

# GEORGE BORROW

THE WELSH  
AND THEIR  
LITERATURE

George Borrow

**The Welsh and Their Literature**

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# George Borrow

## The Welsh and Their Literature / from The London Quarterly Review, January 1861, American Edition

Art. II. —*The Sleeping Bard; or Visions of the World, Death, and Hell.* By Elis Wyn. Translated from the Cambrian British by George Borrow. London, 1860.

The Welsh style themselves Cymry or Cumry, a word which, in their language, means a number of people associated together.<sup>1</sup> They were the second mass of population which moved from Asia into Europe. They followed and pushed forward the Gael or Gauls; were themselves impelled onward by the Slovaks or Sclavonians, who were themselves hunted, goaded, and pestered by a wild, waspish race of people, whom, for want of a better name, we will call Tatars or Tartars. The Cymry have left their name behind them in various regions far eastward of the one where they now sojourn. The most easterly countries which still bear their name, or modifications thereof, are Cambia, 'which is two dayes journey from the head of the great river Bruapo,' and the Cryme or Crimea. In those parts, and 'where Constantinople now is,' they tarried a considerable time, and increased and multiplied marvellously: and it was whilst tarrying in those regions, which they called collectively Gwlad yr Haf, or the summer country, that an extraordinary man was born amongst them, who was called by Greeks and Romans, hundreds of years after his death, Hesus, but whom the Cymry called, and still do call, Hu or Hee, with the surname of Cadarn, or the Mighty. This Hu or Hesus taught his countrymen the use of the plough, and to a certain extent civilized them. Finding eventually that the summer country was becoming over-populated, he placed himself at the head of a vast multitude and set off towards the west. Hu and his people fought or negotiated their way through various countries possessed by the Gael, till they came to the shore of the sea which separates the great isle of the west from the continent. Hearing that it was only thinly peopled they determined to pass over to it; and put their determination into execution, crossing 'the hazy sea,' at present termed the German Ocean, in boats made of wicker work and skins, similar to but larger than the coracles which the Cymry always carried with them in their long expeditions.

This great island was called Alban, Albyn, or Albion. Alban is a Gaelic or Gaulic word, signifying properly a hill-region. It is to be found under various modifications in different parts of the world, but only where the Gaulic race have at some time sojourned. The word Afghan is merely a modification of Alban, or Alpan; so is Armenia; so is Alp; so is of course Albania. The term was given to the island simply because the cliffs which fronted the continent, where the sea between the two lands was narrowest, were very high and towering. The island at the time of the arrival of the Cymry had, as has already been intimated, a scanty population. This population consisted of Gael or Gauls, a people of cognate race to the Cymry, and speaking a language much the same as theirs, differing from it, however, in some respects. Hu and his people took possession of the best parts of the island, either driving the few Gaels to other districts or admitting them to their confederacy. As the country was in a very wild state, much overgrown with forests in which bears and wolves wandered, and abounding with deep stagnant pools, which were the haunts of the avanc or crocodile, Hu forthwith set about clearing it of some of its horrors, and making it more fit to be the abiding place of civilized beings. He made his people cut down woods and forests, and destroy, as far as was possible, wild beasts and crocodiles. He himself went to a gloomy pool, the haunt of the king of the efync, baited a huge hook attached to a cable, filing it into the pool, and when the monster

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<sup>1</sup> It is but right to state that the learned are divided with respect to the meaning of 'Cumro,' and that many believe it to denote *an original inhabitant*.

had gorged the snare drew him out by means of certain gigantic oxen, <sup>2</sup> which he had tamed to the plough, and burnt his horrid, wet, scaly carcass on a fire. He then caused enclosures to be made, fields to be ploughed and sown, pleasant wooden houses to be built, bees to be sheltered and encouraged, and schools to be erected where song and music were taught. O, a truly great man was Hu Gadarn! though a warrior, he preferred the sickle and pruning-hook to the sword, and the sound of the song and lute to the hoarse blast of the buffalo's horn: —

The mighty Hu with mead would pay  
The bard for his melodious lay;  
The Emperor of land and sea  
And of all livings things was he. <sup>3</sup>

