TRACES OF CATHOLICISM IN WELSH FOLKLORE AND CUSTOM

WALES is the lost Brittany of Catholicism in this island. The Reformation was ill-received by the people, and for some considerable time the loyalty of the Welsh to the old religion was a force on which the leaders of Catholicism could rely. For a generation or more after the accession of Elizabeth the religious opinions and prejudices of the greater number of Welshmen are best represented by the forceful lines of the schoolmaster-poet, Richard Gwyn of Llanidloes :

> Adam, the first man had
> But one Paradise;
> And there is but one Church, upon a hill,
> Where there is right communion.
>
> . . . . .
>
> She is conspicuous as the sun,
> And she is dowered beyond price,
> Though smoke mounts from Satan's pit,
> Between the blind man and the sky.

In the end Catholicism in Wales perished, for the most part rather from inanition than from any very positive process of conversion to Protestantism.

Strype, speaking of the middle of the sixteenth century, says :

> In Wales the people ordinarily carried their beads about with them to church and used them in prayer. And even at Carmarthen, while the Bishop was at the communion table bareheaded, doing his devotions, the people kneeled there and knocked their breasts at the sight of the communion, using the same superstitious ceremonies as they had used in times past before the mass. They brought their corpses to be buried with songs and candles lighted up about them. And one Doctor Hughes ministering the Communion in the Cathedral Church of S. David's, did after the popish manner break the host into three pieces, putting one of the parts into the cup, and giving a whole cake to the communicant without breaking the same.

The evidence of the famous Vicar Pritchard in his *Canwyll y Cymry* points to much the same state of affairs as existing in Carmarthenshire during the first half of the seventeenth century. He aimed at influencing his people by means of simple stanzas which could be easily memorised by the common folk. A whole poem of twenty-one verses is devoted to an attack on the doctrine of Purgatory, and another of no less than thirty-three verses is called 'An Answer to the Question about Praying for the Dead.' The practice of invoking the saints was also apparently still common.

†Ni wyr Abraham o'n cyflwr,
Ni all Clement roi i ni swccwr,
Ni chlyw Peder ddim o'n gweddi;
Ar Dduw'n unig y mae gwaeddi.

. . . . .

Cymred eraill hen Saint Cathrin,
Dewi, Clement, Martha, Martin,
Byth ni cheisiaf fi gyfryngwr
Ryngwy' a Dduw ond Christ fy Mhrynwr.

†Nought knows Abraham of our condition
Nor can Clement give us help,
Peter hears nothing of our prayer;
On God only may we cry.

. . . . .

Let others have their old Saint Catherine,
David, Clement, Martha, Martin,
Never will I seek a mediator
Between me and God but Christ my Redeemer.

Dineley says that in 1684 at Llanrwst 'over the Timber Arch of the Chancell, lieth hid the ancient figure of the Crucifixion as bigg as life.' The Rood had, presumably, been preserved in the hope that one day it would be possible to replace it.

By the beginning of the eighteenth century Catholicism was, with the exception of a few districts, little more than a fading memory. What did survive was

a mass of social custom and tradition which had its roots in the old religion. The city of Mansoul is based, like Troy, on the ruins of yet earlier strongholds, the remains of which are to be found deep-bedded beneath, and sometimes directing unperceived, the thoroughfares of the Present.

This matter can best be illustrated by an incident within my own experience in South-West Wales. I was talking to a man whom I had lately come to know rather well. He was of a type the like of which is not to be found in England, a village carpenter who really deserved that much-abused title 'craftsman,' a Methodist 'elder,' and one of the most cultured men, in the only true sense of the word, whom I have ever met. He was talking—and talking very well—about cases of apparently supernatural warnings of the approach of death. He then asked me if I knew the reason why they were so common in South-West Wales—a district which has certainly always had the reputation of being decidedly 'fey.' When I answered that I did not know, he gave me the following explanation. When Bishop Ferrar of St. David's was burnt at Carmarthen in 1554 he told those who were standing by that, if the doctrine for which he was about to die were the truth, a sign of approaching death would for ever afterwards be given to those in the diocese of St. David's who needed it. It is this explanation which illustrates my point. The mediaeval legend was that St. David, finding his people careless of preparing for death, prayed that the inhabitants of his diocese might never be without a special warning of its approach. In the explanation given to me the story remained; but the Saint had given way to the Marian martyr, the truth of whose doctrine was thereby guaranteed. The legend does not disappear with the advent of Protestantism. It simply undergoes a 'sea change,' it is adapted to suit the new religious reality.

