

Too Many Castles and Too Few Kings

The Death of Llywelyn the Last

An Essay Prepared For

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Introduction

The People of Land and Song, Reshaped

The destinies of two resilient and ancient Celtic people groups, the Scots and the Welsh, were dramatically altered, not by their own heroes, heroines or villains, but rather externally, by England, by way of France. The House of Anjou, a medieval royal dynasty little known outside of the circles of historians and scholars would issue the instrument of their troubles. This French House begat Edward the First, the Plantagenet King of England who, by brutality and cunning craftiness, defeated both William Wallace, the fabled champion of the Scots and succorer of Robert the Bruce, and Llywelyn ap Gruffudd, the opportunistic patriot and last ruler of an independent North Wales.

This essay focuses on the latter, for works exploring the impact of the Edwardian Administration's encroaches and injuries inflicted upon Alba are plentiful (in Hollywood, mainstream articles, prose and academia) while the permanent changes suffered by Cymru is given less spotlight, reflection and study. In fact, a proper treatment of Llywelyn ap Gruffudd's life written in English didn't appear until the 1990s when the late Jenkyn Beverly Smith (deceased 2024) published *Llywelyn ap Gruffudd: Prince of Wales*. A Welsh Medieval expert who made great contributions to the Board of Celtic Studies and was the Assistant Keeper of the Department of Manuscripts and Records at the National Library of Wales in Aberystwyth, Smith's scholarly work reads more like a fast paced novel than an academic prose. This is by necessity as the book's subject lived a life of intrigue, failure and fame at a remarkable and transitory time in Welsh history. Of the hero, Smith writes:

Llywelyn ap Gruffudd was the first prince in the history of Wales to secure the king of England's recognition of a title which implicitly proclaimed the unity of a large part of the country under the lordship of a single ruler, and securing Henry's acknowledgement that an extensive dominion was now vested in one person was a considerable achievement.¹

Before he became Llywelyn the Last, he was Llywelyn *the First*, a meteoric rise before his woeful fall that reshaped the *People of Land, Lineage and Legend*, sadistically, with their very land, lineage and legend. This essay summarizes the rise of the Prince of Wales, and the condition of Wales at the time of the Edwardian campaigns, then gives overview of key consequences of his passing. The examples demonstrate how that Edward, having a pension for

¹ Jenkyn Beverly Smith, *Llywelyn Ap Gruffudd, Prince of Wales*, Kindle ed. (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2014), p. 26

punishment and revenge, 'hit below the belt' on categories deeply connected to Welsh Identity and dramatically transformed the very physical and aesthetic landscape through a capacious castle construction campaign, and egregiously mocked Welsh legends and lineage.

The Three Imperatives - The Rise of Llewelyn

The ancient Britons (who in the process of time became the Welsh) had royal houses and dynasties that trace to (or before) the time of Christ. And, although they have had legendary rulers who, in a military context were defenders of the People collectively (usually given the title of *Wledig*) or island as a whole, the prevailing political structure was de-centralized, local and tribal. Kingdoms were divided, chieftains warred, and rights of territorial inheritance often resulted in a fractured people perpetually defending themselves against external enemies from without, and divisive struggles from within. This changed in the medieval era, beginning with the reign of Llywelyn's grandfather (also called Llywelyn). Beverly writes:

The nation's sense of identity may perhaps be traced to an early period in its history, but the idea of a single political structure embracing the various lands held under Welsh lordship was relatively new. Signs of an aspiration for political coherence may be discerned a little earlier, but the objective came to be a practical proposition only when Llywelyn ap Iorwerth, in the early years of the thirteenth century, was able to bring the princes of Wales together in a military alliance which gave birth to a form of political unity under his lordship.²

The unity wrought by the two Llywelyn's in 13th century Wales was unimaginable two centuries earlier. The invasions in 11th century saw the south of Wales largely held captive to, and under the thumb of the Norman Fitzhamons following the death of Iestyn Gwrgan, the last ruler of Morgannwg, around 1093. The Midlands and borderlands between what are today England and Wales were ruled by the Marcher Lords, Norman (and later English) placed 'marquis' who, over a span of two centuries held territories and influence as far as the southwest horn of Wales. Local rulers were often under the employ or manipulated by the Marcher Lords, creating dynamics of "Welsh fighting the Welsh" and legal 'grey areas' that would, in time swell and erupt into material problems for Llywelyn the Last. But not so North Wales. The northern kingdom of Gwynedd was more effectual in fighting off the conquest. And although in frequent conflict (internally and externally), a true sense of coalescence of Welsh law, religion and culture was pure, intact and thriving in Gwynedd. Historian John Edward Lloyd,

