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The earliest inhabitants

In a dimly lit room in a secluded but sturdy farmhouse in early eighteenth-century Cardiganshire, a gifted young Anglican ordinand, aptly named Theophilus Evans, composed in his native language an epic history of Wales which remained a bestseller until the twilight of the Victorian era. Entitled *Drych y Prif Oesoedd* (A Mirror of the First Ages) (1716), this racy historical narrative of the allegedly glorious origins of the Welsh was Evans's spirited riposte to English satirists who had painted unflattering portraits of Wales as 'a country in the world's backside' and as 'the very rubbish of Noah's flood'. A superb storyteller, he packed his pages with more heroes and gripping incidents than any novel of blood and thunder might have done, and by conjuring up images of luminaries like Gomer, Brutus, Beli, Brân and Arthur (Boudica, styled 'Buddug' by Evans, was the only heroine to elbow her way into this pageant) he caught the imagination of the Welsh reading public and deeply shaped their view of the distant past. This was history, or perhaps mythical writing, on a grand scale, and the vivid tales and heroic victories and defeats in this unashamedly Cambrocentric work were so well tailored to the needs of a people desperately searching for their own national identity that it became a popular classic, especially when editions in the Victorian era began including vivid engraved illustrations. Even the Welsh who emigrated in large numbers to Pennsylvania in the nineteenth century insisted on publishing an English translation at Ebensburg in 1834, so that their American-born offspring could familiarize themselves with key events in the

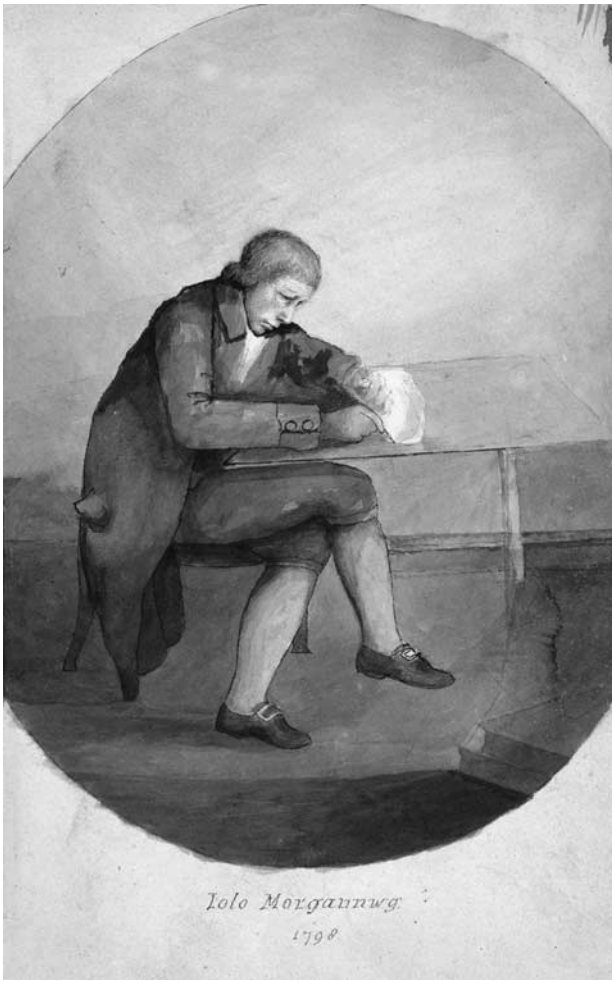
history of the land of their fathers. In an extravagant eulogy to the Welsh edition of 1898, the historian O. M. Edwards claimed that no Welsh history book had ever matched Evans's pantheon of heroes.

