

Gerald of Wales and the Writing of Welsh History

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ABSTRACT

This thesis will seek to explore the methods and motivations found in the historical and cultural writings of Gerald of Wales, focusing on his Welsh themed works, in order to better understand Gerald the man and his importance in the writing of Welsh history. Gerald is a significant figure in medieval British literary culture, particularly with regards to Welsh affairs. However, he was brought up in Marcher society and his feelings towards Wales are characterised by a complex mixture of pride and scorn, which has led many critics to see an unresolved crisis of identity at the heart of Gerald's Welsh works. I start with a discussion of Gerald's rather selective approach to history writing and how this influenced his general outlook on Welsh affairs and the place of Wales in early British history. This is followed by consideration of Gerald's Paris schooling and the importance of his classical education as a lense through which he viewed and wrote about Wales, as well as the way his intellectual background affected his engagement with Welsh sources. I then go on to consider the value of two recent academic cultural theories, namely 'autoethnography' and 'hybridity', as possible models for explaining the ambivalence and complexities in Gerald's Welsh works, in addition to considering the potential difficulties with the usage of key terms, such as 'ethnography' and 'identity', in the context of Gerald's writings. I look at specific examples from *The Journey Through Wales* and *The Description of Wales*, which demonstrate Gerald's often contradictory feelings towards the country of his birth and his preoccupation with monstrous and hybrid forms in his imaginative conception of Wales and the Welsh March, before concluding with a discussion of his legacy and his importance as a source for scholars of Welsh history.

INTRODUCTION

Gerald of Wales was one of the most prolific writers of social and historical works during the medieval period. His writings encompassed a considerable variety of topics, ranging from almost proto-journalistic 'travel writing' to political guide books for members of the English crown. He is probably most admired for his 'Celtic' books, including his two works on Welsh affairs, *The Journey Through Wales* (*The Journey*) and *The Description of Wales* (*The Description*), which will serve as the main textual focus of this study. In contrast with some of the historical writing of the period, Gerald's style is lively and engaging, characterised by an often acerbic wit and eye for juicy detail that gives his works a vivid sense of immediacy for even a modern reader. As such, he is still widely read and is much quoted by scholars seeking to better understand the medieval period in England and Wales.

However, his works have often been considered difficult for later commentators to interpret. They are generally regarded to be important sources for the history of medieval Wales, yet they do not offer a sustained narrative of Welsh or native British affairs in the manner of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britonum* or earlier Insular historical texts. Similarly, they are often cited as instrumental texts in the creation of Welsh identity in the middle ages, but they are frequently highly critical of the Welsh people and have been read by many as Anglo-Norman 'colonial' texts that caricature the Welsh as savage, untrustworthy barbarians, constituting an attack on Welsh culture that paved the way for the Edwardian conquest in the following century. Furthermore, they are often seen as disordered documents, pieced together with a succession of anecdotes and lacking in an overall cohesive structure.

This study seeks to assess the value of Gerald's work for modern historians of Wales by placing them in their historical context and analysing them through the lense of current academic theories of textual criticism.

To achieve this, the study will be divided into five chapters.

Chapter 1 will consider Gerald's possible purposes in writing his books about Wales and his treatment and perception of 'history'. Gerald makes reference to the fact that he is writing history in the manner of earlier exemplars, but it is clear that he does not understand history in the modern empirical sense. I will show that Gerald was quite typical of medieval writers, in that he saw history as serving a didactic purpose, rather than a dispassionate, academic one. In the British context, and in a manner reminiscent of Gildas's writings on the native Britons, Gerald explains the contemporary struggles of the Welsh in terms of retribution for their past follies.

Chapter 2 will consider the influence of Gerald's continental education in Paris and the way this shaped his approach to the writing of history. Although Gerald is remembered mainly for his writings about Wales and Ireland, as well as his involvement in Welsh ecclesiastical affairs, he spent large portions of his life studying in Paris and arguably had a fundamentally different world view to many of the people he was writing about. Recent scholarship has focused on the complexity of Gerald's writing and the layers of meaning that can be found through a close reading of his works. In particular, the recent collection of essays edited by Georgia Henley and Joseph McMullen offers fresh perspectives on Gerald's writing process and the critical importance of his scholarly background in shaping his view of Welsh and British history. We will examine some of the arguments put forward by recent scholarship and consider how it might further our understanding of Gerald's Welsh writings.

Chapter 3 will consider the concept of 'autoethnography', as expounded by Shirin Khanmohamadi, and its usefulness for understanding Gerald's methodology and the frequent contradictions we find in his works. *The Description* is highly critical of the Welsh, and seemingly offers a blueprint for the Anglo-Norman invaders to complete their conquest. On the other hand, Gerald claims he is actively 'preserving' a record of Welsh culture and customs in his writing, almost defending them from the

ongoing process of destruction. I will consider Khanmohamadi's assertion that Gerald was 'intervening' in the colonial process and that he was consciously 'insisting' on partiality and multiple perspectives in his elaboration of the 'truth' as an act of resistance to the dominant Anglo-Norman colonial discourse.

Chapter 4 will explore the importance of Gerald's 'hybridity' and fractured sense of identity in more detail. Gerald's books are renowned for their vivid descriptions of local legends and fantastic, 'monstrous' people and animals. In this chapter we will consider the ideas of Jeremy Cohen and other scholars, which focus on the 'difficult aftermath' of an era of conquest and the profound affect it had on writers like Gerald in medieval Britain. To what extent do we find what we might describe as an 'unharmonious fusion' in Gerald's writing and how important is this in gaining an understanding of his works?

Chapter 5 will conclude this study by assessing how useful Gerald's works are for modern historians in understanding Welsh history and the creation of Welsh identity in the middle ages. I will also explain the importance of approaching Gerald's works critically and how modern readers need to be constantly 'on the alert' when engaging with them as sources for the history of twelfth-century Wales.

CHAPTER 1

GERALD'S 'WELSH' WORKS: BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Gerald of Wales was a prolific writer, producing dozens of works over the course of his career that covered a multitude of topics. For this reason, he is considered to be an important and illuminating source for historians trying to piece together a picture of medieval Wales from the fragmentary Welsh related literary corpus that has come down to us from that time.

However, we might well ask the question: was Gerald himself in any meaningful sense a writer of 'history'? When we look through the catalogue of his surviving works, there is no stand out title that marks him out as a historian or chronicler in the manner of his near contemporary Geoffrey of Monmouth, who was explicit about his purpose in writing 'A History' of the ancient British kings and the world they lived in. Nor does Gerald offer us an 'ecclesiastical history', or a sustained narrative of the rise and fall of the native Britons, in the manner of the Brittonic or Anglo-Saxon writers that had come before him.

Instead, we get only glimpses of historical events in Gerald's work. For example, in *The Journey* he offers snapshots of local history relating to the places he travels through with the Archbishop of Canterbury during the course of their crusading travels through the various regions of Wales, encompassing both 'Puria Wallia' and Norman-occupied Wales.¹ In *The Description*, he takes a more general perspective that we might consider to be more 'historical' in its conception. He makes reference to the ancient Trojan origins of the Welsh people and their subsequent exile and settlement in the British isles. However, he does not set down anything close to a chronological narrative attempting to tell the entire story of the Welsh lands and people. Instead, he chooses episodes or legends that illuminate his particular themes, usually rooted in the contemporary situation in Wales and the Norman marcher lands.

With all this in mind, how are we to understand Gerald's understanding and treatment of history? Moreover, what value can we find in a body of work that generally eschews the chronological approach and is reticent to say the least with regards to identifying written sources from which we might hope to construct a basis for the author's narrative descriptions and often highly opinionated statements of 'facts'? As we shall see, the answers to such questions are perhaps as complex as the mind of Gerald himself.

In terms of modern scholarship, Gerald has been widely read, analysed and debated over the last few decades. The starting point for this modern fixation on all things Gerald was the monograph 'Gerald of Wales' written by Robert Bartlett in the early 1980s.² Appropriately, considering the subject, Bartlett offers a multi-faceted study of Gerald's life and works, dividing his study into three parts that focus on different aspects of Gerald's writings. Bartlett delves through accounts of Gerald the Welshman, Gerald the churchman, Gerald the courtier, Gerald the scientist, Gerald the mystic, Gerald the Scientist and Gerald the ethnographer. In doing so, Bartlett composed a ground breaking and strikingly modern study of Gerald that laid the foundations for a rich debate that continues to deepen our understanding of both the medieval writer and the times he lived in.

As Bartlett's work continues to be an influential model for the study of Gerald, it will be useful to summarise some of his main points here. Bartlett begins by discussing the importance of Gerald's education in shaping his writing and giving him the tools and impetus to 'analyse' the society he lived

¹ Giraldus Cambrensis, & L. Thorpe, *The Journey Through Wales and The Description of Wales* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978)

² Robert Bartlett, *Gerald of Wales, 1146-1223* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982)

in, particularly the Marches, Wales and Ireland. As Bartlett points out, Gerald incorporated much of the new Latin learning that he had picked up in Paris in his works, peppering them with classical references, allusions and quotations.³ According to Bartlett, we should consider Gerald to be a 'humanist' in the same way as other twelfth-century writers, and therefore a conscious and active participant in the high literary culture of the period.⁴ This is an important observation, as Gerald has often been characterised as a rather eccentric and somewhat erratic outlier, operating on the frontier of established twelfth-century literary society. On the contrary, he clearly saw himself as part of something bigger with regards to his literary career.

Bartlett's next point, though, is perhaps most pertinent in the context of the current chapter. Despite Gerald's literary and professional ambitions, he saw himself, according to Bartlett, as a 'historian' and should therefore be considered a key contributor to 'the English historical tradition' of the period— notwithstanding the fact that most of his famous works were about Wales and Ireland, not England.⁵ However, as we have already seen, Gerald often intertwines historical interludes and allusions into his writing about contemporary events and social processes. In other words, the past is always an imminent and influential part of the present in Gerald's work. Indeed, it seems clear that it was understanding and analysing the present that most occupied Gerald's thoughts. His treatment of history then, as Bartlett concedes, might better be characterised as 'ethnographic' writing⁶, with its focus on and fascination for the traditions and traits of the Welsh and Irish peoples.

While he drew on the traditions established by Gildas, and shared similarities with Geoffrey of Monmouth, who was a man of comparable background and upbringing, Gerald's work arguably displayed greater innovation and attempted to explicate the 'material, cultural, and historical realities' of Wales and Ireland in a more direct fashion than Gildas and a less fanciful way than Geoffrey.⁷ Bartlett contends that this attempt at a greater 'realism' in Gerald's work was partly due to the growth of 'scholasticism and naturalism' in the intellectual culture of Latin Christendom. The most obvious reflection of this influence was what Bartlett terms 'an alert and individualised observation of the natural world' in Gerald's works, something he shared with other writers of the period.⁸ Indeed, Gerald was often keen to stress that his work was based on observation and his own enquiries, drawing on his own personal knowledge and experience of the places he wrote about. For example, he includes an account of the behaviour of dogs in his narration of the preaching of the crusade through the See of Llandaff in *The Journey*, describing the 'infallible powers' of a dog's nose and the 'healing properties of its tongue'. Gerald is quick to stress that his description is 'what I myself have learnt...from my own experience and my own observation'.⁹

In the epilogue to his monograph, Bartlett summarises the main aspects of Gerald's life and works, presenting a complex portrait of an extraordinary man, in some ways ahead of his time and circumstances. Gerald's works, Bartlett says, were suffused with his unique personality and driven by a colossal vanity that showed up in his writing time and again.¹⁰ He was also 'authoritarian' in his religion, in keeping with his deep sense of self-importance and the gravity he attached to his role in the world. Gerald's 'God', Bartlett argues, was a 'judge and lord, not a father',¹¹ and we might see Gerald in a similar light when considering his purposes and attitudes in the pages of his Welsh books.