For many years after the death of Hu the Cymry retrograded instead of advancing in civilization; they ceased to be a united people; plunder and devastation were of daily occurrence among them; every one did as he pleased, as far as in his power lay; there was no law, but the law of the strongest; and no justice, save that which was obtained from clemency and courtesy. At length one Prydain arose, who, either from ambition or a nobler motive, determined to introduce a system of government amongst them. By strength of arm and character he induced the Cymry of the lower country to acknowledge him for their head, and to obey certain laws which he enacted for the regulation of conduct. But neither his sovereignty nor his laws were regarded by the Cymry of the hilly regions. Prydain was the first king amongst the Cymry; and from his time the island was called Britain, which is a modification of his name, and the inhabitants Britons. The independent Cymry, however, disdained to call themselves or their districts after him, but still styled themselves Cymry, and their districts Cumrie-land and Cumberland; whilst the Gael of the North, who never submitted to his sway, and who knew little about him, still called themselves Gael, and their country Caledon and Alban.

Various kings succeeded Prydain, during whose reigns the Britons continued in much the same state as that in which he had left them; on the coming of one Dyfnwal Moelmud, however, to the throne, a mighty improvement was effected in their condition. This prince was the great lawgiver of the Britons, and the greatest benefactor which the race had known since the days of Hu Gadarn. Tradition differs as to his exact origin, but there is ground for believing that he was the chief of a Cornish tribe, and that he was elected to the throne on account of his wisdom and virtue. He gave a regular system of laws and a constitution to the kingdom, and appointed magistrates in every place, whose duty it was to administer justice without respect of persons in all disputes, and whenever the law had been violated. This great and good man is believed to have lived about 400 years before the Christian era.

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<sup>2</sup> Yehen banog: humped or bunched oxen, probably buffaloes. Banog is derived from ban – a prominence, protuberance, or peak.

<sup>3</sup> Above we have given what we believe to be a plain and fair history of Hu Gadarn; but it is necessary to state, that after his death he was deified, and was confounded with the Creator, the vivifying power and the sun, and mixed up with all kinds of myths and legends. Many of the professedly Christian Welsh bards when speaking of the Deity have called Him Hu, and ascribed to the Creator the actions of the creature. Their doing so, however, can cause us but little surprise when we reflect that the bards down to a very late period cherished a great many druidical and heathen notions, and frequently comported themselves in a manner more becoming heathens than Christian men. Of the confounding of what is heavenly with what is earthly we have a remarkable instance in the ode of Iolo Goch to the ploughman, four lines of which, slightly modified, we have given above. In that ode the ploughman is confounded with the Eternal, and the plough with the rainbow: —‘The Mighty Hu who reigns for ever, Of mead and song to men the giver, The emperor of land and sea And of all things which living be, Did hold a plough with his good hand, Soon as the deluge left the land, To show to men, both strong and weak, The haughty hearted and the meek, There is no trade the heaven below So noble as to guide the plough.’ To the Deity under the name of Hu there are some lines by one Rhys, a Welsh bard of the time of Queen Elizabeth, though they are perhaps more applicable to the Universal Pan or Nature than to the God of the Christians: —‘If with small things we Hu compare, No smaller thing than Hu is there, Yet greatest of the great is He, Our Lord, our God of Mystery; How swift he moves! a lucid ray, A sunbeam wafts him on his way; He’s great on land, and great on ocean, Of one more great I have no notion; I dread lest I should underrate This being, infinitely great.’

After the Cymric or British race had been established in the island about 1300 years, they were invaded by the Romans, under Julius Cæsar. The king, who at that time ruled in Britain, was called Caswallon; he was a great warrior and much beloved by his subjects. In him and his Britons the Romans found their match and more, for after a month's hard fighting and skirmishing, they were compelled to betake themselves to Gaul, the country from which they had come.

Mighty was the triumph in Britain, says an old chronicler, on the retreat of the redoubted foe; and Caswallon gave a grand festival at Caer Lud, or London, which was reckoned in after times one of the three grand festivals of Britain. A grand festival indeed it must have been, if, as an ancient bard says,

‘Full twenty thousand beeves and deer  
Were slain to find the guests with cheer.’

