

WALES: THE LAND OF THE STRANGERS

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THE Welshman's premium as a music-hall joke is at a low ebb. Instead he is becoming a curio, an oddity to be discovered on a walking holiday in the Welsh mountains or during a stay at one of the remoter resorts. Strange things emanate from the land of Wales—the hidden meanings of a Dylan Thomas, the mystic spirit which captures the soul of a David Jones even before he sets foot in the country, the suspect magic in the oratory of a Lloyd George, the religious fervour of a rigger crowd swaying on the touch-line. For those who have the courage to penetrate there might be a glimpse of a woman in a tall Welsh hat (specially provided by the Tourist Board), the music of miners going to their work, the lilt of a language as old as Taliesin and as dark as Eryri. There is a growing feeling that there are strangers in our midst—their very name of *Welsh* means that.

The attitude of the outsider is normally one of two extremes—it is either an unstinted adulation based on an acquaintance with the great names of Wales or else one of a slightly contemptuous indifference based on a few unpleasant encounters with Welshmen and an impatience with a nation which has no right to survive beyond a quaint desire to preserve an archaic language and a tradition which, rich and picturesque though it might have been, is now only of use to the antiquarian.

The right of a nation to have its tradition and its culture recognized is a fundamental Christian value. Belief in the Incarnation does more than breed a respect for the sacredness of the individual, for the individual implies the context into which he is inserted, the society in which he lives. Salvation is worked out here and now. It is dishonest to want to be someone else—and being 'me' means being me as member of this nation with its tradition and temperament, its culture and character. Whilst 'being Welsh' means something different from 'being English' or being anything else, then the Welsh have a right to be understood as Welsh and not judged as a poor representation of the English. This right to be recognized is not a question of politics. It is the issue which Pope Pius XII has underlined so well in his Christmas Message for 1954:

The real error consists in confusing national life in the proper sense with nationalist politics. . . . National life is in itself that operative composite of all the values of civilization which are proper to and characteristic of a particular group, for whose spiritual unity they constitute as it were a bond. At the same time it enriches, as its own contribution, the culture of all humanity. In its essence, therefore, national life is something not political.

One of the greatest tragedies for Wales is the fact that it is normally known to the outside world by a section of its people who, far from being representative of it, are more of a caricature of it. The familiar Welsh mining types from the over-anglicized valleys of the South are not typical of Wales as a whole. They are not typical of anything which is truly Welsh any more than they are typical of anything which is truly English. Perhaps they are a race apart. The fact that they do not speak Welsh is of little account—neither do many of the people who are, for all that, in no way whatever like the English whose language they speak. And there lies the second cause of misunderstanding in the relation of Wales to the outside world.

The infiltration of English as the language of the Welsh has not anglicized the Welsh tradition except in the extreme valleys of the South. The Americans have the advantage of having succeeded in modifying the English language to a sufficient extent so as to make it immediately apparent that they are not the same people though they might share a basic tongue. There are too many dialects in English, and Wales is geographically too close, for the same to be felt about the Welshman speaking English. The Welshman may even be thinking in English, but the whole mould of his character and the cast of his thought-processes has been formed in a tradition quite different from that of England. The fact that a subject nation has preserved its language and literature not merely as a forced instrument of expression but as a living creative medium of communication is not only proof of a mere tenacity but of that indefinable spirit which underlies all national culture and civilization.

To change trains at Newport is to realize that one has travelled abroad since leaving London. There are dark, eager faces with bright intense eyes; a curiosity which is the manifestation of friendliness. One hour in a railway compartment and you have

given a fair résumé of your life story, a survey of your friends and relations in the Principality, a statement of your views on religion and politics, and probably have the impression that life-long friendships have been formed. If you are Welsh, you belong. If you are not Welsh you are given the impression of belonging. It is part of a general desire to please which is not surprising in a nation which has been subject for many centuries. This restricting of the boundaries of the nation, this turning in of the Welsh upon themselves has meant that the tendency in all their ideas, their movements, their character itself has been to grow deeper and more intense. What might have spread broadly over a wide area has been concentrated into narrow limits. It is like the structure of the traditional Welsh poetry, bound fast by a regime of strict and complex rules until it would seem that no one could create spontaneously within such an exacting medium. Yet that is what has been done. And it is precisely the strictness and the *ascese* which results from that which has led to the greatness of the creation. To live and to work in a confined space is to learn to look to more fundamental things which underlie the particular, over-familiar objects and so to enlarge the world to the proportions of the universe. There is this marked tendency in the Welsh nature to pass beyond the individual person and situation to more universal and ultimate things. It is a tendency which has often earned the charge of ruthlessness or of hypocrisy. But it is part of a desire which is almost an obsession to probe into the meaning of things. It is this which underlies the fact that the conversation of the humblest and the poorest is of theology and philosophy, of literary criticism and of ideas in general. And it is this which led in this century to the cult of 'Education', the collecting of scholarships and degrees, the class distinction which was based on the number of letters after a man's name or the number of diplomas (bògus though many of them might have been) on the walls of a man's parlour. It was the motive which led to the sacrifices which were made to establish the University of Wales and to populate it with young people. It was a university built with the pennies of the poor, and any defect from which it was to suffer was to be such an excessive pre-occupation with degrees and quantities of knowledge that it became a superior kind of grammar school. (A situation which, it should be noted here, the University authorities have done and still are doing much to correct.)

