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THE CONTEXT AND PURPOSES OF GEOFFREY OF MONMOUTH'S *HISTORY OF THE KINGS OF BRITAIN*

John Gillingham

It is unlikely, to say the least, that there could ever be a single satisfying explanation of a book as extraordinary and influential as Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*. Covering almost two thousand years and the reigns of ninety-nine kings it is so full of material of different kinds that almost anyone who reads it with a particular interest in mind will be able to pick out passages which support their own interpretation. This, of course, is what I shall be doing. The History (HRB) is particularly susceptible of myriad interpretations since it is shot through and through with ambiguity. In one of its most famous passages, for example, we are told that at the battle of Camlann 'Arthur was mortally wounded and was thence taken to the Isle of Avalon to have his wounds healed'.¹ Moreover central to the book's structure – as also to Geoffrey's later work, the *Vita Merlini* – is prophecy.² HRB contains not only the Prophecies of Merlin; there are also prophecies at the book's beginning – notably Diana's prophecy foretelling the destiny of Brutus and his descendants – and at its end, when the 'angelic voice' speaks of the return of Britons.³ It is of the nature of prophecy, even when its main thrust is plain, that it should contain all manner of unknown quantities and ambiguities. In HRB Geoffrey himself

* This paper owes a great deal – much more than its footnotes imply – to the kindness and critical acumen of Rees Davies.

¹ *The Historia Regum Britanniae of Geoffrey of Monmouth I*. Bern, Burgerbibliothek, MS. 568, ed. Neil Wright, Cambridge 1984, c. 178; Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. Lewis Thorpe, Harmondsworth 1966, xi, 2. All passages from Geoffrey of Monmouth will be cited in this double fashion in order to facilitate use of other editions. For the differences, textually minor but historically interesting, between the Bern MS and Geoffrey's original text see Wright, liv–lix, and below p. 117.

² H. Pähler, *Strukturuntersuchungen zur Historia Regum Britanniae des Geoffrey of Monmouth*, Bonn 1958, 140–41.

³ HRB, cc. 16, 112–17, 205; Thorpe, i.11, vii.3–4, xii.17. A version of the Prophecies of Merlin seems to have been in Orderic's hands by 1135–6 (Orderic, vi, 380–88), and this is often taken to mean that Geoffrey had started writing before then. Probably he had, but it is also possible that Orderic used a text which was in circulation before Geoffrey composed the HRB version. See below n. 110. Julia Crick, *The Historia Regum Britanniae of Geoffrey of Monmouth. III. A Summary Catalogue of the Manuscripts*, Cambridge 1989, 330–32, has counted more than seventy mss of the Prophecies as a separate work.

tells us that after Merlin had delivered himself of his prophecies 'ambiguitate verborum suorum astantes in admirationem commovit'. Here, of course, lies endless scope for misinterpretation – just as, at Arthur's great court at Caerleon, it was misinterpretation of prophecy which contributed to the launching of the fateful campaign against Rome.⁴ Even so there are I think a few things of which we can be tolerably sure. We can be confident that Geoffrey had completed HRB very shortly before January 1139, when Henry of Huntingdon saw it at Bec and was bowled over by what he read.⁵ I think that we are also entitled to accept Neil Wright's view that the work was originally and primarily dedicated to Robert of Gloucester.⁶ Indeed both date and dedication are vital to my understanding of Geoffrey's purposes. I also believe that the main thrust of HRB can be discerned. In trying to sum it up in a few words I do not think I can do better than paraphrase another Geoffrey, Geoffrey Barrow: Geoffrey was a Welshman whose object was to secure cultural respectability for his own nation.⁷

In saying this I am implying some measure of disagreement with three interpretations which have been influential, even dominant, for much of this century. In my view there is something to be said for all three interpretations, but all give undue weight to subsidiary themes. I shall consider them briefly before moving on to offer my own interpretation. The first is the notion that Geoffrey had no serious political purpose but that, as Sir John Lloyd put it, 'his first and last thought was for literary effect'.⁸ In recent years, and particularly since the publication of Christopher Brooke's brilliant study of 'Geoffrey of Monmouth as a Historian' in 1976, it has been generally thought that the effect for which he was striving was a humorous one, that he was writing parody. Although, as Brooke acknowledged, parody can be written with serious intent, in his view the political motivation was clearly subordinate to the 'mockery and mischief'.⁹ For Valerie Flint, though there was an over-riding purpose behind the parody, in her opinion it had nothing to do with national politics but was intended to exalt

⁴ HRB, cc. 118, 160; Thorpe, viii.1, ix.17.

⁵ Although many scholars have preferred 1136, I entirely agree with Wright, xi–xvi, in accepting what is essentially Tatlock's argument, J. S. P. Tatlock, *The Legendary History of Britain*, Berkeley 1950, 433–4. Given the close connections in the diocese of Lincoln between Henry and Geoffrey, and the fact that until January 1139 Henry had been hunting in vain for information on events before Caesar, it is very unlikely that HRB can have been completed for long before it came to the assiduous Henry's attention.

⁶ Wright, xii–xv, especially since it is clear from the terms of the joint dedication to Stephen and Robert that Robert can be referred to as *consul* as well as *dux*.

⁷ G. W. S. Barrow, 'Wales and Scotland in the Middle Ages' *Welsh Historical Review*, x, 1980–1, 305.

⁸ J. E. Lloyd, *A History of Wales*, London 1939, vol. 2, 528.

⁹ Christopher Brooke, 'Geoffrey of Monmouth as a historian' in ed. C. Brooke et al., *Church and Government in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge 1976, 77–91. Though granting that there were passages likely to 'appeal to a Welsh audience' he felt that 'if the Celtic hope was uppermost in his mind, or the Norman empire, he could easily have made his interest much clearer'. Thus John Clark, 'Trinovantum – the evolution of a legend' *Journal of Medieval History*, 7, 1981, 143, has Geoffrey writing 'tongue in cheek'.

non-monastic virtues and styles of life.¹⁰ I agree with her that there was a serious purpose behind this entertainment, but given the overwhelmingly political and military content of Geoffrey's history I think it more likely that it had to do with matters of politics, the politics of cultural nationalism.

This brings me to the second of the three interpretations, the belief that Geoffrey was much more concerned with the Anglo-Norman elite than with the Welsh. Clearly since all his work was dedicated to prominent members of that elite, he must in a sense have been writing for them. But the questions remain: in what sense and in whose interest? Was Geoffrey basically an ambitious man seeking preferment, telling the elite what he thought they wanted to hear?¹¹ Or were his concerns more complicated, ambiguous even?¹² Undoubtedly HRB contains strains which would have struck a chord with the ruling elite. As Normandy and England slid into civil war after Henry I's death, Geoffrey's frequent references to the damaging effects of discord have an obvious point.¹³ Indeed as Neil Wright has suggested the two double dedications 'to men who newly found themselves enemies', first to Robert and Waleran of Meulan, then to Robert and King Stephen, could well be construed as 'a powerful, if covert, plea for unity'.¹⁴ But warnings against discord could have applied to the Welsh just as much as to the Anglo-Normans, even more so, many would have said.¹⁵ It has also been powerfully argued, and widely accepted, that Arthur's empire was in some way a pre-figuration of the Norman Empire, that the figure of Arthur was formed in the image of Charlemagne, or Alexander, and that in the line of British kings descended from Brutus, Geoffrey was providing the contemporary kings of England with 'a genealogy older and more distinguished than that of

¹⁰ Valerie I. J. Flint, 'The *Historia Regum Britanniae* of Geoffrey of Monmouth: parody and its purpose. A suggestion', *Speculum*, liv, 1979, 447–68. That some readers were indeed disturbed by HRB's relatively secular and non-monastic tone is suggested by some early alterations to the text, *The Historia Regum Britanniae of Geoffrey of Monmouth. II. The First Variant Version*, ed. Neil Wright, Woodbridge 1988, I, lxxv.

¹¹ On this assumption there was little point in writing for the Welsh for, as G. H. Gerould put it, 'The Welsh of that day did not furnish prime ministers to England, with deaneries and bishoprics in their gift', 'King Arthur and Politics' *Speculum*, ii, 1927, 38. Cf. T. D. Kendrick, *British Antiquity*, London 1950, 9.