³ Bartlett (1982), p.3

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Bartlett (1982), p.5

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Bartlett (1982), p.6

⁹ Giraldus, *The Journey* (1978), p.130

¹⁰ Bartlett (1982), p.211

¹¹ Ibid

Bartlett sums up his study by stressing the mass of contradictions and ambiguities that characterised Gerald's life and works. His was a career of 'discordant ideals and interests', at once scholastic, religious, and humanist, that remained 'unreconciled' at his death. Furthermore, he was a man interested in power and authority, who lived and worked for much of his life in the service of royalty, but who nevertheless failed to find the 'fulfilment' or recognition that he seemed to believe to be his rightful destiny. As Bartlett puts it, Gerald's mixed Norman-Welsh ancestry, his 'ambiguous national position', acted as a 'millstone around his neck', eventually costing him the very path to advancement that he had worked so hard to win for himself through his writings.¹²

In terms of more recent Giraldian scholarship, Huw Pryce has written extensively about Gerald's two Welsh works, focusing particularly on Gerald's understanding and uses of history in his books. Pryce argues that *The Description*, in particular, has a 'strong historical dimension', due to its frequent references to the distant past¹³. In keeping with the traditions of earlier Insular history writing, and the more contemporary work of Geoffrey of Monmouth, Gerald traces the ancestry of the ancient Britons, and therefore the modern Welsh people, to the fall of Troy.¹⁴ Indeed, according to Pryce, Gerald makes a sustained argument in *The Description* that these 'Trojan' origins had left a 'deep and enduring imprint' on the character of the Welsh.¹⁵ Pryce goes on to show how Gerald's understanding of the distant past is used as 'a point of both contrast and connection with the present'.¹⁶

Pryce argues that this focus on 'racial inheritance' was used by Gerald for a deeper purpose: to act as a foundation for his 'condemnation of immoral behaviour'.¹⁷ In other words, this focus on the distant past was not just an attempt at historical depth; instead, it was an attempt to use history for a particular purpose, namely to identify an origin for the supposed moral weaknesses of the contemporary Welsh. Pryce points to the first preface of *The Description* to help clarify Gerald's purpose, pointing out that the author had explicitly stated his debt to Gildas and the sixth-century account *The Ruin of Britain*, praising it as 'true history'.¹⁸ According to Pryce, the work of Gildas helped Gerald develop his own approach to history writing and provided him with an exemplar for how to live a worthy and 'holy' life.¹⁹ Pryce points out that Gerald took 'much less material' from Gildas than Geoffrey of Monmouth did when he wrote about the history of the Britons. Crucially, however, Gerald took inspiration from the didactic structure of *The Ruin* and, as Pryce sees it, used it as the basis for the construction of his own work.²⁰

Pryce goes on to discuss how, for the most part, modern scholars have paid little attention to the influence of Gildas on Gerald's work. One notable exception in this regard, perhaps unsurprisingly, is Robert Bartlett. In his study of Gerald, Bartlett points out that Gerald is at pains to stress the need for an 'objective' approach when writing history. Gildas had famously criticised the evils of his countrymen, earning the praise of critics such as William of Newburgh. Bartlett suggests that Gerald

¹² Bartlett (1982), p.212

¹³ Huw Pryce, 'Gerald of Wales and the Welsh Past' in Henley, & McMullen, A. J. (Eds.), *Gerald of Wales: New Perspectives on a Medieval Writer and Critic*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2018), p.13

¹⁴ Giraldus, *The Description*, p.135

¹⁵ Huw Pryce, 'Gerald of Wales, Gildas, and the Descriptio Kambriae', in *Tome Studies in Medieval Celtic History and Law in Honour of Thomas Charles-Edwards* Vol. 31 (2012), p. 117 <https://doi.org/10.7722/j.ctt81mmk.16>

¹⁶ Ibid; examples of this include Gerald's contrasting of the old and new names for Wales, as well as specific traits that Gerald finds in Welsh people of the twelfth century, including their 'swarthy' appearance and fondness for moustaches. Gerald describes how this latter trait went back to time immemorial and cites Caesar as his authority for this claim.

¹⁷ Ibid, p.118

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Ibid, p. 120

used Gildas as his model due to the earlier writer's 'reputation for historical impartiality'.²¹ In other words, according to Pryce, the connection with Gildas helped Gerald to 'legitimise' the negative side of his portrait of the Welsh.²²

More significantly, especially from a Welsh perspective, was the use of Welsh history to make a political point. In Pryce's view, Gerald turned the native traditions of the Welsh people 'against' them in an attempt to undermine any notion of a native Brittonic revival and to consolidate the ideological basis for 'Marcher and royal ambitions' in the country.²³ Indeed, as Pryce points out, Gerald argued in *The Description* that the Welsh were paying for their sins, 'both past and present'.²⁴ Indeed, Gerald ends *The Description* with a typically cryptic parting shot. He offers the Welsh the prospect, perhaps the consolation, that they will 'survive' in their corner of the island, but by implication he also discounts any possibility of them regaining their former lordship over the whole of Britain as in their days of glory. Indeed, their historical prominence is consigned conclusively by Gerald to the distant past.²⁵ It is therefore difficult not to see *The Description* as essentially hostile to Welsh culture and ambitions. Considering Gerald's dual background, this may seem somewhat puzzling. As we have already mentioned though, Gerald probably felt much greater ties of loyalty to the Marcher society in which he was brought up and educated than to the more obscure attraction of his Welsh ancestry. As Pryce argues, however, there is another way to interpret *The Description*. Gerald perhaps hoped that his two Welsh books would benefit his career. We might see it, in Pryce's view, as a 'last ditch' attempt to advance himself and to 'save his curial career'.²⁶ As such, the negative view he offers of the Welsh might have sprung from personal opportunism rather than a deeply rooted hostility towards the country of his birth.

Whatever his motivations, it seems clear that Gerald never intended to write a grand narrative of Welsh history in the way that Geoffrey of Monmouth had done for the early Britons. Instead, we might see his work as an example of what Pryce calls the 'appropriation' of Welsh history by Anglo-Norman culture.²⁷ Arguably, this process of appropriation of the past was founded on a highly selective approach to history that we find underpinning Gerald's works. The extent of his understanding of the Welsh language and his knowledge of Welsh language historical texts and traditions is difficult to quantify, but it seems clear that he does not draw extensively on native written sources. Indeed, despite occasional reference to earlier texts, particularly those relating to the ecclesiastical history of St Davids²⁸, it seems likely that a large proportion of his material on Welsh history was based on oral tradition and the creative fruits of his own experience. As Pryce argues, the influence of his own family's traditions may have played a crucial role in shaping the composition of his work. *The Journey* contains a number of flashbacks to twelfth-century events, especially those connected to the history of the Marcher settlers in Welsh lands. More specifically, the deeds of his own relatives, including his uncle, David Fitz Gerald, form part of the narrative.²⁹ It seems indisputable, then, that Gerald took considerable inspiration from the cultural milieu of which he was a part, to the exclusion of any significant engagement with extant native sources of Welsh history and culture that were available at the time he was writing.

²¹ Bartlett (1982), p.182-3

²² Pryce (2012), p.120

²³ Ibid, p.122

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Giraldus, *The Description*, p.274

²⁶ Pryce (2012), p.123

²⁷ Ibid, p.124

²⁸ Gerald makes general references to 'Welsh annals' and ancient records in this respect, as well as in his account of the foundation of Brycheiniog. However, we have very little hard evidence of which particular Welsh texts he may have used as sources.

²⁹ Pryce (2018), p.15

Gerald did show a greater interest in the historical traditions and sources of St Davids though, including lists of bishops taken from written records that helped bolster the case for the primacy of St Davids in Welsh religious life and its supposed metropolitan status as granted by papal gift. He makes several references to this in *The Journey*.³⁰ However, as Pryce points out, here again Gerald actively 'adapted' his source material and 'integrated it into an interpretation that drew on his own understanding of Welsh history'. The reign of Henry I and the Norman conquests were presented by Gerald as a 'crucial turning point' that set the Welsh future on a new and irrevocable path³¹.

It is also useful to consider in more detail the sources Gerald used when producing his Welsh works. To what extent did he have access to texts relating to Welsh history, either in Latin or in the Welsh language itself, and, perhaps more importantly, to what extent did he engage with such 'native' materials in the process of writing his books? Brynley Roberts was one of the first scholars to consider the question of how much traditional learning we find in *The Journey* and *The Description*. More recently, Ben Guy has considered a more pertinent question. He asks what kind of evidence exists that Gerald had used texts *produced* in Wales, and considers which texts they might be. Guy acknowledges Gerald's extensive use of what we might term 'Welsh lore', a 'body of inherited knowledge'³² regarding Welsh history found in the works of writers such as Bede, Gildas and Geoffrey of Monmouth, as well as literature and traditions that may have been current among the Welsh *beirdd* (poets) in the medieval period. However, he points out that in answering the question of Gerald's use of Welsh sources we need to focus our attention on written texts that have survived.³³ Guy focuses on two texts that Gerald claimed to be familiar with and, presumably, had access to: the first was a Latin text, *De situ Brecheniauc*, which provides an account of Brychan (founder of Brycheiniog), and the second a Welsh language genealogy relating to the descendants of Rhodri Mawr.³⁴

Guy explains how Gerald would have had easy access to a copy of *De situ* in the place of its composition, in or around Brecon Priory, and argues that this text would have provided Gerald with the information he relays regarding the life of Brychan and the purity of his daughters in *The Journey*.³⁵ He notes how the entry in British Library Cotton MS Domitian A is 'particularly reminiscent' of Gerald's version of the story and emphasises the fact that Gerald has no doubts about the authenticity of the tale or about including it in his work.³⁶ Gerald's confidence in this source, says Guy, seems to stem from the fact it was written in Latin.³⁷ In contrast, he shows far less trust towards Welsh language genealogies. *De situ* was also part of the hagiographical tradition of medieval writing with which Gerald was particularly familiar, giving it a higher sense of authenticity in his eyes according to Guy.³⁸ He therefore describes it as a 'historia' when referring to it in *The Journey*.

