

Eric Hobsbawm, Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*
Cambridge University Press, 31 Jul 1992

Many of the traditions which we think of as very ancient in their origins were not in fact sanctioned by long usage over the centuries, but were invented comparatively recently. This book explores examples of this process of invention - the creation of Welsh and Scottish 'national culture'; the elaboration of British royal rituals in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; the origins of imperial rituals in British India and Africa; and the attempts by radical movements to develop counter-traditions of their own. It addresses the complex interaction of past and present, bringing together historians and anthropologists in a fascinating study of ritual and symbolism which poses new questions for the understanding of our history.

The harp, to be precise the triple harp, was used frequently as a symbol of Wales. The triple harps themselves were sometimes decorated with national symbols, leeks entwined about the foot, and princely plumes sprouting from the top. Harps were used on banners and in books, on scrolls and medals, often with fitting mottoes in Welsh that 'Wales is the land of the harp', 'the language of the soul is upon its strings' and so on. The Welsh mountain goat, still a most impressive sight in Snowdonia, was adopted by some as a Welsh symbol. Pennant used a goatherd with his hornpipe or *pibgorn* and his goats as a frontispiece to his *Tours*, Lady Llanover adopted a wild goat as one of her heraldic supporters, and some of the Welsh regiments adopted the goat as a regimental mascot. Not unnaturally the goat was also a useful symbolic caricature for Wales in lampoons and cartoons.

The eisteddfod, provincial and national, was the occasion in this period for a riotous display of insignia, and the national symbols we have mentioned were all mixed up with the special insignia of the Gorsedd of Bards. Thousands of eisteddfod crowns and chairs were produced, and a language of decoration was needed for these objects. Iolo Morganwg (a good journeyman mason and amateur artist) was a prolific manufacturer of symbols, the most famous being his *nod cyfrin* (mystic sign) of three bars, each bar representing past, present and future, and representing the name of God in the druidic

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theology, which is still used as a most impressive ideogram for the National Eisteddfod. The high point of eisteddfod rites and rituals was not reached until the late nineteenth century when elaborate costumes and regalia, replete with all the symbols we have mentioned above, were designed for the Gorsedd of Bards by Sir Hubert von Herkomer and Sir Goscombe John.

The new ceremonials and the symbols and insignia all served to help Welshmen visualize their own country, and they had an exceptional importance in a national community that was not a political state. They were a substitute for the lost customs and rites of the old society of patronal festivals, merry nights and calendar feasts.

A TURNING POINT: 'THE TREASON OF THE BLUE BOOKS'

In 1847 the royal commission into the state of education in Wales reported its findings to the government in its Blue Books. The inquiry was instigated for many reasons; the concern for the growing hold of dissent or nonconformity over the common people, the lack of provision of education in Wales and the growth of unrest over the past few decades culminating in the Merthyr Rising of 1831, the Chartist risings of 1839 and the Rebecca Riots from 1839 to 1843. The commissioners (all Englishmen) reported on much in Wales besides education, attributing the backwardness and immorality of the people (especially the women) to the influence of dissent and the Welsh language. The storm of protest which resulted in Wales at what many considered a gross libel of a nation, based upon the biased evidence given by an unrepresentative minority of Welshmen to the English commissioners, was called 'The Treason of the Blue Books' (*Brad y Llyfrau Gleision*). This was an elaborate historical pun on the words 'Treason of the Long Knives' which had been a favourite subject of the romantic mythologists. The leader of the Welsh (or British) in the late fifth century was Vortigern (Gwrtheyrn) who invited the Saxons under Hengist and Horsa to come to Britain to aid him against his enemies. The Saxons invited Vortigern to a banquet, according to the story, at which he fell in love with Hengist's daughter Alys Rhonwen or Rowena and asked to marry her. The Saxons, some time later in another banquet, at a special signal leapt upon the carousing Welsh chieftains who were at the table, and slaughtered them with their long knives, forcing Vortigern to hand

over a large area of England to them. This Welsh Saint Bartholomew's Eve had been known as a fable by the Welsh in past centuries. It was taken in the seventeenth century by the balladist Matthew Owen as a punishment for sins, to be accepted humbly and passively. In the eighteenth century, the mythologists had seen its dramatic interest and it was illustrated by romantic artists such as Henry Fuseli and Angelica Kauffmann in the 1770s. After 1847, however, it was turned into a form of political propaganda to goad the Welsh into action.⁸⁶

