

INTRODUCTION TO WELSH HAGIOLOGY

THE present revival of Catholicism in Wales would be incomplete without the old devotion to the early Welsh Saints, of whose constant intercession for their native land we now begin to see the fruit. Though their cultus was forbidden at the Reformation, they have kept their place in the affection of the Welsh people; and the increased knowledge of their lives gained by modern scholars is a valuable help in restoring their rightful place in popular devotion. To the historian their chief importance is their formative influence on the Welsh nation, which, as is being increasingly recognised, grew out of Celtic monasticism, of which these Saints were the founders. Under Roman rule British Christianity had its centres in the cities and its organisation was interwoven with that urban life which was the framework of the imperial system. The decay of urban life after the departure of the Legions induced a period of stagnation in British Christianity from which it was rescued only by the monastic movement, which introduced a new organisation better able to adapt itself to the tribal system now replacing imperial administration. Thus it was Celtic monasticism which fused the British tribes and the remnants of Roman culture into a spiritual unity, so that, from being a merely geographical term in Roman times, by the 8th century *Britanni* had become the name of a nation. That its ethos even today is essentially religious is the enduring legacy of the early Welsh Saints. It is not surprising, therefore, that the increasing study of their lives by modern scholars has been prompted by historical rather than by religious motives. Even the few specialists in Welsh hagiology have been led by the unsatisfactory nature of their material to concentrate overmuch on the *minutiae* of their craft, often contenting themselves with the attempt to unravel the intricate relationship of the various Lives. Hence the great progress made by these scholars by no means renders superfluous the work of the Catholic hagiologist who endeavours to rekindle popular devotion to these Saints whose official cultus has been preserved intact in the liturgy of the Catholic Church. Although our aim is thus a practical one, we are not thereby justified in lowering our critical standards; before spreading devotion to these Saints we must do what is humanly possible to distinguish truth from legend. In this article I shall try to describe the present position of Welsh hagiology, and to estimate the prospects of future progress.

Although early martyrologies and dedications witness to the existence of the Welsh Saints, our quest for further knowledge is handicapped by the lateness of their Lives, which were written five centuries after the events they profess to narrate. The occasion that

produced them was the coming of the Normans. Stung by the open contempt of these foreign oppressors for the native Saints, the Welsh clergy composed these Lives to extol their greatness. By the 13th century the Normans themselves had fallen under their spell and began to encourage fresh compilations of their Lives. These were due partly to a desire for liturgical uniformity, but chiefly to the rivalry between Llandaff and St Davids, each see revising the Life of its founder to justify its claims in the struggle for precedence. The 11th-century Lives survive only in these later revisions of which the hitherto earliest collection, *Brit. Mus. MS. Vespasian A XIV*, c. 1200 (ed. Wade-Evans, Univ. of Wales Press, 1944), is now antedated some fifty years by the newly-discovered Gotha MS. It is hard to believe there were no earlier Lives, especially when we remember the 7th-century Breton Life of St Samson, but, if they existed, they must have perished in the continual sacking of the Welsh monasteries by Danish pirates. Since St Davids, for example, burnt in 645 and again in 810, was sacked five times between 982 and 1022, we need not wonder that the 12th century hagiographer had often to eke out his sources with invention. Sometimes he had nothing to guide him but the saint's name and dedications, with perhaps a few charters whose ancient script he could not always decipher. Poor as they are, these Lives are almost our only material, and we must make the best of them. Excellent pioneer work has been done by Wade-Evans, the late Canon Doble and others who have introduced order into confusion by tracing the interrelation of the various Lives. Can we now go a step further and unearth the earlier material embedded in them and determine its date? Although the work is only beginning the prospect is hopeful. Further progress can come only from a closer attention to the comparative study of mediaeval, especially of Celtic, hagiology. The Irish Lives, in particular, which are roughly contemporary with the Welsh Lives, must not be neglected. Many of them have a common feature whose important bearing on the development of the Welsh Lives does not seem to have been hitherto realised. At the beginning of the Life the future greatness of the saint is suggested by certain portents connected with his birth. These birth stories are usually considered to be relics of Celtic mythology. Thus Plummer regards the stories of unnatural births as remnants of folklore, and considers that the angel announcing the birth of the saint has displaced the druid who foretells the birth of the Irish hero. Similarly Wade-Evans, in an attempt to explain the strange story of the birth of St David, suggests some primitive marriage custom which Rhygyfarch could not understand.

