CHAPTER 1

Literary Sources

The study is still unwritten which will range widely over the various elements in medieval historical writing and explore properly the basic questions of purpose and design. In the medieval context, it is wrong to look at the chronicles and annals written in one country alone: the significance of the historical activity, from the grandest to the most localised, within one area can only be assessed in a wider study. The number of people involved in historical writing, their degree of learning, their width of horizon, their attitude towards their sources, their awareness of the passage of time, basic issues such as these cannot be discussed adequately on English or French, much less Welsh, materials alone. My purpose, however, in this chapter is not to attempt this major study, but to bring together elementary suggestions for some of the ways in which the narrative sources for Welsh history may eventually be fitted into this European scene. At the same time, the practical purpose of this series has dominated the presentation, so that anyone unfamiliar with the present state of scholarship may have some straightforward introduction to the texts themselves and to appraisals of them.

The creation of Wales and the evidences for it are very much corollaries of the *adventus Saxonum*. As England was born, so was Wales, not quite by default, but rather by remainder. The slow end of Roman Britain and the gradual conquest of much of the island by Germanic tribes is attested in four principal early literary sources, which are essential also for the study of early Wales. The works of the British writers, Gildas and Nennius, and the purely Anglo-Saxon works of Bede and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* must jointly take first place in any survey.

The works of Gildas and Nennius, especially Nennius, pose, however, grave critical problems, turning on argument of a very

specialised kind. These shadowy men have been the object of much ingenious and learned argument among historians, archaeologists, philologists and Celticists generally, and, although a reasonable consensus of opinion about Gildas has emerged, as much cannot be said for Nennius.

In the case of Gildas, the value of the reasonably firm conclusion which has been reached can best be shown by the implications of the dubiety which it has replaced. The *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae* as it has descended to us is a short book of 110 chapters, containing, especially in its first twenty-six chapters, a substantial amount of obscure historical narrative.[1] The 'Ruin of Britain' is, as Ebert described it, a *Tendenzschrift*:[2] this is no sober set of annals, no dispassionate chronicle; it is certainly in part, probably in whole, a bitter, despairing outburst by a man who lived through some part of the confusion of the Anglo-Saxon conquest. But to use the *De Excidio*, it is necessary to know facts about the author with greater precision. It has been argued that the historical section of the book is separate from the denunciatory, homiletic section, that they are by two distinct authors. The most influential, vigorous and extreme exponent of the two Gildases was the Rev. A. W. Wade-Evans, who died in 1964 after sixty years of study and publications on problems involving the interpretation of Gildas.[3] Archbishop Ussher, in the seventeenth century, had popularised the view that there were two Gildases, one Gildas 'Albanius' of the fifth century, the other, Gildas 'Badonicus' of the sixth century. Ussher, however, regarded the *De Excidio* as the sole work of Gildas Badonicus.[4] Wade-Evans used the old concept of Albanius and Badonicus, but divided the *De Excidio*

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[1] For a bibliography of Gildas studies, see W. F. Bolton, *A History of Anglo-Latin Literature, 597–1066, i, 597–740* (Princeton 1967), 244–8.

[2] Quoted in the Cymmrodorion Society edition of *De Excidio Britanniae*, ed. H. Williams (Cymmrodorion Record Series iii, 1899), i, p. v.

[3] See, as well as the list of works by Wade-Evans in Bolton, *Anglo-Latin Literature*, H. D. Emanuel, 'The Rev. A. W. Wade-Evans: an Appreciation of his Contribution to the Study of Early Welsh History', *Trans. Hon. Soc. Cymm.* (1965), 266–71.

[4] J. Ussher, *Britannicarum Ecclesiarum Antiquitates* (Dublin 1639), 441–2.

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between them and redated them drastically. Gildas Albanius was, to Wade-Evans, the early author of the denunciatory part of the book, now designated the *Epistola* (as the author himself called it in the opening words of the preface), while Gildas Badonicus completed the historical section, the real *De Excidio*, in 708. The style of this early eighth-century work was then touched up to become more akin to the rhetorical ebullience of the *Epistola* and interpolated before the first chapter of the earlier text. Thus, in the eyes of Wade-Evans, the text as Mommsen established it in 1898[1] was a composite one. The implications of such an assertion are serious, of course, and coloured Wade-Evans's interpretation of the fifth century.[2] This is not to say that others have not reached comparable conclusions, reducing the dramatic quality of the invasions and emphasising the gradualness of the process: as Dr H. D. Emanuel has very properly pointed out, H. M. Chadwick and Kenneth Jackson would support a similar general conclusion from archaeological and philological evidence respectively.[3] But the effect of transferring the more historical part of the *De Excidio* to the eighth century is to deprive us of a remarkable contemporary account, however obscure, however polemical. It implies moreover a sophisticated ability to manipulate Latin, to imitate a past style of great artificiality: if this ability had been proven, it would have been of interest in the intellectual and ecclesiastical history of Britain.

