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Abstract

Discusses two of the noted forgers of ancient Celtic documents who influenced the Celtic Revival of the nineteenth century and whose inventions influence our perceptions of Celtic literature and mythology (and fantasy writers) even today.

Additional Keywords

Celtic Revival; Hersard de la Villemarque, Theodore; Literature, Celtic—Forgeries; Literature, Celtic—Spurious; Morganwg, Iolo

New Myths for Old

The Legacy of Iolo Morgannwg and Hersard de le Villemarque

Alexi Kondratiev

The idea of continuity—with its attendant hope for survival, for performance—has long been one of the main integrating factors in culture. Well-established roots in the past confer solidity and legitimacy upon the activities of the present. An institution that has stood the test of time is often thought to have more authority than institutions that have just begun to operate. Newly-formed organizations seek to gain acceptance by showing that they are the fulfillment of processes that have existed in the culture since time immemorial. And in literature, a tale or a poem that has been passed on unchanged through many centuries is somehow endowed with a particular prestige, as though some unusual power within it were responsible for its resistance to oblivion. Only since the Romantic period has originality come to be seen as an end in itself, and departure from tradition come to be praised more highly than the cultivation and furtherance of tradition. Even in this post-Romantic age of ours we can still feel a thrill at experiencing something that has come out of the deep past. It establishes a sense of contact, of sharing, between ourselves and our remote ancestors; it reassures us by intimating that a generation's deeds are not erased when it dies out of the world, that good works are carried on and continue to grow even after those who initiated them have gone.

It is not surprising, then, that writers should often have claimed ancient models or ancient sources for certain of their works, even when the content of those works was mostly—or even entirely—their own invention. Thus J.R.R. Tolkien informed us that the material for *The Lord of the Rings* was drawn from the Red Book of Westmarch, a chronicle compiled by hobbits at the end of the Third Age of our world. Geoffrey of Monmouth, whose twelfth-century *Historia Regum Britanniae* may have been the seed from which the many-branched and still-flourishing tree of Arthurian Romance sprang, claimed as his source an "ancient British book." In the case of the Red Book of Westmarch, we are of course aware that no such manuscript is available, that to our knowledge there is no historical context that could have produced such a work, and that therefore Tolkien meant it as a literary device, a signal that we should, by a suspension of disbelief, approach *The Lord of the Rings* as we would a work of great antiquity. In Geoffrey's case, the situation is less clear: we have no way of knowing how seriously he meant his "ancient British book," or how seriously his contemporaries took the claim. The fact remains that subsequent elaborators of the Arthurian mythos have felt free to deal with it as fiction, albeit relating to events that did perhaps take place in some long-ago period. Geoffrey's "source" could as easily be understood as a literary device as otherwise.

Yet it has happened that, at various times and in various places, certain writers not only claimed imaginary ancient sources for their works, but went so far as to forge the documents to support their claim, so as to induce not only secondary but primary belief in the antiquity of their material. The motives behind

such painstaking and time-consuming deceit are not always clear. In some cases we are no doubt dealing with a compulsive liar and his urge to manipulate other people's credulity. Yet in other cases it seems that the main goal was not to delude, but to gain respectability and power for some beloved cause which was perceived as weak or languishing in obscurity. This has occurred most commonly in the context of nationalist movements, where the legitimacy of a nation's claim to self-determination was often felt to be confirmed by the long-standing continuity of its institutions and traditions. An ancient literary tradition in a given nation's vernacular would prove the historical distinctiveness of that nation. If no long tradition existed in writing, one could look for evidence of it in oral folklore; or, if one had the skill and the imagination for it, one could, of course, try to forge it. Attempts of this sort were made in several countries—the *Kralovedvorsky Rukopis* in Czechoslovakia is a notable example—but no national movement attracted as many ingenious and gifted literary forgers as the last Celtic Revival which began in Europe in the eighteenth century.

