

What insights into Medieval society can we gain from the works of Gerald of Wales?

Gerald of Wales was an early Medieval visionary of noble birth who sought to reform the Welsh church by reconstituting it to an archiepiscopal status, and thus freeing it from the subservience of Canterbury¹. Gerald's determination and defiance against the crown, is arguably what he is remembered best for, and it is through his scholarship and written records that we may gain insight into such aspects of medieval society that may otherwise have been impossible to comprehend. Although disputed by some, it is my belief that his works are of the utmost historical importance, which I intend to outline in this following piece.

Born between the years 1145-1147 at Manorbier castle, Pembrokeshire²; Gerald would go on to lead a long and interesting, if not peculiar life, eventually succumbing to age in 1223³ having obtained only the arguably modest position of Archdeacon at Brecon. His father, William de Barri was a Norman knight, and his great-grandfather, Rhys ap Tewdur, was the prince of South Wales; making Gerald three-quarters Norman, and one-quarter Welsh⁴. For much of his youth, his own Uncle would also hold sway over the bishopric of St. David's; the diocese that he himself would aspire to attain throughout much, if not all of his existence⁵. We know that Gerald was a man of many traits - an intellectual, scholar, and political domineer; he was a well-traversed individual who settled in many places throughout Christendom.

As soon as he was old enough to leave Manorbier, he was sent to the Benedictine comune of St. Peter's abbey in Gloucestershire, and afterwards, the university of Paris⁶, which would assume the former's position in scholastic teaching for the next nine years. Gerald would again visit Paris in 1177⁷, in an overseeing capacity, lecturing the discourse of his philosophy and unquestionably that of the Christian faith. As a man of strength and ingenuity, he would write seventeen known literary pieces⁸, whilst visiting the papacy of Rome multiple times⁹, accompanying Archbishop Baldwin on a preaching tour for the third crusade¹⁰, and attending to the needs of John Lackland, future King of England during his heinances tour in Ireland¹¹. He was offered four separate bishoprics, all of which he declined to accept¹², without forgetting to mention his famous orchestration of a rebellious feud against the crown which lasted almost five years¹³, as a response, yet again to his overlooked candidacy for the bishopric of St. David's - a conflict, that when "resolved", was described by the Prince of Powis in the following manner:

¹ Gerald of Wales, *The Journey Through Wales and The Description of Wales*, 1191, trans. by Lewis Thorpe (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1978) p. 14.

² G. Gymro, *Gerald the Welsh-man*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1947) p13.

³ Betty Radice in *The Journey Through Wales and The Description of Wales*, by Gerald of Wales 1191, trans. by Lewis Thorpe (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1978) p. preface.

⁴ Gymro, *Gerald the Welsh-man*, p. 13.

⁵ Gymro, *Gerald the Welsh-man*, p. 15.

⁶ Miles, *Gerald of Wales: Giraldus Cambrensis*, p. 33.

⁷ Gymro, *Gerald the Welsh-man*, p. 15.

⁸ Radice, in *The Journey Through Wales and The Description of Wales*, p. preface.

⁹ Gymro, *Gerald the Welsh-man*, p. 17.

¹⁰ Radice, in *The Journey Through Wales and The Description of Wales*, p. preface.

¹¹ Gymro, *Gerald the Welsh-man*, p. 15.

¹² J. Miles, *Gerald of Wales: Giraldus Cambrensis* (Llandysul: Gomer Press: 1974) p. 41.

¹³ Miles, *Gerald of Wales: Giraldus Cambrensis*, p. 44.

“Many a great war have we Welshman fought with England, but none so great and fierce as his who fought the King and Archbishop and withstood the might of the whole clergy and people of England for the honor of Wales¹⁴”.