This late dating no longer, however, has influential defenders. Anyone venturing afresh on the study of the fifth and sixth centuries must, of course, make up his own mind about his attitude to the first twenty-six chapters of the *De Excidio*, but he will now do so in the knowledge that modern linguistic analysis lends no support to the idea of dual authorship. The

[1] *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Auctores Antiquissimi*, xiii, *Chronica Minora Saec. IV, V, VI, VII*, iii, ed. T. Mommsen (Berlin 1898), 1–85. There are only four manuscripts, one each from the eleventh, twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

[2] See, in particular, A. W. Wade-Evans, *The Emergence of England and Wales* (Wetteren, Belgium, 1956; 2nd ed., Cambridge 1959).

[3] Emanuel, *Trans. Hon. Soc. Cymm.* (1965), 269.

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text is throughout consistent with sixth-century Latinity.[1]

Beyond the celebrated allusions to the *superbus tyrannus* (identified plausibly with Vortigern) and to Ambrosius Aurelianus,[2] the evidence which it supplies of education and church life a century and more after the Romans finally left Britain is uniquely valuable. The purely denunciatory later parts of the book contain long groups of chapters (38–63, 76–105) which 'can be regarded as nothing more than anthologies of scriptural passages bearing on the subject at hand':[3] clearly the author could expect his readers to recognise the stream of allusions and to be able to extract their meaning: 'I could wish indeed that these testimonies of holy Scripture . . . should all be interpreted according to the historical or the moral sense.'[4] Moreover, the severe strictures which Gildas lays upon his fellow-churchmen, are themselves evidence:

> Britain has priests, but foolish ones; a great number of ministers, but shameless ones; clerics, but crafty plunderers; shepherds, as they say, but wolves ready for the slaughter of souls . . . They teach the people, but by furnishing the worst examples, teach vice and evil morals . . . With a shudder, indeed, at having to linger long at these things, I can with truth make one statement, that is, all these are changed into the contrary deeds, so that the clergy are . . . unchaste, double-tongued, drunk, greedy of filthy lucre, having faith and, to speak more truly, infidelity in an impure conscience.[5]

Gildas, in short, is very treacherous to use for specific acts, specific people, specific dates,[6] but as a general source for the atmosphere of Britain as it was becoming England and Wales he is unique.

Although Bede is next in time to Gildas, and uses the first

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[1] F. Kerlouégan, 'Le Latin du *De Excidio Britanniae* de Gildas', *Christianity in Britain, 300–700*, ed. M. W. Barley and R. P. C. Hanson (Leicester 1968), 151–76.   [2] cc. 23, 25.   [3] Bolton, *Anglo-Latin Literature*, 37.   [4] c. 93.   [5] cc. 66, 109.

[6] Cf. the defence of Gildas by C. E. Stevens, 'Gildas Sapiens', *English Historical Review*, lvi (1941), 353–73, and the attack by F. Lot, 'De la valeur historique de *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae* de Gildas', *Mediaeval Studies in Memory of Gertrude Schoepperle Loomis* (Paris 1927), 229–64.

twenty-six chapters of the *De Excidio* extensively, Nennius is more conveniently taken in conjunction with Gildas. The *Historia Brittonum* which goes under the authorship of Nennius is still 'one of the most difficult and most controversial texts in the historiography of the middle ages'.[1] The textual history is not in itself of uncommon complexity,[2] but the method by which the text itself was compiled is very debatable indeed. As with the *De Excidio*, there is a basic question of authorship. The problem of the *Historia* is, however, much more complicated because it is itself an edition of earlier works; it owes much in its early sections to the ecclesiastical history of Eusebius, the chronicle of Prosper of Aquitaine, probably Bede, certain early Irish works and Gildas himself. It incorporates Anglo–Saxon genealogies of the sixth to eighth centuries. It includes a *Liber Sancti Germani* which Lot ascribed, unconvincingly, to the industry of Nennius himself.[3] It has ten chapters on the 'marvels of Britain', curiosities of the island, including Ireland and Anglesey, very Celtic specimens of a common literary genre.[4] And, most celebrated, the *Historia* has in chapter 56 the twelve victories of Arthur, 'dux bellorum': there is a whole international literary culture erected on the hints given in chapter 56.

