

CHAPTER I

THE HISTORICAL VALUE OF CONTEMPORARY WELSH LITERATURE

IN the course of the present narrative, an endeavour will be made to show that Wales and the border counties exercised a more formidable and decisive influence than is generally believed, upon the course of the struggle between Lancaster and York. The history of the period has been thickly overgrown with the moss of tradition, romance, and myth, most of which accumulated during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. A great deal of the fiction was clearly invented to inflate family pride ; some was due to a literal interpretation of purely rhetorical passages in the panegyrics of the poets. It is needless to say that such material, except what can be shown to have a foundation of truth, or at least of strong probability, is worthless as historical evidence. Yet, it has held sway for many centuries, and has given rise to considerable confusion. It will be essential to our purpose to rely exclusively upon original documents and contemporary sources of information. Amongst these will be included certain Welsh records which have been hitherto, and are still to a large extent, unexplored fields of historical research. The greater part of this material is in manuscript, scattered broadcast in public and private libraries. Some of it is already in print, but in many different publications, and consequently most inaccessible to the average student.

In so far as events were recorded at all in Wales during the second half of the fifteenth century, that function was

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performed by the poets. Their chief interest, admittedly, is literary and linguistic. Nevertheless, the student of history may reasonably inquire what may be their title to credence, what reliance can be placed upon them, and with what abatements their presentation of persons and events should be accepted as truth.

Let it at once be granted that these men did not profess to write down facts, dry and ungarnished. History would have gained much, and literature lost little, if the bards, instead of writing historical poems, had recorded their information in the form of annals or chronicles. But they were primarily poets, not chroniclers. As poets, they necessarily employ the artifices of their craft. They exaggerate; they invent; they draw upon their armoury of rhetoric. They colour, and frequently distort, facts to suit the exigencies of the occasion, and in the interests of those whose patronage they solicited. Their information is often garbled.

Further, those portions of their writings which have any value for the historian are not poems descriptive of events and actions. They are odes and elegies for the glorification of individuals, and only incidentally admit descriptive narrative. The fabrications of rhetoric, therefore, are not absent. There is little minuteness of detail; rarely any chronology or geography. Genealogies are plentiful, but of family rather than of general interest. There is an amplitude of vague, hazy allusions, which were doubtless perfectly intelligible to that generation; to us they are shades of a vanished past.

Lastly, they are prejudiced, especially against the Saxon. Many of their poems were written under the sting of humiliation, when the wounds of defeat were still open and sore. Invective not infrequently descends to vilification. In this respect the poetry of the period cannot be paralleled at any epoch in the history of the literature of Wales.

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This feature in the poets, however, has its value for the **National prejudices.** historian ; for it reveals the deep chasm which separated the two nations. Its most outspoken exponent was Lewis Glyn Cothi, who could rarely hide his invincible repugnance to the name of Saxon. It detracts considerably from the historical value of his testimony that he was himself a victim of persecution at the hands of English residents in Wales. He tells us that, having made preparations for taking up his abode in Chester, he was unceremoniously expelled from the city, and his belongings looted by the inhabitants. His fiercest attacks were delivered when his feelings were thus embittered by personal affront, or by such a national disaster as that at Edgecote. The same applies, though in a lesser degree, to the lambent sarcasm of Guto'r Glyn. He had occasion to journey through many parts of England, visiting among other places Warwick, Stafford and Coventry. When he reached the north of England, he experienced a very hostile disposition towards his language and country. However, his weapons are not poisoned, though his threats are generally well-directed.

These two are not the only poets that bear witness to the estrangement between the nations. Ieuan Deulwyn, smarting beneath the exclusion of his countrymen from civil rights, implores Sir Richard Herbert "to lock the door of privilege against the Saxon."

Chwi a ellwch â'ch allwydd
Roi clo ar sais rhag cael swydd.