Of the mass of social habit and tradition which went to make up the life of the people during the three centuries which followed the Reformation, some examples are worthy of consideration. They are so for two reasons. Firstly, because they show how slow in reality the Welsh were to adapt themselves to the new religion; and, secondly, because they illustrate—or rather hint at—the process of half-conscious adjustment between the still powerful memory of the past and the implications of the new state of affairs.

Few things made a greater impression on the mind of the mediaeval man than the elaborate and solemn funeral rites of the Church. Indeed, in numberless ways men were continually being reminded of those Four Last Things, the faded representation of which can still sometimes be seen faintly under the whitewash over the chancel-arch in some churches in the English countryside. It is not surprising, therefore, if the mark of Catholic thought and custom should have remained indelibly impressed on the funeral customs of Wales long after Catholicism itself had passed away.

In the Vale of Clwyd at the end of the last century —and in other parts of Wales as well—it was still customary in many parishes to toll a bell on the evening of the day on which anyone had died. Variations in the method of tolling showed whether it was a child or an adult, a man or a woman, a married or unmarried person for whom the bell was being tolled.

The 'gwylnos' (or vigil) was a common custom. An account of it, to be found in Williams's *Observations on the Snowdon Mountains* (Oxford, 1802), is worth quoting:

> When the parish bell announces the death of a person, it is immediately enquired on what day the funeral is to be; and on the night preceding that day, all the neighbours assemble at the house where the corpse is, which they call

> Ty corph, *i.e.*, ' the corpse's house.' The coffin, with the remains of the deceased, is then placed on stools in an open part of the house, covered with black cloth, or, if the deceased was unmarried, with a clean white sheet, with three candles burning on it. Every person on entering the house falls devoutly on his knees before the corpse, and repeats to himself the Lord's Prayer, or any other prayer that he chooses. After, if he is a smoker, a pipe and tobacco are offered to him. This meeting is called Gwylnos, and in some places Pydrena. The first word means vigil; the other is, no doubt, a corrupt word from Paderau, that is, Paters or Paternosters. When the assembly is full, the parish clerk reads the common service appointed for the Burial of the Dead; at the conclusion of which psalms, hymns, and other godly songs are sung; and since Methodism is become so universal, someone stands up and delivers an oration on the melancholy subject, and then the company drop away by degrees.

The custom still survives in the form of a prayer-meeting with a short sermon, held in the house on the evening before the funeral.

Before the funeral procession began, after the coffin had been brought out of the house and placed on the bier, the woman who was nearest of kin to the dead person stood behind the coffin and gave food (loaves of bread and sometimes a cheese with a coin stuck in it) and drink to certain of the poor of the parish. The procession started with the Lord's Prayer, and whenever it came to a cross-road the people knelt and repeated the same prayer. Since the coming of Methodism, instead of the repeating of the Paternoster, hymns are sung.

When the first part of the burial service had been completed each of the congregation in turn walked up to the chancel and placed a coin, usually on the altar. This was called ' offrwm ' (*i.e.*, offering).

The Sunday after the funeral (in some places the second Sunday) was called Sul Coffa (Commemoration Sunday). The relatives of the dead person knelt

round the grave before Morning Prayer and said the Paternoster. The anniversary of the funeral was also originally observed.

In these funeral customs we have clearly illustrated the extraordinarily interesting process of that slow dissolution of Catholic custom to which I have referred. In the Gwylnos we have the Vespers for the Dead, which was commonly called the Placebo (from the psalm, ' Placebo Domino in regione vivorum '), and the Mattins (which came directly after midnight and was generally called the Dirge). The black or white cloth, the lighted candles, the Paternosters and the funeral procession need no explanation. The 'offrwm' was originally an offering for Masses for the dead man's soul. The ceremony on Sul Coffa corresponds to the ' thirty day ' ' month mind ' and the ' year mind ' or obit, directions for which played such a large part in mediaeval wills.