¹² 'Did Geoffrey, like others after him, find his mixed loyalties, emotions and hopes rather a problem?' is the question asked by Brynley F. Roberts, 'Geoffrey of Monmouth and the Welsh Historical Tradition' *Nottingham Medieval Studies*, xx, 1976, 40. Cf. Stephen Knight, *Arthurian Literature and Society*, London, 1983, 64–66, (a reference I owe to the kindness of Ruth Harvey).

¹³ Especially HRB c. 185; Thorpe xi.9, where Geoffrey employs a direct approach using the second person singular, 'you foolish people . . . never happy but when you are fighting one another'. See W. F. Schirmer, *Die frühen Darstellungen des Arthurstoffes*, Köln 1958, 25.

¹⁴ Wright, xv.

¹⁵ When in the *Life of Merlin* Geoffrey again adopts a direct approach he has Wales in mind, 'Kambria gaudebit suffuso sanguine semper/ Gens inimica deo, quid gaudes sanguine fuso?', *The Vita Merlini*, ed. J. J. Parry, Urbana (Illinois) 1925, ll. 601–2.

the Frankish rulers descended from Charlemagne'. This, in Wright's words, 'was a history in which the new Norman masters of Britain could take pride.'¹⁶

One difficulty with this line of argument is that it is not easy to show that this is how contemporaries read it. Perhaps this is why some commentators have suggested that Geoffrey was serving the political interests not of the Norman kings, but of the Angevin monarchy.¹⁷ Clearly the figure of Arthur was well-known at the Angevin court, but that is very different from the idea that Henry II was thought of as Arthur's heir.¹⁸ As William Leckie has shown, many people were well aware of the problems which Geoffrey's history posed, especially his history of the sixth and seventh centuries, and not until the end of the twelfth century did any English historian treat Geoffrey in a reverential way – indeed Leckie very plausibly suggests that William of Newburgh's famous and fierce attack on Geoffrey's veracity may have been a reaction against a recent trend.¹⁹ In that case, so far as the kings of England were concerned, HRB would have remained a highly dubious source of propaganda until very late in the twelfth century.²⁰ If what was wanted was a predecessor with claims to all Britain then

¹⁶ Marjorie Chibnall, *Anglo-Norman England 1066–1166*, London 1986, 211; Wright, xix; Gerould, 45, 49; Tatlock, 305–20; Schirmer, 28–30;

¹⁷ R. Howard Bloch, *Etymologies and Genealogies. A Literary Anthropology of the French Middle Ages*, Chicago 1983, 82. Cf. 'the prophecies might be read as referring to the Angevin empire rather than to a Celtic revival', Brooke, 'Geoffrey', 88.

¹⁸ Ulrich Broich, 'Heinrich II als Patron der Literatur seiner Zeit', *Wissenschaftliche Abhandlungen der Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Forschung des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen*, xxiii, 1962, 90–92. Thus neither the fairly long passage about Arthur in *Draco Normannicus* nor the passing allusions in Benoit (ed. C. Fahlin, *Chronique des ducs de Normandie par Benoit*, Uppsala 1951–67, II. 33,592–96, 41,284–88) assign him any such role. I am not persuaded by the ingenious but overcomplicated interpretation of the Arthur passage in *Draco Normannicus* offered by Peter Johaneck, 'König Arthur und die Plantagenets', *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* xxi, 1987, 384–9.

¹⁹ R. William Leckie, *The Passage of Dominion*, Toronto 1981, 73–101. Thus the two earliest chroniclers to take Geoffrey more or less on trust are Diceto and Gervase of Canterbury, both writing c.1188 to c.1200. This ties in with the date at which Gerald of Wales first mentions Arthur and points more to Richard's reign than to Henry's. See below, nn. 20, 23.

²⁰ It was suitable only for the most far-fetched claims, e.g. the assertion that Rufus planned to go to Rome 'pur challenger, Lancient dreit de cel pais, Ke i out Brens e Belins' Gaimar, *L'Estoire des Engleis*, ed. A. Bell, Anglo-Norman Texts, Oxford 1960, II. 5966–8. The status of Brennius and Belinus was less insecure than that of Arthur, which might explain Gerald of Wales's treatment of early Irish 'history' in his *Topographia Hibernica*, (*Opera*, v, ed. J. F. Dimock, RS 1867, 148), where what seems to be the earliest manuscript mentions them but not Arthur. By 1189, however, Gerald is willing to give more countenance to Arthur, both in the *Topographia* and in the *Expugnatio Hibernica*, ed. A. B. Scott and F. X. Martin, Dublin 1978, 148. Not surprisingly William of Newburgh was very dismissive of claims to Ireland based on Arthur, *Historia Rerum Anglicarum*, ed. R. Howlett in *Chronicles of the Reigns of Stephen, Henry II and Richard I*, RS 1884, i, 166. Walter Ullmann's suggestion ('On the influence of Geoffrey of Monmouth in English history', in ed. C. Bauer, L. Boehm and M. Muller, *Speculum Historiale*, Freiburg 1965, 272–3) that John of Salisbury may have used HRB in the 1150s in order to persuade Pope Adrian IV to grant Ireland to Henry depends upon a rather forced translation of a passage from the *Metalogicon* and receives no support from the text of *Laudabiliter* itself. Elsewhere, moreover, John was very scathing indeed

Edgar could perform that function much more securely. Indeed, as both Ailred of Rievaulx and Roger of Howden noted, Edgar was to the English what Charlemagne was to the French, or indeed, as Howden added, as Arthur to the Britons.²¹ As this remark of Howden reminds us, in the twelfth century the British history belonged to the Britons, not to the kings of England, for whom the possibility of Arthur's return fighting-fit from the Isle of Avalon would have been an uncomfortable prospect. By the end of the century, however, not only were the problems of Geoffrey's reliability gradually being forgotten, but also the discovery at Glastonbury of Arthur's body, still bearing terrible wounds, meant that he could now be regarded as truly dead and buried.²² Only now could the British history be expropriated and made politically useful to the kings of England. My impression is that the first king of England to associate himself with Arthur was Richard the Lionheart.²³ But to suppose that it was for this that Geoffrey wrote HRB is indeed to endow him with prophetic powers. At the end of the century William of Newburgh had no doubt that HRB was 'written to please the Britons'.²⁴ What is much more to the point, this is what the author himself implied when he said that it was the Britons who should garland him for what he had done for them in what he called his *Gesta Britonum*.²⁵

For the Britons. But for which Britons? For the Bretons, for the Cornish, for the Welsh or for some combination of all or any two of them? Here I come to the third interpretation, the idea that Geoffrey was more Breton than Welsh, or at any rate that he sympathised with the Bretons much more than with the Welsh. According to the great Geoffrey scholar Tatlock, Geoffrey showed 'strong and steady favouritism for the Bretons and contempt for the Welsh'. 'Nothing', he wrote, 'is more certain than this'.²⁶ Undoubtedly nothing is more certain than that this view is widely held, especially, interestingly enough, among the leading

about claims based on HRB. See *The Letters of John of Salisbury*, ed. W. J. Millor and C. N. L. Brooke, Oxford 1979, ii, 666–69.

²¹ Roger of Howden, *Chronica*, ed. W. Stubbs, RS 1868, i, 64 (using Simeon of Durham); Ailred, *Genealogia Regum Anglorum*, Pat. Lat. 195, col. 726.

²² The various accounts of this episode are conveniently brought together in Gerald of Wales, *The Journey through Wales and The Description of Wales*, trans. L. Thorpe, Harmondsworth 1978, Appendix 3; also E. K. Chambers, *Arthur of Britain*, London 1927, Records 25–6.

²³ Roger of Howden, *Gesta Regis Ricardi*, ed. W. Stubbs, RS 1867, ii, 159, where Richard possessed Caliburn, the sword of Arthur, *rex Britonum*. By the time Howden edited this passage for his *Chronica*, (iii, 97), Arthur had become *rex Anglie*.

²⁴ Newburgh i, 14.

²⁵ 'Vos ergo Britanni, Lauream date Gaufrido de Monumeta. Est etenim vester, nam quondam prelia vestra, Vestrorumque ducum cecinit scripsitque libellum, Quem nunc Gesta vocant Britonum celebrata per orbem'. *Vita Merlini*, II. 1525–9.

