"I AM NO FRIVOLOUS MINSTREL": THE WELSH BARDS AND KING EDWARD I

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“I AM NO FRIVOLOUS MINSTREL”: THE WELSH BARDS AND KING EDWARD I

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ABSTRACT
After his military and economic defeat of the Welsh in 1282, King Edward I of England realized the most effective means of controlling Wales was by undermining the efficacy of its culture. This thesis argues the definitive role of the Welsh bardic tradition in the historical context of Edward’s understanding that cultural domination was as vital to the total sublimation of the Welsh as were their military and economic defeats. While many historians have examined Edward’s military and economic campaigns against the Welsh, few have concentrated on his understanding that dominating thirteenth-century Welsh cultural coherence was Edward’s most important methodology.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

COPYRIGHT………………………………………………………………………………...ii

ABSTRACT………………………………………………………………………………iii

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ……………………………………………………………iv

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION…………………………………………………………1

CHAPTER 2: “TO PRAISE MY GRACIOUS, BOUNTIFUL LAND”……………...13

CHAPTER 3: “THERE WAS A GREAT BATTLE”………………………………...25

CHAPTER 4: “A WELSH LION HELD THEM”…………………………………….45

CHAPTER 5: “AND THEN ALL WALES WAS CAST TO THE GROUND”……..65

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION…………………………………………………………83

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY…………………………………………………………86
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Throughout its history, Wales has always maintained its separate identity, remaining detached to more or lesser degrees from the others with whom it shares the isle of Britain. Medieval Wales was unique in that its recurrent ability to rise from its own ashes – the periodic political and military upheavals that marked its existence until well into the late Middle Ages – came not from the fierce courage of its warrior princes nor from the wise pragmatism of its counselors nor from any cohesive economic base. This ability to periodically transform itself was anchored in Wales’ cultural identity, which survived only because it was cultivated and protected by the bards. The people of Gwynedd and Powys and the other principalities survived a cyclical existence of periodically irresponsible leadership, savage warfare, barbaric invasions, punitive conquests, and the anguished transition from political independence to acquiescent inclusion only and at last because of the continued presence of their storytellers. Because of an ancient and honored profession that could enfold the memories of a people into a collection of words and sounds and thereby ensure its survival, the essence of the Welsh people would not be extinguished.

Many English kings had comprehended Wales in political and economic terms. King Edward I understood that Wales was uniquely defined by its culture, and building on this, following his military defeat of the Welsh in 1282, Edward realized the most effective means of finalizing his conquest was by undermining the efficacy of that culture. The Welsh bardic tradition played the definitive role in the historical context of Edward’s campaign to undermine that role, based on the king’s understanding that
cultural domination was as vital to the total sublimation of the Welsh as military and economic control. While many historians have examined Edward’s military and economic campaigns against the Welsh, few have concentrated on his understanding that dominating Welsh cultural coherence was Edward’s most important methodology.

The Welsh cultural construct, informed as it was by its history and its powerful neighbors to the east, encompassed the purpose of the Welsh bards as they held their country together during its political fragmentation and internecine warfare. Throughout each cycle of strong leadership followed by dissolution of territory or disruptive dynastic succession followed eventually by the appearance of another strong leader to begin the cycle again, the bards were the necessary cohesive element between the periods of chaos and stability.

The bards earliest panegyrics, elegies, and eulogies, dating from the sixth century to those of the thirteenth century, when considered in the political context of each period, reveal how uniquely vital the bards were to Welsh cultural identity. Even though the arts—drama, crafts, music, dance—have been influential in the history of every group as the shared memories and beliefs that will define its identity evolve, the paradigm of the bards in Welsh society differs significantly from others, including their English counterparts during that same period. The English, with their somewhat stable linear succession of rulers, charged their bards with the tasks of panegyric presentations simply to disseminate stories that reflected what they thought of as their superiority; whereas the Welsh, with their periodically chaotic swings between strong and weak leadership, had a more visceral need. The Welsh bard was keeper of the cultural identity that inspired the Welsh quest for independence during some five hundred years of struggle pre-Conquest and two
hundred years post-Conquest, long after their former adversaries – the fierce Anglo-Saxons, children of Alfred – had surrendered.

A people’s cultural identity is fed by the memories of past events – memories that may or may not be based in fact but nevertheless provide a shared foundation from which the culture can continue to function and go forward. For the Welsh, it was the bards who fostered this identity with poems engendering visceral ethnic emotions related to legends and communal memories of their people in particular and of their Celtic heritage in general.¹ In the absence of a centralized political identity, the bards used their poetry not only to shape understanding of current events but, also, to ensure that that concept of events would be the one remembered by future generation and not a reworking or replacement of the poetry by the English.

In planning the dismemberment of Wales as an independent entity in 1282, Edward fell back on the least practical but the most inherent and powerful of his tyrant’s tools: Wales’ cultural identity. Edward I understood it was the communal self of the Welsh that had to be blocked in order to fully immerse and so sublimate the culture. That is why following his victory he systematically set about dismantling that culture by taking possession of its most treasured artifacts, by dismantling its civic frame, that is, laws that had evolved through the centuries in ways unique to Welsh practice, and by destroying its aristocracy and therewith the context in which the bards functioned.