Until lately in many districts it was the custom to distribute food on All Souls' Day to the poor. It was considered that this gift was in some way of benefit to the dead. In Llanasa parish in the Vale of Clwyd it was seed-cakes which were given to the poor, who, on receiving them, prayed for a blessing on the next crop of wheat. In Carnarvonshire the dole was called 'solcd' and in other parts such as the Vale of Clwyd ' bwyd cennad y mierw,' which Professor T. Gwyn Jones considers to be best translated as ' the food of the letting-loose of the dead.'

In the case of the Plygain or Pulgain at Christmas we are faced with an example not only of survival but, what is more, of adaptation. In origin the word is Latin, as are most of the religious and cultural words in the language. The first of the masses for Christmas Day is called in the Sarum Missal ' missa in galli cantu '—the mass at the cock-crowing, and the Low Latin ' pullicantio ' became in South Wales ' pylgein ' and

in North Wales ' plygain ' (the mediaeval form was ' pylgeint.') The modern Breton term for the midnight mass is ' pelgent.'

With the Reformation the midnight mass disappeared but (it was the year of the Armada) the Welsh Bible of Bishop Morgan made its appearance. The story went that as a boy in the old house of Ty Mawr, William Morgan had learnt Greek and Hebrew from a monk who lay concealed in the house. Be that as it may, Bishop Morgan's translation was a masterpiece. ' Its stately diction; its scholarly accuracy, its pure and idiomatic style and its sonorous eloquence have never been surpassed in any language.'

It was necessary to find something which might take the place of the midnight mass, and therefore the Plygain became a carol service. The Bible of Bishop Morgan provided a wealth of material for the manufacture of the new carols. It is a matter of doubt as to whether there was any large body of carols in mediaeval Wales. Certainly none have survived, the earliest existing examples being of the seventeenth century.

The service took place, at first, at three o'clock in the morning and, later, between four and five o'clock. To-day, in the places where it is still held, it is generally at six o'clock. It was generally the custom to meet beforehand at particular farm houses and to sit up until it was time to go to church. The time was usually spent by the younger members of the party in making a particular kind of toffee called cyflaith, in singing and the telling of stories. In the towns the clergyman was often escorted from the rectory to the church by a procession of the young men carrying lighted candles specially made for the occasion and brightly coloured. The churchwardens also supplied a large quantity of tallow dips. When the procession arrived at the church every man stuck his lighted candle on the pew or on the wall beside him. Rough

home-made candlesticks of clay were often used. The service began with Morning Prayer and then followed the carol singing. As soon as one singer or party of singers had finished, another was ready to take their place, and the service went on for a couple of hours or more. The carols were often composed by local bards. Their merits as literature varied considerably but they were all alike in being lengthy. Their composers seem to have argued that the longer the carol the more assured would be the poet's fame with posterity.

The majority of the carols were verse narratives of the Incarnation and Atonement, but, despite the influence of the Authorised Version, there was much in them which owed but little to that book. They contained a great quantity of legends which had been handed down from the Middle Ages, and the origins of which are often to be found in the Apocryphal Gospels. In the eighteenth century most Welsh peasants knew the names of the three kings, Our Lady's parents, the two thieves and the centurion on Calvary. In some cases the carol singers at the Plygain were accompanied by a harper.

The decay of the custom was mainly due to the scenes of drunkenness and disorder which frequently took place. One example will suffice. On one occasion at Hope two young men at the Plygain service found themselves standing behind a youth who boasted a fine head of bushy red hair. One of them suggested to his companion that it would be only fitting to set this shock of red hair on fire and the other immediately applied his candle to the unfortunate young man's hair, which promptly flared up. No great feat of imagination is needed to imagine the scene of uproar and confusion which followed.

Evensong on Christmas Day was always held at night and not, as was the invariable custom on other

days, in the afternoon. As at the Plygain, everyone came with a candle and the church was brilliantly illuminated. It was from this that the service got its name of Gosper Canwyllan (Candle Vespers). As in the morning, carols were sung.