The second of the texts explicitly mentioned and used by Gerald in *The Description*, namely the genealogy of the princes of Wales, seems to have been regarded by him with a greater degree of hesitation and qualification. After listing the descent of the princes of North and South Wales down to Rhodri Mawr, Gerald goes on to explain that the genealogies are traced back much further in the 'old and authentic books' of the Welsh bards and singers, taking the line of descent through Trojan ancestors, the Virgin Mary, and all the way back to Adam himself.³⁹ Gerald then states that these

³⁰ Giraldus, *The Journey*, p.159

³¹ Pryce (2018), p.23

³² Ben Guy 'Gerald and Welsh Genealogical Learning' in Henley, & McMullen, A. J. (Eds.), *Gerald of Wales: New Perspectives on a Medieval Writer and Critic*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2018), p.61

³³ Ibid

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ Ibid, p. 62

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ Ibid, p.63

³⁸ Ibid, p. 64

³⁹ Giraldus, *The Description*, p223

genealogies are 'written, however, in Welsh', and have been omitted due to the fact that they may seem 'more fictitious than historical'.⁴⁰ Guy speculates that Gerald's hesitation in using the Welsh genealogies 'indicates his scepticism about the reliability of texts written in the vernacular'.⁴¹ Conversely, Guy argues, Gerald considered Latin to be 'the only proper vehicle for historical truth, and vernacular texts as inherently suspicious'.⁴² Indeed, as Guy points out, by the year 1200, Latin had become the 'dominant medium' in England 'for scholarly and historical exposition', which perhaps explains his reluctance to embrace Welsh language sources.⁴³

The evidence considered in this chapter suggests that Gerald did indeed engage extensively with Welsh history in his works, even if he was not committed to writing a complete chronicle of Welsh affairs up to his own day. Instead, he was selective, choosing particular themes and topics that helped illuminate his own interests centred around interpreting and understanding the place of Wales in the wider contemporary British context that he was living in. Gerald also based much of his understanding of Welsh history on existing Latin sources, particularly the earlier Insular tradition of chronicle writing and the emerging Anglo-Norman historical consensus of his own day. However, there is little evidence that Gerald was particularly familiar with Welsh language texts and it seems that he did not trust them as sources for his works.

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ Guy (2018), p.64

⁴² Ibid, p.65

⁴³ Ibid

CHAPTER 2

GERALD AND CLASSICAL SCHOLARSHIP: THE INFLUENCE OF HIS EUROPEAN EDUCATION ON HIS CONCEPTION OF WELSH HISTORY

As one reads through Gerald's Welsh works, it becomes increasingly clear that, despite his commitment to observation from nature and writing based on the evidence of his own eyes, his work does in fact lean heavily on the education and training he acquired in Paris. In this chapter we will look at some examples of the imprint of his formal learning that we find in *The Journey* and *The Description*, and then consider what significance his intellectual background had on his engagement with Welsh history and culture.

The first example is his lively interest in animal behaviour and his tendency to draw parallels between animal and human traits. An interesting example is Gerald's apparent obsession with beavers, which he wrote about in his *Topography of Ireland* and in both *The Journey* and *The Description*. Gerald's rather startling description of the beaver was developed over a number of revisions and drew inspiration from the bestiary tradition in medieval ecclesiastical writing. Michael Faletra has traced the various iterations of Gerald's 'beaver' material and argues that this rather obscure obsession offers us a window on how Gerald 'made sense of the world around him' according to the ideas of the twelfth-century renaissance.⁴⁴

Gerald first discusses the topic of beavers in the *Topography*, which, as Faletra notes, is rather puzzling, because beavers were not found in Ireland.⁴⁵ His inclusion of this material would therefore seem to be rather a significant digression. The most significant expansion of the beaver material, however, occurred in the first recension of *The Journey* in 1191. This time the topic fits in rather better, as the beaver is found in Wales, where Gerald perhaps became familiar with their habits. In this version, Gerald includes his infamous passage on how beavers react if they are trapped by hunters and have no chance of escape—namely, biting off their own testicles in order to remove the principle objects coveted by their pursuers.⁴⁶ This sensational story, which surely cannot have been gleaned from first hand observations, can be traced to classical exemplars, including Cicero, Juvenal and Isidore of Seville, and later writers in the bestiary tradition.⁴⁷ The key point here is that he turns to established classical and ecclesiastical models to expand his material about Wales in *The Description* and *The Journey*.

Faletra argues, however, that Gerald uses the bestiary tradition in a novel and unique way in his Welsh and Irish works. As he points out, animal descriptions were intended to draw out an 'explicit moral allegory' when used in works belonging to the bestiary tradition. In the case of the beaver, the practice of self-castration is likened to the way a priest or holy man, who 'wishes to live chaste, cuts himself off from all vices and all acts of lewdness, and tosses them in the devil's face'.⁴⁸ However, Gerald 'suppresses' this moralising aspect from the bestiary tradition, leaving the reader to interpret his reasons for including it. We might conclude that he simply wished to show off his talents as a

⁴⁴ Michael Faletra, 'Giraldian Beavers: Revision and the Making of Meaning in Gerald's Early Works' in Henley, & McMullen, A. J. (Eds.), *Gerald of Wales: New Perspectives on a Medieval Writer and Critic*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2018), p.1

⁴⁵ Ibid, p.3

⁴⁶ Giraldus, *The Journey*, p.175

⁴⁷ Faletra (2018), p.6

⁴⁸ Pierre de Beauvais, *A Medieval Book of Beasts: Pierre de Beauvais's Bestiary* translated by G. R. Mermier (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), p.138

naturalist, but Faletra argues that Gerald was actually forcing the reader to 'engage with more figurative and interpretive strategies' in drawing out meaning in his 'Celtic' works.⁴⁹

Faletra offers some plausible explanations for Gerald's inclusion of the beaver passage in different contexts. In the case of the *Topography*, he notes the contrast between the industrious beavers and Gerald's description of the Irish themselves, who are 'repeatedly' accused of indigence. Furthermore, Faletra draws a parallel between the non-native, 'expatriate' beaver and Gerald, a Welshman in Ireland, speculating that Gerald was making a 'metonymical insertion of the author into the text' and that 'the clever and busy beaver may well be Gerald himself'.⁵⁰

Furthermore, Faletra argues that the beaver story is intended as an allegory or 'indirect suggestion' in the expanded version found in *The Description*. Throughout the work, Faletra notes, Gerald makes repeated references to the 'cunning and sly ingenuity of the Welsh'. In this context, according to Faletra, Gerald was drawing 'a sort of parallel between the beavers and the Welsh'.⁵¹ In other words, like the beavers, the Welsh showed considerable 'cunning' when defending themselves, something that would surely be of crucial importance to them in their struggle to survive against the Anglo-Norman assault.⁵² Whether we agree with Faletra's specific interpretation of the beaver episode or not, his assertion that Gerald strived 'not to foreclose meanings'⁵³ in his works, and that he invited the reader to find their own interpretations among the multi-focal, richly layered texts he produced, would seem to be a fruitful approach to reading and understanding *The Journey* and *The Description*.

The second example of Gerald's engagement with the intellectual trends of the day in his Welsh writings was Gerald's use of humour in his work. As Peter Jones shows in his article 'Gerald of Wales's Sense of Humour', the moral implications of humour changed radically over the course of Gerald's lifetime. In the 1140s, around the time of Gerald's birth, laughter was usually connected with the devil in written texts and works of art. By the time Gerald died in the 1220s, however, 'humour had assumed a central place in the life of both the royal court and the Church'.⁵⁴ According to Jones, Gerald believed that humour was useful when it was used to attack 'immorality'. In contrast, he believed it was 'anathema' to employ humour to mock 'serious theology' or holy objects such as saints. Indeed, he often portrayed people who laughed at holy subjects or holy property as being subjected to 'divine punishment' for their behaviour.⁵⁵ We find examples of this in his Welsh work, including the brutal deaths of a group of youths from Anglesey who had refused to pledge themselves to the crusade and were murdered 'as if by divine vengeance' the next day.⁵⁶

Gerald, Jones claims, saw himself as a 'moral satirist' in the same manner as his contemporaries, such as Nigel Wireker and, particularly, Walter Map, who specifically boasted that his stories 'penetrated to otherwise inaccessible truths'.⁵⁷ Gerald also commended satirical wit in particular figures or peoples. Indeed, he praises the witty wordplay of the Welsh poets, considering it a 'virtue' and 'admiring how their jokes voiced difficult truths and dealt with otherwise unmentionable scandals'.⁵⁸ However, as Jones notes, the Welsh and the Irish were often the targets of Gerald's wit. His humour was primarily

⁴⁹ Faletra (2018), p.6

⁵⁰ Ibid, p.7

⁵¹ Ibid, p.8

⁵² Ibid

⁵³ Ibid, p.9

⁵⁴ Peter J. A. Jones, 'Gerald of Wales's Sense of Humour' in Henley, & McMullen, A. J. (Eds.), *Gerald of Wales: New Perspectives on a Medieval Writer and Critic* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2018), p.134

⁵⁵ Ibid, p.135

⁵⁶ Giraldus, *The Journey*, p.186

⁵⁷ Ibid

⁵⁸ Ibid

'invective' in nature, 'laughing at rather than with the subject',⁵⁹ and, apparently, he found much to ridicule in the native culture of the Welsh. An example of this is the story of a knight who have birth to a calf in Wales, which Gerald included as an 'exotic curiosity' in *The Journey*.⁶⁰ Gerald also acknowledged the 'biting humour' that underpinned life at the royal court, something he personally experienced. In Gerald's view, joking worked as a 'superficial and utilitarian tool of power', and he used it to great effect in both his dealings with the king and his acts of negotiation on behalf of the crown, such as the time he met with the Lord Rhys and 'softened him up with witty words'.⁶¹ In *The Description*, when discussing the positive aspects of the Welsh, Gerald states that this type of 'persuasive humour' was one of their main strengths, claiming it in himself as 'one of his own ancestral Welsh traits'.⁶²

In addition, Gerald draws on classical precedents from Macrobius to show his readers how humour could be used to 'offer indirect censure to figures in authority'.⁶³ Interestingly, he gives a vivid example of the renowned Welsh wit to help illustrate his point, noting how the Prince Owain Cyfeiliog made a humorous allusion to Henry II's considerable appetite for appropriating church revenues by tearing a loaf of bread into pieces, communion style, and then eating them one by one, telling the king 'I'm imitating you, my lord!', when Henry asked him what he was doing. Fortunately for Owain, the monarch took this witty rebuke in good humour.⁶⁴ As Jones notes, Gerald felt that, when properly utilised, 'humour could be the best way of correcting the wrongdoings of the powerful'.⁶⁵ The episode above also sees Gerald presenting a Welsh prince as an active participant in English court life, suggesting both the independence of the Welsh (the prince is defending the revenues of the Welsh church) and, in another duality, their intertwined political relationship with their would be conquerors. Again, the examples we see here arguably demonstrate how Gerald took his classical learning, combined it with his understanding and participation in contemporary intellectual currents drawn from the ecclesiastical movement for 'moral reform', and applied the whole to his analysis of the Welsh when composing *The Journey* and *The Description*.