An eminent modern Welsh archaeologist, who probably never bothered to read the original version, once described Evans's theatrical pageant as 'a fairly dotty book'. Credulous, uncritical and even dotty it might appear to the modern reader, but it was a formative influence in the development of ideas about the Welsh past. Like most of his contemporaries, the world-view of this unlikely people's remembrancer was dominated by the literal meaning of the most sacred scriptural text. At his side as he wrote, a copy of the Welsh bible – the most authoritative source for every Christian historian – would have provided him not only with irrefutable proof of the manner in which God had created the earth but also an avowedly accurate chronology of the past. Taking his cue from the calculations made by James Ussher, Archbishop of Armagh in the early seventeenth century, he believed that the Creation had occurred in 4004 BC. Had he read John Lightfoot, the Cambridge scholar, he would also have noted the precise time of 18 October 4004 BC, swiftly followed by Adam's creation (at 9 a.m.) five days later. Startling as it may seem to us, Evans took for granted that, following the Creation, humankind derived from Adam and that, after the Flood, the world had been repeopled by Noah's three sons – Shem, Ham and Japhet – and by their descendants, most notably Gomer, founder of the tribe known as the Cimbri, the first colonizers of the land mass which became known as Wales. The most significant part of Evans's tale, therefore, was his proud affirmation that the Welsh had enjoyed a privileged position in the events which unfolded between the Creation and the Flood. In a second edition, he declared: 'here is the blood and race of the old Welsh, as exalted as any earthly lineage could be'. In the context of the time, this was a dramatically reassuring statement.

During the Welsh cultural renaissance of the eighteenth century, interest swiftly developed in the study of ancient Britain and the role of the Celtic peripheries, not least because of the attempts made in Edward Lhuyd's magisterial *Archaeologia Britannica* (The Archaeology of Britain) (1707) to celebrate the honourable ancestry of the Welsh by providing them with seemingly irrefutable proof of

the common origin of the Celtic languages. The notion of insular Celts therefore was called into being by this remarkably erudite and far-seeing Welsh polymath. Scholarly and unscholarly thinking about the alleged 'Celticity' of Britain and Ireland thus begins with Lhuyd, and his position as keeper of the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford from 1691 to 1709 lent authority to his writings. As the Welsh themselves began to discover, invent and re-invent literary, historical and musical treasures, they derived comfort from the knowledge that their identity was based on a history considerably older than that of England. Members of the London-based Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion, founded in 1751, claimed to be the descendants of the aboriginal Britons and a flurry of topographical guides and paintings highlighted strikingly attractive prehistoric remains. A wave of Romantic learning, which created the most bizarre and extravagant fantasies about noble ancestors known as Celts, also played a significant role in reviving interest in the history of one of the oldest living literary languages in Europe.

At the end of the eighteenth century Theophilus Evans's patriotic torch was taken up by Edward Williams, who was better known by his bardic pseudonym Iolo Morganwg (Edward of Glamorgan). There has been no greater cultural icon in Wales than this astonishingly erudite and inventive stonemason. Like the Anglican Theophilus Evans, this Unitarian wordsmith from Flemingston in the Vale of Glamorgan believed that the biblical narrative was divinely inspired and that it provided the only convincing explanation of the origins of the universe and the diversity of human and animal life. In a ringing declaration of faith in God's handiwork, he wrote: 'the Almighty audibly proclaimed his existence and instantaneously with that utterance all the creation with a shout of inexpressible joy leapt into existence'. But Iolo Morganwg went much further than Evans. Fuelled by copious supplies of laudanum and a heady mixture of fact, fiction and extravagant fantasies, he became the most successful literary and historical forger in Europe. In the feverish hunt for the Welsh past, Iolo was the leader of the pack and, even to this day, he remains a deeply mysterious and controversial figure. He was fascinated by barrows, earthworks, hillforts and especially stone circles, and his writings were suffused with bardic and druidic lore. His most durable legacy was the Gorsedd of the Bards of the



1. The Romantic historian and poet Edward Williams (1747–1826), universally known by his bardic name Iolo Morganwg, exerted an enormous influence on how people interpreted the prehistoric past. This painting, by William Owen Pughe, was made in 1798. (The National Library of Wales)

Island of Britain, a remarkable druidic moot which first met on Primrose Hill, London, in June 1792 and which was subsequently incorporated into the official activities of the National Eisteddfod of Wales. By attracting like-minded Druids, poets, scholars and

democrats to this intellectual forcing-house, Iolo hoped not only to popularize the old druidic lore but also to advance the radical cause of Jacobinism and provide a new vision of Welsh nationality. A nation exists and flourishes only in its collective memory, and this first national institution was designed to stiffen the self-confidence and pride of one of the forgotten peoples of Europe. Iolo Morganwg's writings exercised a profound influence on cultural life in nineteenth-century Wales and successfully clouded the judgement of scholars up to the First World War.