This present-day concern with education and the things of the mind is in the direct tradition whereby the aristocracy of Wales was always one of intellect and never one of wealth. The spirit of the philosopher will ever be found either amongst those who, enabled by their wealth to enjoy great leisure, are sufficiently free from the dangers of their life and immune to its debilitating influence to be able to reflect on deeper things; or else it will be found amongst the poor (the point at which poverty of body and poverty of spirit coincide) where the simple tasks and the very struggle for existence must either breed a bitterness and a rebellion or else an inner tranquillity in which things, all things, are seen in their true perspective. The Wales which demands the right to survive is the Wales which was formed in a rigid agrarian economy verging on poverty. The asceticism of the Celtic saints was a natural consequence of the bleakness and the bareness of the land itself. The strenuous routine of the Cistercian life which for years underlay the pattern of Welsh affairs was in closest keeping with the exacting demands of a poor soil and surface rock. One often hears stories of Welsh farmers within comparatively recent times being forced to dig their land with a spade, acre by acre, since the plough could not be used on such a thin layer of soil. That rugged, bare contact with nature breeds things in a man deeper than the body, deeper even than the mind: they form his soul. It is a life which tends of itself to God. Black, bare, bleak, austere—but profound and because profound then rich—not as luxuriant plains and fertile fields are rich, but with the richness of a torrent voice heard at the bottom of one of the dark valley sweeps of Snowdon.

There is in the whole tradition of Welsh thought and culture an inter-relation, one might almost say an inter-penetration, between the personal and the cosmic, between the natural and the supernatural. And it must be remembered that this tradition has always been Christian. It has no pagan antecedents. As such writers as Saunders Lewis and David Jones have pointed out, the Welsh nation is the only true surviving part in these islands of the citizens of Rome. And part of that heritage was the Roman Apostolic Catholic Faith. Saunders Lewis has said, 'The Mass in Wales is something older than the oldest thing in Welsh literature'.

It is important to remember that the civilization and the culture of Wales is essentially Christian. The secular outlook in Wales is a direct consequence of English influence. That is why the religious

situation in Wales at the present is of such great moment. Nonconformity has preserved the continuity of that Christian tradition—hard though the task has been to fit its theology to a tradition which was so markedly sacramental in the fullest sense of the word. But as Nonconformity sublimates itself on the one hand into social and political ideals, and degenerates on the other into a moral system which has lost the idea of sacrifice and discipline, then a dangerous vacuum is being created. Those people who agitate for Welsh Home Rule are in point of fact agitating for much more than a purely political ideal. They are fighting to preserve a Christian tradition against the slow, seeping influences of an indifferent secularism. It is not by accident that many of the leaders of the movement and many of the intellectuals and scholars have found their way to the Catholic Faith. There is a very real sense in which to be fully Welsh means to be Catholic, as there is a very real sense in which Wales never lost her Faith. It was taken away from her; she refused to apostatise. It was not until the Methodist Revival that a substitute came, and even then there kept shafting through those ideas and beliefs that had been so enshrined in the literature and the traditions of the country that they could never be lost. For the literary tradition of Wales had been crystallized in the fifteenth century. It was therefore Catholic, scholastic and classical. In its *awdlau* and *cywyddau* the teachings of the Church had lived on and the whole pattern of Catholic thought and philosophy had been imprinted.

It might be remarked that many people speak of the 'land of song', and endless are the debates about a musical nation which has produced no great composers, no great instrumentalists. But the word 'song' implies a literature. The Welsh musical tradition is one of words wedded to music. It is also a tradition of choral singing or of singing in harmony. Hymns at Marble Arch, hymns at Wembley and Twickenham, and hymns wherever you go from Anglesey to Monmouth. There again we might see the sense of living in close communal relationship. More even than that. In singing these hymns (a great mark of the whole Revival movement in Wales) these people found an expression of their membership one of another in Christ's Body which they had lost when they drifted from the unifying bond of the Church. It was through that shared act, blending their voices, often spontaneously, to words that contain some of the loveliest religious verse ever

written that they revitalized their religious life and regained the glories of great spiritual experiences. In these words they learned to pray and so to know God again and in these words they overcame their depressions and their misery. They were the promise of hope for the future—like Israel in Egypt—even if it was a future held safe only within eternity.

The real music of Wales is a music within the words, in the lilt of the voice and the rhythms of the *cynhangedd*. The oratory, the poetry, the prose and the endless talk—are all bound up with words and their magic. That is why the language has survived despite all the difficulties, and that is why some people are so fierce in their efforts to preserve it at all costs.

Wales is the land of the strangers. It is something to perceive that fact: it is almost too much to try to understand it. These few thoughts have not been an attempt to explain, still less an attempt to explain away. But in our talks of colonial problems and world peace and international securities it is so easy to overlook the values and the riches on our own doorsteps. To travel far enough into Wales is to discover this ancient vital Christian culture and tradition, and in so far as that is something with which we are little acquainted today, then I suppose the traveller is right in thinking he has stumbled on a 'curio'. It could be, some day, that he will even want to take it away with him.

HOLY WEEK 1956

In order to provide English versions of the new Holy Week Liturgy, Holy Week Books have been published by Burns Oates and Washbourne at 5s. and by the Liturgical Apostolate (St André, Bruges) at 3s. These contain the full Latin and English texts and useful notes.