Edward did not burn five hundred bards at the stake, which story was given credence by some scholars as late as the beginning of the twentieth century. He simply

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¹There are shared themes and motifs in the Celtic canon that can be found in those parts of the world for whom the strongest common link is storytelling. However, in the case of the Welsh in the Middle Ages, these shared themes and motifs became more than simple storytelling when translated by the bards into the Welsh people’s strongest identity tool. Alwyn Rees and Brinley Rees, Celtic Heritage (London: Thames and Hudson, 1961), 20.
transformed the framework in which they had existed for generations. It was not that
their more important patrons, the princes, had been replaced with those of lesser stature,
the barons. It was that the culture the bards promulgated had been dismantled and what
was left was one less momentous, more mundane in its concerns and character. ² There
was much more at stake now, but much less with which to meet that challenge.

Though there is no definitive history of the origins and development of the role of
the Welsh bard, it likely was created out of the necessity of having one who would
remember and transmit the glorious deeds of the clan and its leaders, thus ensuring their
lasting fame and honor.³ What probably began as part of a religious ceremony with priest
and celebrants,⁴ where the communal god was given thanks in victory or petitioned to
welcome with honor the warriors who had been lost in defeat, evolved into a celebration
of the leader of the warriors, who, god-like, defeated chaos and provided his people with
security and prosperity.⁵

From this, it is reasonable to assume, developed the role of the bards, whose
praise of the mortal god engendered a sense of communal self, or culture, while the
priests acted as intermediaries to the immortal deity.⁶ Thus, the separation became a

² Until it was not and a dynamic figure such as Owain Glyn Dwr could spark a rebellion in 1400.
³ Fame and honor were virtually a matter of life and death to the Celtic people of the heroic age.
⁴ In his book The Druids, Stuart Piggott relates that an eighteenth century writer declared the
poems of Taliesin exhibited a complete system of druidism. There are others who have equated the bardic
tradition with that of the Druids, but consideration of that issue is beyond the purview of this thesis.
⁵ Williams, The Poets of the Welsh Princes, 19.
⁶ Regarding what the priests could not do, Patrick Wormald notes that the English Council of
Clovesho in 746-747 prohibited priests from signing like bards. Whether the Welsh church had a similar
prohibition is not known, but this does indicate some disapproval of the bardic profession on the part of the
Church in Britain. Patrick Wormald, “The Age of Bede and Aethelbald,” The Anglo-Saxons, ed. James
fusion, where the priests and bards complemented each other’s purpose in essentially the same role, though on opposite sides of the altar. In time, the priests’ role would become formalized within the confines of prescribed religious tenets, as would the role of the bards in rules prescribed by their own organization and in the law of the land. In time, the bards’ role would expand to include historian, genealogist, educator, and record-keeper.

The very fact that a ninth-century Welsh monk in his history of the Britons\(^7\) listed the names of sixth-century\(^8\) bards acknowledged their place among the celebrated historical figures of the Brythonic people. The author Nennius did not mention any other renowned artists nor skilled craftsmen – though the metal and jeweled crafts created by the Britons in earlier ages testified to their exceptional skill – nor did he site any outstanding warriors other than the better-known rulers of Brythonic history. There were extensive citations of important Biblical and historic figures, and there was a listing of five sixth-century Welsh bards, which was a telling admission of where influence lay in the author’s world.

\(^7\) Historia Brittonum, History of the Britons, trans. J. A. Giles (Lexington, KY, 2014), 21. Though there has been discussion in the past about the question of whether Nennius should be credited with writing the Historia, there is now historical consensus that credits the text to Nennius. Andrew Breeze, Medieval Welsh Literature (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1997), 7.

\(^8\) David Dumville in his 1992 essay “Early Welsh Poetry: Problems of Historicity” states the dilemma in dating early Medieval documents: “In effect, we are blundering about in a period and an area for which we have no contemporary sources…and where we can scarcely grasp even the essentials of the context. At every turn we risk relapsing into the foolish old game of trying to write narrative history of an effectively prehistoric period with the aid of unhistorical and non-contemporary sources…” Dumville concludes by calling for more scholarship. A search for further studies reveals no consensus has been reached. Therefore, for the purposes of this thesis, the traditional dates in relation to historic events and literature will be used. David Dumville, Britons and Anglo-Saxons in the Early Middle Ages (Hampshire, GB: Variorum, 1993), IV, 4.
The extent to which the sixth-century bards\(^9\) were acknowledged in ninth-century society cannot be determined, especially as no known written records existed of the *Cynfeirdd*’s poetry until the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. However, the fact that Nennius cited them by name makes it highly likely that remnants or even whole poems had been preserved and were known in the ninth century.

The works of only two of the five poets cited by Nennius, Taliesin and Aneirin, are known today, and even what is known cannot be definitively verified as having been created by either.\(^{10}\) Also, there is the question of what and from whom Taliesin and Aneirin learned their profession. Whether they began as apprentices, as the later bardic process required, whether they were familiar with other poetic traditions, whether they traveled extensively, as later bards would – all this is unknown. The *Gogynfeirdd* – or the Not Early Poets, also called the Poets of the Princes – who sang in the halls of the great Welsh rulers of the eleventh and twelfth centuries assumed the techniques of the *Cynfeirdd* in their poetry and then refined those techniques so as to suit the needs of their time and place. It is logical to assume the *Cynfeirdd* had done the same six centuries earlier.\(^{11}\)

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\(^9\) Called the *Cynfeirdd*, or Early Poets, by later generations. J. E. Caerwyn Williams, *The Poets of the Welsh Princes*, 1.