That these Irish Lives have borrowed largely from folklore cannot be denied, but I think Plummer was misled by his conviction that

all legendary incidents could be traced to pagan sources. I mention Plummer in particular because of his eminence as a hagiologist; the rationalising methods of scholars such as Sir John Rhys, or of Fisher and Baring Gould in their *Lives of the Welsh Saints*, need not detain us. As O'Rahilly (*Early Irish History and Myth*, 1944, p. 263) rightly says, 'Of all methods applied to the interpretation of mythic material, the rationalistic method is surely the most absurd'. When we have admitted that many of the incidents in these birth stories were borrowed from mythology, we still have to explain how these birth stories became a 'common form', and since mythology cannot do this we must look elsewhere. Now it must be remembered that the aim of the hagiographer was not an historical narrative—often the paucity of his material precluded this—but a panegyric to edify the brethren. Hence he was quick to seize on incidents that could be utilised to show the likeness of the saint to his Master. The Virgin Birth, of course, was unique (although attempts were made to imitate even this, c.f., e.g., the two Lives of Kentigern), but in the gospel story of the birth of the Baptist, with its close analogy to the Gospel of the Infancy, the hagiographer had a model that was not beyond his reach, and which enabled him to show the eminence of his saint by his likeness to the Baptist, than whom none greater had arisen among those born of women. The prototype, therefore, of this 'common form' is the gospel narrative of the birth of the Baptist, and that hagiographers were conscious of this is clear from their quoting the well-known texts applied to the Baptist (Jerem. 1, 5 and Isaias 49, 1, *de vulva sanctificavi te . . .*) and Lk. 7, 28 (see e.g. Declan, Finnian and Moling in Plummer's *Vit. SS. Hib.*, also the Lives of Cadoc and Kentigern). The four incidents taken from the life of the Baptist for imitation were (1) the angelic prophecy, (2) the miraculous conception, (3) the miracle in the womb (needed to justify the application of Jerem. 1, 5) and (4) the miracle at birth. To these was added (5) the miracle at baptism in imitation of Mt. 3, 17. In none of the Irish Lives do all five incidents occur—of the 32 Saints in Plummer's *Vit. SS. Hib.*, eight have one incident only, nine have two, three have three, and two have four—but that it is the ideal form at which hagiographers were consciously aiming is clear from the frequent verbal reminiscences of the gospel narrative.

Turning now to the Welsh Lives we find most of them, unlike the Irish, to be very poorly constructed, being little more than a collection of events with no attempt to weave them into a connected story. These show no trace of this 'common form', and there seems to be small hope of uncovering earlier sources in them, unless the study of Welsh charters succeeds in throwing light upon them. But two Lives stand out in marked contrast, viz., David and Cadoc, and it will

pay us to study these in some detail. The Life of St David was written by Rhygyfarch c. 1090, probably at Llanbadarn Fawr; that of St Cadoc by Lifris c. 1100 at Llancarfan. Although their original form is somewhat conjectural, since our earliest MSS. are fifty years later and show signs of revision, for our present purpose we can assume that the originals were substantially the same. Now both have this 'common form' that we found in the Irish Lives, and since Lifris seems to have been influenced by Rhygyfarch's slightly earlier Life it is a fair assumption that he copied it from him or at least drew it from the same source. Whence, then, did Rhygyfarch take it? His father Sulien, before becoming Bishop of St Davids, studied in Irish monasteries for thirteen years, and the school of learning he founded shows traces of Irish influence. His son Rhygyfarch borrows from the Irish Lives of Aeddan, Ailbe and Bairre, and we may fairly conclude that he introduced into Welsh hagiography this common form for the story of a saint's birth from the same source. Although he is thus an imitator, he improved on his models, being the first to succeed in incorporating all five incidents. However banal his Life may appear to modern readers, judged by the accepted standards of his day it ranks very high, in fact purely as a creative work it is probably the greatest of the Celtic Lives.

If this account of the growth of a common form in Ireland and its adoption by Rhygyfarch is correct it will throw much light on the composition of the Welsh Lives. First, as to the authorship of the Life of St David. Although Rhygyfarch says that he compiled it from documents 'written in the style of the ancients', a study of the MSS. would lead one to suspect that in fact he was only the copyist of an earlier Life. *Buchedd Dewi*, the Welsh Life written in 1346 by a hermit at Llanddewibrefi, points to a more primitive version than any extant MS. of Rhygyfarch. Even if we suppose that it derives from the holograph of which only revisions survive, it is still hard to understand how all copies of this holograph, although extant in the 14th century, should have perished, while innumerable variants of the 12th-century revisions have survived. A likely author for this hypothetical earlier Life would be Asser, Bishop of St Davids, whose translation to the see of Sherborne is suggested by the Rev. Silas Harris as the probable explanation of the Sherborne cultus of David attested in 1061,¹ and whose Life of Alfred written c. 893 shows sufficient similarity of style with passages in Rhygyfarch to make the attribution plausible. But the adoption of this 'common form' by Rhygyfarch in its latest development proves him to be the author of the Life from which all later versions derive. It also explains much