Gerald also betrays a rather deterministic outlook on the nature of 'national' groups in his discussion of medieval medical ideas. Owain Nash has argued that Gerald's ideas about national groups, such as the Welsh, the English, or the Irish, were based upon the ancient concept of the humours, which Nash claims formed the principal explanatory model for human behaviour in the middle ages. According to Nash, Gerald's concept of the physical body offers us 'important insights into his understanding of human behaviour'.⁶⁶ Nash points out that Gerald strongly subscribes to 'climactic theory' when explaining particular types of human behaviour, particularly the differences between the traits of geographically disparate groups.⁶⁷ In his *De Principis Instructione*, for example, he builds on hippocratic ideas to develop an original theory of the reasons for sin and heresy. The people of the East, Gerald tells us, are driven to lust by the oppressive heat, while those of the West are compelled towards avarice and greed by the coldness of the climate. The devil takes advantage of these climactic compulsions to sow discord and spread heresy among particular peoples.⁶⁸ Nash argues that Gerald's ideas 'implied a humoral body' and that this perspective led him to the belief that 'the body...was

⁵⁹ Ibid

⁶⁰ Giraldus, *The Journey*, p.88

⁶¹ Ibid, p.141

⁶² Ibid

⁶³ Ibid

⁶⁴ Ibid

⁶⁵ Ibid

⁶⁶ Ibid

⁶⁷ Ibid, p.177

⁶⁸ Ibid

fundamentally defined by its external environment'.⁶⁹ This results in an 'underlying logic' in Gerald's ethnographic thinking, based on descriptions of human behaviour in 'bodily terms' that, Nash claims, unifies Gerald's 'ethnographic' writing.⁷⁰ Of particular significance with regards to his use of climactic theory was his attribution of Trojan origins to what he regards as typical 'Welsh' characteristics in *The Description*. Gerald claims that the Welsh, as well as the French and the Romans, all derived a confident, assertive style of speech from their origins in 'hot' Troy, in contrast to the 'halting and slow' speech of the English and Germans, a result of the cold environment in their ancestral homelands.⁷¹ Indeed, we find similar ideas in Gerald's Welsh works. In *The Description*, Gerald spuriously claims that the Welsh have an apparent tendency towards 'sodomy' due to their Trojan origins, while *The Journey* describes a supposed predilection towards lust in the inhabitants of 'hot', Eastern lands. Nash argues that Gerald therefore 'consistently links lust with warmth'.⁷²

Gerald also claims, as Nash points out, that the Welsh were much affected by their diet. In *The Description*, he emphasises the 'extremes' of 'both the Welsh character...and [their] diet'. With regards to their eating habits, Gerald found them disposed towards both 'frugality and gluttony', with little middle ground in between. As a healthy body depended upon 'balance' of the four humours, such 'extremes in consumption' inevitably led, in Gerald's eyes, to 'extremes in behaviour' on the part of the Welsh.⁷³ Moreover, Gerald specifically links the dietary habits of the Welsh with what he considered to be their 'primitive' level of economic development. In *The Description* Gerald identifies pastoralism as their main economic mode of production. He connects this primarily to their diet, which Gerald claimed was based on 'less bread and more meat' than their neighbours, and to what he perceived as their 'economic inactivity'.⁷⁴ According to Nash, the point Gerald wanted to make was that the Welsh diet tied together the 'production and consumption of food', whereas the urban city dwellers in England had much greater 'control' over their diet and were therefore 'better able to balance the humours'.⁷⁵

The examples we have considered in this chapter demonstrate the strong influence of classical learning on Gerald's approach to social and cultural topics. He is naturally curious and seems to view the world in an organic or naturalistic fashion. In seeking out answers for what he perceives to be interesting or striking phenomenon, he tends to turn to classical models or covertly moralistic methods of interpretation closely modelled on the exemplars he would have become intimately familiar with during his years of study in the Paris university and other ecclesiastical institutions of learning. However, as Michael Faletra's works on 'Geraldian beavers' in particular shows, there is a strongly allegorical, hidden aspect to Gerald's work that suggests a potentially much deeper, more personal, motive for some of the more bewildering passages in his works.

⁶⁹ Ibid

⁷⁰ Ibid, p.181

⁷¹ Ibid

⁷² Nash, p.181

⁷³ Nash, p.182

⁷⁴ Giraldus, *The Description*, p.233

⁷⁵ Ibid

CHAPTER 3

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AND RESISTANCE: THE IMPORTANCE OF GERALD'S DUAL ORIGINS IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF HIS WELSH WORKS

As we have already seen, there are aspects of Gerald's work that might better be termed 'ethnography' rather than history. However, we should first consider what we mean in using this term. According to the Oxford Dictionary of Etymology, the word can be traced back to the Greek, combining the terms 'people' or 'nation', referring to a large collective group, and the expression 'to write'.⁷⁶ In modern usage, this is generally taken to mean writing about the social or cultural habits of a particular 'collective', or defined group of people, what we usually now refer to as a 'nation'. In an academic context, Anthony Harrison lists several definitions offered by scholars over the past few decades, which range in complexity from 'the task of describing a particular culture' through to a 'theory of description'.⁷⁷ Importantly, according to Harrison, ethnography refers to a process of both 'research and inscription'. It involves a 'methodology' that Harrison describes as involving 'participant-observation', meaning an observer doing research in a particular community, combined with a written description, the end product of the research, which is referred to as an 'ethnography'.⁷⁸ While the word may seem out of place in the Church-dominated intellectual life of the medieval period, it is worth noting that several Roman writers, most notably Caesar, had written what we might term 'ethnographic' tracts and that the practice underwent something of a revival in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

Shirin Khanmohamadi has written extensively on this subject, particularly with regards to what she terms 'border ethnography', and she singles out Gerald as 'the most important border [writer] of the Celtic periphery, and among the most important ethnographers of the medieval period'.⁷⁹ Khanmohamadi goes on to credit Gerald with 'reviving the classical genre of ethnography...for the medieval period' in *The Description*, noting how it focuses on the customs and habits of a single people, the Welsh, in a way that was novel in the post-Roman world.⁸⁰ Khanmohamadi describes *The Description* as an 'ethnographic monograph', suggesting it was both a revival of the Latin exemplars of antiquity, 'not seen in the West for over a thousand years', and something innovative and new for the middle ages⁸¹. The novelty found in *The Description* raises an important question, according to Khanmohamadi: what compelled Gerald to produce a 'full blown ethnographic monograph...seemingly ex nihilo'?⁸²

Before we consider Khanmohamadi's explanation for Gerald's 'ethnographic monograph' though, we might well question whether she is being somewhat disingenuous in her analysis. It is surely a matter of debate whether Gerald's work truly qualifies as 'ethnography'. As we have seen, modern scholarship generally considers ethnography to be composed of both 'participation' and 'written production' based on methodological research. We are therefore compelled to ask: Did Gerald really 'participate' in native Welsh culture to any significant extent? And did he actually carry out any recognisable 'ethnographic research' prior to the completion of his works? With regards to participation, the evidence suggests that Gerald's experience of native Welsh culture was somewhat haphazard. He was born in Wales and had Welsh ancestry, but he grew up in the Marches and his education was an international affair, taking him far from his roots to the academic ferment of Paris.

⁷⁶ *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Etymology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p.256

⁷⁷ Anthony Harrison, *Ethnography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p.5

⁷⁸ Ibid

⁷⁹ Shirin Khanmohamadi, *In light of Another's Word : European Ethnography in the Middle Ages* (First Edition) (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), p. 37 <https://doi.org/10.9783/9780812208979>

⁸⁰ Ibid, p.38

⁸¹ Ibid

⁸² Ibid

His background also resulted in a skewed focus and imbalanced pool of knowledge based around South Wales, particularly St Davids, the site of his clerical ambitions. We should also recognise that the majority of Gerald's direct dealings with Wales were framed by his career in the Church. *The Journey* is a perfect example of this. The book contains many observations and remarks about contemporary Wales, but they are generally brief impressions, glimpses taken and anecdotes snatched from the saddle as he and the Archbishop's entourage passed through. The wider focus of *The Journey* was on the spiritual drive to recruit bodies for the crusades, spearheaded by the Church at Canterbury and the English crown. Gerald's total experience of Welsh culture surely falls rather short of 'participation' as understood by modern ethnographers. As for research and methodology, we should concede that medieval writers worked to a very different set of standards to those we are used to today. However, it seems clear when reading Gerald's 'Welsh' works that much of his writing is not based on any significant level of analysis of his subject. As we have noted, his 'ethnography' is heavily focused on certain areas, mainly based around churches and religious sites. He also draws heavily, and rather uncritically, on other writers in his work, most notably Gildas and Geoffrey of Monmouth, somewhat rehashing common preconceptions about the Welsh and their history, focusing heavily on the Matter of Britain. Most significantly, there is a lack of native Welsh voices in Gerald's work. Gerald's level of understanding of the Welsh language is a matter of debate, but there is little discussion of specific encounters with locals or their characteristic ways of speaking or thinking. Moreover, Gerald arguably shows little appreciation of contemporary Welsh culture as it was in his day, relying heavily instead on stereotypes and preconceptions he had picked up through his extensive reading and literary endeavours.

We might also take issue with Khanmohamadi's easy characterisation of Gerald as a writer of the 'Celtic periphery'. As Caoimhin De Barra has pointed out in his recent work on Celtic identity, the notion that early Ireland and Britain were inhabited by ethnically homogenous 'Celts' has come under 'increasing attack' by scholars in recent decades.⁸³ Malcolm Chapman was among the first to challenge the idea of an ancient 'Celtic' culture, pointing out that the very name was originally a label used by the Greeks and Romans to refer to the 'barbarous hordes' on the edge of the 'civilised' world. According to Chapman this practice of labelling peripheral peoples as 'Celtic' was continued as a key aspect of the English colonial mentality, with the concept of 'the Celts' being projected onto the Welsh and Irish peoples, until eventually the Welsh, Irish and Scots actually adopted the term as a label of empowerment and self-identity during the Romantic age, despite a 'somewhat tenuous' link to the peripheral peoples that inhabited ancient Britain.⁸⁴ Archeologists such as Simon James have also expressed skepticism about the idea of a cohesive, unified 'Celtic' society in early British history.⁸⁵ They point to an absence of material evidence for the arrival of a new culture in ancient Britain and consequently question the assumption that Welsh, Scottish and Irish people are the descendants of 'ancient Celts'. As De Barra observes, the idea of a Celtic identity 'clearly exists today, but what exactly is meant by Celtic...remain[s] ambiguous'.⁸⁶ Furthermore, to describe Gerald as an 'ethnographer' of the 'Celtic periphery', when his work was clearly part of the Anglo-Norman literary tradition, would seem to be rather inaccurate. That said, it is clear that the Welsh, as well as the Irish and the Scots, viewed themselves as distinct from the English in medieval times, particularly with regards to their language, literature, customs and laws. We might therefore argue that 'Celtic' is perhaps a useful term for defining the peoples of the British Isles that did not subscribe to English customs and norms. However, we should also recognise that it is still a problematic term and that its uncritical application to peoples in medieval Britain should be avoided.