\(^{10}\) Andrew Breeze, *Medieval Welsh Literature*, 7, and Gwyn Williams, *An Introduction to Welsh Poetry* (Philadelphia: Dufour Editions, 1952), 18. Nora Chadwick notes that “…out of fifty-eight poems contained in the manuscript claiming to be the work of the sixth-century poet Taliesin nearly all are believed to have been composed at about 900 or 930, and not more than a dozen can be shown on textual and linguistic grounds to be of sixth-century date, or a little earlier, and therefore to represent virtually the work of Taliesin himself.” Chadwick contrasts this with Aneirin and his epic *Y Gododdin*, about which there is more confidence but not absolute certainty that it was composed by Aneirin.

\(^{11}\) “…Taliesin and Aneirin saw themselves…as continuing a very ancient Celtic tradition rather than establishing a new one. But the survival of their works alone did, in the eyes of their successors, give them the status of founders, as it gave to their poetry, so responsive to the events of the period in which it was composed, the qualities of heroic legend.” Joseph P. Clancy, *Medieval Welsh Poems* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003), 14.
The power of the Welsh bard in the popular imagination was felt long after their supposed subjugation by Edward I, as evidenced by two examples of later poets whose narratives about the bards were political expressions framed by a Welsh legend.

The first, “The Bard,” written in 1757 by the English scholar-poet Thomas Gray, was something of a phenomenon at the time, appearing as it did at the literary crossroads of a Celtic revival and an English-based movement to bring the peoples of Britain together under a cultural umbrella of shared history.\(^\text{12}\)

Gray’s poem used the bardic technique of one time/one place: Edward and his men are stopped in their passage on Gwynedd’s Mount Snowdon by the sudden appearance of an ancient Welsh bard standing on a cliff opposite them. A brief except from the poem follows:

…Nor even they virtues, tyrant, shall avail
To save thy secret soul from nightly fears,
From Cambria’s curse, from Cambria’s tears!’
Such were the sounds, that o’er the crested pride
Of the first Edward scatter’d wild dismay,
As down the steep of Snowdon’s shaggy side
He wound the toilsome march his long array….

‘But oh! what solemn scenes on Snowdon’s height
Descending slow their flitt’ring skirts unroll?
Visions of glory, spare my aching sight,
Ye unborn Ages, crowd not on my soul!
No more our long-lost Arthur we bewail.
All-hail, ye genuine kings, Britannia’s issue, hail!’….

Enough for me: with joy I see
The different doom our Fates assign.
Be thine Despair, and scept’red Care,

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To triumph, and to die, are mine.’
He spoke, and headlong from the mountain’s height
Deep in the roaring tide he plung’d to endless night.

“The Bard: A Pindaric Ode” Thomas Gray

The publication is credited with beginning the Celtic Revival in England, which revival drew attention not to the Welsh culture of the day but instead to a romantic past through which eighteenth-century readers could lament the tragic destruction of the Welsh bards without having to consider the eighteenth-century reality of Wales or its culture.

The second example, “The Bards of Wales,” was written in 1857 by the Hungarian patriot and poet Jano Arany. Commissioned to write a poem in honor of Emperor Franz Joseph of Austria soon after Hungary’s defeat in the 1848 revolution, Arany drew inspiration from the Welsh legend that claimed, erroneously, that King Edward had sent five hundred Welsh bards to the stake when they refused to honor him in song.

A brief excerpt captures the outrage of a defeated people:

‘…Where is a bard to praise my deeds
And sing my victory?’

‘Here, O king, is one will sing
Thy deeds that so inspire,’ …
Piled like sheaves at harvest-time
Lie thousands put to the sword,
And they that live weep as they glean;
This is your work, my lord.’

‘Out! to the stake!’ the king’s commands…
But recklessly, unbidden too,
A third rose in his stead….

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14 Prescott, “Gray’s Pale Spectre,” 83.
‘The brave have perished in the fight –
Mark thou my words, O king:
No bard of Wales will praise thy name,
None stoop to such a thing.’

‘We shall see!’ The king commands
And dreadful is his word:
That any bard who will not sing
His praise shall not be spared….

‘Tis said five hundred went to die,
Went singing to their doom;…
What is that sound? In London’s streets
Who is it sings so late?...

…o’er the sound of fife and drum
And brazen trumpet’s clang
Five hundred voices raise the song
That the martyrs sang.

“The Bards of Wales,” Janos Anary

Such was the importance of the Medieval bard that poets in later centuries could reinterpret the poems for their own political purposes. This does not mean, though, that the bards, however influential their role in society, were not above having limitations placed on them. They were independent of their king or prince in that they could travel wherever they wished – which provided opportunities for information gathering, since their patron could not simply pay a social visit, as his bard could – and he was not subject to many of the same constraints as other members of the court. Still, bards were unpopular with the Church, especially by the time of the Gogynfeirdd, when often bards

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16 Thomas Stephens, The Literature of the Kymry Being a Critical Essay on the History of the Language and Literature of Wales During the Twelfth and Two Succeeding Centuries (London: Longman, 1869), 102. Stephens states that “the bard and the priest were sworn enemies,” and that the bards received almost nothing but scorn from the clergy. Stephens credits this to the fact that both groups were beggars. If
had taken the place of the local bishop or priest as the prince’s counsel or representative. The bards were literate and usually well-traveled, quick to adapt in changing situations, as are all performers, and, most importantly, were influenced primarily by the needs of their patron. In this atmosphere, the Welsh bards needed to be careful in their actions and quickly make amends if they had taken a wrong step.

This excerpt from “Petition For Reconciliation” by the twelfth-century bard Cynddelw Brydydd Mawr to his lord Rhys ap Gruffudd demonstrates the bard’s understanding of how best to placate his lord:

I implore God’s favour, doubtless your gift,
Your gifted man am I,…

I implore, I plead a great plea to the Lord
Who made heaven and earth,
Refuge from your wrath, singer’s friend,
On your gates, on your gate-keeper.
I implore your favour, hide not your support,
Since remorse is proper….