When Gerald was born, the Welsh church constituted the four dioceses of St. Davids, Bangor, Llandaff and St. Asaph. All four bishops owed their appointments to the crown and had acknowledged the authority of Canterbury¹⁵. Essentially, this led to a scenario

“that provided fertile ground for differences between the spiritual and the temporal authorities, as it meant that a man was likely to be chosen because of his subservience to the crown rather than because of his abilities as an administrator and his dedication as a priest¹⁶”.

We can substantiate such claims with the appointments made by the crown to Welsh dioceses and clerical positions in general; for example, when in 1205 King John approved of his good friend Bishop John of Norwich for the Archbishopric of Canterbury that led to a dispute with the papacy and its preferred candidate, Stephen Langton; thus laying England under a papal interdict from 1208-1213¹⁷. This was an intentional dismissal against Gerald who was by far the highest respected clergyman in Wales, and therefore the best choice for bishop of St. Davids. The primary consideration for the monarchy “was to ensure that those who gained preferment were sympathetic to their royal persons and their royal purposes¹⁸”. “When the archbishop pointed out the political problems that might arise if Gerald were given the oversight of St. Davids, King John wholly agreed¹⁹ and Gerald was passed-by.

When King Henry II had previously equated his decision upon a lesser candidate, in the eyes of the Welsh church, it was because “his personal regard for Gerald was easily outweighed by his knowledge that men of principle and conscience can be far more dangerous²⁰” and furthermore, because “he knew that convictions rooted in religion were very deeply rooted indeed²¹”. It has also been reported that Gerald “had a number of Becketts qualities²²” “regarding the supremacy of the spiritual order over the temporal rulers, so It is hardly surprising then that along with his noble birth and connections with influential characters both domestically and overseas, he was simply too much of a threat to be handed down the keys to a sizeable region of a conflicted kingdom. “Both Henry II and King John after him, had assessed Gerald’s character only too accurately”. They had foreseen what “was only too likely to arise if Gerald had been accorded the authority of bishop of this important see²³”.

¹⁴ Miles, *Gerald of Wales: Giraldus Cambrensis*, p. 47.

¹⁵ Miles, *Gerald of Wales: Giraldus Cambrensis*, p. 23.

¹⁶ Miles, *Gerald of Wales: Giraldus Cambrensis*, p. 18.

¹⁷ Miles, *Gerald of Wales: Giraldus Cambrensis*, p. 47.

¹⁸ Miles, *Gerald of Wales: Giraldus Cambrensis*, p. 22-23.

¹⁹ Miles, *Gerald of Wales: Giraldus Cambrensis*, p. 43.

²⁰ Miles, *Gerald of Wales: Giraldus Cambrensis*, p. 38.

²¹ Miles, *Gerald of Wales: Giraldus Cambrensis*, p. 38

²² Miles, *Gerald of Wales: Giraldus Cambrensis*, p. 37.

²³ Miles, *Gerald of Wales: Giraldus Cambrensis*, p. 45.

The contextual works of Gerald have given us immense insight into the friction between the church and the sovereign state; the battle for power as it were, for Christianity in Medieval society was a destructive and constructive weapon and therefore the ultimate mode of control. It was the wealthiest institution in Europe, able to wield an effective and mighty army when required as evident from the many crusades initiated by the church, yet funded by all-else. Such was therefore an emblem of desire for every monarch, for the purpose of attack, defence, or indeed from an economical standpoint. The spread of a Christian land was akin to a chess board, whereby each bishop had their jurisdiction or diocese, thus influencing the populous and subsequent economy of each locality within. The bishopric acted as the central point of a web of power; therefore, depending on the allegiance of that representative, a monarch could either suffer or prosper. It was subsequently the incentive of every monarch to nominate individuals loyal to themselves, whom they could administer and influence like a personal puppet. It was especially vital for the crown that frontier kingdoms remained closely monitored, for in a region as isolated as Wales, where unity was in constant fluctuation and the English Kings had less power due to linguistic differences, as-well-as the lack of military might due to harsh terrains, the church became useful as a tool for social cohesion, by which unruly populations could be subvertly conquered.