²⁶ Tatlock, 414, 443 and indeed virtually *passim*, so strongly does he take this view. So also Schirmer, 20. However see G. H. Gerould's review of Tatlock in *Speculum*, xxvi, 1951, 223–4. Other scholars are inclined to emphasise the pro-Cornish strain in Geoffrey's writing, notably O. J. Padel, 'Geoffrey of Monmouth and Cornwall' *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies*, 8, 1984, 1–27. Pähler argued that Arthur's description of a square pond in which four different kinds of fish lived, each keeping to its own corner (HRB c. 150; Thorpe, ix.7), was a plea on behalf of the oppressed peoples of Britain by an author who himself belonged to one of these communities, Pähler, 78–81.

Welsh scholars of Welsh medieval history – who should, I suppose, see these things more clearly than a Saxon can.²⁷ But essentially the theory that Geoffrey was anti-Welsh is based on his criticisms of the Welsh of his own day, and on grounds such as these we might as well argue that the sympathies of Wulfstan, the author of the *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos* were not with the English, or that Gildas's sympathies weren't British. The belief that the present generation is sinful, and being punished by God for its sins, was surely too commonplace for it to lend support to any such theory.

Whether or not Geoffrey was of Breton descent, the fact is that he identified himself as 'from Monmouth' and, to judge from HRB, he knew that region better than any other.²⁸ Moreover linguistic evidence has been adduced to show that he was familiar with Welsh, but not with Breton.²⁹ In any case the key to Geoffrey's outlook is not the belief that recent generations of Welshmen have been corrupt but rather the direct line of continuity which he traces between Britons and Welsh. 'Britain', Geoffrey explains at the outset, 'is inhabited by five peoples, Normans, Britons, Saxons, Picts and Scots. In former times, before the other peoples came, the Britons occupied the land from sea to sea. Then the vengeance of God overtook them because of their pride . . .'. The book ends with God's vengeance, famine and disease striking down the Britons and allowing the Saxons to occupy the island, 'opposed only by those pitiful remnants of the Britons who dwelt in the forests of Wales'. And these remnants *iam non vocabantur Britones sed Gualenses*. Clearly here it is the Welsh, not the Bretons, who are the heirs of the Britons.³⁰ Moreover, as above all Brynley Roberts has emphasised, HRB is of a piece with traditional Welsh historiography, with its themes of British unity, rivalry with Rome, loss of sovereignty to the Saxons and the hope of future recovery.³¹ Indeed in one respect Geoffrey seems to be more Welsh even than the Welsh; he locates Arthur's court in Wales at Caerleon, whereas earlier Welsh tradition seems to have placed it in Cornwall.³² The focus of all this is clearly Welsh or, at the very least, British seen from a Welsh angle.

²⁷ J. E. Lloyd, 'Geoffrey of Monmouth', *EHR*, lvii, 1942, 466–7. Cf. 'Geoffrey's History shows scant sympathy for the Welsh', R. R. Davies, *Conquest, Coexistence and Change. Wales 1063–1415*, Oxford 1987, 106. It was presumably this train of thought which led to the description of Geoffrey as 'a Norman-Breton ecclesiastic' by Rachel Bromwich, *The Welsh Triads*, 2nd edn. Cardiff 1978, lxxxv.

²⁸ Tatlock, 68–77.

²⁹ T. D. Crawford, 'On the Linguistic Competence of Geoffrey of Monmouth' *Medium Aevum*, li, 1982, 152–62. I am grateful to Vanessa Barker for drawing this to my attention. Cf. Tatlock, 82. Like William of Malmesbury and Henry of Huntingdon no doubt Geoffrey spoke French.

³⁰ HRB cc. 5, 204, 205, 207; Thorpe, i.2, xii.16, 17, 19. That 'the Britons are now called the Welsh' was common parlance among early twelfth-century chroniclers, e.g., *De gestis regum*, i, 135, 148; Orderic ii, 276, iv, 138.

³¹ Roberts, 29–40. Possibly, as Bromwich points out, this was also Breton tradition, but it seems perverse to try to associate Geoffrey, given his known connections in SE Wales, with a Breton tradition of which we cannot be sure, when with the 'pseudo-learned Welsh tradition' we can stay on firmer ground, (Bromwich, xcvi, cxxvi).

³² Bromwich, 275; Padel, 19–20.

Moreover although scholars still argue whether Geoffrey's – doubtless fictitious – 'very ancient book in the British tongue' was in Breton or Welsh, at least Gaimar writing c.1140, i.e. very soon afterwards, seems to have believed that it was a Welsh book, a *geste* of the British kings.³³ However the notion that Geoffrey was hostile or indifferent to the Welsh has been a widespread one and, as will be plain, it has had important consequences.

I intend to focus on two points that have long been recognised as among the most remarkable features of the History. First its epilogue, the extraordinary words addressed to William of Malmesbury and Henry of Huntingdon, telling them to steer clear of the History of the Britons.³⁴ Second, King Arthur's crown-wearing at Caerleon, widely regarded as the structural and dramatic climax of his History. I begin with Henry of Huntingdon, whose *Historia Anglorum* was first published in the early 1130s. According to Henry it is history 'which chiefly distinguishes rational beings from brutes. For brutes, whether they are men or animals, neither know nor wish to know anything about their origins or their history'.³⁵ To be without a history was the mark of the beast. Yet the Britons had virtually no history. At any rate the learned world knew virtually nothing about it. As William of Malmesbury had written, 'what notice the Britons had attracted from other peoples they owed to Gildas'.³⁶ Indeed precisely this is Geoffrey's starting point. 'It has seemed a remarkable thing to me that apart from mention of them by Gildas and Bede, I have not been able to discover anything at all on the kings who lived here before the Incarnation of Christ, or indeed about Arthur and all those who followed on after the Incarnation'.³⁷ Geoffrey, of course, filled the gap in magnificent style. But he did much more. If what the contemporary world of learning knew about the Britons was derived from the pages of Bede and Gildas, then they knew little good of them. In Bede's eyes the ancient Britons were barbarians, and so it is naturally as barbarians that they re-appear in Henry of Huntingdon.³⁸ Geoffrey's Britons, however, are very far from being barbarians.

This may seem obvious, but it is important to see it in context. Although Bede had emphatically portrayed the seventh century British king Cadwalla as a barbarian,³⁹ this view of a fellow Christian seems to have found no echo until the

³³ Robert of Gloucester had had a *geste* translated from 'books about the British kings belonging to the Welsh'. Gaimar used this (as well as other books) in the composition of his own history, adding details, he tells us, 'Ke li Waleis ourent leisse'. Gaimar, *Estoire*, ll. 6432–6463. I am grateful to Ian Short for discussion of this convoluted passage. Cf. Brooke, 'Geoffrey', 83. In HRB c. 23, Thorpe ii.1, *lingua Britannica* clearly means Welsh, as noted by Thorpe, 39.

³⁴ HRB c. 208; Thorpe, 284.

³⁵ Huntingdon, 2–3.

³⁶ *De Gestis Regum*, i, 24. Thus Sigebert of Gembloux writing his universal chronicle in 1111 could say nothing of the origins of the Britons. On the absence of British history see Tatlock, 428–31.

³⁷ HRB c. 1; Thorpe, i.1.

³⁸ *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors, Oxford 1969, I, 2 (p. 22); Huntingdon, 18.

³⁹ Bede, II, c. 20, (p. 202).

twelfth century. Reading works written in England during the ninth, tenth and eleventh centuries, what strikes me is the absence of any sharply defined attitude towards the Welsh. Aethelweard, for example, consistently treats Danes as barbarians, but his occasional references to Britons are neutral in tone. For him the word 'barbarian' is a synonym for 'pagan'. The author of the Life of Edward the Confessor sees the Welsh as 'an untamed people' (*gens indomita*) and once again it is the Danes and Norwegians who are called barbarous.⁴⁰ The many different contributors to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle all treat the Welsh either neutrally, or occasionally, after the Norman Conquest, even sympathetically, as under the year 1094 when we are told of the Welsh fight against 'the French who had deprived them of their land'.⁴¹ In the Latin version of the chronicle composed at Worcester this has become 'the Welsh seeking their liberty'.⁴² Indeed even as late as the 1130s the Worcester chronicler remains remarkably sympathetic to the Welsh cause.⁴³

But by the 1130s John of Worcester is beginning to look a little old-fashioned. A different view of the Welsh has taken root. By 1125 William of Malmesbury is writing of the Welsh as barbarians. His comment on Harold's campaign against the Welsh in 1064 was that it subordinated *omnem illam barbariem*.⁴⁴ This language was not in his sources. It reflects William's own view of the world. William's underlying assumption is that 'we' – the Anglo-French – are civilised and 'they', the Welsh, Scots and Irish, are not.⁴⁵ This view of the Welsh was clearly fully developed by the late 1140s, when the author of the *Gesta Stephani* was writing. He sees Wales as 'a land abounding in deer, fish, milk and herds', and one which breeds 'men of an animal type'; the Welsh we learn are a *barbara gens*, characterised by 'untamed savagery'.⁴⁶ By the second half of the twelfth century this view of the Welsh had become the standard one. As Chretien of Troyes put it, 'Gallois sont tuit par nature, Plus fol que bestes en pasture'.⁴⁷

⁴⁰ *The Chronicle of Aethelweard*, ed. A. Campbell, London 1962, 22–23, 31, 36–49, 52; *Vita Eadwardi*, 9, 57–8. The latter author seems slightly more critical of the Scots than of the Welsh.