⁸³ Caoimhin De Barra, *The Coming of the Celts* (Paris: University of Notre Dame Press, 2018), p.15

⁸⁴ Malcolm Chapman, *The Celts: The Construction of the Modern Myth* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), p.21

⁸⁵ Simon James, *The Atlantic Celts* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1999), p. 59

⁸⁶ De Barra (2018), p. 17

We can surely agree with Khanmohamadi, though, that Gerald's work was unique for medieval times in terms of its length and its attempt to offer a comprehensive picture of the Welsh people. As such, it was indeed innovative and has elements of a proto-ethnographic tract. Khanmohamadi finds the answer to its startling appearance in a cultural interpretation of both the work itself and the personal circumstances of the author. She characterises Gerald's work as 'salvage anthropology', which she describes as 'an improvised, textual response to the perceived threat of cultural loss of traditional Welsh byways'.⁸⁷ She claims that Wales was a 'contact zone', subject to 'colonial incursion', a space of 'dynamic, uneasy, and often asymmetrical colonial encounters that allow for new, dialogically derived cultural understandings and subjectivities'.⁸⁸

Khanmohamadi then goes on to present her central thesis: that Gerald's work should be regarded as an 'early form' of 'autoethnography'. She claims that *The Description* is 'bilingual', in so much as it employs 'two contradictory' cultural 'languages', Anglo-Norman and Welsh, which 'undermines the stability of metropolitan or colonial viewpoints'.⁸⁹ She identifies what she calls Gerald's 'signature ambivalence' right at the beginning of *The Description* when he identifies Wales as his own country, 'nostra', while almost in the same breath declaring his Anglo-Norman allegiance by characterising the Welsh and their ways as 'alien' and 'utterly different from other peoples'.⁹⁰ This idea of difference from Anglo-Norman norms is predicated on the foundations of the 'developmental anthropology' that formed part of Gerald's 'metropolitan' training.⁹¹ However, Gerald then goes on to 'disrupt' this viewpoint by selectively appropriating 'powerfully resonant native Welsh themes' in a 'double discourse' of opposed 'languages and functions'.⁹²

In the first book of *The Description*, for example, Gerald quickly draws attention to the uncivil nature of the Welsh.⁹³ As Khanmohamadi puts it, Gerald 'follows the barbarian script' in pointing out the 'inexplicable ferocity' of the Welsh in battle, a stock depiction of marginal peoples found in other 'border ethnographies' of the twelfth century.⁹⁴ Moreover, he goes on to present a 'primitive' picture of Welsh economic activities in accordance with the strictures of 'classical developmental anthropology' and Anglo-Norman ideas of what constitutes 'civil' life. He describes how the Welsh generally survive on milk and meat instead of bread⁹⁵, which according to Khanmohamadi is 'shorthand' for a pastoral, less 'developed' mode of economic organisation.⁹⁶ The habitats of Welsh people are also put forward by Gerald as further evidence of their 'incivility'. He describes how the Welsh, along with other Celtic peoples, make their homes in or near 'open pastures and forests'. According to Gerald, the Welsh 'do not live in towns, villages or castles, but lead a solitary existence deep in the woods'.⁹⁷ Khanmohamadi claims that in this passage Gerald characterises the Welsh as 'antisocial' and describes them 'almost solely on the basis of what they do not do'. He is therefore making an 'implicit comparison' with the town and stone oriented model of contemporary Anglo-Norman life and finds the Welsh left wanting in their 'crude' way of living.⁹⁸ Gerald also finds fault in the political life of the Welsh. Although Gerald is not unique in this regard, he finds the absence of centralised authority in the person of a single king to be a major weakness and even recommends

⁸⁷ Ibid

⁸⁸ Ibid

⁸⁹ Khanmohamadi (2014), p.40

⁹⁰ Ibid

⁹¹ Ibid

⁹² Ibid

⁹³ Giraldus, *The Description*, p.233

⁹⁴ Khanmohamadi (2014), p.41

⁹⁵ Giraldus, *The Description*, p.233

⁹⁶ Ibid

⁹⁷ Giraldus, *The Description*, p.251

⁹⁸ Khanmohamadi (2014), p.42

against it in the second part of *The Description*. Moreover, Gerald sees significance in the importance of kinship structures in the lives of Welsh people, noting the 'fractious effects' of Welsh partible inheritance near the end of his book.⁹⁹

Another major point of difference in Wales from the mores of Anglo-Norman society, as presented in the *The Description*, was the 'blood feud', which Gerald claimed was still widespread in Welsh life at the time he was writing. According to Khanmohamadi, 'the blood feud...signalled utter disorder and violence' and stood in stark contrast to the legal precedents of English Royal justice. However, Gerald was surely mistaken in characterising medieval Wales as a semi-barbaric society ruled by a form of tribal custom. The laws of Hywel Dda, which were eventually written down as legal texts and survive in thirteenth century manuscripts, included provisions to regulate the blood feud and increased the capacity of Welsh rulers to intervene in the dispensation of justice. Wales, therefore, despite its somewhat fragmented political nature, had 'a goodly measure of legal unity' and its provisions were so well established that the English crown had long recognised its 'unitary and distinct character', which held force throughout Wales and the Marches. As R.R.Davies notes, by Gerald's time 'Welsh law had been converted into a potent symbol of Welsh national identity'.¹⁰⁰

Gerald was clearly highly critical of the country of his birth. Indeed, he seems to view Wales in a similar manner to other Anglo-Norman observers of the era and according to Khanmohamadi, *The Description* therefore seems to function in a rather conventional way 'as a work of colonial ethnography'.¹⁰¹ Khanmohamadi notes that this interpretation is supported by the fact that it was written in Latin, presumably for a mainly Anglo-Norman audience, and was also dedicated to the Archbishop of Canterbury, Stephen Langton. Gerald even offers advice on how the Normans might conquer and govern the Welsh in the last part of the book, further strengthening the argument that his work was that of a 'native informer', buttressing and reinforcing the colonial assumptions of the invaders.¹⁰²

In the next part of her analysis, however, Khanmohamadi points out other aspects of Gerald's work that 'overtly challenge' the Anglo-Norman point of view and, instead, champion the Welsh perspective.¹⁰³ This suggests exactly the opposite with regards to Gerald's purposes and where his loyalties lay. For instance, Gerald follows up his blueprint for the conquest of the Welsh with another chapter offering advice on how they might resist the Normans and frustrate the plans of the invaders.¹⁰⁴ She claims that this is evidence of a 'duality of perspective' that puts Gerald in a difficult position between 'two seemingly opposing states'. It results, she says, in an uneasy 'hybridity' that characterises the entire work¹⁰⁵, noting how Gerald counters his earlier criticisms of Welsh life and customs by adopting a 'radically different voice emerging out of the Welsh's own mythic narratives of resistance and redemption'.¹⁰⁶ In particular, Gerald closes the book with the words of the old man of Pencader, who answers the king's question about the prospects of the Anglo-Norman invasion 'in the language of Welsh political redemption'.¹⁰⁷

Khanmohamadi goes on to claim that the 'very composition' of *The Description* was 'an intervention in the colonialist agenda' during a time of increasing Anglo-Norman acculturation, 'an improvised,

⁹⁹ Giraldus, *The Description*, p.273

¹⁰⁰ Khanmohamadi (2014) p.43; R. R. Davies, *The Age of Conquest* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.18

¹⁰¹ Ibid

¹⁰² Ibid; Giraldus, *The Description*, pp.271-72

¹⁰³ Khanmohamadi (2014), p.44

¹⁰⁴ Giraldus, *The Description*, pp.273-74

¹⁰⁵ Khanmohamadi (2014), p.44

¹⁰⁶ Ibid

¹⁰⁷ Ibid

textual response to the perceived need for cultural salvage against colonial incursion'.¹⁰⁸ It was, she says, a call to 'preserve' traditional Welsh culture against 'the ravages of modernity and acculturation'. In addition, she points out that Gerald shows an uncharacteristically romantic 'sentimentality' in carrying out his self-appointed task of salvage, stating to his audience that he wished to 'rescue from oblivion' the deeds and customs of the Welsh.¹⁰⁹ Gerald's commitment to 'cultural salvage', says Khanmohamadi, betrays a 'canny 'autoethnographic' consciousness'.¹¹⁰ In the words of Pratt, autoethnography 'selectively appropriates some tools of objectification...to counter objectification'.¹¹¹ Gerald, in other words, was engaged in a conscious act of resistance in an attempt to 'disrupt colonial discourse'.¹¹² As a result, Khanmohamadi says, Gerald frequently 'confounds' his audience, producing a text full of seeming contradictions and bewildering about faces.¹¹³ However, it is this capacity to confound that constitutes a 'central and defining feature' of autoethnography. It is a 'mixing' of 'colonial and native perspectives' that undermines the metropolitan assumptions by joining 'in a complex, mutually defining, dialogue' with them.¹¹⁴ Put another way, Anglo-Norman colonial encroachment was not a one way act of straight forward destruction. Coloniser and colonised were 'brought together' and each party changed and influenced the other. Rather than wiping out Welsh traditions of the past, the invaders incorporated those traditions into their own self-perceptions and teleological narratives in order to gain legitimacy.¹¹⁵ *The Description*, then, according to the ethnographic viewpoint, is part of a wider 'dialogic engagement with ethnographic others'¹¹⁶ on the part of the Anglo-Normans that apparently characterised the period in which Gerald was writing. As part of his project Gerald, according to Khanmohamadi, displays the 'sly civility' of colonial mimicry. He paints a 'still life' of Welsh customs in order to 'arrest' their acculturation.¹¹⁷

As we have already mentioned, however, the degree to which Gerald truly understood Welsh customs and culture is open to question. Khanmohamadi's rather sanguine view of Gerald's 'salvation' of Welsh society from Anglo-Norman initiated 'oblivion' seems to minimise and excuse the rather derogatory picture Gerald paints of Welsh people in large chunks of his Welsh works and beyond, as well as his rather thin appreciation of (some might say rather scant regard for) contemporary native Welsh culture as it existed in his own day. On the contrary, we might argue that it is overstating Gerald's importance for Wales and considerably twisting the truth to claim, as Khanmohamadi does, that Gerald was championing or genuinely attempting to 'rescue' Welsh culture. We might argue that Gerald was really trying to rescue his own conception of Welsh culture, his own idea of what Wales and Welsh people represented or should aspire to be, which was rooted in the distant and 'heroic' Trojan/Brittonic past and, to some degree, far removed from the reality of twelfth-century Wales.

Rather than being in a moribund state waiting for the death blow from the English king, however, Wales was a hugely dynamic place in the middle ages. Despite the Norman incursions and the growth of English power, the rulers and princely courts of Wales developed a brilliant and rich native culture that was long obscured by the devastating effects of the Edwardian conquest. In recent decades, however, scholars of Welsh history have begun rediscovering and exploring much of the cultural milieu of medieval Wales, allowing us to fully appreciate the depth of Welsh cultural achievements during a time when, according to certain colonial theorists such as Khanmohamadi, and seemingly in

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, p.45

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, p.46

¹¹⁰ Ibid, p.47

¹¹¹ Mary Louise Pratt, 'Field Work in Common Places' in James Clifford and George Marcus (Eds.) *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p.33

¹¹² Khanmohamadi (2014), p.47

¹¹³ Ibid

¹¹⁴ Ibid, p.48

¹¹⁵ Ibid, p.49

¹¹⁶ Ibid

¹¹⁷ Ibid

the eyes of Gerald himself, Welsh customs and byways were apparently teetering on the edge of extinction.

The most obvious expression of this cultural richness was the work of the poets of the princes, some of which has survived in manuscript form through to the modern era. The poets played an important role in a sophisticated Welsh courtly life and helped to legitimate and underpin the power of Welsh rulers. Their compositions often evoked the 'Brittonic' Welsh past and included prophecies of Welsh resurgence in the face of foreign conquest. However, more significantly, as noted by Huw Pryce, the works of the poets 'could accommodate different emphases' and often used the past to address contemporary matters and concerns in their own Welsh regions. As Pryce argues, the poets drew on a complex shared mythology to praise the princes, particularly by tracing their royal genealogy, or to sing encouragement 'before a princely war band', helping to rally martial strength amidst the bloodily competitive arena of medieval Welsh political life. They also helped forge a sense of 'national' unity through their ability to make both imaginary and actual tours around Wales, some of them enjoying the patronage of multiple Welsh kings or princes.¹¹⁸ Language and literature were potent 'badges' of national identity, a fact recognised by the Lord Rhys of Deheubarth, who was famous for his cultivation of the literary arts. His assembly of poets at Cardigan in 1176, which Gerald obviously did not attend, was the forerunner of the Eisteddfod, which has become such an important part of Welsh cultural identity. Crucially, however, we also find poets composing works asserting the ancient liberties of leading kin groups in response to 'intrusive princely power'.¹¹⁹ The unitary, utilitarian and sometimes agitating nature of medieval Welsh poetry suggests a thriving social and cultural life in medieval Wales that belies the passive, static image presented by numerous later commentators and theorists.