I am bard to my lord, green billow’s splendor,
Songfest singer’s roads’ splendor.
Plea for refuge, long-feared exile:
I implore a high lord’s favour.

The Welsh bards were vital to their society, subliminally outlining a template for leadership, expressing while creating the expectations the people had of their lords. The bards led the people in grieving when their lords died and in celebration when new lords

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came forward to provide stability and protection to the clan. A bard, with the memories he recalled and those he created, was the central constant in the life of his community.

Each group of people who lived on the island of Britain from before memory to the death of Llewelyn the Last had its poets to sing its history, but only the Welsh bards had the power to inspire and ignite the ethnic fervor of generation after generation, guarding it during the times of chaos and fragmentation. Though the demise of the bards was less dramatic than its legend, their power did move Edward I to actions he would not have taken otherwise. His understanding of the Welsh culture, enflamed by the bards, as he saw it, was testimony of his respect for their power.

It is natural to question whether a king highly respected for his military acumen and superior governing skills – both of which are logic-based characteristics – would give such credence to the idea of the power of storytelling. However, in a society such as Medieval Britain in which even some of the most educated individuals believed in the power of omens, of herbal concoctions that could conjure up lust or hatred or even cause death, in the credence of numerology and astrology, in magic, certainly the possibility of an individual being persuaded by something rooted deeply in the communal consciousness over centuries cannot be dismissed casually. Given what we know of

19 Roger Sherman Loomis presented more than sufficient proof to support the claim of Edward’s belief in the power of storytelling in his 1953 article in *Speculum*, “Edward I, Arthurian Enthusiast.” Loomis detailed Edward’s fascination with the Arthurian legend to the point of holding elaborate Round Table celebrations on several occasions. At the one held following Edward’s defeat of the Welsh, the guests, as well as the king, acted out roles from the legend, with Edward, of course, playing the part of Arthur. Loomis ended his article by stating “…it seems clear by the facts I have presented that he [Edward] was strongly influenced by literary tradition…” In using himself as the most reliable reference point, Edward would naturally have assumed that if a man of his superior intellectual abilities could be so completely enfolded into a legend, certainly his intellectually inferior subjects could follow the same path.

20 It is well to remember, too, that poetry and storytelling were much more highly respected in Medieval Britain than they are in present-day America. It is rare in our society for a poem to be considered an iconic element of our culture or for a poet to be raised to the level of celebrity enjoyed by others.
Edward’s passion for the Arthurian legend, of his being so attuned to the literary traditions of his day, and of his understanding of the Welsh culture, it is not so difficult to believe the king would credit the bards with having great influence and power in their society.

In order to better understand the bardic tradition in Wales and its unique influence, it is necessary to place it in its historic context. A review of the history of Wales, and of England, as that history impacted on the Welsh, provides a broader appreciation for the argument that the Welsh bards were unique in their centrality within the framework of the Welsh culture and that, in the vacuum left by weak leadership periodically throughout Welsh history, the bards played a dual role: They were both the instruments of the cultural identity and they were a part of that identity, which becomes clear as we take note of important historical transitions.

This historical review is divided into two periods, each ending with a defining moment: First is from the sixth century to the middle of the eleventh century and the death of Gruffudd ap Llywelyn, one of Wales’ most powerful Medieval rulers. Second is the period consisting of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and the golden age of the Poets of the Princes. A brief history of Edward’s military conquest of Wales is followed by an examination of this attempted acculturation of the Welsh people into the dominant culture of England, including the intended destruction of the bards.
CHAPTER 2

“TO PRAISE MY GRACIOUS, BOUNTIFUL LORD,”¹
THE MEDIEVAL WELSH BARD

Oh, God, is a man sinful
To take gold in return for praise?
Good the role, as good the reward,
If God displays no displeasure.
May one freely take from an open hand?
If it’s freely and sinlessly given,….

Threatened, I’ll not despair:
I am no frivolous minstrel,
I’m not an ill-mannered jester.
No, and I know how to sing,….

The Holy Spirit inspires me,
Flawless name, who dwells in me:…
The hand of God, from true grace,
Gives the muse to his servant:
Wise for the bard, fluent praise,
To compose song that’s fitting.

“In Defense of Praise,”
Gruffudd Llwyd ²

It is natural to conclude that the self-reflection inherent in this poem would not

have been unique to this poet. In a profession that had so many facets – storyteller,
entertainer, propagandist, historian, genealogist, preservationist, educator, spokesman –

and had been criticized on occasion for being sycophantic,³ one would not have been able

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¹ Clancy, Medieval Welsh Poems, 151.

² Ibid., 261.

³ For instance, the six-century British monk Gildas in his De Excidio Britanniae (Concerning the Fall of Britain), charged the Welsh ruler Maelgwyn Gwynedd with listening to “the voice of the rascally crew yelling forth, like bacchanalian revelers, full of lies and foaming phlegm, so as to besmear every one near them.” This is, according to J.E. Caerwyn Williams, “one of the earliest references to bards on Welsh soil,” though a distinctly unflattering introduction. “Early Welsh Literature,” J. E. Caerwyn Williams, Wales Through the Ages, ed. A. J. Roderick (London: Christopher Davies Publishers, 1959), 42-43.
to help pausing occasionally to consider what role was being filled and how authentically. As foundation for arguing the unique and seminal role of the Welsh bards in their culture between the sixth and thirteenth centuries, we will examine the parameters of that role, as defined by their lords, the needs of their societies, and by their own professional organizations.