⁴¹ ASC, 171. This was probably written soon after the event, C. Clark, *The Peterborough Chronicle 1070–1154*, 2nd edn, Oxford 1970, xxi.

⁴² Worcester, ii, 35, 41 where William II is said to have intended to kill all Welshmen.

⁴³ 'Walenses in defensione suae nativae terrae', *The Chronicle of John of Worcester*, ed. J. R. H. Weaver, Oxford 1908, 43. For connections between the churches of Worcester and South Wales see David Crouch, 'Urban: First Bishop of Llandaff, 1107–34' *Journal of Welsh Ecclesiastical History*, vii, 1989, 3; Wendy Davies, 'St Mary's Worcester and the *Liber Landaviensis*' *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, iv, 1972, 459–85.

⁴⁴ *De gestis regum*, i, 237; cf. ii, 376, 472, 477.

⁴⁵ This is made explicit in William's comment on David of Scotland being made *curialior* through contact and upbringing 'amongst us' so that the rust of Scottish barbarism was polished away, *De gestis regum*, ii, 476–7. Amongst the earliest exponents of this attitude to Celtic society were two reform-minded Italians, Lanfranc and Anselm. It is reflected in the comment that St Asaph in 1125 was vacant *pro vastitate et barbarie*, Hugh the Chantor, *The History of the Church of York*, ed. C. Johnson, London 1961, 32, 123.

⁴⁶ *Gesta Stephani*, ed. K. R. Potter and R. H. C. Davis, Oxford 1976, 14, 172, 194.

⁴⁷ Chretien de Troyes, *Le Conte du Graal*, ed. W. Roach, 2nd edn, Geneva 1959, ll. 243–44.

Twentieth century historians, above all Robert Bartlett and Rees Davies, have produced extremely illuminating analyses of the contemptuous attitude of self-consciously civilised peoples towards the more pastoral peoples on the fringes of twelfth century Europe, but they have not really traced the emergence of this attitude – though it seems to me one of the most important ideological developments in medieval Britain, one which was to shape much subsequent history.⁴⁸ In this context the writings of Orderic Vitalis are peculiarly interesting, since he wrote so much and over so long a period, from c.1115 to c.1141. Whereas references to the Welsh in passages written before the mid-1130s are either neutral or even sympathetic in tone, by the mid-1130s he is using strong but strikingly ambiguous language – they are barbarians, yet a Christian and badly oppressed people for all that. By 1140 the sympathy seems to have gone; his vocabulary is more uniformly hostile and condescending.⁴⁹

In other words in 1125 William of Malmesbury is giving expression to a relatively new point of view, one that is becoming fashionable and powerful. For this reason it is, I think, worth looking closely at William's concept of the barbarian – a term which he uses noticeably more frequently than other contemporary historians. Paradoxically the best approach to this is through William's treatment of the civilised, the English.⁵⁰ Their history was, in his eyes, a progress from barbarism to civilisation; he makes this explicit in his reflections on 1066.⁵¹ The civilising process started at the court of King Ethelberht of Kent. Since Ethelberht was the first English king to be converted it is easy to assume that William equated civilisation with Christianity.⁵² In fact in William's eyes the process predated the king's conversion. The critical moment was his marriage to Bertha, the daughter of the *rex Francorum*, since it 'was by this connexion with the French that a once barbarous people began to divest themselves of their wild

⁴⁸ Robert Bartlett, *Gerald of Wales*, Oxford 1982, above all chapter 6, 'The Face of the Barbarian'; R. R. Davies, 'Buchedd a moes y Cymry. The Manners and Morals of the Welsh', *Welsh History Review*, 12, 1984–5, 155–79; R. R. Davies, *Domination and Conquest*, Cambridge 1990, 20ff, 113ff.; W. R. Jones, 'England against the Celtic Fringe' *Journal of World History*, 13, 1971, 155–71. There are some intriguing thoughts on the change in attitude in Denis Bethell, 'English Monks and Irish Reform in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries', *Historical Studies*, 8, 1971, 111–35.

⁴⁹ Orderic, ii, 138, 216, 228, 234, 260–2, 276; iv, 138; vi, 536, 542. It is not merely that Orderic becomes more critical as the Welsh give more trouble. Although he doesn't mince his words about the Angevin attacks on Normandy in 1136–8 (vi, 470, 526), he compares them with infidels not with barbarians.

⁵⁰ That the English were civilised is not a view Paschal II shared, as is clear from the language of his letters as copied into Eadmer, 135, 185–6. However William of Malmesbury, though he used Eadmer, did not allow papal opinion to colour his view of his own people. In Eadmer's own case it is clear that once he had direct experience of the Scots he became more critical of Scottish customs. Cf. Bethell, 127.

⁵¹ Whereas formerly the English *vultu et gestu barbarico, usu bellico, ritu fanatico vivebant*, gradually they had become civilised thanks to their conversion, to peace and the passage of time: *De gestis regum*, ii, 304. As for an early Anglo-Saxon like Hengest, he had been *barbarus*, preferring *omnia cruentius quam civilis*, i, 10–12.

⁵² As does W. R. Jones, 'The Image of the Barbarian in Medieval Europe', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 13, 1971, 391–2.

frame of mind and incline towards a gentler way of life'.⁵³ The ninth century case of King Egberht of Wessex makes explicit that it was not conversion which did it, since Egberht was already a Christian before he went into exile in France. But it was in France that he learned foreign ways which in William's words were 'very different from his native barbarism'. For, as William put it, the French 'are unrivalled among western nations in military skill and in polished manners'. In this passage it is the present tense which is particularly striking.⁵⁴ Of Sigebert King of East Anglia we are told that 'all his barbarism was polished away by his upbringing among the French'; when he returned home he founded schools so that rustics could learn the delights of letters.⁵⁵ In William's view then it was French culture, not Christianity alone, which made the English civilised. In his own day William felt that it was French scholars and poets, men like John of Tours, Hildebert of Le Mans and Godfrey of Winchester, who represented a revival of correct Latinity after the 'barbarism' of authors like Aethelweard and of antique literary and ethical values.⁵⁶ Indeed in William's eyes even people who were so Christian that they went on crusade could none the less be barbarians. Thus when recounting Urban's preaching of the crusade, he tells us that some of those who responded to Urban's call lived in *nationibus barbaris*: and he lists them, the Welsh, Scots, Danes and Norwegians.⁵⁷ If Christians like the Welsh were to be looked upon as barbarians then the familiar concept of the barbarian, one which equated pagan and barbarian, – as Aethelweard had done – had to be discarded and a new, classicizing one formulated. William's achievement was to introduce this concept into English history. Presumably this is related to the depth and intensity of his immersion in classical literature.⁵⁸

William also saw civilisation in socio-economic as well as in cultural terms. This comes across very clearly in his view of Irish society, a society he describes in terms of an explicit contrast with English and French society. 'Whereas the English and the French live in market-oriented towns enjoying a more cultivated style of life, the Irish live in rustic squalor, for owing to the ignorance of the farmers their land is inadequately cultivated'.⁵⁹ For William of Malmesbury then towns and an appropriate knowledge of agriculture (*scientia cultorum*) were

⁵³ 'Tum vero Francorum contubernio gens eatenus barbara ad unas consuetudines confoederata, silvestres animos indies exuere, et ad leviores mores declinare'. *De gestis regum*, i, 13.

⁵⁴ 'Est enim gens illa et exercitatione virium, et comitate morum cunctarum occidentalium facile princeps. (Egbert) mores longe a gentilitia barbarie alienos indueret'. *De gestis regum*, i, 105–6.

⁵⁵ *De gestis regum*, i, 97.