It was said that on Christmas morning the hardest frost would thaw and that the rosemary as well as the thorn tree which St. Joseph of Arimathea had planted at Glastonbury blossomed. Over a hundred years ago a miller of Eifionydd, of the name of Sion Owain, walked to Glastonbury to see the tree. He knew no word of English except the words 'stick of Joseph,' but he reached Glastonbury and came back again with a sprig from the tree, which he kept as a protection from misfortune.

Until the beginning of the last century the great day in the year of each parish was that of the gwylmabsant (*i.e.*, the festival of the Holy Man), the feast of the patron saint of the parish. The festivities started as a rule on the Sunday nearest the saint's day. In Llanymawddwy in Merionethshire this day was called Sul y Pwdin (Pudding Sunday), and was the one day in the year on which, as a rule, there was pudding for dinner in the farm houses in the parish. The four or five days following were given up to merry-making. From the whole surrounding district people came pouring in. Young men and girls who were in service on farms in other parishes came back to see their parents and to take part in the celebrations. Special beds were made up on the floors and in the barn and hay lofts, and a gwylmabsant bed was a proverb all over the countryside for overcrowding. The days were spent in running, jumping, putting the weight, wrestling, cock-fighting, dancing, and musical contests. Football matches were played between rival parishes and the losers supplied their conquerors with

beer. In some places, it is said, relics of the Saints were carried in procession. At Llandudno in 1761 interludes were acted. Bull-baiting and bear-baiting were also the custom in some cases. The dancing frequently took place in the churchyard, though on the north side where no burials, with the exception of those of suicides, ever took place. Malkin (1804), speaking of two great yew trees in the churchyard at Aberdwy in Radnorshire, says, 'An intelligent clergyman of the neighbourhood informed me that he had frequently seen sixty couples dancing, at Aberdwy feast, under the shade of these yews.'

The causes for the decline of the gwylmabsant were, in the main, two. In the first place they inevitably gave occasion for a vast amount of drunkenness and disorder. The football matches, in particular, frequently degenerated into pitched battles, especially where, as was so often the case, there was a long-standing feud between two parishes. Knappau, the South Welsh form of the game, was, in particular, a form of sport in comparison with which the fiercest modern encounter on the Cardiff Arms Park pales into insignificance. The chief matches of the year were between Nevern and Pembroke on Shrove Tuesday and when Kemes (for all intents and purposes North Pembrokeshire) met Cardiganshire on Corpus Christi day. George Owen, of Henllys, who had been a leading player in his youth ' the signes and seales of which I carrye in my head, handes and other parts of my body,' remarks 'At these two playes have often been esteemed two thousand footmen besides horsemen.' In this ' truly warlike exercise ' the horsemen, armed with stout cudgels, would frequently charge the footmen. In 1588 a mariner, sailing post haste to join the fleet which was to meet the Armada, mistook a game of Knappau for the outbreak of civil strife and stopped in the hope of pacifying the riot. If not on

the same scale, parish football matches were carried out in much the same spirit.

The second reason for the disappearance of the gwylmabsant was the rise of Methodism. The preaching meeting and, later on, after great searchings of heart, the revived eisteddfod, took its place.

And here a word of warning is necessary for the benefit of enthusiastic Englishmen of the 'Mass and Maypole' school. It is wise not to waste too much time in denouncing the 'sombre Puritanism' of the Evangelical divines and preachers of the eighteenth century Welsh revival. In the first place, although the loss of the gwylmabsant meant the loss of much that was good, the institution had become so corrupted that it must in many ways have been an intolerable nuisance. It had been cut off from that which was its root and origin and decay was the inevitable result.

In dealing with the many customs connected with holy wells, of which, as in every Celtic country, there are in Wales a great number, we are on very difficult ground indeed. The fact that most of the wells are dedicated to saints has obscured the fact that the wells and many of the customs connected with them are very much older than the saints whose names they commemorate. In certain cases, however, the influence of Catholicism is obvious.

At Llysfaen, near Abergele, animals were taken to the well of Saint Cynfran, and water was sprinkled on them with the words 'Rhad Duw a Chynfran lwyd ar y da,' 'the blessing of God and holy Cynfran on the cattle.'