Clearly the elements in this work come from a long period of time. All are not found in all manuscripts and the debate turns on the number of 'editions' and 'editors'. The *Historia* indeed appears to be 'an organism rather than a composition as we usually understand the latter term'.[5] But Nennius as an individual has survived, and the balance of probability is not only that he

[1] F. Lot, *Nennius et l'Historia Brittonum* (Bibliothèque de l'Ecole des Hautes Etudes, Sciences historiques et philologiques, cclxiii, Paris 1934), introduction.

[2] Cf. F. Liebermann, 'Nennius', *Essays in Medieval History presented to Thomas Frederick Tout*, ed. A. G. Little and F. M. Powicke (Manchester 1925), 33. The four manuscript groups were established by Mommsen.

[3] *Ibid.*, 80–6. Mrs Chadwick regards it as deriving from a life written before 700, 'Early Culture and Learning in North Wales', *Studies in the Early British Church* (Cambridge 1958), 113.

[4] Lot, *Nennius*, 106–14.

[5] Chadwick, 'Early Culture and Learning', *Studies in the Early British Church*, 42.

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existed but that he did make the basic compilation himself late in the eighth or early in the ninth century. He was a Welshman, probably from South Wales, although Lot is contemptuous of Liebermann's suggestion that he may have 'held the post of official interpreter at his prince's court near the English frontier'.[1] He was certainly a cleric, writing Latin which Lot castigated as 'exécrable, rempli de "brittonismes"':[2] and 'he is generally regarded, rightly or wrongly, as a dim-witted and muddle-headed person'.[3] He had a sense of humour, if the Nemniuus of a Bodleian manuscript is indeed the same man, as seems plausible. In this Bodleian manuscript there is a copy of a faked alphabet, of general Runic aspect, with the note: 'Nemniuus invented these letters, when a certain Saxon scholar jeered at the Britons for not having an alphabet of their own. So he suddenly devised them out of his own head, in order to refute the charge of stupidity brought against his nation'.[4]

This pioneer spirit in historical compilation and in Celtic mystification, who faked an alphabet as a good antiquarian joke, belongs in a small way to the world of Geoffrey of Monmouth: but he enshrines more fact and less fancy in his *Historia* than Geoffrey was to do three hundred years later. Nennius vexes all his users: he had little power of historical discrimination, as his treatment of Bede demonstrates. But he realised the need to preserve some records of his country's past and recognised, unlike Gildas, that the Anglo-Saxons had something to offer Wales, however immoral their original conquest of Britain may have been. 'He approached very near the door of Anglo-Latin civilisa-tion, and paved the way for his greater countryman, the biographer of Alfred.'[5] But most of all, he paved the way for the ineffable Geoffrey of Monmouth.

[1] Lot, *Nennius,* 115 n.4; Liebermann, *Essays presented to Tout,* 39.
[2] Lot, *Nennius,* 116.
[3] K. Jackson, 'On the Northern British Section in Nennius', *Celt and Saxon,* ed. N. K. Chadwick (Cambridge 1963), 57.
[4] Ifor Williams, 'Notes on Nennius', *B.B.C.S.,* vii (1933–35), 380–1; 'The Nennian Preface: a Possible Emendation', *ibid.,* ix (1937–39), 342.
[5] Liebermann, *Essays presented to Tout,* 44.

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It is a relief to turn to Bede after facing the bitter critical dilemmas and indifferent prose presented by Gildas and Nennius. Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* is still read and enjoyed by thousands of non-specialists: since the *editio princeps* in 1475–80 there have been few decades in which a printed edition has not been easily available somewhere in Europe. Today there are at least four editions of the Latin and five English translations in print. It circulated widely in manuscript from Bede's own day until a century after the printing press was operating in Europe. Over 160 manuscripts are still in existence.[1] The Moore and the Leningrad manuscripts, probably both copied from Bede's own autograph, went abroad quite early; copies were in Germany by 800; and an early ninth-century Nonantola manuscript seems to be central to the dissemination of the text in Italy. There is little textual problem, for 'the scribes of our two oldest manuscripts might well have been among the disciples who gathered around the master's death-bed' in 735.[2] The Christian world, therefore, has had constant access to the historical work of this Northumbrian monk for over twelve hundred years. Very few writers have exercised so consistent an appeal over so long a period.