The action taken as a result of the brouhaha over the Blue Books was paradoxical and contradictory. On the one hand it made the Welsh more nationalistic and Anglophobe than they had ever been before, on the other it made the Welsh concerned to answer the criticisms of the commissioners by becoming more like the English, by turning themselves into practical, hard-headed, business-like English-speaking Britons. The brouhaha also caused new alliances and new divisions in Welsh society. The historical revival of the eighteenth century, of which we have been discussing the mythological part, had stayed aloof from the great forces of religious debate, political reform and the industrial revolution. The great antiquarians and scholars were in general hostile to the tremendous force of Methodism, which not only destroyed the old merry way of life but also filled most effectively any vacuum which might have been left. Iolo Morganwg, for instance, wrote to his patron Owain Myfyr in 1799 that the Gwyneddigion and other London Welsh patriots were being maligned as Painites at the Methodist Association at Bala by one of Iolo's enemies whom he always called Ginshop Jones. Ginshop Jones was a life-guard of George III who left to become an innkeeper and Methodist elder. 'North Wales', complained Iolo, 'is now as Methodistical as South Wales, and South Wales as Hell.'⁸⁷

William Roberts, 'Nefydd', Baptist minister and organizer of schools wrote a collection of essays in 1852 *Crefydd yr Oesoedd Tywyll* (Religion of the Dark Ages) where he contrasts the semi-pagan folk culture of Wales with the new respectable Welsh culture of his day, that of the eisteddfod, the literary society, the debating club and the journals, and noted that until recently the harsh spirit of Geneva had kept the Methodists from enjoying this blossoming culture. The

⁸⁶ David Williams, *A History of Modern Wales* (London, 1950), pp. 246–68 on nonconformity, and pp. 269–85 on the growth of national consciousness, is excellent for the 1840s.

⁸⁷ G. J. Williams, 'Llythrau Llenorion' (Letters of Authors), *Y Llenor*, vi (1927), p. 39.

old guard of the Methodists were dying off rapidly in the 1840s. The young could see to what extent Welsh culture had changed, and the Blue Books controversy finally drove them into the arms of the other dissenters and the Welsh patriots, because the commissioners lumped them all together and attacked Methodists, dissenters and the Welsh language as one.

The closing of the gap between Welsh patriots and the dissenters and Methodists unfortunately meant the opening of a gap between the patriots and the Anglicans, who had in various ways dominated the cultural revival since the eighteenth century, and had certainly been its most brilliant promoters from 1815 to 1847. The new wave of interest in things Welsh after 1815 was much encouraged by the movement known in Welsh as *Yr Hen Bersoniaid Llengar* (Old Literary Parsons), but which in fact involved many laymen and laywomen as well.⁸⁸ They were somewhat reactionary in politics and harked back to the less disturbed peaceful Wales of the eighteenth century. They wished to preserve what was left of Merrie Wales, and through dominating literature and history they hoped to prevent any further encroachments by dissent or Methodism upon Welsh life. They included the historian Angharad Llwyd (the daughter of John Lloyd, Pennant's companion); Lady Llanover; Lady Charlotte Guest, the editor of the famous edition of Welsh medieval tales which she called *The Mabinogion* (1849); John Jones, 'Tegid', precentor of Christ Church, Oxford; the folk song collector Maria Jane Williams of Aberpergwm; Thomas Price, 'Carnhuanawc', cleric, historian and Celticist; John Jenkins, 'Ifor Ceri', cleric, eisteddfod organizer and folk song collector; and the cleric John Williams, 'Ab Ithel', the unscrupulous editor of Iolo Morganwg's druidic papers, and one of the founders of the Cambrian Archaeological Association.