Another important aspect of medieval Welsh culture was the thriving cultural life of Welsh abbeys and the considerable literary output produced by the scriptoriums within their walls. There was what Pryce describes as an 'efflorescence' of sacred writing in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, focusing particularly on the lives of the Welsh saints.¹²⁰ *The Book of Llandaff* and other manuscripts contain significant collections of Lives composed during that time. This resurgence in the production of *Vitae Sanctorum* in a Welsh context was connected to a revival in the cults of saints stimulated by the ongoing changes to ecclesiastical organisation in Wales in the wake of the Norman conquest. *The Life of Saint David* by Rhygyfarch is one important example, which was most likely composed to counter the erosion of the importance of the Cathedral of Saint David's and reassert its primacy in Church life in Wales. However, the production of such Lives demonstrates a strong awareness of the Welsh past and exhibits 'distinctive characteristics deriving from a particular historical culture' based in Wales.¹²¹ In other words, these religious texts were a continuation of a longstanding Welsh tradition of producing sacred writings based on Welsh church figures.

In addition to sacred writings, there was also a significant body of chronicle and historical writing in Wales in the centuries preceding the Edwardian conquest that narrated recent history and contemporary events, focusing particularly on the deeds of Welsh rulers. One important example is the *Life of Gruffudd ap Cynan*, which was produced sometime around the mid-twelfth century. The place of composition of the text is a matter of scholarly contention, but the text is significant both for being the sole 'near-contemporary biography' of a Welsh ruler to survive and for its accounts of native Welsh oral historical traditions that have since been lost to us.¹²² Perhaps the most significant chronicles to survive, however, are the *Annales Cambriae* and the *Brut y Tywysogyon*. Pryce notes that these texts 'continued the St David's tradition represented by the Harleian chronicle that ended in

¹¹⁸ Davies (2000), p.17

¹¹⁹ Pryce (2022), p.37

¹²⁰ Ibid, p.38

¹²¹ Ibid

¹²² Ibid, p.40

954', and therefore provide us with a native account of Welsh history that was produced in both Welsh and Latin versions.¹²³ Although they betray elements of Galfridian influence, being viewed by many as picking up where Geoffrey's history of the Britons concluded, they stand as important monuments to the continuation of native Welsh historical writing in the era between the Norman and Edwardian invasions.

The 'autoethnographic' interpretation of Gerald's Welsh writings offers an interesting and useful way of approaching the complex and contradictory nature of his work. It correctly stresses Gerald's use of multiple viewpoints, a characteristic trait of medieval historiography in Khanmohamadi's view, and makes a persuasive argument for a 'coexistence of countervailing, opposing truths' in Gerald's writing.¹²⁴ We may also agree that Gerald consciously chose to provide his readers with 'partial gazes' of Welsh reality and that Gerald's 'ethnic dualism' heightened his commitment to such an approach.¹²⁵ However, in seeking out examples of Gerald's 'relational' view of the truth, proponents of an 'autoethnographic' reading of his work underplay or present disingenuous solutions for Gerald's often hostile and derogatory claims about medieval Welsh society. In addition, they have a tendency to perpetuate a misleading and negative image of medieval Welsh culture, as something static and even backward, in keeping with the progressive narrative of history underpinning the intellectual and political milieu in which Gerald was an active participant. By contrast, Wales was a dynamic place, undergoing processes of profound change while retaining many elements of its traditional culture that made it a unique and distinct community. While Gerald clearly appreciated certain aspects of 'Welsh' character and society, he was arguably a little too detached and critical to fully appreciate the cultural richness and significant achievements that characterised Welsh life in the twelfth century.

¹²³ Ibid

¹²⁴ Khanmohamadi (2014), p.51

¹²⁵ Ibid

CHAPTER 4

HYBRIDITY AND 'DIFFICULT MIDDLES': GERALD'S FRACTURED SENSE OF 'IDENTITY'

Gerald strikes us as almost unique in terms of medieval writers from the British Isles on account of his complex and somewhat atypical background. He had royal Welsh ancestry through his grandmother, which he was ostensibly very proud of, but he grew to manhood in the Marches. He acquired his university education far from home in Paris, surrounded by the stimulating intellectual atmosphere of scholasticism. Later he would enjoy a conspicuous career, working as a cleric at the English royal court in the very heart of English state affairs, before pursuing a role in the Church and embarking on his famous career as a writer. He was at once a Marcher, a 'Welshman', a cleric, a man of letters, a devout citizen of European Christendom and above all an original, ambitious and independent thinker. All these different elements and experiences that make him such a fascinating individual must have been constantly competing within him for primacy.

Gerald's supposed struggles to reconcile all these conflicting aspects of his selfhood have been commented on and analysed by countless scholars, some of whom we have already heard from in this study. One of the most recent attempts to penetrate to the 'truth' of the Geraldian enigma is that of Jeffrey Cohen, who writes in his book-length study that Gerald wrestled with a 'fractured sense of self'¹²⁶ and was, in effect, tortured by a twisted knot of incompatible loyalties. Drawing on post-colonial theories, Cohen claims that Gerald had a problem of 'identity' that permeated his works and underpinned much of his outlook. Cohen claims that 'identity' was something far less secure in twelfth-century society as compared to the supposedly more fixed sense of self, generally bounded in national terms, that many people take for granted today. Cohen argues that medieval individuals, particularly members of the literate, higher echelons, such as Gerald, often had multiple identities available to them, from which they could pick and choose according to the circumstances.¹²⁷ However, Cohen also concedes that cultural boundaries between collective groups were essentially fixed in medieval Britain, at least from the point of view of the elites. Firm lines of belonging had been created, particularly by the hegemonic Anglo-Norman state that would go on to become the English nation. This somewhat double-edged description of medieval identity invokes a striking sense of ambiguity and uncertainty. As the majority of Cohen's book makes abundantly clear, there is no absolute 'truth' when we consider the question of identity during medieval times, and in the experience of Gerald of Wales in particular. Identity is something elusive, always shifting and defying categorisation, a fluid label that is infinitely mutable.¹²⁸

However, before we consider Cohen's analysis of Gerald's 'struggles' in more detail, it is worth asking exactly what we mean by 'identity'. As Euryon Rhys Roberts has commented in a recent study of medieval Wales, the term 'identity', indeed the very concept, 'defies easy definition', despite the fact that it is confidently deployed by scholars in almost every academic study pertaining to culture or history from the medieval period through to modern times.¹²⁹ In recent decades, however, historians and cultural commentators have gradually begun to challenge this assumption of the transparent, self-explanatory nature of 'identity'. Philip Gleason was one of the first scholars to trace the use of the term in a landmark study, 'Identifying Identity: A Semantic History', in the early 1980s. Gleason credits the American academic Erik H. Erikson with developing and popularising the modern usage of the word, as well as coining the phrase 'identity crisis', which is so often used by commentators when

¹²⁶ Jeffrey Cohen, *Hybridity, Identity and Monstrosity in Medieval Britain: On Difficult Middles* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p.1

¹²⁷ Ibid, p.79

¹²⁸ Ibid, p.80

¹²⁹ Euryon Rhys Roberts, 'A Surfeit of Identity? Regional Solidarities, Welsh Identity and the Idea of Britain', in Pleszczyński, Andrzej (Ed.), *Imagined Communities: Constructing Collective Identities in Medieval Europe* (Leiden: Brill Press, 2018), p.249

discussing Gerald of Wales.¹³⁰ Erikson's attempts to define 'identity', however, were still somewhat tenuous. He describes it, somewhat vaguely, as 'a process "located" in the core of the individual and yet also in the core of his communal culture'.¹³¹ In other words, according to Gleason's interpretation, 'identity involves an interaction between the interior development of the individual personality...and the growth of a sense of selfhood that arises from participating in society'.¹³² This suggests that 'identity' has two aspects, one psychological and the other sociological, which led to competing interpretations of the concept. Gleason argues that these two approaches significantly diverged as to whether identity was to be conceived as 'something internal that persists through change' or as 'something ascribed from without that changes according to circumstance'. According to Gleason, Erikson places primacy on the 'elements of interiority and continuity' of the psychological aspect. Sociologists, however, 'view identity as an artefact of interaction between the individual and society'.¹³³ In other words, 'identity' is about the designation and 'internalisation' of a label or name, and behaving in accordance with its attendant 'prescriptions'.

Richard Handler, in a more recent study, has added to the debate initiated by Gleason. Handler takes a more skeptical view and argues that we should be 'suspicious' of the term 'identity', just as modern scholarship is careful when employing other terms, such as 'culture' or 'nation'. He sees the concept of 'identity' as something 'peculiar to the modern Western world' that should not be used 'as a neutral conceptual tool'.¹³⁴ Identity, just as culture, is not something fixed or fundamental according to Handler. Collective groups 'are not bounded objects in the natural world', rather they are 'symbolic processes that emerge and dissolve in particular contexts of action'. In other words, 'identity' is something continually negotiated and adapted, and, as Handler puts it, 'groups do not have essential identities'.¹³⁵ Handler also claims that 'Western' ideas about 'collectivity' are based on 'individualist metaphors', conceiving social groups to be 'human individuals writ large' and ascribing them with the 'boundedness...and homogeneity' generally reserved for individual people. He also criticises Gleason and the American sociological tradition for applying their own conception of 'identity' uncritically to societies and social groups in the medieval or other historical periods.¹³⁶

Benedict Anderson has also made a contribution to the discussion of identity by offering 'in an anthropological spirit' his definition of a 'nation', namely 'an imagined political community - and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign'.¹³⁷ It is 'imagined', Anderson contends, because the members of the nation will never meet most of their compatriots, but in each exists 'the image of their communion'. It is imagined as 'limited' because it is encompassed by 'finite boundaries' that separates it from wider mankind. It is imagined as 'sovereign' due to its emergence in an era of 'Enlightenment and Revolution' which tore down the divinely-ordained, hierarchical system of the more distant past.¹³⁸ 'Nations dream of being free', Anderson argues, and '[t]he gage and emblem of this freedom is the sovereign state'. Lastly, the nation is imagined as a 'community', a 'deep, horizontal comradeship', despite the reality of 'inequality and exploitation' contained within it. As Anderson puts it, this is the reason why 'so many millions of people...[are] willing to die for such limited

¹³⁰ Philip Gleason, 'Identifying Identity: A Semantic History', *The Journal of American History* 69, No. 4 (1983), pp. 910-931; Erik H. Erikson, *Identity, Youth and Crisis* (New York: Norton Company, 1968)

¹³¹ Erikson (1968), p.77

¹³² Gleason (1983), p.920

¹³³ Ibid, p.922

¹³⁴ Richard Handler, 'Is "Identity" a Useful Cross-Cultural Concept?', in Gillis, John R. (Ed.), *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), p. 27

¹³⁵ Ibid, p.33

¹³⁶ Ibid, p.35

¹³⁷ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2nd Edition (London: Verso, 1991), pp.5-6

¹³⁸ Ibid, p.6

imaginings'.¹³⁹ A recent study on the 'construction' of identity in medieval Europe also attempts to define the concept. Andrzej Pleszczyński and his colleagues note that societies are created by the past 'not only materially, but also ideologically'. They claim that 'identity' should be understood as a 'consciousness factor' that actually connects people, but also as a 'label', used by an author or observer, which 'defines an imagined group'. They acknowledge Anderson's previous work on the subject in their arguments, but extend his approach beyond the 'nation' and apply it to 'all larger human groups'.¹⁴⁰

'Identity', as the debate above shows, is not something easily defined. However, the idea of the 'construction' of an 'imagined community' is arguably a very useful one when we consider the historical situation in the British Isles in the twelfth century. Gerald was writing in an era of considerable turbulence, characterised by almost continuous change and successive acts of struggle and conquest. In earlier centuries, insular writers such as Gildas and Bede had pioneered the idea of the 'Britons' and the 'Anglo-Saxons', respectively, as homogeneous peoples with unique and recognisable histories of their own. As Cohen points out, according to the focused interpretation of history that developed from these beginnings and grew in importance in the centuries that followed, 'no middle space was allowed' and particular groups of people were increasingly designated as 'separate', divided into 'desired absolutes' such as 'Briton', 'Anglo-Saxon', 'English', 'Welsh', 'Norman', 'Christian' or 'Heathen'. The twelfth century was particularly important in this regard, according to Cohen, as it saw the English community reconsolidating after the disruption of the Norman invasion and a 'hardening' of English attitudes towards neighbouring peoples. There was the emergence of an increasing focus on 'ethnic' difference in addition to religious difference. Such 'difference' was found in the customs of particular peoples and even in physical characteristics.