The most important factor of Gerald's works is that they were written then and there, during the period in which the narrative of this essay has been ascribed, therefore his writings as a source of information are often considered primary, as-well-as the fact that they are the opinions of a being, that lived within a position of historical prominence, which is why we should be inclined to study him with due intrigue. This being is by no means a lucky layman who gained the gift of literacy and used such for the purposes of fictional flamboyance, nay. Gerald was a man of remarkable qualities grown within the upper rungs of a hierarchical social order, hence the emphasis placed within these former paragraphs on the character of his ancestry and his own lifetime activities. We must undoubtedly be critical, and refrain from promoting the status of a sole voice as a representation of historical events, however we must also be wary not to undermine them, for the most valuable and indeed the most accurate information that we can ever obtain, is that which stems from the period in question, whether a text, building, or skelton, all may have their limits in terms of the knowledge we are able to extract from them; however that simply means that we must make it our utmost duty as historians to comprehend where those limits lie, and apply the relevant sources and materials to our subject of study, without falling for the mistake of caricaturing. Much like a police investigation, we must question the motive of Gerald's works. To those works that concern his own personal career, is it difficult, if not impossible to determine whose voice is truly representative of the reality. What we can substantiate however, is the more prominent events themselves; for instance, dates and individuals concerned, which have been recorded elsewhere by numerous scholars of the same era, as-well-as in artworks, and burials; take Kings and bishops as an example of such. By utilising an array of sources we can build on what Gerald's narrative has provided us with and conclude accordingly. Therefore his voice does indeed hold value, and certainly contributes to our understanding of the era in question. Statements such as: "Not even his greatest friends and admirers would have put their whole trust in his accuracy", and: "It shows no depth of scholarship", is remarkably ludicrous²⁴, for

²⁴ The Lord Archbishop of Wales, Gwilym Cambrensis in *Gerald of Wales: Giraldus Cambrensis* (Llandysul: Gomer Press: 1974) p. (Foreward)

such is total conjecture, especially so since the claimant of the above statement never indeed spoke personally with any of Gerald's associates. The simple fact that Gerald's writings in regards to his professional life is powerful enough, almost nine-hundred years later to stimulate this very discussion, shows indeed, that it is of historical value, and is most certainly insightful.

Other areas not yet covered in our discussion and from which we shall briefly draw conclusion, is his attention to detail in a somewhat anthropological approach. His descriptive sentiments in regards to cultural traits and customs of the Welsh people allow us the understanding of some of the habits of the common folks to whom publication in such times was scant. Literacy was scarce; and interest in such topics was likely abhorrent, hence why such jottings must be treated with greatness.

"Now and again we catch a glimpse of ordinary folk at work or at play or at their worship: the credulity of the common people in believing every miracle and marvel; their reverence for relics of all kinds - horns, croziers, and hand-bells; and the ecstatic singing and dancing²⁵".

Basic examples of human behaviour allow historians to better understand their knowledge of a topic, or in the case of this essay, a social group. Much like the analogy of the church dioceses as a web of power used in an earlier paragraph; the web of history extends out indefinitely; however, the more expansive our sources, the more the web shall reveal its history. To conclude, I believe that we can draw many insights from the works of Gerald of Wales, from the anthropological, to the topographical, and especially the rivalry between the papal state and the monarchy of England in Medieval in the twelfth and thirteenth century. Therefore Gerald of Wales has certainly helped us understand more about Medieval society in Europe.

Gymro, Gerallt, *Gerald the Welsh-man*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1947).

Gerald of Wales, *The Journey Through Wales and The Description of Wales, 1191*, trans. by Lewis Thorpe (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1978).

Miles, John, *Gerald of Wales: Giraldus Cambrensis*, (Llandysul: Gomer Press, 1974).

²⁵ Gymro, *Gerald the Welsh-man*, p. 69.