Dafydd Llwyd appeals to Jasper Tudor to bring to an end the days of official intolerance, and warns his countrymen against "putting their faith in the signet of the Saxon." But we are not surprised to find such bitterness in the poet when we know that he was the friend of Griffith Vaughan, who was brutally murdered by Lord Grey of Powys, in 1447. Some of Tudur Penllyn's lines are equally acrid, and were also largely the outcome of personal injury. The poets'

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invective was thus sharpened on a whetstone of disappointment, injustice, oppression, and cruelty ; their anger burned fiercely ; yet the dregs of passion are of little value, for serious history cannot be built on diatribes.

Whatever pretensions to historical verity these poets may have must rest mainly on their close acquaintance with some of the chief politicians of the day. This enabled them to obtain information at first-hand from the actors themselves. This is the most that can be said on behalf of chroniclers in general, few of whom were actual eye-witnesses of the events they describe. The majority can claim no more than that they were contemporary. The Welsh poet, on the other hand, was a welcome guest at the homes of the gentry, whom he visited at regular intervals.

Lewis Glyn Cothi's home was situated in the valley of the Cothi, in Carmarthenshire. Close by lay Newton, the home of his patron, Griffith ap Nicholas, who dominated West Wales in the middle of the century. He was intimate with the Herberts of Raglan, and with the Vaughans of Bredwardine and Tretower. At times we catch glimpses of him in Chester, Flint, Anglesey. His list of patrons, in fact, includes every contemporary Welshman of note. Ieuan Deulwyn, another Carmarthenshire poet, was a native of Kidwelly. He also dedicated several odes to the Herberts. Guto'r Glyn came from the neighbourhood of Llangollen, in the valley of the Dee. He was as ubiquitous as Lewis Glyn Cothi, and not less in demand as a household bard. Dafydd Llwyd and Tudur Penllyn lived in Merionethshire, on terms of friendship with the garrison at Harlech. There are strong grounds for the belief that Robin Ddu, the swarthy bard of Anglesey, met Owen Tudor when the latter withdrew to Wales after his escape from Newgate.

It is to be observed, moreover, that the poets may have obtained access to the chief English politicians. Humphrey, duke of Gloucester, as earl of Pembroke, and for many years

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chief justice either of North Wales or of the South, had occasion to pay several visits to the country. He was an ardent patron of letters. But though there appears to be no evidence in his voluminous correspondence with men of letters that he ever came into close touch with Welsh literary circles, Lewis Glyn Cothi alludes to him in terms of sympathy and admiration. The early promotion of Reginald Pecock, apparently a native of West Wales, was due to the influence and patronage of Humphrey. Griffith ap Nicholas, the patron and neighbour of Lewis Glyn Cothi, together with a large number of other Welshmen, was in the duke's retinue when he appeared at the parliament of Bury, in 1447.

In their writings these poets show abundant traces that they were alive to the march of events. It was an essential part of their business to get information, and turn it to account. It is impossible to avoid the conviction that Lewis Glyn Cothi derived the raw material for his vivid description of the battle of Edgecote directly from some of the Herberts or the Vaughans, or their associates in that murderous fight. In his ode to Thomas ap Roger, who was among the slain, it is not difficult to discern what is intrinsically improbable, or what is palpably the product of the poet's imagination. When the poet asserts that the greatest carnage on that day took place under his hero's standard, we are inclined to ascribe it to a natural anxiety to magnify and applaud. Even the professed historian cannot always avoid the artifices of eloquence; and fifteenth century chroniclers are rarely impartial. But in this ode there are undoubted germs of truth. A basis of fact underlies the amplifications and excesses of rhetoric. The statements that part of the Welsh army cut its way through the ranks of the northerners, that Thomas ap Roger fought against desperate odds with a broken lance, that the combatants amidst the clash and clangour of battle shouted, some for Edward, others for king

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Harry, some for Herbert, others for Warwick, have a note of probability and truth. Facts are hard to hide ; fabrication is not always easy. It is not strange, therefore, that the above description is in many ways substantiated by Hall, the Tudor chronicler. Guto'r Glyn's realistic version of the campaign against Harlech castle by the Herberts in 1468 is also a valuable piece of historical evidence which it would be fastidious to ignore. Briefly, and divested of its trappings, it amounts to this. One division of the attacking army advanced along the coast of North Wales, leaving a trail of devastation and ruin ; another advanced from the south ; Harlech offered but a feeble resistance—" By a Herbert it could be obtained for the asking " ; and the army numbered about nine thousand, an estimate which, as we shall see, is corroborated by Hall, and roughly by the Issue Rolls.