⁵⁶ As pointed out by R. M. Thomson, *William of Malmesbury*, Woodbridge 1987, 13, 17, 71–2. See *De gestis pontificum*, 172, 195 (where John of Tours looks upon the English monks as barbarians; also *De gestis regum*, ii, 387).

⁵⁷ *De gestis regum*, ii, 399.

⁵⁸ Among English scholars only John of Salisbury matches the breadth of his reading, Thomson, 6–10.

⁵⁹ *De gestis regum*, ii, 485. Gerald was still making similar points about the Welsh economy many decades later. 'The Welsh do not live in towns, villages or castles . . . they pay no heed to trade, shipping or industry', *Opera*, vi, 180, 200, (*Descriptio Cambriae*, i.8, 17).

bases of civilisation. One implication of this was that more pastoral economies, like the Welsh, were unlikely to sustain civilised life – connexions of this sort were certainly in the mind of the author of the *Gesta Stephani*. A second implication, of course, was that it had to have been the Romans who brought civilisation to Britain, for as everyone who had read Bede knew, it was as a result of Roman rule that cities, lighthouses, bridges and roads were built in Britain.⁶⁰ Naturally historians like William of Malmesbury and Orderic Vitalis believed that towns like Bath and Carlisle were founded by Julius Caesar.⁶¹

It is against the background of a revival of the classical concept of barbarian, and in consequence the growing fashion for dismissing the Celtic peoples as barbarians, that we must read Geoffrey's History. According to Geoffrey, Bath was founded by the British king Bladud and Carlisle by King Leil. Doubtless, as Valerie Flint has emphasised, all this was meant to tease William, but it also has a much more serious purpose.⁶² In Geoffrey's eyes town foundation is one of the proper activities of the good king. It often goes together with building roads, encouraging agriculture and issuing laws, – also, of course, an activity associated with the Romans. Thus when Brutus's followers first arrived in this island, 'they began to cultivate the fields'; Brutus himself built a city, New Troy, and issued laws.⁶³ Like Leil and Bladud, subsequent competent rulers do the same things. Belinus builds cities and roads. Dunvallo built temples, issued laws which are said to be well-known to the English even to this day; among other things Dunvallo's laws protected the roads and the ploughs of the farmers. Another outstanding law-giver was Marcia, whose laws Alfred translated and called the Mercian law. Gorbodanus encouraged the farmers to till the soil (*colonos ad agriculturam animabat*). Lud was such a *gloriosus edificator urbium* that New Troy came to be re-named London.⁶⁴ Geoffrey, in other words, asserts not only that the Britons had a long and heroic history of migration and successful war, but that they had long been civilised.

Being civilised themselves it was not at all surprising that they had looked upon the Saxons as barbarians – as readers of Gildas and 'Nennius' would have known they had.⁶⁵ Nor surprising that they had shared the contempt of the

⁶⁰ Bede I, 11 (p. 40), where we also learn that the Romans had possessed a *ius dominandi* over the islands beyond Britain.

⁶¹ *De gestis pontificum*, 194, 291; Orderic, vi, 518.

⁶² HRB cc. 29–30, Thorpe, ii.9–10; Flint, 453–7.

⁶³ HRB cc. 21–2; Thorpe, i.16–18. In Bede's eyes when an English king issued laws it was *iuxta exempla Romanorum*, II, 5 (p. 150).

⁶⁴ HRB cc. 34, 47, 49, 53, 69, 127; Thorpe, ii.17, iii.13, 16, 20, iv.16, viii.9. See A. Gransden *Historical Writing in England c.550 to c.1307*, London, 1974, 206–7, on Geoffrey's 'hallmarks of good kingship'. The model did not go unnoticed. According to his later twelfth century life, under the rule of Gruffydd ap Cynan (d.1137), 'he increased all manner of goods in Gwynedd, and the inhabitants began to build churches in every direction therein, and to plant . . . and to make orchards and gardens, and surround them with walls and ditches, and to construct walled buildings, and to support themselves from the fruit of the earth after the fashion of the Romans'. *The History of Gruffydd ap Cynan*, ed. A. Jones, Manchester 1910, 155.

⁶⁵ E.g. HRB cc. 191, 194, 206; Thorpe, xii.2, 5, 18. Some readers found the 'Nennian' view

twelfth-century Anglo-Norman world for the Scots, Picts and Irish.⁶⁶ In a sense all this is obvious. What, I think, is not so obvious is the cultural and intellectual juncture at which Geoffrey settled down to write in these terms. He was writing just at the time when the learned Anglo-French world with which he was familiar was beginning to despise Welshmen, to write off the Britons as barbarians, as brutish creatures without a history. It is in this fundamental sense that his history was inspired by Henry of Huntingdon and William of Malmesbury. It is not just that he was taking the mickey out of them; nor just that his figure of Arthur was inspired by William's remark that Arthur was worthy of a genuine history, not just of being dreamed of in bogus legends.⁶⁷ More importantly the whole conception and structure of the History was a refutation of attitudes which had been gaining currency in advanced intellectual circles, and which were now well on the way to becoming part of the established view of insular history. Right at the end of his history he alludes to, and even concedes the possibility, that the modern Welsh are indeed barbarians. 'From now on the Britons were called Welsh, the word deriving either from the name of their leader Gualo, or of queen Galeas, or from their barbarism'.⁶⁸ But by setting this concession to modern taste in a framework of his own making, a fictional history of highly civilised pre-Roman British kings, the effect Geoffrey achieves is anything but dismissive. After all the whole history began with Brutus and that party of Trojans who, after their defeat by the Greeks, chose to retreat into the forest depths, preferring to live like wild animals (*ferino ritu*), eating meat and grass, – i.e. putting up with a pastoral economy – rather than remain under the yoke of Greek slavery.⁶⁹ There is a parallel here with the situation of the twelfth century Welsh; and what their ancestors had done once the Welsh could surely do again. Thus no medieval Welshman made the mistake of thinking Geoffrey anti-Welsh.⁷⁰

But there is rather more to Geoffrey's timing than this. Geoffrey finished writing shortly before January 1139. Presumably he was hard at work in the years immediately after the death of Henry I. During Henry's reign the Anglo-French advance into Wales had been so overwhelming that, in the words of the

that the Saxons were barbarians a bit disquieting, cf. *Historia Brittonum. The 'Vatican' Recension*, ed. D. Dumville, Woodbridge 1985, 5.

⁶⁶ Tatlock 18, 80. In HRB cc. 148–9; Thorpe, ix.5–6, the Scots and Picts, peoples with a Christian clergy, are treated as barbarians. So too are the Irish whom Geoffrey, like other twelfth century observers, describes as *gens nuda et inermis*, HRB cc. 149, 153; Thorpe, ix.6, 10. Undoubtedly one of the significant omissions from HRB is any allusion to Patrick in Ireland.

⁶⁷ *De gestis regum*, i, 11.

⁶⁸ HRB c. 207, Thorpe, xii.19.

⁶⁹ HRB c. 8, Thorpe, i.4.

⁷⁰ As is clear from the number of Welsh *Bruts*, the Welsh recognised the line of continuity which Geoffrey drew between them and the Britons. Here, after all, Geoffrey had been doing no more than draw on Welsh tradition, one which remained strong. 'The Welsh being sprung by unbroken succession from the original stock of Britons, boast of all Britain as theirs by right' – such, at any rate, are the words which Gerald attributes to Hubert Walter, W. S. Davies, 'Giraldus Cambrensis: De Invectionibus' *Y Cymmrodor*, xxx, 1920, 84–5.

