

In *The Description of Wales*, does Gerald of Wales treat the Welsh past favourably or unfavourably?

While *Descriptio Kambriae* ('Description of Wales') can be considered an 'innovative exercise of ethnography'¹ rather than a historical account, it nonetheless contains frequent references to Welsh history. In the First Preface, Gerald compares the work to the histories of other countries and offers the explicit aim of rescuing 'from oblivion those deeds so nobly done which have not yet been fully recorded.'² It seems clear that Gerald himself considered *Descriptio* a historical work, and his extensive engagement with Gildas and Geoffrey of Monmouth is evident throughout the text. Whether Gerald's treatment of Welsh history is favourable or unfavourable bears consideration, and it will be necessary to refer to his other main work about Wales, *Itinerarium Kambriae* ('Journey Through Wales'), which also contains a historical dimension.³

To understand Gerald's position on Welsh history, it may help us to understand his hybrid ethnic identity. Gerald's family comprised prominent Anglo-Norman colonists; his father, William de Barri was the marcher lord of Manorbier Castle, and his grandfather, Gerald of Windsor was handpicked by Henry I to be constable of Pembroke Castle. Gerald's maternal uncle, David Fitzgerald, was bishop of St David's 1148–1176.⁴ His Welsh connection derived from his maternal grandmother, Nest, through whom Gerald was descended from Rhys ap Tewdwr and a cousin of Rhys ap Gruffydd, prince of Deheubarth.⁵ This placed Gerald among the

¹ Huw Pryce, 'Gerald of Wales and the Welsh Past,' in *Gerald of Wales : New Perspectives on a Medieval Writer and Critic*, ed. by Georgia Henley, and A. Joseph McMullen (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2018), p. 36.

² Gerald of Wales, *The Journey through Wales ; and, the Description of Wales*, trans. by Lewis Thorpe (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), p. 163.

³ Pryce, 'Gerald of Wales and the Welsh Past,' pp. 37–38.

⁴ Michael A Faletra, *Wales and the Medieval Colonial Imagination: The Matters of Britain in the Twelfth Century*, 1st ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2014), pp. 135–136 <<https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137391032>> [accessed 27 Nov. 2024].

⁵ Crick, 'The British past and the Welsh future', p. 63.

elite of both cultures. It has been pointed out that Gerald probably did not speak Welsh and his life followed a Norman career path; Crick asserts that Gerald, like Geoffrey, appears to 'have been Welsh primarily by osmosis, by virtue of origin or residence in the border-areas under Anglo-Norman control'.⁶ On the other hand, Gerald certainly identified with his Welsh ancestry and made full use of his princely connections for support where possible.⁷ Faltra suggests that in both *Descriptio* and *Itinerarium*:

...we see in these and in other works by Gerald a series of attempts to think through his own ethnic hybridity and to provide an account of the past that could render his own actions consistent and meaningful...It is precisely personal identity and the history of the polities of England, Wales, and Britain that collide in Gerald's family background.⁸

Gerald's writing on Wales was informed by personal knowledge and experience deeper than that of an outsider,⁹ however he did not affiliate fully with either the colonized Welsh or the colonizer Normans, and an ambivalence towards both characterizes much of his writing.¹⁰ This can be observed in the final chapters of *Descriptio*, where Gerald first offers military advice to Norman lords on how to subdue and govern the Welsh, and then offers the Welsh advice on how to resist such an invasion.¹¹

Gerald's model for the ancient British past was derived from Gildas, whom he invokes in the First Preface: 'His history may not be all that polished, but at least it is true. It is Gildas, then, whom I, Gerald, propose to follow.'¹² This provides an insight into *Descriptio's* purpose; Gerald

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ Faltra, *Wales and the Medieval Colonial Imagination*, pp. 135–136.

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 135.

⁹ Pryce, 'Gerald of Wales and the Welsh Past,' p. 35.

¹⁰ Faltra, *Wales and the Medieval Colonial Imagination*, p. 138.

¹¹ Gerald of Wales, *The Journey through Wales; and, the Description of Wales*, trans. by Lewis Thorpe (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), pp. 216–244.