Even at the end of the eighteenth century many people resorted to Ffynnon Degla in the parish of Llandegla, in Denbighshire. Thomas Pennant visited the well and wrote an account of it in his *Tour in Wales* (1784):

> The church (he says) is dedicated to Saint Tecla, virgin and martyr; who, after her conversion by Saint Paul, suffered under Nero at Iconium. About two hundred yards from the church, in a quillet called Gwern Degla, rises a small spring. The water is under the tutelage of the saint; and to this day held to be extremely beneficial in the Clwyf Tegla, St. Tecla's Disease, or the falling sickness. The patient washes his limbs in the well; makes an offering into it of fourpence; walks round it three times; and thrice repeats the Lord's Prayer. These ceremonies are never begun until after sunset, in order to inspire the votaries with greater awe. If the afflicted be of the male sex, like Socrates he makes an offering of a cock to his Aesculapius, or rather to Tecla Hygeia; if of the fair sex, a hen. The fowl is carried in a basket round the well; after that into the churchyard; when the same orizons, and the same circumambulations are performed round the church. The votary then enters the church; gets under the communion table; lies down with the Bible under his or her head; is covered with the carpet or cloth, and rests there until break of day; departing after offering sixpence. If the bird dies, the cure is supposed to have been effected, and the disease transferred to the devoted victim.

Resort to the well seems to have ceased soon after the beginning of the nineteenth century.

At Ffynnon yr Ychen, Llandeilo Llewydarth, in Pembrokeshire, water was drunk by the sick out of the reputed skull of St. Teilo at any rate up to the end of the nineteenth century.

People suffering from debility and fits, particularly children, were taken to Saint Beuno's well at Clynnog. Pennant says of Saint Beuno:

> Votaries were wont to have great faith in him, and did not doubt but that by means of a night's lodging on his tomb a cure would be found for all diseases. It was customary to cover it with rushes and leave on it till morning sick children, after making them first undergo ablution in the neighbouring Holy Well; and I myself once saw on it a feather bed on which a poor paralytic from Merionethshire had lain the whole night after undergoing the ceremony.

In a remote valley in the Berwyn mountains is the church of Pennant Melangell. When Brochwel, Prince of Powys (who flourished at the beginning of the seventh century) was hunting in this valley, a hare, closely pursued by his hounds, took refuge beneath the robe of the saint. The hounds refused to touch it, and the prince, filled with awe, gave the valley to the maiden. The rock on the mountain side on which she slept is still to be seen, and, until the eighteenth century, no person dared to kill a hare in the parish. Even later than this it was believed that if, when a hare was pursued by the hounds, anyone cried, ' God and Saint Melangell be with thee ' it was sure to escape.

In conclusion, it is worth remembering that when the wreck of mere custom has disappeared, there will still remain, as long as the language of Wales endures, one living sign of the religion which she once professed. It is, perhaps, that for which the Catholic would most wish. The wild flowers are still the flowers of Mary. The Cistercian and afterwards the Friar brought to Wales an increase in devotion to the Mother of God and made her ' the heroine of the Welsh peasant for two hundred years.' Before the presence of Mary the fabled loveliness of Olwen and Enid who had, perhaps, once been the goddesses of the old Celtic heathendom and who still lingered as the theme of the story-teller and the poet, faded like a dream. It was written of Olwen that ' her hair was of brighter gold than the flower of the broom, her skin was whiter than the foam of the wave, and her fingers were fairer than the blossoms of the wood anemone amidst the spray of the meadow fountain. The eye of the trained hawk, the glance of the falcon, was not brighter than hers' and ' four white trefoils sprang up wherever she trod.' She kept but the bindweed and the clover, while Enid surrendered all but the lily of the valley.

Mary took the galingale as her garland, the alchemilla for a mantle, the milk-thistle for a comb, the calceolus for her slippers. The great mullein was a candle for her and the ashe-keys were her keys. The sharp dock became her balances and the common centaury her ladder. The thrift formed a pillow for her and the cowslip held her tears. The toad-flax gave her thread for her spinning and the ploughman's spikenard was her medicine. The dewberry and the wild clary were hers, the anthyllis became 'the fingers of Mary' and the hair moss 'the golden hair of the Virgin.' They remain, the lasting pledges of 'second spring.'

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