Before 1700 the word "Celt", to the average educated person, referred to an ancient European people of which the Gauls and the Britons had been branches and which, after being overrun by the Romans and Germans, had vanished from the map. There remained the vague notion that the Welsh were the descendants of the early Britons, but the cultural implications of this were never worked out and the word "Celtic" was not normally used to describe them. Then, in the first quarter of the eighteenth century, the writings of the Welsh antiquarian Edward Lhuyd gave "Celtic" a new meaning and revolutionized concepts of Western history, not only in the Celtic countries but throughout Europe. According to Lhuyd's comparative studies, the languages of the six nations now perceived as Celtic were not only related to each other (a fact which, in the case of Welsh and Irish, had long been overlooked), but also to that of the people called "Celts" by the Greek and Latin sources. The new cultural perspectives opened up by this discovery were, to many scholars, immensely important. It meant that the Celts were not just obscure barbarians in the murky dawn of European history, but a people still existing in the modern world. It also meant that, through the channel of language, there was a link between the Celts of the present day and the Celts who had invaded Rome and Greece, who had fought Caesar, and whose mysterious priests, the Druids, were cryptically referred to by the Classical writers as natural philosophers of no mean status. What had the wisdom of the Druids actually consisted of? There were no literary texts available from the Old Celtic period, only scattered inscriptions and references to personal and place names. None of the literature preserved in the modern Celtic languages was older than Mediaeval. There was a gaping void in the record, then, between the Christian Celts of the Middle Ages and the barely glimpsed Druids of antiquity. Yet the urge to fill that void became a

compelling one to many Celtic Revivalists, and indeed to many non-Celtic intellectuals of the period. It was a time of cultural tension, social and aesthetic values were changing, traditional structures were being challenged, nationalism, capitalism and industrialism began to play a dominant role in political life. There was an eager search for alternatives to the models inherited from Classical antiquity and from the Church. A number of philosophers thought they might find such an alternative in the pagan traditions of the Celts, demonstrably one of the most ancient European peoples and--even the Classical writers admitted it--once possessed of great wisdom. The idea of a culture both primitive and enlightened was very appealing to the nascent Romantic sensibility. To the early Romantics, recovery of ancient Celtic traditions through concrete documents would have been a justification for a new philosophical outlook; for the Celtic Revivalists, it would have been immensely encouraging evidence of continuity. No such documents had ever turned up, but their eventual discovery was still thought plausible at the time. Bands of eager antiquarians went questing through the countryside (mostly in Wales, where the Celtic Revival had begun), combing the private libraries, the attics of manors and farmhouses alike, for works of great age. When, after a generation's searching, no suitable documents had been found, the temptation to forge them must have been strong. And such forgeries did occur, as we shall see.

Three "Celtic forgers" stand out most prominently in the history of the Revival: James Macpherson (1736-1796); Iolo Morganwg¹ (Edward Williams); and Theodore Hersart de la Villemarque. Macpherson, the Scottish author of *Ossian* and the best known of the three, will not concern us here. While his enjoyed enormous popularity in European literary circles and won such diverse admirers as Napoleon and Chateaubriand, it is, in the final analysis, inferior to the authentic Irish and Scottish stories which served as its models. And although Macpherson attempted to forge a Gaelic original, he in fact composed *Ossian* in English, so that, apart from having contributed no new elements to Celtic tradition, it cannot really be considered a part of Celtic literature. The case of the two other writers, however, is very different: relatively unknown outside their native countries, they forged original and inspired works which gained such wide acceptance that even today, after the forgery has been exposed, they continue to determine popular ideas about the Celts and their traditions, and still influence Celtic-inspired fantasy literature.

Edward Williams--later known to all as Iolo Morganwg (Iolo being the diminutive form of *Iorwerth*, the Welsh name which has come to be considered the equivalent of English 'Edward')--was born in 1747 in the village of Pen Onn, Glamorgan (Morgannwg), South Wales. English was the language of his home, since his mother had little Welsh, yet he appears to have been fluent in Welsh from early childhood, Welsh being the common speech of the district at the time. Because of health problems (and probably psychological difficulties as well) he never went to school, but received a very adequate education from his mother. Following in his father's footsteps, he became a stonemason and practiced that trade all his life, first in Glamorgan, then for a few years in the London area, and finally in Glamorgan again, in the Trefflemin cottage where, until his death in 1826, he spent most of his free time writing furiously on every available scrap of paper.