¹² *ibid.*, p. 164.

used Gildas' version of history 'as a stick with which to beat the Welsh',¹³ outlining their many faults in his eyes in Book II of *Descriptio*;¹⁴ 'It was because of their sins, and more particularly the wicked and detestable vice of homosexuality, that the Welsh were punished by God and so lost first Troy then Britain.'¹⁵ Just as Gildas blamed the Britons' sinful ways on their loss of Britain to the Saxons, so Gerald blamed the Welsh of his own time for their losses to the Normans.¹⁶ While Gildas' framework of British history was popularized and elaborated upon by Geoffrey of Monmouth – who frequently miscited Gildas for his own purposes¹⁷ – Gerald had a complex relationship with his near-contemporary; Gerald borrowed much of *Descriptio*'s history from Geoffrey's *De Gestis Britonum*, but he only names Geoffrey explicitly to disparage him. This could represent a literary one-upmanship given Geoffrey's popularity,¹⁸ however Gerald also places more emphasis on the Trojan and British origins of the Welsh,¹⁹ even ascribing their darker complexion to 'the hot and arid regions of the Trojan plain'.²⁰ Gerald openly challenges Geoffrey's assertion that *Wallia* derives from 'a leader called Walo',²¹ correctly identifying the pejorative origins of the word 'Wales' as being related to the Anglo-Saxon word for foreigner. Yet in the same chapter, Gerald draws on Geoffrey's *Gestis* extensively, giving the Trojan origin story of the founding of Britain by Brutus, and the derivation of the Welsh *Cymry* from his son, Camber, who inherited the land west of the Severn. In contrast to Gerald's critical portrait of the Welsh character in Book II, he legitimizes Geoffrey's *Gestis* as part of Welsh history while

¹³ Pryce, 'Gerald of Wales and the Welsh Past,' p. 36.

¹⁴ Gerald, *The Description of Wales*, p. 203.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 213.

¹⁶ Huw Pryce, 'Saints, Kings, and Princes: Welsh Pasts in an Age of Conquest, c.1070–1282', *Writing Welsh History: From the Early Middle Ages to the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford, 2022: online edn, Oxford Academic, 21 Apr. 2022), p. 51. <<https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198746034.003.0004>> [accessed 27 Nov. 2024]

¹⁷ Crick, 'The British past and the Welsh future', p. 68.

¹⁸ Jaako Tahkokallio, *A Companion to Geoffrey of Monmouth*, ed. by Joshua Byron Smith, and Georgia Henley, 1st edn. (Leiden, The Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2020), p. 155

¹⁹ Pryce, 'Saints, Kings, and Princes', pp. 50–51.

²⁰ Gerald, *The Description of Wales*, p. 193.

²¹ Gerald, *The Description of Wales*, p. 180.

adapting it for his own purposes; 'By using Kambria and Kambri or Kambrenses, terms redolent of the Britons' heyday as depicted by Geoffrey, Gerald was thus able to confer dignity on both Wales and the Welsh from whom he was partly descended.'²²

Gerald's connection between the Britons of the Roman period and the twelfth century Welsh is further developed by references to classical sources such as Caesar and Lucan, ultimately building upon Geoffrey's narrative of a legendary British past.²³ However, *Descriptio* offers limited coverage of the period from the seventh century to Gerald's own lifetime.²⁴ Gerald tells us that the descendants of Rhodri Mawr, from his son Cadell down through Tewdwr, 'ruled over all Wales.'²⁵ This false assertion seems placed here to support the claims of his cousin, the Lord Rhys,²⁶ and speaks to Gerald's alignment with the dynasty of South Wales.²⁷ Gerald then provides a genealogy of the princes of South and North Wales, giving precedence to Rhys. He follows this with:

Welsh bards, singers and jongleurs kept accurate copies of the genealogies of these princes in their old manuscripts, which were, of course, written in Welsh. They would also recite them from memory, going back from Rhodri Mawr to the time of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and then farther still to Silvius, Ascanius and Aeneas. They then continue the line back to Adam himself. I have deliberately shortened my family-trees and omitted all this, because I felt that genealogies so protracted and remote might seem ridiculous to many of my readers.²⁸

²² Pryce, 'Saints, Kings, and Princes', p. 51.

²³ Pryce, 'Gerald of Wales and the Welsh Past,' p. 36.