² Jenkyn Beverly Smith, *Llywelyn Ap Gruffudd, Prince of Wales*, Kindle ed. (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2014), p. 26

who was Professor of History at University College of North Wales in the early twentieth century, wrote a two volume comprehensive history of Wales. Of the buildup to Llywelyn ap Gruffudd's reign, he writes:

At the beginning of the twelfth century the struggle had been fought out and its broad issues decided, however much it might rest with later generations to settle matters of detail; North Wales, it was decreed was to retain substantially its Welsh rulers and its independence, while the most of what was best worth having in the South was to fall into the hands of the invader.³

This was the reality into which Llywelyn was born, and the concerns of his House were focused on 'settling matters of detail'. For although the North was not annexed, it was only nominally independent and in constant threat of English domination, or absorption. The rights to reign and rule were fought with the letter (where territorial claims were made based upon legal, or theological grounds) and by the sword. Beverley describes the core drivers of Llywelyn's desire to serve as Prince and protector of Wales:

Three features may be recognized: a memory of a royal lineage which could be traced back to the Trojan origins of the nation itself; a sense of territory; and a grasp of the legitimate and inherent nature of the status which the lineage maintained upon the patrimonial territory.⁴

Whether an act of overreach, duty or hubris, Llywelyn ap Gruffudd bent his knee to the King of England upon condition that the King of England (at the time Henry II) recognized Llywelyn's title and position as the singular Prince of Wales. The surface level notion was that the fealty to the English Crown would extend to the Prince of Wales only and, in turn, the rulers of the local Welsh kingdoms, such as Powys and Deheubarth, would be subordinate to Llywelyn alone, thus preserving their lineage, kingdom and territorial claims. This strategy did create short eras of peace, but could also be conceived as an opportunistic maneuver for power by Gwynedd. Beverley observes:

The compulsions which brought Llywelyn ap Iorwerth and Llywelyn ap Gruffudd, each in turn in their years of supremacy, to seek the crown's recognition of the

³ John Edward Lloyd, *A History of Wales From The Earliest Times to The Edwardian Conquest*, Volume 2, (London : Longmans, Gren, and Co., 1912), p. 40

⁴ Jenkyn Beverly Smith, *Llywelyn Ap Gruffudd, Prince of Wales*, Kindle ed. (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2014), p. 29

authority which they exercised in Wales may not be altogether easy to comprehend.⁵

Put into informal conversational prose for illustration, Llywelyn either swore fealty to Henry to two potential ends :

“I will be bow to you, but leave my friends alone and I will rule them as you direct.” Or

“I will bow down to you and you will empower me to expand my power over my friends.”

Scholars debate which of these (or a shade of grey betwixt and between) motivated Llywelyn, but peace ensued, for a time. Llywelyn was the titular Prince of Wales from 1258 to his death in 1282.

The Thorn in the Flesh, Edward I and Wales

Tenuous as it was, Llywelyn had wrought peace.

Enter Edward, son of King Henry the Second. Historian Michael Prestiwch, speaking at a conference on the impact of Edwardian Castles in Wales, records :

Edward's involvement in Wales began in 1254, when the grant made to him at the time of his marriage to Eleanor of Castile included t h e earldom of Chester. With this came the Four Cantrefs (Perfeddwlad), the Lands between the rivers Dee and Conwy. Harsh rule by Edward's officials, notably Geoffrey de Langley, provoked rebellion in 1256. The rising brought Llywelyn ap Gruffudd, prince of Gwynedd, immense success not only in the north, but also in mid- and south Wales. Edward's forces were defeated in the Tywi valley in 1257. A royal expedition in the same year reached Deganwy, but was forced to withdraw, faced by famine and harassed by the Welsh. Edward was present in the army, and must have learned a hard lesson from the campaign.⁶

⁵Jenkyn Beverly Smith, *Llywelyn Ap Gruffudd, Prince of Wales*, Kindle ed. (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2014), p. 49

⁶Michael Prestiwch Kenyon, *The Impact Of Edwardian Castles In Wales: The Proceedings Of A Conference Held At Bangor University, 7-9 September 2007* edited by John R Kenyon and Diane Williams (Oxford, Oxbow Books, 2010) p. 1