What was the Welsh stonemason writing? During his

stay in London he became acquainted with many members of the English cultural establishment, who regarded him as an amusing exotic with literary pretensions, "the Welsh bard."² Iolo was a short and physically ugly man, but his quick wit and powerfully expressive speech won him respect in intellectual circles. Anecdotes about his eccentricities abounded. Though intensely fond of horses, he could never bring himself to ride one, and would go on outings with his horse walking beside him, like a dog. Even if he had forgiven someone who had wronged him, he would never again come under that man's roof, but would, when visiting, conduct a friendly conversation from just beyond the threshold. He was a passionate supporter of the French Revolution (an attitude not uncommon among Welsh-speaking intellectuals of his generation) and on several occasions ran afoul of the English authorities because of his political opinions. As for his religious convictions, he was a Unitarian with an anticlerical turn of mind, though he appears to have enjoyed the Catholic imagery of Mediaeval Welsh poetry. His attempts at writing English verse, collected in 1794 under the title *Poems Lyrical and Pastoral*, were not about to win him immortality in the annals of English literature: they were, to put it in the most charitable terms, uninspired. His Welsh verse, however, was another matter entirely; but his English contemporaries could only know about that aspect of his creative life from hearsay.

Some time before going to London Iolo had been seized with what can only be described as a burning passion for the Welsh language, coupled with an intense patriotic love for his native Glamorgan. The great antiquarian wave that had followed Edward Lhuyd's discoveries was still strong in Iolo's youth. Some of these language enthusiasts, who became known as *gramadegyddion*, not only collected old manuscripts but made detailed studies of the contemporary speech of the countryside, compiling vocabulary lists and defining grammatical points. Iolo became acquainted with a local *gramadegydd*, Sion Bradford, who gave him the run of his well-stocked library and introduced the younger man to the riches of Welsh literary tradition. Reading, to Iolo, was always an immediate spur to creative writing. The intricacies of *canu caeth* (the alliterative forms of traditional Welsh verse) fascinated him, and he rapidly gained proficiency in their use, producing high-quality pastiches of all the poets he read. He became intensely involved not only with the form but with the subject matter of the poetry: it seemed to compose a vast, mosaic-like picture of Welsh cultural history--with many gaps and obscurities here and there. But to Iolo such gaps and obscurities were intolerable, and he had a compulsive urge to clarify them. Where scholarship could not provide him with the answers, his imagination did: his pastiches soon became devoted to elucidations of obscure points in the poems he studied. This feverish rewriting of Welsh literature would occupy him to the end of his life.

In London he had become associated with Cymdeithas Gwyneddigion Llundain, a group of North Welshmen residing in London and devoted to the preservation of Welsh culture. Impressed by Iolo's knowledge of poetry, they requested his assistance in their work. When Owen Jones (better known by his bardic name, Owain Myfyr) wrote to Iolo for help with a definitive edition of Dafydd ap Gwilym's *cywyddau*, Iolo first sent him some copies of authentic manuscripts, and then some of his own pastiches. The latter were accepted as genuine without a qualm; Iolo's forgeries had begun to go public. He did not stop there: by the time Owain

Myfyr issued the final volume of his monumental Myvyrian Archaiology of Wales in 1809 (a compendium of early Welsh poetry and some prose), about a third of its contents had in fact been composed by Iolo, and featured such imaginary writers as Catwg Doeth and the Bardd Glas.

Iolo's fierce love for his native Glamorgan has already been mentioned. He seems to have somewhat resented the fact that it was mostly North Welshmen he found in the forefront of the Revival, and that North Welsh traditions were being researched more extensively. Many of his pastiches are attempts to link all the great figures of Welsh literature with Glamorgan in some way. The imaginary writers whose works he forged were also invariably associated with Glamorgan, and intended to revive the fame of that district.