It has always been assumed that William Herbert, earl of Pembroke, was a steady Yorkist. Lewis Glyn Cothi implies the contrary, and further research has proved conclusively that he was correct. The editor of the only edition of the poet failed to appreciate this fact, and consequently became enmeshed in a tangle of contradictions. The same poet observes that the sons of Griffith ap Nicholas were on the side of Lancaster, and William of Worcester agrees with him. We must therefore dismiss as worthless the idle story of the family biographer in the *Cambrian Register*, though that document has been credited by so distinguished an authority as James Gairdiner, and has been the favourite resort of generations of less responsible writers.

One important function of the fifteenth century Welsh poet should not be overlooked. He was an instrument in the hands of the leader of the moment to advertise prospective political movements, sometimes openly, at other times in enigma.

Prophecies there are in plenty, the pardonable effervescence of a seething nationalism. But it would be a

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mistake to regard these futurist proclamations as the forecasts of partisans, destitute of foundation, and unwarranted in fact. In one of his poems Lewis Glyn Cothi, apprehensive for the cause of Margaret and her son Edward, alludes to Jasper Tudor's search for assistance in France and Brittany, his forthcoming return to Wales by sea, and his probable landing at Milford Haven about the Feast of St John. No date is given ; but the facts coincide with the movements of Jasper Tudor during the few months which immediately preceded the battle of Mortimer's Cross. For

Prophecy
and fact. Jasper actually obtained help abroad ; he came by sea ; the battle took place in the first week in February. Now the Feast of St John the Evangelist would be December 27, and the few intervening weeks would enable Jasper to gather his forces and reach Mortimer's Cross, in Herefordshire, by February.

Similarly, there are copious references to the prospective invasion of Henry of Richmond in 1485, which we cannot entirely ignore as vague and unreliable prophecy. It is a curious coincidence that the cherished belief of the medieval Welsh sage, that a Welshman would one day ascend the throne of Britain, found its fulfilment in the person of Henry Tudor.

It has been said—and this is the prevailing modern view—that “ during the civil war there was but one rose, the white rose of York, there was no Lancastrian rose : the red rose of the House of Tudor first appeared on Bosworth Field.” This may be true of England ; it is not true of Wales. The red rose of the Tudors had appeared in Wales long before it blossomed in splendour on Bosworth field. From the very beginning of the war the Tudors made Wales their special sphere of action. Edmund, earl of Richmond, came here early in 1456, and made Pembroke and Tenby his headquarters. On his death the same year, his place was taken by his brother Jasper, earl of Pembroke. From then till 1485 the history of the

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war in Wales is largely a record of the movements and the schemes, the failures and the successes of Jasper.

It is not surprising, therefore, that contemporary Welsh literature should contain frequent allusions to the family device. One or two instances shall suffice. In an ode to Owen Tudor, written soon after the battle of Mortimer's Cross, Robin Ddu, the Anglesey poet, while bewailing his hero's death, transfers his hopes to Jasper, and prophesies "the victory of the red dragon over the dishonoured white."

Draig wen ddibarch yn gwarchae
A draig goch a dyr y cae.

Although in this couplet the play between "red" and "white" is unmistakable, the "dragon" as a substitute for "rose" may not seem convincing. However, the same poet in a poem written during the exile of the Tudors, looks forward hopefully to the time when "red roses will rule in splendour":

Rhos cochion mewn rhwysg uchel.