As Henry II passed away and Edward I became king, his struggles with the Welsh threatened to define his reign. The homage paid his father never came from Llywelyn, whose power expanded, along with the internal struggles thereof. At times Edward was the adjudicator of the rights of inheritance so precious to Llywelyn, at other times he found himself quelling uprisings and rebellions. Edward also suffered bitter defeats by the Welsh under Llewelyn's control. In 1256 the Middle Country, finding that Edward desired to expand the Shire system into Wales, revolted. J. Lloyd teaches that Llywelyn was suited to the task, routing the English and enjoying thorough victories as far as the Severn River in the South and Kidwelly in the Southwest. The Northern Prince of Wales, whose authority and title had come from the father, was handily thwarting the son.⁷

By 1277, after tumult and undulations that at various times had Edward attending Llywelyn's wedding, converting Llewelyn's own brother to his cause, then in turn losing him yet again. Through matches of letters and wit the tension strained, and Edward purposed to put down the Welsh rebellion.

The campaign was conducted in two parts, the first a military action meant to quell but, growing weary of fighting the indomitable Welsh, and growing in debt, the second campaign converted into the brutal campaign of conquest. After protracted fighting, and losses by both the English and Welsh, Llywelyn himself was slain, under mysterious and circumstances, becoming the death rattle for Welsh independence. Of his dubious death in 1282, Beverly writes :

We may never know exactly what occurred on the day the prince of Wales died: was it a sudden, even accidental, happening, or the result of a long-conceived plot; was he a lone fugitive or a prince who fell with his men in fierce combat?⁸

Edward would go on to hunt down and execute Dafydd in 1283, bringing an end to the great conflict with Gwynedd.

A Castle for Every Cantref – The Reshaping of the Land

Castles. The response to the passing of Llywelyn ap Gruffudd was the completion or rapid construction of monumental castles changing the skyline of North Wales, forever.

⁷ John Edward Lloyd, *A History of Wales From The Earliest Times to The Edwardian Conquest*, Volume 2, (London : Longmans, Green, and Co., 1912), pg. 719-720

⁸ Jenkyn Beverly Smith, *Llywelyn Ap Gruffudd, Prince of Wales*, Kindle ed. (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2014), pp. 917-918

According to John Edward Lloyd, the first Norman Castle built in Wales was constructed in 1093 in Ceredigion, enabling the invaders to establish a powerful strategic position near the sea.⁹ Although the precedent was here set for a castle to pop up as quickly as possible once territory was taken, there was no precedent for the magnitude and indeed the intended purpose of Edward's fortresses. The first Norman castle was composed of wood and earth, Edward's first castle in North Wales, Rhuddlan (built concurrently with Flint Castle) was a stonework structure of massive size, laid out concentrically and using a 'diamond style' layout with gatehouses at the corners, the inner court circumferenced by high walls and turrets. This first (of several) Castles began construction during the campaigns of 1277, but was completed in 1282, followed by several more landscape changing Castles to include; Caernarfon (1283), Conwy (1283), Denbigh (1283) and Harlech (1283).

These castles, placed upon the sacred territories Llywelyn obsessively protected, were not built for defense, rather for colonization, declarations of power, and a stunningly physical announcement of a change of order. Sir Robert Rees Davies, author of *The Age of Conquest, Wales 1063-1415* exclaims that *Edward had meant to savor his victory in Wales, 1282-3 to the full.*¹⁰ Meant to punctuate his victory, and ensure his dominance, *Edward placed his faith, above all, in castle building as the prime instrument to contain thwart the Welsh.*¹¹ If Rhuddlan and Flint were menacing, the post-Llywelyn constructions were spectacular, menacing and expensive. R.R Davies teaches that Edward spared no expense for his rapid building campaign :

Resources were commandeered from every part of Edward's realm: lead from the Isle of Man; iron and steel from Newcastle-under-Lyme; rope from Lincolnshire; timber from Liverpool. Manpower was assembled with a speed and on a scale which were truly remarkable: already in 1283 and 1284 as many as 4,000 workmen-diggers, carpenters, masons, carters, and quarrymen-drawn from almost every county of England were working at Harlech, Caernarfon, and Conway alone. The best master-craftsmen that Edward I could find were hired to supervise and coordinate the king's works in Wales.¹²

