

**THE ITINERARY THROUGH
WALES, AND THE
DESCRIPTION OF WALES**

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The itinerary through Wales, and the description of Wales by Giraldus Cambrensis

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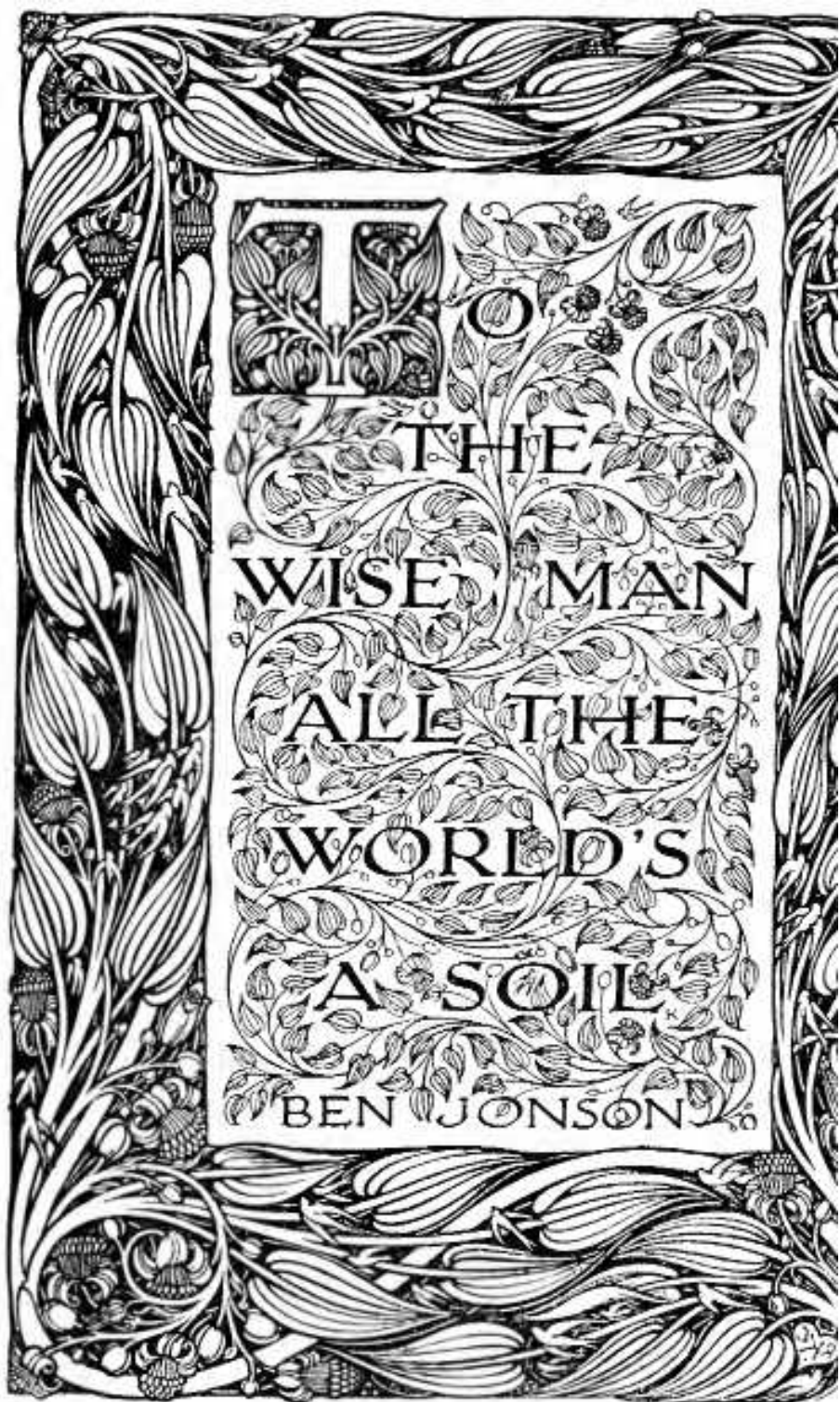
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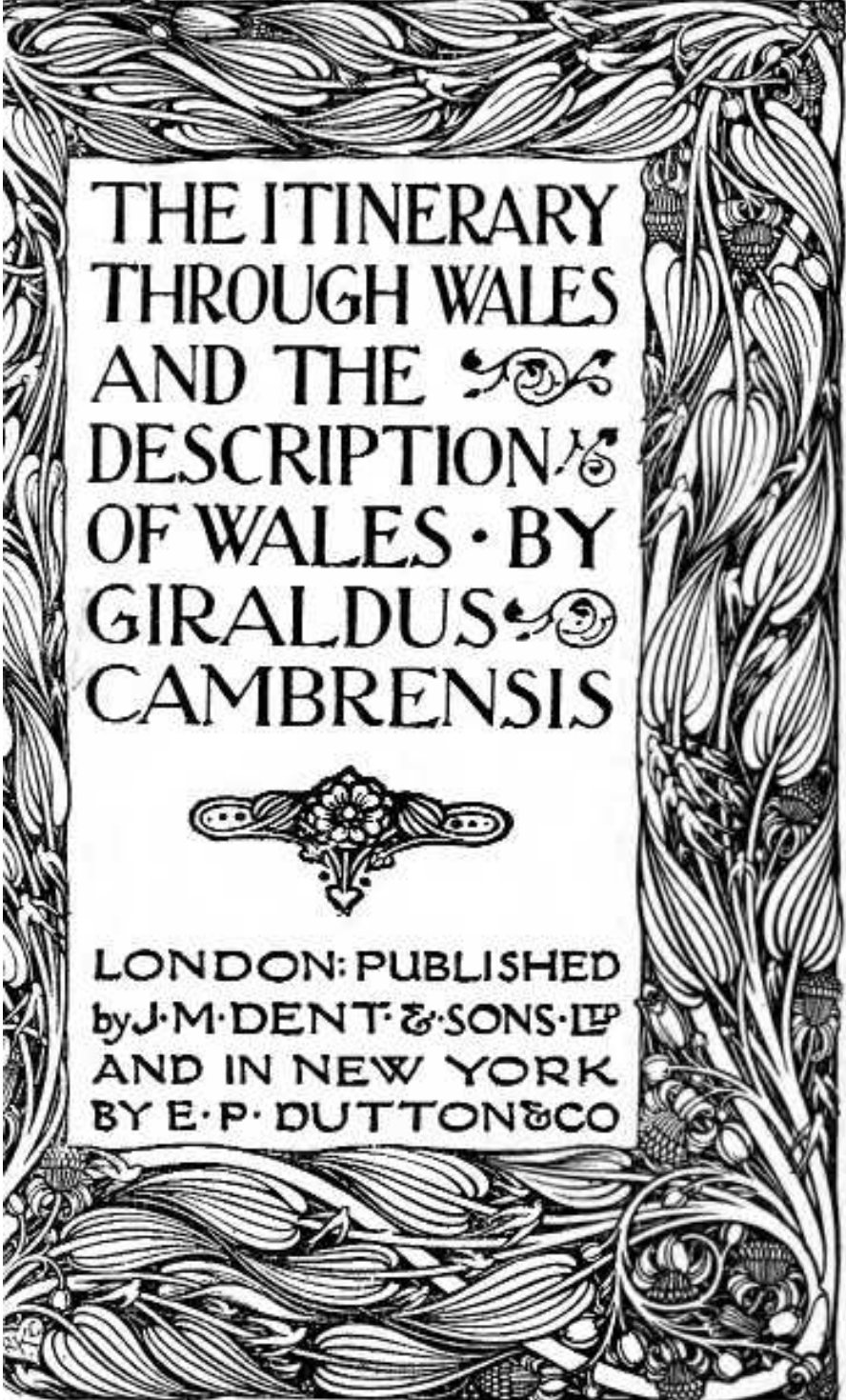
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GIRALDUS CAMBRENSIS