At its most elemental, it might appear the job of the Welsh bards consisted of the use of panegyrics, elegies, and eulogies to engender honor and fame for their lords in order to maintain the existing political and social order \(^4\) -- in exchange for food, shelter, and wealth. In “The Court of Urien,” Taliesin gleefully relates how munificently he is treated by his lord:

And splendid lands for me in abundance,
Great possessions and gold and wealth.
Wealth and gold, and high honour,
High honor and fulfilled desire,... \(^5\)

Taliesin ends his poem by praising Urien’s prowess as a warrior, “[R]ouser of battle, defender of the land,” states the people of Rheged “all entreat [Urien],/With a single voice, the great and the small” and promises:

Taliesin’s praise-song will entertain them.
You are the best whose qualities ever
I have heard of, and I will praise
All that you do.\(^6\)

Taliesin was trading in more than simple praise. He was providing entertainment in a way suitable to the culture.\(^7\) He was crafting a king for the people of Rheged by


\(^{5}\) Clancy, Medieval Welsh Poems, 40-41.

\(^{6}\) Ibid., 43.
praising Urien’s munificence and his battle prowess – two of the most highly regarded attributes of a king. In crafting a king suitable for the expectations of the people of Urien – and the war-band present when the poem was sung – Taliesin was also crafting a future for Owain, Urien’s son, and crafting a collective self-image of Rheged that could be used by Urien to engender loyalty and obedience. In their article, “Custom and Habit(us): The Meaning of Traditions and Legends in Early Medieval Western Britain,” David Harvey and Rhys Jones point out that the legends of family origins created in and around the ninth century in western Wales were a means of an identity that would justify the family’s place as rulers of their kingdoms. In transforming their kings and princes into quasi-legends, bards were justifying the honor and obedience and remunerations given rulers by their followers.

This does not mean the bards were simply propagandists, persuading their lords and their lords’ communities what each needed and wanted. The role of the Welsh bard was much more elemental and, at the same time, complex. The bard, like a priest, was there to raise the level of the ceremony, so that boasting became a shared moment of triumph, to lead those present through the closure of bidding fallen comrades good-bye, and to give expression to feelings the participants might have had a difficult time expressing themselves.

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The purpose of the Welsh *pencerdd*, or chief of song, and his recompense were clearly laid out in the tenth century laws of Hywel Dda, as were the purpose and compensation of the household bard, or *bardd teulu*, of the court:

The right of the chief of song is to sit on the left of the *edling*. He has his land free. He is to sing first in the hall. A wedding donation he receives, to wit, twenty-four pence from every virgin when she shall marry… A bard when he shall have won a chair, such is a chief of song… When the king shall will to hear a song, let the chief of song sing two songs concerning God and the third of the chiefs. When the queen shall will to hear a song in her chamber, let the bard of the household sing three songs softly lest the hall be disturbed…

A bard of the household has a steer out of every spoil at the capture of which he shall be with the household… He also sings the ‘Monarchy of Britain’ in front of them in the day of battle and fighting… He has his land free, and his horse regularly from the king; and it is the second song he sings in the hall, for the chief of song is to begin. He sits second nearest to the chief of the household. He has a harp from the king, and a gold ring from the queen, when his office shall be given him; and the harp let him never part with.

There is no definitive information confirming to what extent these laws were enacted, nor whether these laws or variations thereof were still in use at the time of the Poets of

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10 A. W. Wade-Evans, *Welsh medieval law, being a text of the laws of Howel the Good, namely the British Museum Harleian ms. 4353 of the 13th century, with translation, introd., appendix, glossary, index, and a map* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1909), 148-149, 179-180. King Offa, c. 910-949, commissioned the codification of the laws of his kingdom, which, by the time of his death, included Gwynedd, Powys, and Dyfed. Scholars have not reached a conclusion whether the final product was simply a codification of what had been already existing laws or whether the process included the writing of new laws.

11 This was part of the bard’s job as court genealogist. It was he who kept track of the family relationships. *The Welsh King and His Court*, ed. T. M. Charles-Edwards, Morfydd E. Owen, and Paul Russell, “Bardd Teulu and Pencerdd,” Dafydd Jenkins (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000), 153.


13 Ibid., 167. It is probable these tenets of the profession, for both *pencerdd* and *bard teulu*, already existed, at least in oral form and that bards were asked for input in the process. These tenets are respectful of both positions, stating very clearly the benefits and the responsibilities of the profession.
the Princes, 1100-1282. It might have happened that, as the profession itself evolved, aspects of the laws that were not suitable to current situations evolved, also.

It stands to reason that, as the sophistication of the court increased over time, so did that of the bardic administration. The pencerdd was the chief of songs, representing an honored craft, with a title that was not exclusive to his court. The pencerdd gave the bardd teulu his assignment a week before the event, thus ensuring that their performance pieces complemented each other and were well-prepared.¹⁴

It was the bard who sent the lord’s soldiers off to battle or on raiding parties with a song and who sang for them as they divided their plunder afterwards. For this, he was entitled to the best of the plundered animals on particular occasions.¹⁵

Prior to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and the Poets of the Princes, the bond between a bard and the court where he served could be one in which he had independence, with no obligation to be present at court except for specific occasions. This meant the bard could travel to those courts that did not have a pencerdd or bardd teulu and perform. Bards probably traveled with an entourage made up of bards-in-training or bards with less experience. Any profits made by performing were shared, with the pencerdd receiving two shares.¹⁶

The pencerdd was the head of the bardic order in his court and his authority was independent of the prince and the principality’s legal authority. Though the pencerdd was not listed as a court official – whereas the bardd teulu was – he still could be at the center


¹⁵ The Welsh King and His Court, Dafydd Jenkins, 149.