Gesta Stephani, Wales was becoming a second England, law-abiding, prosperous and civilised.⁷¹ One sign of this was the disappearance of the native Welsh kings, as was noted by the well-informed Worcester chronicler under the year 1093.⁷² As David Crouch has recently put it, 'he was a little precipitate but generally correct. The intrusion of the power of the Anglo-Norman monarchy into the heart of Wales undermined the use of the word *rex* by Welsh rulers and their scribes. Welsh magnates of greater influence and pretensions resorted increasingly to the titles *princeps* or *dominus*'.⁷³ Not surprisingly the Welsh resented what the Normans were doing to them. According to the Welsh chronicle (under the year 1114), it seemed that the French were aiming 'to exterminate all the Britons completely, so that the Britannic name should never more be remembered'. In 1116 'many young hotheads', followers of Gruffudd ap Rhys, a Welsh prince in revolt against Henry I, were moved by 'an urge to restore and renew the Britannic kingdom'.⁷⁴

Their opportunity came when Henry died in December 1135. The news was greeted by outbreaks of revolt in several different parts of Wales at once, 'the great revolt' as Sir John Lloyd called it.⁷⁵ With hindsight the rebellion of 1136–8 looks nothing more than a brief reverse eddy in the tide of history, flowing inexorably towards the ever-increasing Anglicisation of Wales. But is this how it was seen in 1136 and 1137? In 1136 and 1137 the Anglo-Normans in Wales were overtaken by a series of dramatic disasters. Twice they were defeated in pitched battle. Two leading magnates, Richard fitz Gilbert of Clare and Payn Fitz John were killed. The whole of Cardigan was overwhelmed; Carmarthen and the neighbouring districts of Cantref Mawr and Cantref Bychan were captured. The Welsh made further advances in the north-east, in the area between the Clwd and the Dee, in Maelienydd and on the Shropshire border. After a few attempts to retrieve the situation, attempts which cost a great deal of money but only led to further setbacks, King Stephen – or so we are told by his biographer – took the strategic decision to leave the Welsh to their own devices, hoping that

⁷¹ *Gesta Stephani*, 14–17, where what the Normans did to Wales is described as *constanter excoluere*, 'they perseveringly civilised it'; 'they imposed law and made the land productive'. From a Welsh point of view this meant that Henry's reign ended 'with four years in succession without there being any history'; *Brut Y Tywysogyon, Red Book of Hergest Version*, ed. T. Jones, Cardiff 1955, 113. See R. R. Davies, 'Henry I and Wales', *Studies in Medieval History presented to R. H. C. Davis*, ed. H. Mayr-Harting and R. I. Moore, London 1985, 132–47. The marcher lords in South Wales were well in at Henry's court, very different, as Judith Green makes clear, from the men who were given estates on the northern frontier, 'Aristocratic Loyalties on the Northern Frontier of England, c.1100–1174', *England in the Twelfth Century*, Cambridge 1990, 83–100.

⁷² When Rhys ap Tewdwr was killed in 1093 'ab illo die regnare in Walonia reges desiare', Worcester, ii, 31.

⁷³ David Crouch, 'The Slow Death of Kingship in Glamorgan, 1067–1158', *Morgannwg*, xxix, 1985, 30.

⁷⁴ *Brut*, 78–81, 86–7.

⁷⁵ This is Lloyd's title for Section II of Chapter XIII ('The National Revival') of his *History of Wales*. In the words of a contemporary the rebels 'collaetantes per omnes se Waloniae fines audacter effuderunt', *Gesta Stephani*, 16.

they would start to quarrel amongst themselves and bring about their own ruin.⁷⁶ Doubtless in the long run he was right, but one of the remarkable features of the revolt of 1136–7 is the way in which the rulers of three separate Welsh principalities, ancient kingdoms, Maelienydd, Gwynedd and Deheubarth, inspired it seems by Gruffudd ap Rhys of Deheubarth – the leader of the ‘young hotheads’ of 1116 – were able to put aside their traditional rivalries and join together against the foreign invader.⁷⁷

It may be possible to obtain further insight into the atmosphere in the aftermath of the great revolt if we can date a little-known text, the Anglo-Norman *Description of England*, to the 1140s. Once thought to have been written by Gaimar, this attribution was denied, on stylistic grounds, by Alexander Bell, who accordingly omitted it from his edition of Gaimar’s *Estoire des Engleis*. Moreover though Bell dated the *Estoire* to c.1140, he was reluctant to date the *Description* at all closely.⁷⁸ In consequence it fell into a kind of limbo, from which fortunately it may soon be rescued.⁷⁹ In three out of the four extant manuscripts of the *Description* it is incorporated into the *Estoire* in one way or another and a date in the 1140s is tempting, partly because it suits my argument, but partly also because the *Description* contains a reference to Carlisle as ‘a new bishopric’. Not only was Carlisle founded in 1133 but it went into abeyance early in the 1150s.⁸⁰ Now in the *Description* we find the following passage. ‘Well have the Welsh revenged themselves, Many of our French they have slain, Some of our castles they have taken, Fiercely they threaten us, Openly they go about saying, That in the end they will have all, By means of Arthur, they will have it back. . . . They will call it Britain again.’⁸¹ Here too there can be no doubt that the figure of Arthur was perceived as a threat to the Anglo-Norman rulers.

Let us suppose that in 1136 Geoffrey was hard at work writing his History. What, I wonder, was the effect of the extra-ordinary news from Wales likely to

⁷⁶ *Gesta Stephani*, 20.

⁷⁷ Davies, *Conquest*, 47–8; Lloyd, 470–72. Not until 1139 does the *Brut Y Tywysogyon* take up its routine theme of Welsh internal strife.

⁷⁸ *Estoire*, ed. Bell, xii–xiii.

⁷⁹ Bell’s text of the ‘The Anglo-Norman *Description of England*’, with an introduction by Lesley Johnson, has now been prepared for publication in *Anglo-Norman Anniversary Studies*, ed. Ian Short, (forthcoming). I am very grateful to Lesley Johnson for her kindness in sending me an advance copy.

⁸⁰ Gaimar, *Estoire des Engleis*, ed. T. D. Hardy and C. T. Martin, RS 1888–9, II, 212. In suggesting a date as early as the 1140s I am merely pushing a little further points made by Bell himself, *Estoire*, xii–xiii.

⁸¹ *Estoire*, ed. Hardy, 213–14. The possibility that this is an allusion to thirteenth century Welsh revolts is further diminished if we date MS D to the late twelfth rather than to the early thirteenth century. See Johnson ‘The Anglo-Norman *Description*’, n. 5 and *Jordan Fantome’s Chronicle*, ed. R. C. Johnston, Oxford 1981, xlv. Thus Lesley Johnson suggests the second half of the twelfth century as the likely date of the *Description*’s composition. But once we are in the twelfth century then Stephen’s reign seems the most likely time since it witnessed by far the most dramatic Welsh revolt of that century, one which created a ‘sense of triumph in the Welsh principalities and of disaster in the marcher lordships’, David Walker, *Medieval Wales*, Cambridge 1990, 47.

be? There are one or two intriguing parallels between incidents in the Welsh revolt and Geoffrey’s history. The prominent role played by Geoffrey’s queens – Cordelia, Gwendolen and Marcia – has long been noted and often linked, plausibly enough, with the contemporary role played by the Empress Matilda.⁸² But perhaps even more dramatic was the part played by Gwenllïan, wife of Gruffudd ap Rhys. According to Gerald, while her husband went north to seek allies in Gwynedd, she herself went to war, riding at the head of an army ‘like a second Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons’. In Gerald’s Latin her name was Guendo-loena, the name of the most warlike of Geoffrey’s queens.⁸³ Historians have not found it so easy to find contemporary resonances for a much more central episode, Guinevere’s betrayal of Arthur, but it is at least worth noting that when Gruffudd ap Rhys was killed in 1137 it was, according to John of Worcester, because he was deceived by the treachery of his wife.⁸⁴

I turn now to my second focus, to Arthur and his court, to what Christopher Brooke called ‘the most revealing passage’, the famous account of the Pentecostal crown-wearing at Caerleon, the town ‘that principally captivated Geoffrey’s imagination’.⁸⁵ Scholars have often asked, why Caerleon? Christopher Brooke discussed the question in terms of the location of the seat of the primate of Britain, Geoffrey’s archbishop of Caerleon. In ecclesiastical terms, as Brooke suggests, this was just a piece of mockery, a tease, all that mattered was that it was not Canterbury, nor York, nor London, nor Winchester, nor Llandaff, nor St Davids. ‘Thus he declared a pox on all their houses, and can have intended nothing but mockery and mischief’.⁸⁶ In terms of Welsh churches, Geoffrey’s joke was a particularly pointed one since in the 1120s and 1130s both Llandaff and St David’s were making ambitious claims. ‘If Wales must have an archbishopric (and why not?) we will place it where our fancy takes us – at Caerleon, “situated in a passing pleasant position on the river Usk”’.⁸⁷ But why does our fancy take us precisely there? Perhaps some local pride, since it’s not far from Monmouth – though it is certainly not the sort of local pride which Bishop Urban of Llandaff would have appreciated.⁸⁸ Most scholars also follow Tatlock in pointing to ‘the ancient remains at the obscure Caerleon’ which ‘appealed to

⁸² Tatlock, 286–8. See also J. Gillingham, ‘Love, Marriage and Politics in the Twelfth Century’ *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, xxv, 1989, 202–303, esp. 295–6, for Geoffrey’s recognition of the greater political importance of heiresses in this period.