Guto'r Glyn, in an ode to Roger Kynaston, composed shortly after the return of Edward IV, plays upon the conflict between a "rose of silver" and "a rose of gold." The rose is also a favourite emblem with Dafydd Llwyd, a warm associate of Jasper. The white rose of York, too, had its adherents. Lewis Glyn Cothi, exultant in praise of Sir William Herbert's prowess in the north of England, describes how "he triumphed with white roses":

A oresgynodd â'i ros gwynion.

But as the white rose is acknowledged to have been a device of the Yorkists, it is unnecessary to enlarge on this point.

The poets, moreover, were not ill-informed on events in France, in which hosts of Welshmen took an active share; but their information is largely of local interest only. How they obtained their knowledge is not altogether a matter of conjecture. A constant stream of warriors passed to and fro between the two countries. Scores of French prisoners were at various

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times lodged in the royal castles of North Wales. On the conclusion of the war, although a few like John Edward, who had married a French wife, became subjects of the king of France, the majority returned to their native land with tales of plunder and adventure.

Guto'r Glyn voices the consternation with which the news of Mathew Gough's capture was received in Wales, and urges the collection of a ransom to redeem him. Lewis Glyn Cothi hints at the same warrior's exploit at the battle of Formigny in 1450, when, at the head of his men, he cut his way through the French lines to safety; and we see no reason to reject the same writer's statement that Gough's life on that occasion was saved by Gwilym Gwent. His death on London Bridge, while endeavouring to save the city from Cade's rebels, sent the nation into mourning, a fact which is curiously corroborated by William of Worcester in a quaint Latin couplet¹.

The Anglesey poet already referred to appears to be our earliest authority for the romance of Owen Tudor and Catherine, the widowed queen of Henry V. Robin Ddu was in close touch with the Tudors and the chief families of North Wales. It is possible, probable even, that he got his information from Owen Tudor himself. The version in Stowe, which is the one generally accepted, is substantially the same, but of a later date.

Enough has now been said to show at least that these writers cannot altogether be ignored by the student of the history of the latter half of the fifteenth century. But after all, the supreme importance of the poets lies in another direction.

It is not theirs to record facts. It is theirs to give expression to the debates and the promptings of the nation's soul. And if we are to seek in them an accurate interpretation of popular feeling, the dynastic question as such had no meaning in Wales. Not one of them holds a brief to buttress either

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Lancaster or York. They sing the glory of a Tudor or a Herbert according as each rises to eminence, and bids fair to become a national leader. Nor can it be said that they exposed themselves to a charge of apostasy if their panegyrics thus alternated between the one and the other. They were consistent in their nationalism. To them Herbert and Tudor were nationalists, not party leaders. Lewis Glyn Cothi saw in Edward IV a descendant of Gwladys the Dark, daughter of Llywelyn the Great ; and he appeals to him, "a royal Welshman," to rid them of oppression, and ameliorate the condition of the peasant. Similarly, Henry of Richmond found in Wales enthusiastic support not because he represented the claims of Lancaster, but because he was the grandson of Owen Tudor.

No leader of dazzling pre-eminence had arisen in Wales since Owen Glyndwr. "Those who are awake know that Wales has long since fallen into a deep sleep, and awaits an embaving champion."

Cysgu 'roedd Cymru medd sawl a'i gwyl
Yn hir heb flaenawr fau ragorawl.

These are the words of Lewis Glyn Cothi who knew the nation's pulse better than any of his contemporaries. The wars of Owen Glyndwr had left the country bruised, and shackled by an oppressive penal code. The people were restive, and in the second half of the century became animated by a profound, sustained passion to rid themselves of the incubus of alien officials. They were no longer inspired by false hopes of an independent nationality. That ideal had perished. Yet Wales a nation was as virile a principle as in the days of the last Llywelyn ; and to advocate it was the touchstone of true worth in her leaders. The poets tuned their harps to blazon the nation's name, and to proclaim the chieftain best fitted to deliver them from bondage.

The first of such men was Griffith ap Nicholas. He died about the time that Jasper Tudor came to Wales. In