¹⁶ Ibid., 149.
of court politics. The relationship with his lord, then, was one of delicately balancing independence with a mutually productive bond, as expressed by Cynddelw to the Lord Rhys: “Without me you would be unable to utter/And I likewise would be unable to utter without you.”

The spoken word here represents the duality of the relationship in matters more than panegyrics. The bard’s role only existed as long as there was a prince to praise and, though the prince’s power certainly did not depend solely on the praise of his bard, without the bard to speak to his character, pedigree, and warrior-like proficiency, it would have been more difficult for the prince to “utter,” to lead, to be feared by his enemies and to retain the loyalty of his followers.

There are a few extant training manuals from the early fourteenth century, from which it can be ascertained the process by which a young man became a bard. Assuming that the process would have been roughly similar between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, it can be said that each bard accepted one apprentice at a time; that an apprenticeship last about nine years; that each apprentice learned some twenty thousand lines of poetry and, in some cases, the musical accompaniment; and that it was necessary to learn an archaic expression used in the poems and an extensive vocabulary, such as the twenty-five words for ‘combat’. When the court pencerdd thought the apprentice was ready, the young man would be given an examination and if he passed would be asked to pay a fee and would be admitted to the order. He could now collect

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17 Ibid., 158-159.


19 Ibid., 171.

20 Williams, *The Poets of the Princes*, 74-80.

21 Parry, *Court Poets*, 511-520.
fees for his work. The apprenticeship for a bard was extremely arduous and long, reflecting on the importance and skillfulness of the profession.

One of the manuals from the fourteenth century provides a list of the qualities of a lord and of a baron, at a time when the bardic profession was in transition and many Welsh bards were serving barons as well as lords:

A lord is praised for possession, and ability, and power and valor, and might, and pride, and gentleness, and wisdom, and discretion, and generosity, and meekness, and amiability towards his men and his associates, and beauty of form, and beauty of body, and nobility of thought, and splendor of deeds, and other gentle, honorable things.

A baron is praised for strength and prowess, and might, and power, and loyalty towards his lord, and wisdom, and discretion, and generosity, and agreeableness, and beauty of body, and good breeding, and other commendable things.

This template of adjectives would have been invaluable to a bardic student, and just as invaluable to those looking for a template of a Welsh ruler, whether lord or baron, after 1282. Just as the Gogynfeirdd of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries had tempered the savagery of the Cynfeirdd’s sixth-century poetry, so did the bards of this new era temper the militaristic tone even further, praising “gentle, honorable things” and “agreeableness, and beauty of body” in their rulers. The expectations of the people had to be tempered, as well, to expect less of warrior mentality and more that of a wise leader. In the poetry of the Cynfeirdd, very little of the king’s individuality was evident in the praise he received.

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22 Also, he could now use a harp strung with gut strings. During his apprenticeship, he had been using a harp strung with horsehair, which muted the sound. Ibid.

Six hundred years later, a lord or baron would be praised generically as well, but with more refined character traits from which the bard could choose.

The extraordinary feat of learning and performing a canon of poems consisting of an estimated two hundred thousand line indicates the bards were men of learning and of great physical stamina. Also, they needed qualities such as sensibility, when counseling their lords, and sensitivity to the political and social machinations surrounding them on a daily basis. The bard’s role in his lord’s court encompassed entertaining, inspiring, and challenging the lords and their followers in political and historic contexts whose purposes can be best understood when the contexts themselves are examined.

As Peredur I. Lynch has written, the value placed on the court poets by their lords was evidenced both by the rewards received by the bards and by the administrative and legal activities entrusted to them. Using thirteenth-century Gwynedd as an example, Lynch states that ‘[S]ecuring their loyalty and co-opting their influence was deemed by the princes [to be] of paramount importance.’ This loyalty and influence was used as more than a means of propaganda in the singing of praise songs, which were often not the full extent of the bard’s responsibility. Again, in the case of Gwynedd, Lynch states that Prince Llywelyn ab Iorwerth’s pencerdd, Einion ap Gwalchmai, was appointed to a commission in 1223 “to determine the boundaries of the kingdoms of the southern

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24 Also, it emphasizes the incredible task Edward I had in trying to erase the cultural memory of a people. Until the last bard was gone and the last page of poetry buried in monasteries, there would be memories that could be shared.


26 It should be remembered that Gwynedd was the center of influence and power for much of the history of the Welsh kingdoms and principalities and so can be assumed to have taken the lead in most matters, including the role of the bard in court.
princelings,” as well as other administrative court matters.” The court bard “had easy access to the highest echelons of power and ample opportunity not only to have a clear insight into the affairs of state, but also, at times, to participate in them.”

Given the symbiotic relationship between several of the Welsh princes and the Marcher lords and the assumed communication between those lords and the king, Edward I surely would have become aware of the responsibilities undertaken by the bards and of the dependence on the part of some of the Welsh princes on their chiefs of song. The fact that bards took part in some principalities’ administrative and legal affairs would have added to Edward’s discomfort when he was attempting to re-fashion a dependent Wales into his kingdom. Though it was long after the death of Edward I that the bard Gruffud Llwyd sang “I am no frivolous minstrel” in his poem “In Defense of Praise,” Llwyd could well have been speaking to Edward’s fears.