A key question in understanding and appreciating Gerald's work therefore emerges: Where did Gerald position himself in the midst of all this bewildering flux and change? Do we find evidence of him subscribing to a particular side? I would argue that Gerald unquestionably projects a strong sense of self-possession in his work and is often keen to stress his elevated background to his readers, particularly with regards to his family bloodline and ancestry. This strong feeling of pride in his past suggests that Gerald had a definite sense of where he was from, regardless of whether, from a modern critical perspective, his self-identification was based on subscribing to and 'internalising' an 'imagined community'. Gerald was certainly extremely proud of his Marcher family roots, and it is this background that he often turns to when discussing questions of personal belonging or family history. Gerald includes many anecdotes from the Marches in his works and is keen to stress the starring role of his kinsmen in the conquest of Ireland in the *Topographica Hibernica*. However, we might argue that it is precisely his self-identification with the contested Marcher region that perhaps led to a lingering sense of doubt regarding the true authenticity of his self-perception. Just as any nation or group, as we have seen, is largely 'constructed' or imaginary, so Gerald's place of 'belonging', his sense of where he was from, his idea of 'home' created and defined by him, was constantly challenged and overrun by the realities of the society in which he lived.

Gerald also seemed to willingly embrace his Welsh heritage when choosing the name 'Giraldus Cambrensis', or Gerald of Wales, by which he would become known to history. His choice is clearly significant. He would surely have had other choices available to him in Latin, but he decided to use a historical term for the Welsh lands that stemmed from the Insular tradition of British history writing, a tradition that placed an emphasis on the heroic Romano-Arthurian past with regards to Welsh affairs. We might question his motivations for doing this. He may have been consciously signifying his kinship with the Welsh people, recognising his origins in the extinct royal line of Deheubarth. However, it is equally plausible, if not more likely, that Gerald chose the name due to its historic and heroic

¹³⁹ Ibid, p.7

¹⁴⁰ Pleszczyński, Andrzej. et al,(Eds.), *Imagined Communities: Constructing Collective Identities in Medieval Europe* (Leiden: Brill Press, 2018), pp.3-4

connotations to add a sense of gravity to his literary persona, while his true self-identification remained with the March that made him. As with much of his work, I would argue that it was often personal ambition, more than national loyalty, that underpinned many of Gerald's actions.

According to Cohen, twelfth-century Britain left 'little room...for some medial space' such as the Welsh March continually evoked by Gerald. However, the March undeniably existed, becoming 'a difficult middle' in Cohen's designation. It was an area, he tells us, where identities, like political boundaries, had yet to be firmly established. As a result, Cohen argues, Gerald was actively trying to 'fix' his identity, seeking solid ground in which to place roots for himself and his social milieu.¹⁴¹ Cohen points out that Gerald used the word 'Marchia' in his works to refer to his homeland, and how he often implied a 'sense of distinction' for the 'Marchers', whom he referred to as 'our people', particularly in contrast to the English, the Normans, or even the Welsh. His reference to 'our people' suggests he saw his principal audience to be among the land holders of the March. As a result, rather than fully embracing his Welsh roots, he remains ambivalent, frequently writing of the Welsh people as a group 'set apart', or even as a barbaric race. As we have seen, he writes in similarly denigrating terms about the English, and often finds fault in the behaviour of the Normans.¹⁴²

In Cohen's view, Gerald was seeking to emphasise the singular nature of the Marchers and to establish a firm sense of their separate identity and destiny. However, his efforts were undermined by the hostility of his English contemporaries, who, Cohen claims, would have been innately opposed to such a 'radical' and 'troubling' assertion of a separate status for the Anglo-Norman settlers in the English-Welsh border lands. This situation, according to Cohen, accounts for the ambiguity and multiplicity of belongings found in Gerald's works.¹⁴³ While Benedict Anderson and other commentators, as we have seen, consider large communities and nations to be 'acts of imagination', seemingly suggesting a rather orderly, linear process of 'construction', Cohen sees the creation of collective identity as something inherently messy and 'paradoxical', with such identities remaining 'elastic' over time, despite attempts to establish something 'permanent and distinct'. This is particularly true, he claims, in contested border spaces such as Gerald's Welsh March, spaces that are 'vast and precarious, inhabited by hybridities irreducible to one side or another of a bifurcated world'.¹⁴⁴ For Cohen, both Gerald's works and Gerald himself are conspicuous examples of these 'hybridities'. His explication of Gerald's struggles for 'identity' are based on the post-colonial cultural concept of 'hybridity', a 'two-fold process of both disjunction and fusion' which leads to startling results of 'cultural mixing and convergence'.¹⁴⁵ In the case of the medieval Britain inhabited by Gerald, Cohen argues, the emergence of hybrid spaces and peoples was a 'conjoining of differences' that remained unharmonious and troublesome for those trying to establish a world of absolutes.¹⁴⁶ According to this interpretation, the phenomenon of hybridity can also be used to account for some of the unusual elements and seemingly inexplicable contradictions in Gerald's work.

Cohen singles out an obsession with 'spectacular phenomena' and monstrous bodies in the works of Gerald, as well as in those of several of his contemporaries, as examples of 'hybridity' in medieval culture and literature. This focus on the fantastic resulted from the 'difficult middles' that formed the background of writers such as Gerald, spaces that were both 'difficult to articulate...and difficult to inhabit'.¹⁴⁷ The monstrous figures we find in their narratives, claims Cohen, are an embodiment of 'medialities' that could not be properly described in the confines of 'precise language'.¹⁴⁸ They are a

¹⁴¹ Cohen (2006), p.81

¹⁴² Ibid

¹⁴³ Ibid, p.82

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, p.5

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, p.2

¹⁴⁶ Ibid

¹⁴⁷ Ibid

¹⁴⁸ Ibid

'chimera on whose body unresolved differences in species stood for unassimilable differences of culture'. It is indeed the case that Gerald's Welsh and Irish works feature a number of strange hybrid beings that strike the reader as monstrous and grotesque. A dramatic example is the Irish Monster of Wicklow, which Gerald describes in the *Topography*. This unfortunate being, half man and half ox, is rejected by the native Irish and finds refuge in a foreign, Marcher, outpost. The foreigners, Gerald's 'people', feed the humanoid creature and are greatly amused by it. However, they too cannot accept it as one of their own.¹⁴⁹ As a consequence, the ox man 'belongs nowhere'.¹⁵⁰ In Cohen's analysis, monsters such as this should be recognised as what he calls 'gemina natura' or 'twinning nature'. The Monster of Wicklow, Cohen claims, sees Gerald reluctantly beholding 'a creature achingly new yet strangely familiar', a vision that was actually a mirror image of 'his own hopelessly heterogeneous self'.¹⁵¹

Gerald's Welsh writings also contain numerous references to Welsh animal life, some of which involve strange mixing or unnatural commingling. In *The Journey*, for example, Gerald recounts the striking tale of the knight who gave birth to a calf, along with other examples of bestial wonders that occurred in the area of Brecknock. Crucially though, Cohen argues, the knight-calf commingling does not lead to an obliteration of identity as it did in the case of the Wicklow monster. Instead this mixing and other Welsh examples are 'fraught with undecidability' and therefore create a realm of infinite possibility. In Cohen's view, the Welsh bestial tales employ the physical body as a space for revealing a 'public spectacle of truth' and represent a sustained effort by Gerald to reveal Wales as a 'hybrid space'.¹⁵² Another striking example of ambiguity in Gerald's treatment of Welsh bestial allusions is found in the story of the Welsh cleric Guaidan. In his Irish works, Gerald had proudly recounted the tale of his ancestor, another Gerald, who broke a siege of his fortress by means of a clever act of subterfuge. We find an echo of this story in the account of Guaidan's actions in *The Journey*, where Gerald describes the Welsh adopting similar tactics to help avert a looming English invasion.¹⁵³ According to Gerald, a knight, who remains unnamed, is dispatched by Henry II to reconnoiter the Welsh lands before the planned invasion. However, Guaidan, his local guide, gives him the mistaken impression that Wales is a forlorn and hopelessly wild country by eating grass and telling him the natives frequently did likewise to stave off hunger. The king is subsequently informed by the astonished Knight that Wales was a land 'impossible to access or settle' and inhabited by a 'bestial race of people, content to live like animals'. As a result, the King temporarily gives up his intended conquest.¹⁵⁴ Guaidan's bestial grazing is therefore presented as a striking act of 'anti-colonial cleverness' by Gerald, in which, as Cohen argues, the cleric mimics the English preconception of Welsh savagery 'to empty it of meaning'. His successful trick shows the Welsh to be far more than mere cattle, waiting for the slaughter, and therefore undermines the capacity of English stereotyping of the 'animalistic Welsh' to 'monsterise'.

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The Journey also recounts Gerald's journey through Chester, another border space at the boundary between England and Wales. As Cohen points out, the city is the burial place of two significant historical figures, namely the Holy Roman Emperor and King Harold. Their morbid presence acts as a reflection of the 'unsettled history' of the British isles. It is therefore 'natural', in Cohen's view, that their mention in *The Journey* is closely followed by a description of 'extraordinary bodies' in Chester, including mutant animals and a handless woman who paints with her feet.¹⁵⁶ Gerald incorporates the

¹⁴⁹ Giraldus Cambrensis, *Expugnatio Hibernica*, ed. and trans. A. B. Scott and F. X. Martin (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1978), p.139

¹⁵⁰ Cohen, p.90

¹⁵¹ Ibid

¹⁵² Giraldus, *The Journey* pp.97-98

¹⁵³ Giraldus, *The Journey*, p.238

¹⁵⁴ Giraldus, *The Journey*, p. 239

¹⁵⁵ Cohen (2006), p.91

¹⁵⁶ Giraldus, *The Journey* p.294

woman, Cohen argues, in order to emphasise ‘the malleability of human flesh, which always retains the capability of transforming into something unforeseen and scarcely imaginable’.¹⁵⁷ Another example of unnatural mixing in Gerald’s works is the fusion of human flesh with church walls or other inanimate objects, usually in the context of divine punishment for blasphemous transgressions or disrespect for the sanctity of a saint or a saint’s tomb. Cohen sees this as another conscious reference to hybridity on Gerald’s part, creating ‘a hybrid space where the private and the social interpenetrate’.¹⁵⁸ However, it is perhaps more plausible to argue that Gerald was simply employing common motifs and stock tales in order to impart moral lessons, as was common in religious texts of his day, rather than pursuing a concealed political agenda in such scenes.