⁸³ Gerald, *Opera* vi, 79, (*Itinerarium* i.9); HRB cc. 24–5; Thorpe, ii.4–5.

⁸⁴ ‘Dolo coniugis suae circumventus’, John of Worcester, 43. Since Gwenllïan had been killed at Kidwelly, this was presumably a subsequent wife – as indeed Guinevere was later thought to be, Gerald of Wales, *The Journey*, 282, 287.

⁸⁵ Brooke, ‘Geoffrey’, 80; Davies, *Conquest*, 106.

⁸⁶ Brooke, ‘Geoffrey’, 82.

⁸⁷ Christopher Brooke, ‘The Archbishops of St David’s, Llandaff and Caerleon-on-Usk’, in N. K. Chadwick, K. Hughes, C. Brooke, K. Jackson, *Studies in the Early British Church*, Cambridge 1958, 201–11, esp. 210.

⁸⁸ He had died in 1134. His successor Uthred was not consecrated until 1140, but had been involved in Urban’s campaign for the greater glory of Llandaff: *Llandaff Episcopal Acta, 1140–1287*, ed. D. Crouch, Cardiff, 1988, xii–xiii. Doubtless the more Geoffrey knew of the making of the Book of Llandaff (on which see Wendy Davies, ‘*Liber Landaviensis*. Its

Geoffrey's historical imagination'.⁸⁹ I do not doubt that these are among the motives which led Geoffrey to site the metropolitan church at Caerleon, but what is at issue in this particular episode – the climax of HRB – is not a church's foundation, but a king's crown-wearing. According to Geoffrey, Arthur's father, King Uther, had worn his crown at London.⁹⁰ So why Caerleon for Arthur's? As Tatlock rightly observed, Geoffrey's 'chief interests are war and politics' and it is therefore I suggest within a military and political context that we should seek an answer.⁹¹

In Tatlock's view, Caerleon's 'prominence is assuredly not due to any importance in his day'.⁹² But here I think Tatlock's insistence that Geoffrey's sympathies were all Breton has misled him. In 1136 two Welsh princes, the brothers Morgan and Iorwerth ap Owain ambushed and killed one of the greatest magnates, Richard of Clare. They then descended from the hills and seized the castles of Usk and Caerleon. By the end of the year the elder brother Morgan controlled virtually all the lands which had once belonged to his grandfather, that King Caradog who had destroyed Harold's hunting-lodge at Portskewett in 1065.⁹³ A few years later, in a charter issued at some date between 1143 and 1154, we find Morgan being accorded the title king in one of the earldom of Hereford charters.⁹⁴ As David Crouch has observed, 'it can only be that Morgan had taken up the kingship that is supposed to have died with his grandfather, Caradog, and even got his neighbour Earl Roger of Hereford to acknowledge it'.⁹⁵ Caerleon was to remain the centre of Morgan's lands until he was killed in 1158.⁹⁶ For some one with Geoffrey of Monmouth's background and interests there can have been no place of greater, or more dramatic, possibly portentous

Construction and Credibility' *EHR*, 88, 1973, 335–51) the greater his amusement in preferring Caerleon, Brooke, 'The Archbishops', 205–6, 232–3.

⁸⁹ Tatlock, 70–1. The ruins did make an impression, HRB c. 72; Thorpe, iv.19.

⁹⁰ HRB c. 137; Thorpe, viii.19. On the Crown of London as symbol of British sovereignty, see Roberts, 32, 37.

⁹¹ Tatlock, 345.

⁹² Ironically this comes not only from a very great Geoffrey scholar but one who believed that if his work had shown anything, it was that when studying Geoffrey it always pays to look at contemporary history, Tatlock, 70, 190, 425. Perhaps it was Sir John Lloyd's determination to free Geoffrey's life from any association with the notorious forger Iolo Morganwg that led that great historian of medieval Wales in the same direction and to conclude that 'the real Geoffrey had no interest in Glamorgan', Lloyd, 'Geoffrey', 462–64. For Caerleon and Glamorgan see below n. 97.

⁹³ *Gesta Stephani*, 16; Gerald, *Opera* vi, 47–8 (*Itin.*, i.4); Crouch, 'The Slow Death', 33.

⁹⁴ 'Charters of the Earldom of Hereford, 1095–1201', ed. D. Walker, *Camden Miscellany*, xxii, 1964, no. 36.

⁹⁵ Crouch, 'The Slow Death', 35–6, was the first to recognise the significance of this witness list. The next witness to this charter, William de Chesny, takes us into circles within which Geoffrey moved. He was castellan of Oxford from 1142 (see *Gesta Stephani*, 130 n.) and brother of that Bishop of Lincoln, formerly canon of St George's, Oxford, to whom Geoffrey dedicated his *Vita Merlini*.

⁹⁶ 'And along with him was killed the best poet, and he was called Gwrgant ap Rhys. And then Iorwerth ap Owain, Morgan's brother, ruled the land of Caerleon', *Brut*, 137. Morgan's association with 'the best poet' must have helped to ensure the fame of his exploits. Intri-

political interest in 1136 or 1137 than Caerleon. And if, as seems most likely, Morgan resumed the ancestral title in the euphoria of 1136–7, then when Geoffrey was writing the later sections of his History, there was once again a king in South Wales, a British king at Caerleon.

If Geoffrey of Monmouth must have been aware of the events of 1136 at Caerleon, so also must have been the man to whom he dedicated his History, Robert of Gloucester. Twice Geoffrey explains that Caerleon is in Glamorgan.⁹⁷ In the 1130s the lord of Glamorgan was none other than Robert of Gloucester. If Robert was thinking of taking up the fight on his sister's behalf then he either had to inflict a rapid and comprehensive defeat upon the Welsh or come to terms with them. Caught up as he would be with the struggle in England the one thing he could not afford was a long war of attrition against the rampant Welsh. In effect he probably had no choice. As R. R. Davies says 'The Welsh were now potential allies in the struggle in England rather than an enemy to be defeated'.⁹⁸ Among those who did in fact join Robert against Stephen was a man whom Orderic called 'Morgan the Welshman who held Usk'.⁹⁹ He is the only Welshman mentioned by Orderic in a list of Robert's allies and he is of course our Morgan.

But how would contemporaries feel about an alliance between Earl Robert and the Welsh? This, after all, was not a minor or peripheral matter. Given the history of the previous hundred years Welsh military and political support was likely to be an important element in a struggle for power in England. Indeed, as it turned out, it looks as though Welsh infantry was to play a major part in the battle of Lincoln and in the capture of King Stephen.¹⁰⁰ As early as 1139 Orderic noted that Robert has called the Welsh to his aid and that these barbarians – as they are called, he observes – having been let loose over England are causing

guinely Iorwerth married – though at an unknown date – Angharad, daughter of Bishop Uthred of Llandaff.

⁹⁷ HRB cc. 72, 156; Thorpe, iv.19, ix.12. See Tatlock, 69.

⁹⁸ Davies, *Conquest*, 47.

⁹⁹ Orderic, vi, 518. Morgan's conquests included patronage over Goldcliff priory, a dependency of Bec – where Henry of Huntingdon saw a copy of HRB in January 1139. David Crouch has pointed to the evidence for a deal between Earl Robert and Morgan, probably clinched before the end of 1136, as well as indications that Robert came to terms with other neighbouring Welsh princes, Crouch, 'The Slow Death', 33–5. Given the fact that Morgan and Iorwerth were to refer to Robert of Gloucester as their lord, and that the Anglo-Norman lords of Caerleon whom they ousted were adherents of Stephen (first Walter de Clare, then, after his death in 1138, Gilbert fitz Gilbert, Stephen's earl of Pembroke), there may well be local political significance in Geoffrey's statement that Caerleon lay in Glamorgan. Not until the 1170s did the Clares, at least temporarily, manage to recover control here. See M. T. Flanagan, *Irish Society, Anglo-Norman Settlers, Angevin Kingship*, Oxford 1989, 139–41, and esp. 157 n. 88; Davies, *Conquest*, 275.

