

**WELSH
NATIONALISM
AND HENRY TUDOR**

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WILLIAM GARMON JONES

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By W. GARMON JONES, M.A., Dean of the
Faculty of Arts, University of Wales.

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WELSH NATIONALISM AND HENRY
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By W. GARMON JONES, M.A.,

Dean of the Faculty of Arts, University of Liverpool.

I.

THE forces which enabled the subtle grandson of Owen Tudor to wrest the sceptre from the last of the fierce Plantagenets and to win a kingdom for his house have not received a complete or even an adequate treatment from historians. This may be due to the dreary and melancholy course of events which culminated at Bosworth Field. For the Wars of the Roses are generally represented as a dynastic feud which embroiled the whole nation, or as a protracted faction-fight, animated by no ideals or principles, and productive only of a desolating anarchy. Yet if we turn our eyes beyond the Severn we may discern the profound significance of the struggle for Wales. There the issues are involved with national sentiments and aspirations, and Welsh intervention, in a

¹ Read (in part) before the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion, at 64, Chancery Lane, London. Chairman—W. Llewelyn Williams, Esq., K.C., M.P., the Recorder of Cardiff.

manner often puzzling to the English historian, frequently turns the scales. Because Henry Tudor was a Welshman, relying on Welsh support, and because his cause in Wales elevated the struggle to a national issue, the main interest of the Wars of the Roses, it seems to me, must be sought in Wales.

I propose, in this sketch, merely to indicate some of the forces that welded tribal Wales into a nation, and that created so passionate a devotion to the Tudor throne. But a preliminary enquiry, though it must be summary, is relevant and essential. A careful and competent English historian of the House of Lancaster has drawn a lurid picture of Wales in the fifteenth century; a "poor and barbarous land" with a "ragged and half-naked peasantry" living in squalor on the outskirts of the English walled towns, disarmed and cowed under the shadow of the mighty castles of their conquerors.¹ If such was the condition of the Welsh people, the part they played in the Wars of the Roses is, indeed, inexplicable. But the unanimous voice of contemporary literature tells another story. The vigorous and splendid social life mirrored in countless poems—the chieftains whose tables were loaded with the choicest of foreign fruits, currants, cinnamon and oranges from the south, and the wines of Rochelle, Bordeaux and Gascony, whose walls were hung with the rich tapestry of Arras, and whose dwellings resounded with the music of harps; the splendour of the monasteries, the "gold adorned choir", the crystal windows, the lofty roofs resplendent with the bearings of princes, the light of torches and the burning of incense, the rich tombs with sculptured figures and arms of the dead,—this is not the reflection of a rude and barbaric

¹ Wylie, *History of England under Henry the Fourth* (London, 1884), vol. i, chap. viii.

society. But—to take an obvious test of economic prosperity—there are innumerable proofs that the Welsh could equip, maintain and move armies. The poems clearly demonstrate that they were not, in spite of the ordinances of Henry IV, a disarmed people. The warrior chief, greater than Arthur in his cuirass, whose white hand lays low a host,¹ has often his stores of arms with which he equips his followers. A contemporary *englyn* preserves a vignette of the war band and its lord :

Mae llu yn Rhosyr, mae llyn,—mae eurgylch,
 Mae Farglwydd Llewelyn,
 A gwyr tal yn ei ganlyn,
 Mil a myrdd mewn gwyrdd a gwyn.

[There is a host in Rhosfair, there is drinking, there are golden bells. There is my lord Llewelyn and tall warriors follow him; a thousand, a host in green and white.]

In this civilization literary culture was pre-eminent; the existence of a large class of bards who supported themselves by their craft is, in itself, an indication of the state of society. The literature, too, is no product of barbarism and misery; in no period of Welsh history was there so prolific, so scholarly or so finished an output. It contrasted strangely with the condition of contemporary literature in England, where a deep silence had fallen on the land, the profound and expectant hush before the dawn and the music of the Elizabethan 'singing-birds'. But the Welsh poetry of this century is finished art—a little too self-conscious perhaps—but art of a high order, polished and dignified in elegy, sparkling and tender in the love poem, skilful and epigrammatic in eulogy and, what is more precious, adorned throughout with an abundant imagery and a rich fancy.

¹ Mwy nag Arthur mewn curas,
 Milwr o gryfdwr a gras . . .
 Llaw wen a bair llenwi bedd,
 Llaw a yr llu i orwedd.

Wales, it is true, was rent with anarchy and internecine strife, due to the absence of any centralized administration and aggravated by the 'over-mighty' Marcher-lords incessant in border warfare, but it was a people in arms, inured to fighting and skilled in the arts of war. The energy, military skill and (it must be added) the treachery displayed in tribal feud was soon to be diverted to a larger issue by a cause which appealed to the historic memories and the ancient aspirations of the race.