¹ *St David in the Liturgy*, 1940, p. 8.

that was obscure in the Life of David. The account of his birth has always been an embarrassment; if true, it was unedifying; if false, it reflected little credit on its inventor. We can now see how it arose. In order to prove David's superiority over all the Saints of Britain and Ireland Rhygyfarch was determined that the story of his birth should excel that of any Irish saint. Not content with an angel to announce his birth, he also makes St Patrick himself foretell the greater power of David. He then represents Nonn as dedicating herself *before*, instead of after, David's birth, and invents the well-known story to make his conception appear preternatural. That the result is not edifying is beside the point; a comparison with similar examples from Irish Lives will show clearly what was in his mind. The next incident, where the yet unborn David prevents Gildas preaching, has puzzled editors, who point out that the two Saints were contemporaries—as if that mattered! Rhygyfarch thus kills two birds, safeguarding the application of Jerem. 1, 5 (*de vulva sanctificavi te*), and showing the victory of David over a Saint of whose criticism of David's austere Rule there is a strong tradition. Portents signal David's birth—the leaping stone derives from a belief in the connection of menhirs with fertility still current in Brittany, though I can find no instance in Welsh folklore—and his baptism is attended with miracles. It is difficult to see what Rhygyfarch could have added to ensure that no other saint should enter this world under happier auspices. Strange to say, the use, however unscrupulous, of this common form actually enhances the historical value of a Life. Much as the facts were distorted to fit into this framework, at least they were preserved, and their original form can often be recovered, while other facts, perhaps of greater interest to us, are lost simply because the hagiographer had no ready-made frame to fit them into. For instance, the angel's prophecy about the honey, fish and stag preserves an ancient charter, with the name of the monastery to which David went as a boy, which could otherwise hardly have survived, yet, because they did not serve his purpose, Rhygyfarch omits David's last words to his disciples: 'My brothers and sisters, be joyful. Keep your Faith, and do the little things that you have seen and heard with me'. This saying, almost certainly authentic, recorded for us by good fortune in *Buchedd Dewi*, is precious for the insight it gives into David's spirit—cheerfulness with strict obedience to the Rule. In one of his poems Saunders Lewis happily compares it with the Little Way of St Thérèse.

This common form bears on another interesting problem. The Irish Lives are known to be older than the earliest MSS. which are of the 14th century. Following the Bollandists, Plummer assigns them to the 12th century; the borrowing of this common form by Rhygyfarch

puts them before 1090. Now we find references in them to Welsh Saints, chiefly Cadoc and David, and since a hagiographer did not borrow from other sources except to enhance the dignity of his own saint, the importance attributed in the Irish Lives to Cadoc and David, who are represented as teachers of Irish Saints, points to an independent tradition about these two Saints going back to the 6th century, and strong confirmation is lent to this view by the absence of any trace of this common form in Welsh Lives before its introduction by Rhygyfarch. Had there been interaction between Welsh and Irish Lives before this one would expect traces of this common form in other Welsh Lives. Its complete absence strengthens the probability that the Irish Lives preserve an independent tradition dating from the time when the second order of Irish Saints, as we read in the Catalogue of Tirechan c. 750, 'a davide episcopo et gilda et doco britonibus missam acceperunt'. In the paucity of early records in Wales this Irish tradition is of great value.

I have dealt with this 'common form' in some detail to illustrate the methods to be used in determining what historical basis these Lives contain. It is a study that calls for specialists, who have to work without the usual aids that lie ready to the scholar's hand in other branches of learning. The most urgent need is a scientific study of Celtic latinity which so far has escaped the attention even of lexicographers, since the Oxford *Medieval Latin Word-List* (1934), although professing to supply the omissions of Ducange, is so arbitrary in its selection of material that the student of these Lives will turn to it in vain for assistance in dating the first appearance of a rare word. A comprehensive study of Celtic latinity from the 6th to the 12th century—and the field is large—must precede the attempt to apply modern critical methods to these Lives. One may sum up by distinguishing three periods in the study of the Welsh Saints: the uncritical period, of which Nedelec's *Cambria Sacra* represents the low-water mark; a period of destructive criticism, when the Lives were regarded as valuable chiefly for such light as they shed on conditions in the 12th century; and the present period, when a critical attitude is compatible with a full realisation of the value of the early material embedded in these late Lives. There is good reason to think that much of this material may ultimately prove to be not much later than the 6th century.

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