But Iolo would not limit himself to mere pastiche. The great mass of material he had picked up from his reading began to coalesce into a distinctive mythology. The word "bard" obsessed him: were not the ancient Bards, according to Classical writers, a minor order of Druids, and were not Welsh poets still called bards? He had run across references to a gorsedd (bardic council) which would meet at certain times for an eisteddfod ('session')--indeed eisteddfodau, as national gatherings of poets, were still held in Iolo's day. In Iolo's mind the Gorsedd became a kind of Bardic church which had flourished from remote antiquity until the end of Welsh independence in 1282, after which it had gone underground, the title of Archdruid and the lore it represented being passed on in secret, going sometimes to well-known personalities, sometimes to obscure ones--rather like C.S. Lewis' legend of the Pendragons of Logres. After a while the tradition had become restricted to Glamorgan. Iolo himself, of course, was the last living repository of this Druidic knowledge. He had been initiated by Sion Brandord, the old Gramadegydd.

Iolo's fabrication quickly won many believers, and met with little serious challenge at first. The Celtic Revival had, in fact, always been waiting for just such a revelation. A Gorsedd was formed, and a "Druidic" eisteddfod was held in 1792 on Primrose Hill in London, inside a "stone circle" and featuring a "meeting stone," products of Iolo's mythopoeic imagination. Iolo then succeeded in merging the Gorsedd ritual with the institution of the eisteddfod, still extant but dying, in Wales. The first National Eisteddfod conducted entirely according to Iolo's specifications was held in Camarthen in 1819. In this form, it has remained the best-known and most central of Wales' cultural institutions, and imitations of it have sprung up in Cornwall and Brittany.

Now that he was accepted by many as the only authority on a secret tradition, Iolo had a ready audience for his mythology. The elaboration of this mythology remained his primary concern to the end of his life, and the massive bulk of the Iolo MSS., compiled after his death, is a witness to the ceaseless activity of his mind. The full range of the mythology--the swarms of names, dates, criss-crossing themes, triads of lore--cannot be dealt with in a paper of this scope. Some of it is distinctly pagan, suggested by references in the older texts, and at times Iolo seems, by a keen poetic intuition, to anticipate certain results of later Celtic scholarship, although at other times he makes amusing blunders. For instance, he gives an important place to a divinity named Hu-Gadarn,

who played a Noah-like role during the deluge and brought the Cymry to Britain from Deffrobani in the Land of Summer. Since Hu also had solar attributes, his association with the Ark led to the concept of a supposed "Helio-Arkite" religion of the ancient Celts much discussed by scholars at the turn of the nineteenth century. In fact, the name Hu-Gadarn first appears in the Welsh Carolingian tale Campeu Siarlymaen, and seems to be a translation of the French name Hugon le Fort. In some other Iolo texts the Noah-like character is named Nefydd Naf Neifion, and the ark itself, called Ked or Haearddor, is equated with the cauldron of Ceridwen.