The Welsh Princes were no strangers to castles dating back to the Roman era. Indeed, the sophisticated hilltop ring-fortresses of the ancient Silures of South Wales have ramparts and earthworks visible to the public to this day. There was a vengeful element, however, to

⁹ Jenkyn Beverly Smith, *Llywelyn Ap Gruffudd, Prince of Wales*, Kindle ed. (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2014), p. 401

¹⁰ Robert Rees Davies, *The Age of Conquest Wales 1063-1415*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 355

¹¹ Ibid, p. 366

¹² Ibid p. 358

Edward's castles both in location, volume and purpose. whose own relatives had joined Llywelyn on Holy Crusades, who had afore adjudicated legal matters with grace and logic and, now had a viciousness and avarice about hammering the Welsh into oblivion. The Castles were used to control, to introduce peasants from England that would displace the local population and to colonize rather than cohabitate with the native Britons. These were works of revenge and great symbols of conquest and occupation.

Desecrating the Home and Stealing the Relics

Edward's vengeance against the sacred was not contained to Castle building alone. The English king was highly educated and possessed a great knowledge of Welsh history, legend and folklore. When yet alive, Llywelyn made an appeal for Papal support of the primacy of Welsh law. The arguments, showed that both men were well versed with the legendary founding of the British Isles by Brutus; Llywelyn appealing to his rights as a son of Kamber ap Brutus, and Edward making claims to the elder son of Brutus, Locrinus. Edward knew of the *Historia Regum Britanniae*.¹³ And not only this, but Beverley describes Edward as an Arthurian enthusiast (as does Davies). The English King knew the Welsh legends, or legendary history, and upon earning his victory, committed intentional acts to either appropriate or ridicule them. In *Age of Conquest*, Davies' writes:

In late July 1284, Edward, lover of tournaments and avid devotee of Arthurian mythology that he was, invited English and foreign knights alike to a lavish "round table" and other festivities at Nefyn one of the most important courts of the former house of Gwynedd to celebrate his victory.¹⁴

Whether done as parody or solemnly, the insult of mimicking Arthurian themes to the sons of Arthur and Brutus, in the lands of Arthur and Brutus carries a sadistic and tyrannical overture, only outmatched by Edward's actual destruction of the relics of the House of Gwynedd.

With equal deliberateness he removed all the insignia of majesty from Gwynedd: Llywelyn's golden coronet, so it is recorded by an English chronicler, was solemnly presented to the shrine of St Edward at Westminster; the jewel or crown

¹³ Smith, J. Beverley. Llywelyn ap Gruffudd: Prince of Wales (p. 474). (Function). Kindle Edition.

¹⁴ Robert Rees Davies, *The Age of Conquest Wales 1063-1415*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 355

of King Arthur was an even more prized treasure; the matrices of the seals of Llywelyn, of his wife, and his brother Dafydd were melted down to make a chalice...¹⁵

Edward appropriated Arthur, then, if the chronicle is true, exterminated the relic associated with him, making a statement to the world that his triumph over Wales was complete. It is imperative to understand that the Mabinogion, Brutus, the Arthuriana and other Welsh legends, although viewed as folklore or pseudohistory in the present, were viewed with verity in times past. A possible downstream consequence of Edward's co-opting and mocking the Arthurian subject matter in the 13th century have remnant ripple effects today in how the Welsh approach 'The Matter of Britain.'

Conclusion – Back to Scotland, Llywelyn the Last Helps William Wallace

Studying the Plantagenet's overkill with respect to his conquest of Wales reveals a raging and vengeful king who truly seemed to come to hate the Welsh. In his overreach, Edward fell into significant financial debt and, although he would go on, in the 1290s and after, to become *The Hammer of the Scots*, he struggled to subdue Alba because of the strain on his purse and psyche over decades of dealings with the Welsh. There is a connection to be explored whereby Llewelyn, who much lesser known, was a forerunner to and great help to the famous William Wallace.

Down the corridor of time, the passing of Llywelyn the Last, and the impact of Edward's campaigns changed the face of Wales forever, created confusion of official status (is Wales a Principality, a Nation, a Kingdom or none of these things?) of Cymru that persists nearly eight hundred years later, and made Wales, which has ever been the People of the Land and Song, also, for better and for worse, the Land of Castles.

¹⁵ Robert Rees Davies, *The Age of Conquest Wales 1063-1415*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1987), pg. 355-356

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