**THE ITINERARY THROUGH
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DESCRIPTION OF WALES**



TO
THE
WISE MAN
ALL THE
WORLD'S
A SOIL
BY BEN JONSON



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THROUGH WALES
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INTRODUCTION

GERALD THE WELSHMAN—Giraldus Cambrensis—was born, probably in 1147, at Manorbier Castle in the county of Pembroke. His father was a Norman noble, William de Barri, who took his name from the little island of Barry off the coast of Glamorgan. His mother, Angharad, was the daughter of Gerald de Windsor¹ by his wife, the famous Princess Nesta, the "Helen of Wales," and the daughter of Rhys ap Tewdwr Mawr, the last independent Prince of South Wales.

Gerald was therefore born to romance and adventure. He was reared in the traditions of the House of Dinevor. He heard the brilliant and pitiful stories of Rhys ap Tewdwr, who, after having lost and won South Wales, died on the stricken field fighting against the Normans, an old man of over fourscore years; and of his gallant son, Prince Rhys, who, after wrenching his patrimony from the invaders, died of a broken heart a few months after his wife, the Princess Gwenllian, had fallen in a skirmish at Kidwelly. No doubt he heard, though he makes but sparing allusion to them, of the loves and adventures of his grandmother, the Princess Nesta, the daughter and sister of a prince, the wife of an adventurer, the concubine of a king, and the paramour of every daring lover—a Welshwoman whose passions embroiled all Wales, and England too, in war, and the mother of heroes—Fitz-Geralds, Fitz-Stephens, and Fitz-Henries, and others—who, regardless of their mother's eccentricity in the choice of their fathers,

¹ It is a somewhat curious coincidence that the island of Barry is now owned by a descendant of Gerald de Windsor's elder brother—the Earl of Plymouth.

united like brothers in the most adventurous undertaking of that age, the Conquest of Ireland.