¹⁰⁰ According to Orderic the front rank of Robert's army was composed of 'a fierce mob of Welshman' and it was the greater number of footsoldiers and Welshmen that won the day, Orderic vi, 542. However although highly probable it is not entirely certain that Earl Robert, as well as Ranulf of Chester, brought Welsh contingents to Lincoln, Huntingdon, 268, 273; *Gesta Stephani*, 110.

untold havoc. 'daily the sons of God are slaughtered like cattle by the swords of the Britons'.¹⁰¹ A few years later the author of the *Gesta Stephani* is complaining of Robert's employment of the 'unbridled barbarousness of the Welsh'.¹⁰² How comfortable would a highly civilised, intellectually aware Anglo-Norman like Robert of Gloucester feel about having barbarians as allies? It is I think worth noting the contrast between the two great writers who sought Robert's patronage: Geoffrey of Monmouth and William of Malmesbury. William never once mentions the fact that Robert has Welsh allies or employs Welsh troops.¹⁰³ Given his views on the barbarous nature of the Welsh is it far-fetched to guess that William's silence on this subject is an embarrassed silence? Geoffrey, of course, was in a totally different situation. He had probably already set out on his task of giving the Welsh an honourable and civilised past. With the rapidly moving events of 1136 and 1137 that task became an even more urgent one. It was no longer just a question of rescuing the reputation of a people from the disdain of a few historically minded scholars, a people who seemed, after all, to be on the way out, in a country being turned into a 'second England'. It was now also a question of giving a distinguished pedigree to a people that had suddenly begun to play once more – as their prophecies said they would – a major part in the politics of Britain. And if the Welsh were now allies of Robert of Gloucester, then might not Geoffrey's counter-history now have the extra advantage of being politically convenient to his patron?¹⁰⁴

Finally, it seems to me, as indeed to many commentators, that the mood of the History changes considerably once Merlin and Arthur enter upon the scene.¹⁰⁵ King Arthur presides over a magnificent and fashionable court, but otherwise the world in which he lives is entirely dominated by war. He founds no towns, issues no laws, shows no concern for the well-being of farmers. He is a warrior-king, a figure from an heroic age, endowed with some overtones of chivalry to bring him up-to-date, but in no sense a paradigm of good civilian kingship. In this he is perceptibly different from Geoffrey's earlier British kings. Arthur is also different because Geoffrey explicitly associates him with the British hope of recovery of sovereignty. The day when the Britons come into their own again is 'the day which Merlin had prophesied to Arthur'.¹⁰⁶ Arthur, though mortally wounded at

¹⁰¹ Orderic uses similar language (*beluino more barbariem suam...exercuerunt*, including the disembowelling of pregnant women) to describe the Scottish invasion of 1138. Cf. n. 49.

¹⁰² 'effrenemque Walensium barbariem', *Gesta Stephani*, 172.

¹⁰³ This is an aspect of William's discretion which has not, I think, been observed hitherto, cf. R. B. Patterson, 'William of Malmesbury's Robert of Gloucester: a Re-evaluation of the *Historia Novella*', *American Historical Review*, lxx, 1965, 983–997.

¹⁰⁴ In passing G. H. Gerould suggested that one of Geoffrey's purposes was 'to flatter the followers of Earl Robert who had Celtic blood', 'King Arthur', 47. I owe the term 'counter-history' to Rees Davies.

¹⁰⁵ Thorpe, 20–22.

¹⁰⁶ HRB c. 205; Thorpe, xii.17. Unless, perhaps, the Arthur referred to here was none other than Geoffrey himself, an ambiguous, half-joking allusion to the nickname given to a man known to be obsessed with the figure of legend, Padel, 1–4. Cf. the self-identification of Gerald as 'Silvester', *Opera*, v, 20 n. 20.

Camblann, was conveyed to the Isle of Avalon to recover and, by implication, to return. Presumably this aspect of Geoffrey's treatment may simply be because Arthur was already associated with the British hope.¹⁰⁷ But it is possible that the theme of recovery may not have been in Geoffrey's mind from the beginning, at any rate he makes no allusion to it in the early parts of the book, not even when he mentions Arthur.¹⁰⁸ It is not until he reaches the Prophecies of Merlin that Geoffrey first refers to the British hope, and then he does so in very powerful and unmistakable terms, so powerful indeed that Tatlock believed they could not have been written by Geoffrey.¹⁰⁹ 'The people that is oppressed shall prevail in the end, for it will resist the savagery of the invaders. The Boar of Cornwall shall bring assistance and will trample their necks beneath its feet. . . . Cadwallader shall summon Conan and shall make an alliance with Albany. Then the foreigners shall be slaughtered and the rivers run with blood'.¹¹⁰ Up until this point Geoffrey had dealt with only two of the main themes of Welsh tradition: the theme of rivalry between Britain and Rome, and the theme of loss of dominion to the Saxons. But from this moment on his history is brought within the framework of another theme, one which had been an integral part of Welsh historiography since at least the tenth century, the theme of deliverance and renewal.¹¹¹

Now Geoffrey himself tells us that he paused during his writing of the History, at a time when, as he put it, 'Merlin began to be talked about very much'; that he then composed a version of the Prophecies of Merlin and dedicated it to Bishop Alexander of Lincoln, before returning to the task of completing his History.¹¹² What all this makes possible, it seems to me, is that the theme of the British recovery entered Geoffrey's History just at that moment when it seemed to be becoming historical reality, when, in the words of the *Description*, 'Openly they go about saying, That in the end they will have it all, By means of Arthur, They will get it back'. We know at any rate that one very early reader of HRB revised the text both in order to play down the theme of the treachery of the Saxons and also in order, as Neil Wright puts it, 'to record unequivocally that the national hero was dead', to put an end, in other words, to the ambiguity which had surrounded Arthur's fate after the Battle of Camblann.¹¹³ As these

¹⁰⁷ *De gestis regum*, ii, 342. Though see Roberts, 40 n. 37.

¹⁰⁸ HRB c. 1; Thorpe, i.1.

¹⁰⁹ Tatlock, 405, 414–15.

¹¹⁰ HRB cc. 112, 115; Thorpe, vii.3. See M. J. Curley, 'A New Edition of John of Cornwall's *Prophetia Merlini*', *Speculum*, lvii, 1982, 245–6, for the identification of Conan and Cadwallader. It is not entirely certain that Orderic's copy of the Prophecies of Merlin included explicit references to the British hope. His initial summary of the Prophecy ends with the Britons 'driven beyond the shores of the Ocean', and then his extract *de Merlini libello*, though it ends with the words 'Deinde revertentur cives in insulam' – which might be taken as an allusion to the British hope – neither includes the phrase which follows immediately in Geoffrey's version, *nam discidium alienigenarum orietur*, nor any of the subsequent passages.

¹¹¹ For discussion of these themes, Roberts, 32–40; Davies, *Conquest*, 77–80.

¹¹² HRB c. 109; Thorpe, vii.1.

¹¹³ Wright, lvi–lix. On the other hand in his *Vita Merlini* Geoffrey makes explicit the promise of Arthur's recovery, ll. 929–40.

alterations to the text make plain, Geoffrey's history in its original form, was felt to be playing with political fire and to be disturbingly anti-English.

To sum up. Geoffrey was a complex and ambiguous writer and I don't mean to imply that I have explained him. But I do want to suggest that among the complexities and ambiguities within which he operated were, at one level, the 'twelfth century Renaissance' perception of the Celtic peoples in general, and the Welsh in particular, as barbarians. To this perception he provided a powerful rejoinder.¹¹⁴ In the event it was not one powerful enough to offset the contemporary realities of a Welsh pastoral economy and an 'unreformed' Welsh social structure. English writers continued to regard the Welsh as a barbarous and primitive people. At another level, and perhaps at a later stage of composition, he responded to a much more immediate political and military situation, the electrifying excitement of the great revolt of 1136-7, the capture of Caerleon by Morgan, King Morgan, and the dilemma which that posed for his patron Robert of Gloucester. And it is surely appropriate to end with a question. Did he fail here as well? Or was this the highly-charged atmosphere in which his relatively prosaic history took flight? In which he was inspired to bring off his greatest coups, Merlin the magician-prophet and Arthur the all-conquering British king, the 'two personages who were to give Geoffrey of Monmouth his place in the development of European literature?'¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ In this sense he may be said to have 'sought to stimulate and satisfy the curiosity of the Normans about the peoples they had come to dominate'. Robin Frame, *The Political Development of the British Isles. 1100-1400*, Oxford, 1990, 8.

¹¹⁵ Thorpe, 21.