Britain was not subdued by the Romans till the time of Claudius Cæsar. When conquered it was still permitted to possess a king of its own, on condition that he should acknowledge the authority of Rome, and pay tribute to her. The first king in the world to confess the faith of Christ was a British king, tributary to Rome. This king, whose name was Lles ap Coel, made his confession as early as the year 160. The Christian faith is supposed by some to have been first preached in Britain by Joseph of Arimathea; by others, by St. Paul himself. After remaining several centuries under the sway of Rome, the Britons again became independent, the Roman legions being withdrawn from the island for the defence of their own country, threatened by barbarian hordes. They did not, however, enjoy their independence long; a ferocious race, of mysterious origin, whom they called Gwyddelian Fichti, invaded them, and filled their country with horror and devastation. Unable to offer any effectual opposition to these invaders, they called to their assistance, from the neighbourhood of the mouth of the Elbe, the Saxons or *men of the knives*, a bold and adventurous, but treacherous and bloody people, who at first fought stoutly for them, but soon turned against them, and eventually all but extirpated them from Southern Britain: —

‘A serpent that coils,  
And with fury boils,  
From Germany coming with arm'd wings spread,  
Shall subdue and enthrall  
The broad Britain all  
From the Lochlin ocean to Severn's bed;

And British men  
Shall be captives then  
To strangers from Saxonia's strand;  
They shall praise their God, and hold  
Their language, as of old,  
But except wild Wales they shall lose their land.’<sup>4</sup>

*Taliesin.*

Yes; the Cymric or British race were dispossessed of Britain with the exception of that part which they still emphatically call Cumrie, but which by other people is called Wales. There they remained independent for a long time, governed by their own princes; and there, though now under the sway of England, they still preserve their venerable language, the oldest in the world, with perhaps

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<sup>4</sup> The poetical translations in this notice are taken from Borrow's 'Songs of Europe.'

the exception of the Gaulic or Irish, with which it is closely connected. Wales is not a Cymric but a Saxon or Teutonic word, bestowed on the land of the Cymry by the seed of Hengist. Like the Gaelic word Alban, it means a hilly or mountainous region, and is connected with wall, wold, and wood. The Germans, from very early times, have called the Cymry Welsh or Waldenses, and the country where they happened to be, Welschland. They still apply to Italy the name of Welschland, a name bestowed upon it by their ancestors, because it was originally principally peopled by the Cymry, whom the Germans called Welsh from the circumstance of their inhabiting some mountainous or forest country in the far East, when they first came in contact with them.

We now proceed to give some account of the literature of the Cymry. We commence with their poetry, and from a very early period, quoting from a Cymric Triad: – ‘These are the three artificers of poetry and record amongst the nation of the Cymry: Gwyddon Ganhebon, who first in the world invented vocal song; and Hu the Mighty, who first invented the means of recording and preserving vocal song; and Tydan, the father of the muse, who first gave rules to vocal song and a system to recording. From what these three men effected Bards and Bardism were derived; the dignities and customs pertaining to which were arranged systematically by the three original bards, Plenydd, Alon, and Gwbon.’ Three ranks or orders constituted what was called barddas, or bardism; that of bard or poet, that of ovydd or philosopher, and that of druid or instructor. The motto of this institution was – ‘Y Gwir yn erbyn y byd,’ or The Truth against the world; from which it would appear that bardism was instituted for the purpose of propagating truth. Bardism, or as it is generally though improperly styled, druidism, was the fount of instruction, moral and religious, in Britain and in Gaul. The vehicle by which instruction, or, as it was probably termed, truth, was propagated, was poetry. The bard wrought the philosophy of the ovydd into song, and the druid or instructor, who was also minister of such religion as the Celts and Cymry possessed, whatever that was, communicated to his pupils the result of the labours of the bard and ovydd. The Druidical verses then probably constituted the most ancient poetry of Britain. These verses were communicated orally, and were never written down whilst bardism or druidism lasted, though the bards and druids at a very early period were acquainted with the use of letters. Whether any genuine bardic poetry has been preserved, it is impossible to say; it is the opinion, however, of Cymric scholars of reputation, that certain ancient strains which the Welsh possess, which are composed in a measure called Englyn milwr, are either druidical strains or imitations of such. Each of these compositions is in three lines; the entire pith however of the triplet, generally consisting of a moral adage or a piece of wholesome advice, lies in the third line, the two first being composed of trivial and unconnected expressions. Many of these stanzas are called the stanzas of ‘The Mountain Snow,’ from the circumstance of their commencing with ‘Eiry Mynydd,’ which has that signification. The three lines rhyme together at their terminations; and a species of alliteration is observable throughout. A word or two here on Cymric rhyme and measures.