In summary, Cohen argues that Gerald’s diversions into the bestial or fantastic represented an exploration of ‘forbidden categories’ in a sustained attempt to present the Welsh March and other border areas, such as Chester, as unsettled and ill-defined middle spaces. His repeated argument for the archbishopric status of St David’s was another example, standing as a ‘defiance’ of the narrative of English clerical supremacy and offering a potentially dangerous ‘recentring’ of the world.¹⁵⁹ In this respect, Cohen draws heavily on the ideas of Homi Bhaba, who coined the term ‘sly civility’ to describe such an act of resistance on the part of the oppressed. This ‘sly civility’, Bhaba theorised, challenges the assumptions of ‘cultural marginalisation’ and reveals the uncertain foundations on which the colonial edifice is built.¹⁶⁰

Elizabeth Hefty also writes of how Gerald was ‘obsessed’ by hybridity in his work. She cites some of the examples we have already discussed, as well as the Wolves of Ulster, a bearded woman, a cow that was also partly a stag, a dog impregnated by a monkey, and several instances of human-animal intercourse. Hefty suggests that Gerald delighted in sharing such stories in order to expound on the idea of ‘things being neither one-nor-the-other’, which reveals to us ‘his own discordant sense of self’. In a similar manner to Cohen, Hefty sees Gerald’s hybrid ‘monsters’ as attempts by him to ‘construct marginal identities’ in response to the contradiction of ‘seemingly incompatible cultural forces’, a process that leads to ‘an inner schism of the self’ for Gerald.¹⁶¹ Both Cohen and Hefty interpret Gerald’s focus on hybridity as a way of coping with his own disappointments and self-loathing, as well as evidence of an elevated understanding of the social forces acting upon him.

However, I am inclined to argue that, perhaps, we need to be cautious in imposing such sweeping social-psychological interpretations on medieval individuals in too rigid or definitive a manner. Despite Gerald’s well-documented struggles for acceptance in his lifetime on account of his Welsh background, he was still an esteemed member of the Church and a prolific, opinionated commentator on ecclesiastical issues. Medieval religious texts, as Hefty herself states, feature instances of hybridity ‘again and again’, with perhaps the most conspicuous example being Christ himself, who is perhaps the ultimate hybrid being, or as Hefty puts it ‘the hybrid of hybrids’.¹⁶² Many of the animal stories in such texts offer a moral lesson to the reader, with unnatural bodily states often emerging as the result of sin and later being rectified after an indication of penance on the part of the sinner. Gerald was therefore drawing on a long tradition that does not fit entirely convincingly with the cultural-political focus of the hybridity thesis. Gerald may have been just as concerned with instructing and saving recalcitrant Christian souls as he was with addressing his own episodes of self-doubt. It is perhaps impossible for us to know for sure.

¹⁵⁷ Cohen (2006), p.104

¹⁵⁸ Ibid

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, p.101

¹⁶⁰ Homi Bhaba, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p.59

¹⁶¹ Elizabeth Hefty, *Fantastic Facts: The Supernatural in the Ethnographic Writings of Giraldus Cambrensis* (Dissertation, 2010), p.41

¹⁶² Ibid, p.36

Furthermore, the idea of hybridity as something conflicted and irreconcilable, of the difficulty of coexistence between contradictory cultural forces, perhaps also needs a certain degree of revision. Many critics of Gerald argue that he is unable to pin down his identity and has to constantly wrestle with competing 'labels', or what we might perhaps call imaginative spaces of belonging. Similarly, historians often despair at the supposedly fractured, disparate nature of medieval Wales that sometimes emerges in the sources, and the difficulty of understanding the self-conception of the inhabitants of the Welsh lands. Were they defined by their particular kingdom, their particular region, their understanding of the broader 'Welsh' past, the emergence of a growing sense of connectedness between the constituent parts of 'puria Wallia', their awareness of an over-arching participation in the larger island of Britain, or their membership in the broader world of Christendom? The argument has often been that medieval people were only capable of single streams of conception, whether that was their village, their region, their particular kingdom, or some other finite label of self-definition. In a recent work, however, Euryon Rhys Roberts has argued that the inhabitants of medieval Wales were far more sophisticated, flexible and imaginative than has often been recognised by scholars. He cites a narrative text, the *Breintiau Arfon*, which seems to place the 'liberties' and 'privileges' of the people of Arfon in multiple different contexts, suggesting a non-conflictual, negotiated 'coexistence' between different territorial concepts (namely local, pan-Welsh, and broader island-wide perspectives) extant in medieval North Wales.¹⁶³ I would argue that it is entirely plausible that Gerald was perhaps also able to live relatively contentedly with multiple backgrounds and sources of identity, whether that was Welsh, Anglo-Norman, religious, cultural or any number of other designators. However, the problem he could not live with was the negative effect of his hybridity on his political/clerical career, which ultimately cost him his long coveted archbishopric at St Davids.

The hybrid hypothesis also somewhat underplays the importance of family and kinship in the construction of medieval identity, particularly in the Welsh and Marcher contexts. Gerald's family background and history, as descended from Princess Nest of Deheubarth, was central for him. Although, as many commentators have noted, Gerald was clearly somewhat insecure in discussing women and was often prone to discomfiting statements of extreme misogyny, he was keen to assign a central place to his grandmother in establishing the legitimacy of his family and its historic connection to royalty and power. His understanding of the importance of her legacy, which seems to have led him to omit any discussion of the rather troubling details of her kidnapping by her cousin Owain, was central to his own feelings of legitimacy and self-worth.¹⁶⁴ We might also argue that such considerations suggest a delicate interplay of psychological and social factors, in which Gerald's inner world was just as important as the influence of the conflicted external world in which he lived.

¹⁶³ Roberts (2018), pp.273-4

¹⁶⁴ See Susan M. Johns, *Gender, Nation and Conquest in the High Middle Ages: Nest of Deheubarth* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013) for an extended discussion of Nest's significance for Gerald

CHAPTER 5

GERALD AND HIS LEGACY - CONCLUSIONS

Gerald of Wales is undoubtedly one of the most important figures in the history of medieval British literary culture, for a myriad of reasons. His works offer historians invaluable testimonies and illuminating insights regarding a period of history that is more often represented through collections of chronicles or works of poetry or prose. Gerald's works often include a vivid level of detail and a lively, almost conversational, style that continues to attract readers through to the present day. It is difficult to disagree with Bartlett's assessment that 'Gerald's writings are varied and personal enough to convey a strong sense of his individuality'.

In addition to gaining important knowledge about the medieval world that Gerald inhabited, we also experience the unique thrill of getting to know Gerald himself in the pages of his books in a manner rarely seen in the works of other medieval writers. McGurk perhaps best describes the reason for the ongoing fascination with Gerald in a summary of his work:

Giraldus Cambrensis remain[s] the only writer of any competence on the Welsh and Irish throughout the Middle Ages. In all that he wrote there is a strong element of the autobiographical, an odd mixture of prejudice and perspicacity, of high ideals and unworthy pronouncements. He remains one of the most romantic writers in medieval literature, attractive as much for his failings as for the originality of his genius.¹⁶⁵

We might question this rather sweeping dismissal of other writers on Welsh affairs from the medieval period, not least those who wrote in the Welsh language, but it is undeniable that Gerald's works are among the most detailed, lengthy and readable books on Welsh society written in Latin to survive from the Middle Ages. McGurk's comment on the modern reader's fascination with Gerald's 'failings' also makes an important point about the emergence of what we might tentatively call 'Giraldian studies' in the modern scholarship of medieval Wales. Gerald's career is characterised as one of ceaseless struggle, either as a rage against the injustices of prejudicial state power or as a futile effort to find and express his sense of identity in a world that cruelly rejected him. Cohen and other proponents of post-modern approaches to Gerald often find a certain level of hopelessness and hesitation in him, a perpetual searching for self that, they claim, remains unresolved in the entirety of his work. They also see him as emblematic, a victim, or sometimes an almost unwitting participant, in the construction of the medieval 'Other' in Britain. Robert Bartlett, along with many others, partly subscribes to this view of Gerald, offering the following observation:

The more insecure, threatened, and divided he felt, the more important it was that he have some picture of himself, as man of letters or man of God, indispensable royal servant or brilliant academic, to give him an anchor. [H]e tried to paint his past in its most glowing colours in order to redeem the present.¹⁶⁶

This view suggests a man defined, if defined at all, by an acute shroud of uncertainty and a perpetual feeling of hopeless confusion, particularly with regards to his sense of 'national' identity. However, I do not find this conception of Gerald entirely convincing. As has already been noted in this study, we need to be cautious about applying modern concepts, such as 'national identity' or 'alienation', to medieval individuals and societies. While Gerald does make reference to his 'doubled' blood and the difficulties arising from his mixed background, his works also suggest a strong sense of purpose and an ability to express himself confidently regardless of the restrictions and challenges he faced. In that

¹⁶⁵ J.J.N. McGurk., 'Gerald of Wales, Part II: 1188-1223', *History Today* 25(5) (1975), p.347

¹⁶⁶ Bartlett (1982), pp.211-12

sense, he did not allow himself to be defined by his apparent lack of self-definition and he was comfortable, as well as highly capable, in blending his multiple sources of belonging within his writings and ideas. Indeed, sometimes Gerald seems rather too confident in himself, displaying hubristic levels of often egotistical self-regard and a spiky edge of embattled conflict in his works. As Frederick Tupper once wrote:

With Gerald blame was always safer than praise—that is, blame of the other man.¹⁶⁷

However, Tupper also went on to concede that Gerald's haughty self-possession was the visible surface of an absolute conviction in his own value as a writer and a public figure:

[Gerald] came confidently to the threshold of death...full of lofty pride that he had waged so great and fierce a war against king and archbishop and had withstood the might of the whole clergy and people of England for the honour of Wales.¹⁶⁸

I would argue that the most striking and significant aspect of Gerald and his work was his degree of awareness. Rather than being wholly focused on simply catering to and pleasing his contemporary audience, Gerald consistently demonstrates a distinct consciousness, almost an obsession, with how he will be perceived by future readers and what his place in history will be. This awareness of posterity is apparent in the way he constantly revised his works in an attempt to perfect them, and in the sense of pride he took in the act of composition. I strongly agree with Joseph McMullen and his colleagues when they write that:

Gerald was keenly aware of the value, as well as the ability, of the written word to shape contemporary understanding of the past. [H]e also took an active role in shaping how future readers could (and would) understand the era in which he lived and his place in it. This high degree of self-awareness is part of what makes Gerald such a compelling voice, and his continued reception is a testament to the success of his endeavour.¹⁶⁹

I am not wholly convinced that Gerald was always fighting for the 'honour of Wales' in his works and endeavors, but there is no doubt that his words and ideas have helped shape our perceptions of medieval Wales and present us with an important frame of reference for further discussion and exploration of medieval Welsh culture in the future. As such, he remains one of the most significant and indispensable founding figures in the academic study of Welsh history.

¹⁶⁷ Frederick Tupper, *Gerald of Wales: A Medieval Egotist* (Sewanee: University of Tennessee Press, 1912), p.24

¹⁶⁸ Ibid

¹⁶⁹ Georgia Henley & A. J. McMullen (Eds.), *Gerald of Wales: New Perspectives on a Medieval Writer and Critic* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2018), p.231

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