The strictly "Bardic" part of the mythology is more consistent. A compilation of the texts dealing with it, entitled the Barddas MS, was published some forty years after Iolo's death. The basic themes of the mythology may be sketched out as follows. There are three 'circles' (cylchoedd) in Existence: Ceugant, Abred, and Gwynfyd. Ceugant is Absolute Perfection, where only God can dwell. God made creatures to dwell in the circle of Gwynfyd, 'blessedness', which is all life without any death. Some of the creatures, through pride, sought to be with God in Ceugant. Unable to bear the presence of Perfection, they were cast down into Annwn, the lowest region of the circle of Abred, where dead matter prevails. From thence they must return, gaining experience and knowledge, through an immensely long series of incarnations, to Gwynfyd. The creatures who did not rebel and remained in Gwynfyd are the dwyfeu, a term which seems to designate both the Celtic gods and the Christiann angels. But all the Creatures in Abred are destined to become dwyfeu in the end. Matter, the stuff of Abred, has a complex structure: the main component is a very fine substance called manred, in which God Himself is present. Manred is acted upon by two antithetical forces, calas which promotes hardness and stasis, and gwyar which promotes fluidity and change, and by a third force, nywfre, which turns dead matter into living matter. Once living matter has attained the human level it becomes susceptible to the Divine awen, the only true source of knowledge, which leads to Gwynfyd. The first man was Menw ap Teirgwaeedd (who appears in the Mabinogi of Kilhwch and Olwen). Awakening into consciousness at the dawn of the world, he could still feel God's creative power at work as three rays of light, or three shouts (hence his name, 'son of the three shouts'). Seizing three sticks, he arranged them in a symbolic ternary figure, the first triad and the representation of the three main vowels. Thus writing and bardism were born at the same time. The first poets were the Gwyddoniaid, who created as the awen came to them, without any formal discipline. The greatest of them, Tydain Tad Awen, began to organize schools through which bardic knowledge could be systematized and transmitted. Then, when Britain was ruled by its eponymous ruler Prydain ab Aedd Mawr, the Primal Bards Plenydd, Alawn and Gwron instituted the first Gorsedd: Madog, Cenwyn and Anllawdd became the first blue-robed prydyddion, bards devoted to maintaining the traditional standards of poetry; Cadawc ab Myl Mur Mawredd, Trysin ab Erbal and Rhuawn Gerdd Arian became the first green-robed ofyddion, seekers of knowledge both through observation and through imagination, guided by the awen; and Meiwyn Fardd, Rhiwallon the Winged son of Prydain, and Berwyn ab Arthrawd were the first white-robed derwyddon, responsible for the rituals of worship. From this original nine grew the tradition of Bardism and Druidism, through a long imaginary history of triumphs and vicissitudes, to culminate in Iolo and his friends, and the Gorsedd he was trying to bring forth into the modern world.

Since the Classical sources suggested that the Druids had been expert in all the branches of "natural philosophy", Iolo assumed that a Bardic text should deal with every kind of "scientific" material. Much of the Barddas MS is a grab-bag of information on history, theology, Druidic calendars, astronomy (which has fifteen planets, eight of them being invisible), physiology, mathematics, writing systems, etc. Readers acquainted with Tolkien will be irresistibly reminded of the Appendices to The Lord of the Rings; there is the same sense of prodigious inventiveness, the same attention to minutiae. Iolo devised a runic alphabet he called Coelbren y Beirdd, and described its origin and development in great detail. One of his most amusing inventions was the Peithynen, a sort of "divining machine" in which sticks inscribed with runes were turned with a crank. An alternate system using stones, the coelfain, survives as the so-called "Celtic Runic Stones" used by some occultists in the United States and elsewhere.

Despite the general climate of acceptance, Iolo's work met with a certain amount of skepticism from the start. The Rev. Edward Davies, writing during Iolo's lifetime, swallowed the mythology whole and became one of the main proponents of the "Helio-Arkite" model of Celtic paganism, but he could not reconcile the egalitarianism and pacifism of Iolo's Bardism with the aristocratic war poetry of ancient bards like Aneurin and Taliesin. Not until 1919, however, when the forgery was exposed in an issue of the Welsh periodical Y Beirniad, was the whole matter officially conceded to be a hoax by the academic establishment. Celtic philology had made great progress during the nineteenth century, and some aspects of Iolo's language began to attract suspicion. Iolo's knowledge of the older prose style was not as extensive as his knowledge of poetry, and his writing in the Barddas MS was full of anachronisms which linguists picked up one by one, until the burden of evidence against him was so great that there was no reason left to believe in the authenticity of his scholarly contribution as a whole.