What is it that has made Bede a monk for all seasons? His scrupulousness; his flair for dealing with evidence; the sheer interest of the story which he has to tell; his common sense; his solid, straightforward, lucid Latin rising occasionally to heights of genuine eloquence; his literary architecture which did not fully solve the problems of organising a narrative of Christian life in many independent English kingdoms but which avoided the sprawling incoherence to which medieval chroniclers were prone and which constructed individual scenes with dramatic skill; his fair-mindedness, even towards the adherents of the Celtic Easter when, like Aidan, they displayed compensating virtues;[3]

[1] M. L. W. Laistner and H. H. King, *A Hand-List of Bede Manuscripts* (Ithaca 1943), 94–102; *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford Medieval Texts, Oxford 1969), xvii.   [2] *Ibid.*, xxxix and Textual Introduction, *passim*.
[3] *Historia Ecclesiastica*, iii, 17.

his memorable stories, like Caedmon's gift of song,[1] or the con-frontation and arbitration between the rival ecclesiastical usages at Whitby in 664,[2] or the parable of the sparrow flying fleetly through the Northumbrian hall, out of darkness into darkness, with which a counsellor of Edwin argued for conversion from paganism to Christianity—'if this new doctrine brings us more certain information, it seems right that we should accept it'.[3]

As a result of all these virtues, Bede's work has endured not just as a unique source to be quarried but also as a book to be read. As much can be said for very few medieval histories. Bede sat in a place of calm. He included enough miracles to satisfy a credulous age, but few enough to disarm a more cynical age; he wrote with sufficient moral intent to encourage good and discourage evil as his period and calling expected,[4] but presented matter of such interest with such fairness and truthfulness that readers anti-pathetic to moral history are rarely alienated.[5] Moreover, he was not, like many historians then and now, scraping the bottom of the barrel to write his book. He discarded more than he put in, his chapters on St Cuthbert are the distillation of his own and others' full-scale biographies of Cuthbert, his excursus on the Easter controversy is a masterly digest by one of the leading chronological specialists of eighth-century Europe. All this gives density to his work: like a medieval scholar reading Holy Scripture, the modern reader can appreciate the *Ecclesiastical History* on a number of levels.

The corollary to this selectivity and condensation is that much which Bede knew but rejected is wholly lost to us. This is not so

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[1] *Historia Ecclesiastica*, iv, 24.   [2] *Ibid.*, iii, 25.
[3] *Ibid.*, ii, 13.   [4] *Ibid.*, Preface.
[5] Cf. Bede's own rare statement of principle in the leading case of Aidan: 'I have written these things about the character and work of Aidan, not by any means commending or praising his lack of knowledge in the matter of the observance of Easter; indeed I heartily detest it, as I have clearly shown in the book which I wrote called *De Temporibus*, but, as a truthful historian, I have described in a straightforward manner those things which were done by him or through him, praising such of his qualities as are worthy of praise and preserv-ing their memory for the benefit of my readers' (iii, 17).

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acute a problem with the English Church itself, but it is acute for the less central parts: secular history which had no ecclesiastical implication, and the geographical periphery. Thus Wales is treated only very incidentally: Edwin's conquest of Anglesey and the revolt of Caedwalla of Gwynedd, allied to Penda of Mercia, in 633,[1] or the state of the Welsh church when Augustine came in 597,[2] are rare examples of *pura Wallia* in Bede. But in the period covered by Bede, up to the early eighth century, the history of Northumbria, Mercia and Wessex, the fate of the Hwicce in Worcestershire and Gloucestershire, the progress of Roman missionary activity compared with Celtic Christianity in the island, are all part and parcel of the history and context of Wales. Historians of Wales cannot but regret that there was no monk at Bangor-is-Coed writing a history of worth comparable to that of the monk of Jarrow: but there was no such monk, and one must be grateful for Bede. As Bertram Colgrave remarked in his last tribute to the man who had dominated his scholarly interests for most of this century, 'one might contrast our knowledge of England in the seventh century with the history of Ireland and Wales for the same period. Here almost all that is known definitely depends on chance references in Bede; for the rest, vague tradition written down centuries later gives us a very uncertain foundation on which to build anything like a comprehensive account.'[3]

The form in which the literary sources are cast changes markedly for the remainder of the Anglo-Saxon period. It is the heyday of the annals, one English, basically West Saxon, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, the others the *Annales Cambriae* and the more literary *Bruts*. The origin of such 'year-notes' lies deep in calendar studies. Most civilisations from the Babylonians to the Christians had need of calendar calculations, whether it be Jewish passover-dates or Roman consul-lists or Christian Easter-dates: each in its turn, on clay tablet, on papyrus, on stone or on parchment, took the opportunity of noting beside a column of years significant happenings within each year. The format was very circumscribing

[1] *Ibid.*, ii, 9, 20; iii, 1. Cf. iv, 23.   [2] *Ibid.*, ii, 2.
[3] *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, ed. Colgrave and Mynors, xviii.