II.

The outbreak of the Wars of the Roses divided the Welsh for York and Lancaster. It is impossible, on the available data, to comprehend all the influences which determined Welsh support, yet some are manifest throughout the struggle, and of these it is clear that the operation of ties of kindred was not the least important.

Hitherto little attention has been paid to clan relationship in Wales; yet there are indications that considerations of kinship influenced partisanship in no small degree. The ancient Welsh tribal system was based on kindred; the members of a tribe, being descended from a common ancestor, were all akin to one another. This system had been modified by many forces, Norman law, feudalism, and the English conquest. But among a people naturally conservative and tenacious of tradition systems hallowed by custom die hard, and there can be no doubt that there were survivals of purely Welsh tribal forms as late as the mid-fifteenth century. The extent of these survivals of a bygone economy is worthy of close investigation, for were this point definitely decided it would explain much of the Welsh attitude to York and Lancaster. A clan relationship might be established tentatively on a common ancestor at a very remote period:

it is conceivable, for example, that the descendants of Cunedda might have formed defensive and offensive alliances for many centuries after his death. Precisely how far this principle operated in later times is not known. There might, too, be ties other than those of common descent, such as alliances by marriage between powerful members of two tribes. Of course it is obvious that such clan alliances did not prevent internecine strife—the *History of the Gwydir Family* contains abundant proof of this—but there does not seem to be any evidence that this ever expanded into tribal conflict.

The influence of kinship in determining the groupings of the Welsh for the Red Rose and White is clear. I select two instances out of many. Sir William Herbert, afterwards Earl of Pembroke, was a staunch Yorkist, and under his influence all Siluria became Yorkist. This was undoubtedly due to the vast ramifications of his family in that country where every chieftain of importance was a descendant of Sir David Gam, the grandfather of Sir William Herbert. The lord of Herast, Thomas ap Rhosser, a second son of Sir Roger Vaughan, the son-in-law of David Gam, was beheaded as a Yorkist partisan at Banbury. He had two brothers, both of whom were powerful chiefs in Siluria and both were Yorkists. Sir Thomas Vaughan of Tretower, the son of one of these brothers, served Edward IV in eighteen engagements; his brother, Watkin Vaughan of Talgarth, was a captain under the Duke of York and was rewarded for his services by the office of constable of Carmarthen. William Vaughan, another great-grandson of Sir David Gam, was appointed constable of Aberystwyth Castle and mayor of the town in the reign of Edward IV. All the members of the various branches of Sir David Gam's family seemed to have followed Sir William Herbert, who represented the

eldest line, and adhered to the White Rose.¹ Considerations of kindred were as powerful among the Lancastrian adherents of North Wales. The wild country of Nantconway was held for the Lancastrians until 1468 by Jevan ap Robert ap Meredydd and Dafydd ap Siencyn.² Jevan ap Robert was undoubtedly a kinsman of the Tudors and followed their lead. Dafydd ap Siencyn's attitude seems also explicable on the same grounds. The famous outlaw of Carreg y Walch, was perhaps the most romantic figure of his age :

Thy castle the depth of the forest,
Thy towers are the oaks of the vale,
Stag of the stags of Nant Conway,

The jewel of all the handsome,
The Butterfly of all the gallants.

The splendid eulogy which celebrates his deeds significantly emphasizes his kinship with the Tudors :—

Peacock from the battle of Pembroke,
Tall kinsman to Harry thou,
The word has been given thee for ever,
Earl Richmond has given it forth,
Sprung from the best of ancestors—
From Rhys Gethin, an Elphin art thou . . .
Thou art kind to the Stags; thou art kinsman
To the Earl. A' conqueror art thou.³
The sword of the Earls⁴ thou art also:
A monarch art thou in our land.
In quiet thou holdest all Gwynedd
Kinsmen eight score are about thee.⁵

¹ See poems addressed to various members of this family in *The Works of Lewis Glyn Cothi* (Oxford, 1837) Dos. I.

² *History of the Gwydir Family* (ed. 1878), pp. 54, 75; Rymer, *Foedera*, xi, pp. 444-446; Williams, *Ancient and Modern Denbigh*, p. 85; Pennant, *Tours in Wales* (ed. Rhys), vol. ii, p. 157.

³ "Car yr iarth, conewerwr wyd".

⁴ Henry, Earl of Richmond, and Jasper Tudor, Earl of Pembroke.

⁵ For a text of the poem, see *Y Brython*, vol. iii, p. 99. A translation by J. Glyn Davies, from which the above extracts are taken, appeared in *The Nationalist*, vol. i, no. 4.