But the seed had sprouted, and nothing would check its growth. Neo-Druidic circles more or less inspired by the Barddas material sprang up everywhere. The Theosophical movement was attracted to Iolo's mythology for a number of reasons: its mention of reincarnation, its universalism, its emphasis on knowledge as a means of salvation, its concept of the awen as an ever-present source of Divine illumination. Thus, in the vast corpus of mythology ultimately derived from Madame Blavatsky's writings, the Celts became one of the first sources of post-Atlantean wisdom, and Iolo's system filtered into popular culture through yet another channel. As this image of the Celts as a people with a highly developed and somewhat Orientalistic philosophy was introduced into milieus farther and farther removed from academe, the evolution of Celtic scholarship had little effect upon it and it sank unshakably firm roots into public consciousness. When Lewis Spence published his Mysteries of Britain in 1928, he still believed in the Barddas material and all its attendant mythology, although he had heard some of the arguments against it. By the time Magic Arts in Celtic Britain came out in 1946, he had reluctantly come to accept the fact that it was a forgery; but his basic conceptions about the Celts seem to have changed little for all that. And although Robert Graves did not claim Iolo as a direct source for the material in The White Goddess, some of his ideas, especially those dealing with the Celtic calendar, are clearly based on Iolo's model.

It is perhaps to lovers of the old Celtic

literature that Iolo's work proved the greatest boon. Where before Celtic mythology had seemed like a vast tangle of colorful detail with no consistent pattern to hold it together, Iolo's system provided a framework for understanding it. The tales could now be read as dramas of spiritual growth and initiation—a reading made all the easier by the prominence of the quest-motif in them (as in the Grail story and its prototypes). Modern writers of Celtic-inspired fantasy have usually been indebted to Iolo in some way. Kenneth Morris' retellings of parts of the Mabinogion tales (The Fate of the Princes of Dyfed and The Book of the Three Dragons) owe as much (if not more) to Iolo's mythology as to the Mabinogion themselves, and he follows Iolo's practice of building full-fledged characters out of otherwise obscure names found in the old texts. Evangeline Walton's retellings of the same tales are more personal and rely more on later Celtic scholarship, but in the earliest of them, The Virgin and the Swine (The Island of the Mighty), her theme of evolving divinities is an obvious echo of Iolo's thought. More recently, Lloyd Alexander's Chronicles of Prydain, original stories based on Welsh themes and imagery, have drawn as much from material compiled or invented by Iolo as from the more familiar "canonical" texts: Hen Wen's divination from carved sticks is a reference to Coelbren y Beirdd; the tripartite design of Adaon's brooch is the first Bardic symbol invented by Menw ap Teirgwaedd; Medwyn, the Noah-figure in The Book of Three, is derived from Menwyd, one of the names of Nefydd Naf Neifion, Iolo's Noah-figure; the gwythaints are based on the gwythaint (literally, 'furious winged ones') who, according to a pseudo-Taliesin poem, fought with Gwydion in Nant Ffrancon until his sister Arianrhod rescued him by surrounding him with a rainbow; Gurgi (gwr -gi, 'man-dog') is, in Mediaeval sources, the name of a (one presumes) fully human companion of Peredur, but Iolo, interpreting his name literally, made him into a half-bestial monster, as does Alexander; Eilonwy's "bauble", the Golden Pelydryn, is derived from the pelydryn aur ("golden ray of light"), a term used by the Mediaeval bards as a metaphor for poetic inspiration, but which Iolo, again through a literal interpretation (and misled, probably, by the syllable pel, which means 'ball'), took to be a luminous sphere used by Druidic initiates; and the examples could go on. Nor are we likely to soon see an end to Iolo's direct or indirect influence on fantasy writers; his themes remain vigorous and attractive, and are often difficult to isolate and recognize for what they are, so deeply have they affected our culture's perception of Celtic tradition.

Part II -- on Hersard de le Villemarque, will appear in the next issue.

NOTES

1. In standard Welsh orthography Morgannwg has two n's, but Iolo himself consistently spelled it with a single n. I will here follow contemporary Welsh usage by writing a single n when referring to Edward Williams' bardic name, and two n's when referring only to the Welsh name of Glamorgan.
2. Much of what we know of Iolo's personality and habits comes from the writings of his friend Elijah Waring, who spoke no Welsh and had little understanding of Iolo's position in the world of Welsh culture. Large portions of Waring's memoir, as well as samples of Iolo's literary output in English, can be found in AP NICHOLAS: 1945.