Bardic involvement in the politics of the court was evident in poems that reflected the consequences of conflict within the principalities. For example, Peryf ap Cedifor’s “Lament for Hywel ab Owain and His Foster-Brothers” expressed the bard’s personal respect and love for the illegitimate son of Owain Gwynedd who died during a power struggle with his half-brothers Dafydd and Rhodri following the father’s death. Also clearly expressed is the poet’s bitterness at the loss of Hywel and three of the poet’s own brothers, in lines such as “Since treason was brewed, unchristian Briton.” The poet’s apparently being unafraid to openly express his support for those who lost in the bid for power demonstrated the security felt by the bard in challenging power. Bards were

27 *The Welsh King and His Court*, Lynch, 170.

highly honored individuals in the Welsh courts and only answerable, within reason, to their professional organizations.\textsuperscript{29} Also, the fractured nature of Welsh politics translated more often than not into taking sides, intentionally or not.

Still, it can be assumed in the usual order of court ceremonies, the bards were expected to be politic in their choice and expression of subject matter. As Edward feared, bards had tremendous influence at court and in general. Part of their training would certainly have been how to use that influence wisely. This was especially true when visiting kings and their entourages were treated to poems recalling the heroes created by Taliesin and Aneirin and the promises and hopes of the Old North’s history. Even better when the bard wove tales of the visiting king’s military victories and the fearsome ways in which he vanquished his enemies into a poem.\textsuperscript{30}

That aspect of the influence derived from inspiring their listeners, however, would have been diminished if there had not already existed a heroic mind set among their audience, one already attuned to the subtext of loyalty to lord and country or to the cathartic pain when remembering the lost glories of Rheged. Inevitably, the bard would compare his lord with the acknowledged heroes of the Old North, using the genealogical lists, probably passed from bard to bard, to subliminally equate his lord’s current deeds with those of bygone eras.\textsuperscript{31}

Inherent in the poetry of the bards was the assumption that the audience knew the basic story. The bard could then build on that story to draw his parallels or lament those

\textsuperscript{29} Jenkins, \textit{The Welsh King and His Court}, 170.

\textsuperscript{30} Dafydd Jenkins, \textit{The Welsh King and His Court}, 23.

\textsuperscript{31} Williams, \textit{Poets}, 31 and 35.
lost in the battle. In the cases of Taliesin and Aneirin, the poets were writing about current events, whereas the Poets of the Princes often looked back to the time of the *cynfeirdd* for inspiration and a sense of communal heritage. This was especially true when performing eulogies or when honoring a new king or prince. Pedigree was extremely important in Medieval Wales. As Wendy Davis writes, “It is notable that ‘noble’ status seems more often to have been determined by birth, family and occupation than by wealth alone.”

Food and drink formed an elemental connection with bardic poetry, both being featured in the poetry itself and as the setting for the bard’s performance. “The public consumption of food is laced with meaning and intrinsically woven into the fabric of our social existences.” It was at the communal feast the bard sang his praise songs, contributing to the continuity of social cohesion in his praise of the lord, and it was there that the lord shared his bounty, ensuring the continuing loyalty of his followers. It was there, also, that the attending warriors would commit to fight on behalf of the lord as payment for that bounty. As Aneirin sang in *Y Gododdin*, the warriors who feasted at the king’s table “drank mead, yellow, sweet, ensnaring,” and ate the food, after which they became food for crows in death. “For their feast of mead, their lives were payment.”

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32 Wendy Davis, *Wales in the Early Middle Ages*, 63. This was probably because wealth could be lost, but an impressive lineage never lost its value.


lord and his war-band, the unspoken commitment resulting from a ritual-like sharing of food and drink.

It is revealing, also, in that it demonstrates the importance of the bard in a warrior society, as the one who is counted on to speak what needs to be heard. Aneirin, when he wrote *Y Gododdin*, surely must have intended to bluntly lay out the terms of the unspoken contract between a lord and his warriors. Balancing this were the praise-full elegies that, again, implied the responsibilities of leadership from the lord and the expectations of service from the war-band.

To know the words the warriors heard from the bards before leaving for battle might be to fully understand the power of words. J. E. Caerwyn Williams writes “the belief in the magic or occult power of words and in poetry as the quintessence of that power,” adding to the ancient belief that the bards had originally been druids, which belief only added to their mystique and influence.

Through words and music, the bards exercised a power that evolved over hundreds of years, as Welsh societies were rocked by political extremes of chaos and order.

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“THERE WAS A GREAT BATTLE”
WALES, 600 – 1063

There was a great battle, Saturday morning,
From the time the sun rose till it set.
Fflamddwyn came on, in four war-bands.
Goddau and Rheged were mustering,
Summoned men, from Argoed to Arfynyyd:
They were given not one day’s delay.
Fflamddwyn shouted, big at boasting:
‘Have my hostages come? Are they ready?’
Answered Owain, bane of the East:
‘They’ve not come, are not here, are not ready,
And a cub of Coel’s line must be pressed
Hard before he’d render one hostage.’
Shouted Urien, lord of Yrechwydd:
‘If a meeting for peace-talk’s to come,
Let our shield-wall rise on the mountain,
And let our faces lift over the rim,
And let our spears, men, be raised high,
And let us make for Fflamddwyn amidst his war-bands,
And let us slay him and his comrades.’
Before Argoed Llwyfam
There was many a dead man.
Crows grew crimsoned from warriors.
And the war-band charged with its chieftain.
For a year I’ll shape song to their triumph.