The net result was that the story of the Creation, of Noah and the Flood, the dispersal of the nations, the descent of the Cimbri from Japhet, son of Noah, and the role of the Druids as custodians of knowledge and mythic lore became part of the warp and woof of the cultural experience of Welsh people. The increasingly Nonconformist population was thoroughly indoctrinated in the biblical account of the origins of humankind. When, at a Sunday school examination in 1821, Margaret Jones of Ganllwyd, Merioneth, recited aloud with complete accuracy thirty-two chapters of the Old Testament, she articulated the common stock of beliefs which chapel-goers held dear. Even as late as 1890 the young Welsh scholar John Morris-Jones stirred up a hornet's nest when he spoke out against the innocent blind faith of the Welsh in the historicity of Gomer, son of Japhet, son of Noah. Ideas about archaeology, prehistory and history were still rudimentary, and the literal interpretation of Genesis continued to hold sway. The word 'prehistoric' did not enter the vocabulary until 1851, and the lack of an accurate and reliable time frame meant that the long sweep of geological and historical time simply could not be imagined. It is significant that the folk names bestowed on Welsh megalithic tombs – Carreg Samson, Bedd yr Afanc, Barclodiad y Gawres – reflected the scriptural and classical narratives with which the public were so thoroughly familiar.

Although nothing can alter the fact that the dependence on scriptural testimony and mythical lore was inimical to intellectual development, inquiring minds were beginning to turn to new forms of investigation. In the 1830s the geologists Adam Sedgwick and R. I. Murchison began to explore the Lower Palaeozoic rocks of Wales and to develop classification systems such as 'Cambrian',

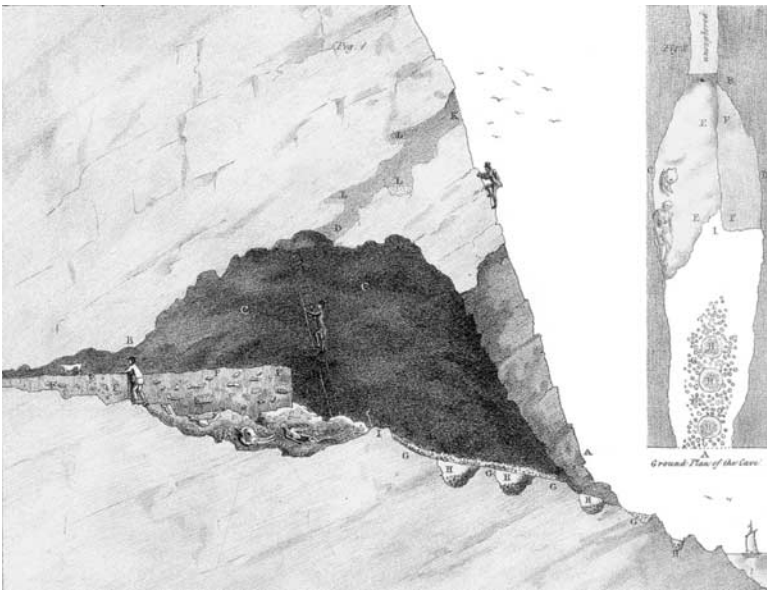
'Silurian' and 'Ordovician', names which, redolent of the old Celtic tribes, eventually gained international recognition. Few people realize that the co-founder of the theory of the evolution of the species by natural selection was a Welshman. During his travels in Papua New Guinea, Usk-born Alfred Russel Wallace, one of the most progressive scientists in mid-Victorian Wales, had formulated by 1858 (independently of Charles Darwin) the interpretation of life as a catalogue of successful errors within the framework of gradual evolutionary change, and had he been an ambitious self-publicist he might well have eclipsed the great Darwin. Such progressive views, however, were generally mistrusted and often vilified. One prominent Welsh Baptist declared that Darwin and his acolytes were themselves 'more akin to monkeys than their purported progenitor', while John Jones, a monoglot Welsh-speaking Calvinistic Methodist preacher from Tal-y-sarn, reckoned that a concerted attempt was afoot to 'turn the Almighty out of the world which he had created with his own fingers'. But the scriptural framework of prehistory was clearly living on borrowed time, for there were signs that the Welsh were opening their minds to some of the fundamental principles of scientific and archaeological investigation. The expanding web of scientific and philosophical societies, supported by industrialists and professional men, was a striking feature of early Victorian urban communities. The Royal Institution of South Wales, set up in Swansea in 1835, sponsored serious scientific research and saw itself as a university in the making. Growing numbers of amateur historians and gentlemen-scholars were exploring fields, hedgerows and tracks, energetically wielding the spade and coyly recording their discoveries in *Archaeologia Cambrensis*, the house journal of the Cambrian Archaeological Association founded in 1846. Some of their bizarre speculations about artefacts and monuments may still cause us some amusement, but wild guesswork was infinitely preferable to short-sighted dogmatism. When the University of Wales (1893) and the National Museum of Wales (1907) were established, to be swiftly followed by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments and Constructions in Wales and Monmouthshire (1908), a process began which ultimately transformed the study of archaeology from being a genteel, haphazard antiquarian pursuit into a rigorous academic discipline in which

