor Wales which held sway — and to some extent still does. They portray a Wales cast down, defeated and chaotic before the advent of the Tudors. Then came what George Owen (*A Dialogue of the Government of Wales*, 1594) called the 'joyful metamorphosis' wrought by Henry Tudor, 'a Moses that delivered us from bondage', 'a prince of our own nation and born in our country', who inaugurated a period of order and good government for Wales, consolidated by the *Acts of Union*. Distortion is inevitable in the sixteenth century by the very nature of the social structure. The unlettered labourer and tenant left no direct testimony of this sort — but the distortion of gentry judgements is compounded when we take into account that it was precisely this class which benefited most from Tudor policy — particularly that of Union. It was the gentry whose alliance with the monarchy guaranteed the stability of the Tudor state at local level. It was the gentry who ensured that local administration worked and justice was administered. These responsibilities cemented the position of the gentry in their community. Not surprisingly they regarded such developments favourably. In modifying the picture left by Tudor gentry writers and attempting to look critically at some of their literary evidence the historian is merely doing his job of examining the historical record sceptically, attempting to weigh up the biases of contemporary observers. But historical evaluation is not just a matter of clinical assessment. The historian then brings his or her own bias to bear, and this is conditioned not by Tudor society but by the society of which the historian is a part. That society has changed dramatically in the recent past with the changing nature of Welsh nationalism in the twentieth century. Especially after the Second World War, Welsh political nationalism developed, to culminate in some heady triumphs in the 1960s and 1970s. Concern over the fate of the Welsh language has grown steadily this century. Practical results have been as varied as widespread Welsh-medium education, full official status for the Welsh language and direct action to secure road signs in Welsh and the establishment of a predominantly Welsh-medium television channel. Inevitably, Welsh nationalists are historians, though not necessarily professional ones. They look to the past for authority and succour. Inevitably, they look to that Tudor century of the *Acts of Union* which, legally, did away with Wales as a separate entity ('incorporated, united and annexed to and with this . . . Realm of England') and decreed that 'henceforth no Person or Persons that use the Welsh Speech or Language shall have or enjoy any Manner, Office or Fees within this Realm of England'. For some committed nationalist writers the verdict is clear. Gwynfor Evans, charismatic president of Plaid Cymru, judged that as a result of Tudor policies 'it was England that lived purposefully; in Wales all feeling of purpose was finished, apart from serving its big neighbour. A host of Welshmen received personal advancement but their country deteriorated and gradually decayed.' The personal advancement, of course, was that of the gentry, and nationalist professional historians would, perhaps less stridently, endorse this judgement. Other Welsh historians would argue that judgements of this kind are anachronistic in that they impose twentieth-century predilections on wholly different sixteenth-century conceptions of state, society and nationalism.

The nationalist controversy is by no means the only one to impinge on the study of Tudor Wales, though it is the most emotive one now. Some generations ago it might have been argued that the religious state of Wales in Tudor times gave rise to most controversy. Like nationalism, religious commitment is an amorphous and elastic concept. How might it be measured? By numbers of martyrs, or *recusants*, or attendance at church, or the outpourings of the new printing press or the anti-clericalism of some Welsh poets, or numbers of monks in monasteries? If we think of the range of evidence here the task of the historian is complex indeed. He has the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* to provide him with details of numbers of monks in monasteries, but has that given him evidence of the depth of their religious commitment? He has to take into account the evidence of *Thomas Cromwell's* visitors who reported on conditions in the monasteries in the knowledge that their master wanted evidence which would legitimize the closure of the monasteries. Little evidence remains by which we can assess the nature of popular belief and attitudes, except in one of the most difficult sources of all, the poetry of the *bards*. If we set these difficulties in the context of the century which saw the break with Rome and the *dissolution of the monasteries* under Henry VIII, and the establishment of the Church of England under Elizabeth I, it is not surprising that historians committed to the Roman Catholic or Protestant cause should have produced widely different accounts both of Tudor policy and the state of religious belief and practice. Only relatively recently has a greater degree of a consensus emerged with the modification of entrenched denominational hostilities.

Some of the complexities of the historian's task have emerged in this discussion of three linked emotive topics — mythology, nationalism and religion. In discussing them we have highlighted some of the implications of historians imposing interpretations on the past — by labelling periods, selecting topics or constructing generalizations. The broad framework of the material on Tudor Wales which follows has been imposed by the editors who perhaps betray some of their own attitudes in so doing. However, within that context, the essayists have come to grips with their own topic in their own way. It will emerge that they have had to cope with very different kinds of sources, all of them in some way deficient, all of them posing their own problems of interpretation. In reading these essays, in conjunction with the sources which the authors have worked on, you will encounter historians providing a great deal of information about Tudor Wales. Through this they provide an insight into the historian's craft. To sum up, we can do no better than use the words, slightly adapted, of one of the contributors, Glanmor Williams, in his book on *Henry Tudor* :

No final answers to great historical questions can be found or expected. Each new generation will continue to ask those questions of the past which it believes to be the most relevant and important, and will answer them in the light of its own knowledge and principles. Part of the answer will come from its experience of the present as well as its knowledge of the past. Since individuals and generations differ from one another in their attitudes, so their answers, too, will be bound to differ. But the task confronting the historian will remain the same: to search for the information as widely, accurately and objectively as he

can; to describe as truthfully as possible what happened; and to discuss honestly and sympathetically what people living at the time and since have thought and felt about it. There is no 'last word' to be spoken on this or any other historical topic.