In Welsh poetry rhyme is found in a twofold shape: there is alliteration, that is rhyme produced by the same letters following each other at certain distances in the body of the line, then there is the common rhyme, produced by two or more lines terminating with the same letters. In the older Welsh poetry, by which we mean that composed before the termination of the first millennium, both rhyme and alliteration are employed, but in a less remarkable manner than in the bardic effusions of comparatively modern times. The extent to which the bards of the middle ages, and those of one or two subsequent centuries, carried rhyme and alliteration seems marvellous to the English versifier. We English think we have accomplished a great feat in rhyme when we have made three lines consonant in their terminations; but Dafydd Benfras, or David of the Thick Head, would make fifty lines rhyme together, and not think that he had accomplished anything remarkable in rhyming either. Our English alliterative triumph is the following line, composed by a young lady in the year 1800, on the occasion of a gentleman of the name of Lee planting a lane with lilacs: —

‘Let lovely lilacs line Lee’s lonely lane!’



in which not only every word, but every syllable commences with the same letter —/.

But what is this English alliterative triumph of the young lady compared with the Welsh alliterative triumph of Dafydd Nanmawr, who wrote a poem of twelve lines, every syllable of which commences with the letter g, with the exception of the last, which begins with n?

The earliest Cymric or British metre seems to have been a trian or triplet, in each line of which there were in general six syllables. The bards of the sixth, seventh, and several succeeding centuries used this metre, and likewise others, invented by themselves, in which the lines are of various length. There was no regular system of prosody till the year 1120, when one was established under the auspices of Gruffydd ap Cynan, prince of Gwynedd. This Ap Cynan, who, though of Welsh origin, was born in Dublin, and educated at the Danish Irish court, was passionately fond of poetry, and was not only well acquainted with that of the British bards, but with the strains of the Icelandic skalds and Irish fileas. Shortly after his accession to the throne of Gwynedd, of which he was the rightful heir, he proclaimed an eisteddfod, or poetical sessions. At this eisteddfod, which was numerously attended by poets of various nations, a system of prosody was drawn up by competent persons, at his instigation, for the use of the Welsh, and established by his authority. This system, in which Cymric, Icelandic, and Irish forms of verse are blended and amalgamated, has with a few unimportant variations maintained its ground to the present time. It contains three primary measures, termed respectively, englyn, cywydd, and awdl. Of the englyn, there are five kinds; of the cywydd, four; and of the awdl, fifteen. Each particular species of englyn, cywydd, and awdl has its appropriate name, which it is needless to give here. These three primary metres, with their modifications, make together twenty-four measures, which embrace the whole system of Welsh versification, in which, as somebody has observed, each line, word, and letter, are so harmonized by consonancy, chained so accurately, woven so closely and correctly, that it is impossible to extract one word or even letter without causing a hideous gap. Whoever has ventured to compose out of these measures, since the time of their establishment, has been considered by the Welsh scholar as unworthy of the name of poet.

The earliest recorded poet of the Cymry, after the days of Gwyddon Ganhebon and the other personages mentioned with him in the triad, is Merddin, Beirdd Emrys Wledig, or Merddin, Bard of Prince Emrys. He flourished about the middle of the fifth century, the period when the Saxons arrived in Britain, under the command of Hengist and Horsa. Besides poetry he was skilled in mathematics, and is said by the Welsh to have been the architect of Stonehenge. He has been surnamed Ambrosius, which is the Latin modification of the name of his patron Emrys. He is the Merddin, or Merlin, who has had to father so many of the prophecies which since his death have been produced. None of his poems are extant.

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