Though his mother was half Saxon and his father probably fully Norman, Gerald, with a true instinct, described himself as a "Welshman." His frank vanity, so naïve as to be void of offence, his easy acceptance of everything which Providence had bestowed on him, his incorrigible belief that all the world took as much interest in himself and all that appealed to him as he did himself, the readiness with which he adapted himself to all sorts of men and of circumstances, his credulity in matters of faith and his shrewd common sense in things of the world, his wit and lively fancy, his eloquence of tongue and pen, his acute rather than accurate observation, his scholarship elegant rather than profound, are all characteristic of a certain lovable type of South Walian. He was not blind to the defects of his countrymen any more than to others of his contemporaries, but the Welsh he chastised as one who loved them. His praise followed ever close upon the heels of his criticism. There was none of the rancour in his references to Wales which defaces his account of contemporary Ireland. He was acquainted with Welsh, though he does not seem to have preached it, and another archdeacon acted as the interpreter of Archbishop Baldwin's Crusade sermon in Anglesea. But he could appreciate the charm of the *Cynghanedd*, the alliterative assonance which is still the most distinctive feature of Welsh poetry. He cannot conceal his sympathy with the imperishable determination of his countrymen to keep alive the language which is their *differentia* among the nations of the world. It is manifest in the story which he relates at the end of his "Description of Wales." Henry II. asked an old Welshman of Pencader in Carmarthenshire if the Welsh could resist his might. "This nation, O King," was the reply, "may often be weakened and in great part destroyed by the power of yourself and of

others, but many a time, as it deserves, it will rise triumphant. But never will it be destroyed by the wrath of man, unless the wrath of God be added. Nor do I think that any other nation than this of Wales, or any other tongue, whatever may hereafter come to pass, shall on the day of the great reckoning before the Most High Judge, answer for this corner of the earth." Prone to discuss with his "Britannic frankness" the faults of his countrymen, he cannot bear that any one else should do so. In the "Description of Wales" he breaks off in the middle of a most unflattering passage concerning the character of the Welsh people to lecture Gildas for having abused his own countrymen. In the preface to his "Instruction of Princes," he makes a bitter reference to the prejudice of the English Court against everything Welsh—"Can any good thing come from Wales?" His fierce Welshmanship is perhaps responsible for the unsympathetic treatment which he has usually received at the hands of English historians. Even to one of the writers of Dr. Traill's "Social England," Gerald was little more than "a strong and passionate Welshman."

Sometimes it was his pleasure to pose as a citizen of the world. He loved Paris, the centre of learning, where he studied as a youth, and where he lectured in his early manhood. He paid four long visits to Rome. He was Court chaplain to Henry II. He accompanied the king on his expeditions to France, and Prince John to Ireland. He retired, when old age grew upon him, to the scholarly seclusion of Lincoln, far from his native land. He was the friend and companion of princes and kings, of scholars and prelates everywhere—in England, in France, and in Italy. And yet there was no place in the world so dear to him as Manorbier. Who can read his vivid description of the old castle by the sea—its ramparts blown upon by the winds that swept over the Irish Sea, its fishponds, its garden, and its lofty nut trees—without feeling that here, after all,

*

was the home of Gerald de Barri? "As Demetia," he said in his "Itinerary," "with its seven cantreds is the fairest of all the lands of Wales, as Pembroke is the fairest part of Demetia, and this spot the fairest of Pembroke, it follows that Manorbier is the sweetest spot in Wales." He has left us a charming account of his boyhood, playing with his brothers on the sands, they building castles and he cathedrals, he earning the title of "boy bishop" by preaching while they engaged in boyish sport. On his last recorded visit to Wales, a broken man, hunted like a criminal by the king, and deserted by the ingrate canons of St. David's, he retired for a brief respite from strife to the sweet peace of Manorbier. It is not known where he died, but it is permissible to hope that he breathed his last in the old home which he never forgot or ceased to love.

He mentions that the Welsh loved high descent and carried their pedigree about with them. In this respect also Gerald was Welsh to the core. He is never more pleased than when he alludes to his relationship with the Princes of Wales, or the Geraldines, or Cadwallon ap Madoc of Powis. He hints, not obscurely, that the real reason why he was passed over for the Bishopric of St. David's in 1186 was that Henry II. feared his *natio et cognatio*, his nation and his family. He becomes almost dithyrambic in extolling the deeds of his kinsmen in Ireland. "Who are they who penetrated into the fastnesses of the enemy? The Geraldines. Who are they who hold the country in submission? The Geraldines. Who are they whom the foemen dread? The Geraldines. Who are they whom envy would disparage? The Geraldines. Yet fight on, my gallant kinsmen,

"*Felices facti si quid mea carmina possuit.*"

Gerald was satisfied, not only with his birthplace and lineage, but with everything that was his. He makes complacent references to his good looks, which he had