The Welsh Manuscripts Society and the Cambrian Archaeological Association, the public school at Llandovery and the Saint David's University College at Lampeter were all means by which this brilliant circle of people tried to affect Welsh life, but they reached the common people mainly through the eisteddfod. In 1819 the Swansea radical journal *Seren Gomer* approved of the Carmarthen eisteddfod,

⁸⁸ Bedwyr Lewis Jones, *Yr Hen Bersoniaid Llengar* (Old Literary Parsons) (Denbigh, 1963); R. T. Jenkins, *Hanes Cymru yn y Bedwaredd Ganrif ar Bymtheg* (History of Wales in the Nineteenth Century) i. 1789–1843 (Cardiff, 1933) has much *passim* on the clerical patriots. For the general position of Celtic studies in the 1830s to the 1860s see Rachel Bromwich, *Matthew Arnold and Celtic Literature: a Retrospect 1865–1965* (Oxford, 1965).

but by 1832 the editor David Evans was deeply suspicious of the Beaumaris eisteddfod on the grounds that it would deflect the Welsh from political reforms. Angharad Llwyd in an appendix to her history of Anglesey, which won the prize at the eisteddfod, printed a speech by another of the patriot clerics, the poet John Blackwell, 'Alun', in which he said that the Welsh peasant was cultured and literate, his books unsullied by immorality, and he did not bother with politics or government.⁸⁹ But things were changing even in the romantic world of the eisteddfod, for already in 1831 Arthur James Johnes (later a judge) won the prize for an essay 'The Causes of Dissent in Wales', a work of what would now be termed sociology. It was only some years later that attempts were made to turn the eisteddfod into a Welsh version of the British Association for the Advancement of Science. The patriot clerics with their concern for the remote and mythological past still dominated the eisteddfod until the late 1840s, but the controversy over the Blue Books placed them in an impossible position, and gradually the dissenters and Methodists turned on their fields of endeavour and took them over, claiming to stand for the Welsh nation and branding the Anglicans as foreign intruders. When the great leader of radical Wales, Henry Richard, published his *Letters and Essays on Wales* in 1866 he virtually equated being Welsh with being a nonconformist, and he brushed the Anglicans aside. The nonconformist take over of Welsh culture created a new image. It weakened Welsh interest in the far-distant national past, replacing it with an interest in the past of the Old Testament and with the early history of dissenting causes in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and emphasized the new puritanical Sunday as 'The Welsh Sunday', the new 'Welsh way of life' being that of the chapel, the singing school (for hymns not ballads), the temperance assemblies, the *Cymanfa Ganu* (hymnsinging assemblies), the quarterly meetings and associations, the mutual improvement societies, and much else which is familiar to the twentieth century as the typical Wales. It is no wonder then that the historian Sir John Lloyd remarked that the Wales of Victoria differed from that of Queen Anne as much as that of Queen Anne had differed from that of Boadicea. John Thomas, 'Ieuan Ddu', published his

⁸⁹ Angharad Llwyd, *A History of the Island of Anglesey* (Ruthin, 1832), p. 39 of appendix. Cf. Mary Ellis, 'Angharad Llwyd', *Flintshire Historical Society Publications*, xxvi (1976), pp. 52-95, and xvii (1978), pp. 43-87.



CHARTIST RIOTS AT NEWPORT.

Chartist Riots at Newport



The Rebecca Riots, an uprising of oppressed peasantry against the burden of tollgates in west Wales, began in the summer of 1839. After only a few months, they ceased as suddenly as they had started and for three-and-a-half years, the countryside was undisturbed. Then, in the winter of 1842, rioting broke out again—with greater violence.