professional standards of excavation, observation and field recording were set. Recent advances in scientific techniques such as radiocarbon dating, dendrochronology (the science of tree-ring dating), the analysis of pollen in soils, peats and lake deposits, as well as aerial photography of the highest standards, have been of critical importance. Thanks to computer-based modelling, we can now even gaze in wonder at the likely features of our prehistoric forebears. The fruitful interplay between archaeologists, geographers, geologists, curators, artists and even forensic scientists means that the prehistory of Wales has now become a lively field of inquiry. Yet, to enter prehistoric Wales is to find oneself in a foreign country. Its chronology is imprecise, textual evidence is almost wholly missing, and archaeological testimony is patchy and fraught with ambiguities. In a strange way, too, the closer we examine it, the more mysterious it becomes.

Our story, which is one of migration, settlement, conflict, change and continuity, begins in the Palaeolithic or Old Stone Age. For many thousands of years before the Wales we recognize today was fully formed, the land was covered by ice hundreds of metres thick. This impenetrable blanket of ice helped to shape the evolution of the Welsh environment. At that stage, Britain and mainland Europe were often part of a continuous land mass, and only when less extreme conditions prevailed did it become possible for hunters to visit. The best surviving early relics in Wales have been discovered in the protected conditions of limestone caves. Exciting later twentieth-century excavation work at Pontnewydd cave in the Elwy valley, Denbighshire, has revealed that Ice Age hunters were present an unimaginably long 225,000 years ago. Pontnewydd is thus the oldest known humanly occupied site in Wales. It also represents the most north-westerly settlement of its period in Eurasia. Striking discoveries have been made within the cave of early Neanderthal remains, extensive fauna, animal bones and artefacts of volcanic rock rather than flint. Neanderthals were heavily built, probably pale-skinned people with prominent brows, projecting mid-faces and huge jaws. They sometimes used well-sheltered caves, living cheek by jowl with rhinoceros, bears, wolves, red deer and horses, and they armed themselves with spears and hand axes. Somehow, against all the odds, these resourceful hunters and scavengers

managed to survive in a forbiddingly cold and sunless environment. Pontnewydd seems to have offered a temporary residence to small groups of Neanderthals, mostly young males, during two separate periods of occupation, around 225,000 and 175,000 years ago. One of the most interesting survivals is the remains of nineteen teeth of five Neanderthals, all of which reveal the characteristic of taurodontism – an enlarged pulp cavity to the teeth and short roots. There is a possibility that hominid remains were deliberately deposited in Pontnewydd cave, and if that proves to be the case Wales will be able to boast of having one of the earliest international examples of the deliberate disposal of human bodies.