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ Gerald, *The Description of Wales*, p. 171.

²⁶ Pryce points out that this may also be true of a story in *Itinerarium Kambriae* 'of how the birds of Llan-gors lake in Brycheiniog proclaimed through their singing that his great-uncle Gruffudd ap Rhys (d.1137) was the true prince of South Wales' ('Gerald of Wales and the Welsh Past,' p. 37).

²⁷ Pryce, 'Gerald of Wales and the Welsh Past,' p. 37.

²⁸ Gerald, *The Description of Wales*, p. 172.

On the surface, this seems like the remark of a dispassionate historian not wishing to burden their reader with a fantastical family tree, but it is worth noting that many noble genealogies in this period traced their subjects' origins to Aeneas and Adam. Furthermore, the association of bards – a respected position still employed by Welsh courts during this time – with itinerant singers and jongleurs appears to cast aspersions on the legitimacy of Welsh oral records. The comment that copies of these genealogies were 'of course, written in Welsh' is reminiscent of Geoffrey of Monmouth's claim of 'a certain very ancient book in the British language'.²⁹ Given the apparent scepticism that Gerald displays of Geoffrey's work, it seems reasonable to suggest that Gerald is implying a similar scepticism towards Welsh genealogies.³⁰ This could be an attempt to support his prestigious Welsh family connections on one hand while waving to the Marcher lords with the other; though Geoffrey is proud of his royal lineage, he nonetheless denigrates it as backwards and convoluted for the benefit of his Anglo-Norman audience.

Gerald discusses the efforts of the pre-Norman English kings to subdue the Welsh: Offa, Ethelfrid, and, 'by far the greatest', Harald.³¹ He compares their success to that of the first three Norman kings, and uses these examples to attribute the Welsh recovery under Owain Gwynedd and the Lord Rhys more to the continental distractions of Henry II's dynasty than to the Welsh themselves.³² Here Gerald turns Geoffrey's view that 'the Britons would not recover their former glory until they had done penance for their sins'³³ against the Welsh, whose recovery likewise cannot be complete as long as they are still following the wicked ways of their ancestors. While Gerald upholds Gildas' account of the post-Roman Britons, he also challenges his assertion that

²⁹ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. and ed. by Michael A. F. F. (Peterborough: Broadview Editions, 2008), p. 41.

³⁰ Faletra, *Wales and the Medieval Colonial Imagination*, p. 144.

³¹ Gerald, *The Description of Wales*, p. 214.

³² Pryce, 'Gerald of Wales and the Welsh Past,' p. 37.

³³ Pryce, 'Saints, Kings, and Princes', p. 51.

they were cowardly and untrustworthy.³⁴ By providing a list of British heroes apparently supported by classical references,³⁵ Gerald appears to remind the Welsh of the martial prowess of their ancestors.³⁶ He then comments: 'The Britons maintain that, when Gildas criticized his own people so bitterly, he wrote as he did because he was so infuriated by the fact that King Arthur had killed his own brother, who was a Scottish chieftain.' As a result, Gildas threw the books he had written praising Arthur and the Britons into the sea. This passage is exemplary of Gerald's treatment of the Welsh past in several ways; Gerald holds up Gildas, 'who revered the truth', while also championing Galfridian history yet hiding the source. He seems to condemn the Welsh past and depict their subjugation as inevitable, but he also constantly reminds them of their former glory, perhaps revealing his own conflicted identity. Ultimately, it must be remembered that *Descriptio* is not a sequential history of Wales.³⁷ Gerald, for whom the Welsh past was a constant and perhaps at times uncomfortable presence, was selective in his treatment of it, as his purpose was not so much to recount Welsh history as it was to engage with the Wales of his own time.

³⁴ Gerald, *The Description of Wales*, p.

³⁵ Gerald lists 'Aurelius Ambrosius, whom even Eutropius praises' (II.2), however Crick points out that no such mention can be found, highlighting the similarities between Gerald and Geoffrey in the liberties they take with their sources. ('The British past and the Welsh future', p. 68.)

³⁶ Crick, 'The British past and the Welsh future', p. 65.

³⁷ Pryce, 'Gerald of Wales and the Welsh Past', p. 48.

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