Around 30,000 years ago, *homo sapiens neanderthalensis* became extinct and was replaced by our own species, *homo sapiens sapiens*. In January 1823 the Revd William Buckland, Professor in Geology at the University of Oxford, discovered the first Pleistocene human



2. Goat's Hole cave, Paviland, on the south Gower coast where the 'Red Lady' was discovered. This illustration appeared in *Reliquiae Diluvianae* (1823) by William Buckland (1784–1856), in which he maintained that the entire globe had been inundated by a great flood. This drawing represents his plan and section of the Paviland cave. (The National Library of Wales)

remains in Wales, at Goat's Hole (Paviland cave), on the Gower peninsula in Glamorgan. An avowed champion of the Deluge hypothesis, Buckland believed that the headless human skeleton he had uncovered had lived and died in Roman times, and might have been an exciseman. He published his findings in *Reliquiae Diluvianae* (Evidence of the Flood) (1823), a work which prompted countless visitors and collectors to examine and pilfer objects at the cave. Since the corpse had been deeply stained with red ochre and decorated with ivory bracelets, word got around that this was a female and, as a result, the 'Red Lady' of Paviland entered the annals of Welsh archaeological folklore. Modern archaeologists, however, have proved beyond doubt that this was a healthy adult male, aged 25–30 and 1.74 m tall, who was interred 26,000 years ago in what may well have been a sacred site for pilgrims. Moreover, the DNA sequence of the mistakenly entitled 'Red Lady' corresponds to the most common extant lineage in Europe. Until – if ever – an earlier burial site is discovered, the extraordinarily elaborate interment of the Paviland male will rank foremost in the story of the coming of fully modern humans to prehistoric Wales. The site's most recent investigator has eloquently shown that the human story of Paviland cave is told 'through its litter of humanly made furniture: stone artefacts of distinctive styles, ornaments of ivory, and even the body of a young man who was accorded a ceremonial burial with rites that lay at, or close to, the head of a European tradition of 5000 years' duration'.

Although aeons of geological time provided the rock formations of Wales, the landforms with which we are familiar have their origins 'at the dripping, thawing, snout of a glacier'. Until large-scale deglaciation – what we would call global warming – occurred, people were in no position to impose their will on the landscape and to establish permanent or semi-permanent settlements. But when the Ice Age ended (around 12,000 BC), sea levels began to rise, the temperature increased, trees (birch, pine and oak) began to etch their silhouette on the skyline, and growing numbers of mobile hunters, armed with multi-purpose stone tools such as pins, needles, harpoons and fish hooks, exploited woodland, constructed rough-and-ready dwellings and lived on deer, oxen, fish and wild plants. Sea levels rose appreciably during the Mesolithic (Middle Stone Age)

period, and substantial hectares of land were submerged. Legends of sunken lands associated with Cantre'r Gwaelod and Traeth Lafan remind us that the coastal outline of Wales was rather different from that of our times. The remarkable discovery of the footprints of two adults and a child walking towards the sea on the inter-tidal flats of Uskmouth, near Newport, dating from the seventh millennium BC, bears witness to the effect of climatic changes on the shores of the rising post-glacial sea. By 6000 BC the final land bridge connecting Wales to the continent had been submerged and the contours of the present British Isles had become familiar. By that stage, too, the so-called post-glacial 'climatic optimum' had brought so much warmth that deciduous forests were spreading quickly. Hunter–gatherers, who lived by their wits and were extraordinarily mobile, assembled largely on the coastal plains, their axes glinting in the warm sun as they chopped down trees. At Goldcliff in Monmouthshire, the latest dated site containing a Mesolithic assemblage, they deliberately burnt vegetation in order to accommodate grazing animals, while at the Nab Head, near Marloes in Pembrokeshire, a thriving fishing settlement existed. These early settlers were canny and robust people, ready to do battle with nature and well able to recognize potentially fertile land close to the western seaways. We should not underestimate their skills and perseverance. Indeed, it is hard not to marvel at the bravery and ingenuity of people who, travelling in slender wooden boats through storms, cross-currents and whirlpools, brought with them new and sophisticated ideas and techniques which helped to develop the processes of husbandry and industry. The Welsh historical geographer E. G. Bowen was among the first to highlight the importance of the movement of people during 'the first Golden Age of the western seaways' and the significance of the Atlantic as a binding force. More recently, the archaeologist Barry Cunliffe, keenly aware of the kinship of peoples who lived on, or sailed along, the Atlantic coasts, has argued that the peoples of the long Atlantic facade of Europe developed a set of common beliefs and values over thousands of years, as well as an 'oceanic mentality' which included 'challenge, awe, a heightened awareness of time, and a deep restlessness'.

The western trade routes certainly facilitated brisk trafficking as migrants, sailors and traders linked the European continent with