And until I die, old,
By death’s strict demand,
I shall not be joyful
Unless I praise Urien.

“The Battle of Argoed Llwyfain,”
Taliesin

Taliesin’s evocative poem encompasses the themes, style, and imagery of the
songs of the Welsh bards, who gave voice to the culture of a people whose identity was
rooted in ancient legends and heroic tales. From the six to the thirteenth century, as

1 Clancy, Medieval Welsh Poems, 42.
ambitious rulers intermittently united the disparate Welsh kingdoms and principalities in between periods of internecine struggle, the songs of the bards were held in the soul of the Welsh, nurturing and protecting its cultural identity in the chaotic times between Rhodri and Hywel, Gruffudd ap Lewellan, Llewellyn the Great, and Llewellyn the Last.

The Saxons, whose advance into the land of the Britons\(^2\) Taliesin’s lord Urien, king of Rheged, was trying to halt, shared a complex history with their enemies, the natives of the island. Until the early fifth century, the island of the Britons was a colony of the Roman Empire. The post-Roman history of the island was the subject of a book by a British monk named Gildas, some of whose facts are considered questionable but who provided a sense of the challenges faced by the British people in the sixth century. According to Gildas, it was in facing one of those challenges – an incursion by the Picts and Scots – that a powerful leader hired Germanic mercenaries to protect his kingdom. Eventually, the Saxons began to wrest land from their employers, settling in the southeast and along the east coast.\(^3\)

The British were able to stop the advancing Saxon settlements with a victory c. 500 at the Battle of Mons Badonicus, in which an individual named Arthur, or Ambrosius Aurelius, may or may not have triumphed in battle. By 550, however, the Saxons were again pushing the limits of their settlements, and by the end of the sixth century had reached as far as Cornwall and Devon. It was around this time that Christianity arrived in the person of St. Augustine, and during the rest of the century it took hold, establishing

\(^2\) Called Old North, it consisted of present-day northern England and southern Scotland.

itself as a source of education and literacy. A renowned school was established at Canterbury and another in Northumbeland.

The Venerable Bede, a theologian and historian, c. 672-735, wrote his great work on the *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* around 731, establish a sense of a unified people in using the name ‘English’. A great deal of what is known of Wales’ early history comes mainly from its bards, establishing their role as those who defined the cultural identity of the Welsh from the earliest days of the Old North kingdoms. “The Battle of Argoed Llwyfain” is an excellent example of the execution of that role. Simply presented, sparing in adjectives yet perfectly capturing the characters’ strengths and weaknesses, abundant with vivid imagery of battle, these twenty-eight lines reflected the essence of Welsh endurance, courage, loyalty, and fierce pride. It was this knife-like poetic precision powerfully cutting to the heart of a shared cultural identity that Edward I recognized in 1282 as a more powerful challenge to the final sublimation of the Welsh than any political or economic factor.

Taliesin, who wrote and sang “The Battle of Argoed Llwyfain” was one of the sixth-century poets -- called the *Cynfeirdd*, the early bards, by later generations – cited in the ninth-century *Historia Brittonum*, or *History of the Britons*. The bards who came after looked to the *Cynfeirdd* for templates of the panegyrics, elegies, and eulogies of their craft. Though there is only small, but choice, evidence of the bardic craft extant from the ninth through eleventh centuries, it can be assumed such poems were indeed

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4 Cited in the text are the bards Talhaearn, Aneirin, Taliesin, Blwchfardd, and Cian. Only the works of Taliesin and Aneirin have survived. David Dumville dates the *Historia Brittonum*, which he labels “a monument of mediaeval historiography,” at 829-830 and attributes authorship to a multilingual cleric writing in Welsh. Nine Latin recensions and a Middle Irish translation of the *Historia* have survived. *Historia Brittonum*, ed. David Dumville (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer), 3.
crafted by the fact that three of the most powerful and influential of Wales’ rulers – Rhodri Mawr ap Merfyn, Hywel Dda, and Gruffudd ap Lewelyn – came from that period. Given the importance placed on honor and fame by the Medieval Welsh, there can be no doubt that these rulers would have wanted their accomplishments remembered in the same manner as the Heroic Age kings of the Old North. Also, there is a reference – albeit, an unflattering one – to the bards in the poem *Armes Prydein* written around 930: “…let them not seek a sorcerer, nor a greedy poet.”

Taliesin was the court poet of Urien, king of Rheged; Aneirin was bard in the court of Mynyddawg Mwynfawr, ruler of Gododdin. Taliesin’s panegyrics honoring Urien set the tone for bards who came after by creating a format that recorded the king’s accomplishments for posterity, while setting standards for kingship that would encompass the ambitions of future kings and the expectations of their subjects. An excerpt from “In Praise of Urien” demonstrates this combination:

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When you charge into battle you wreak a slaughter…
Houses fired before daybreak… round the bravest ruler.
The bravest offspring. You yourself are the best:
Was not nor will be ever your equal.
When one beholds him great is the terror…
Around him rejoicing and abundant riches,
Golden king of the north, high lord of monachs.
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In this one poem, Taliesin’s words embody the perfect ruler: He is brave, he wins battles, he produces a future ruler who is as brave as he is and thus ensures stability in the

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6 Both kingdoms were in the area of what is now northern England and southern Scotland.


kingdom, he is generous with his wealth, and he is admired, if not paid homage to, by other rulers.

Little is known definitively about Taliesin, though much was written during the Middle Ages. A thirteenth-century manuscript called *The Book of Taliesin* contains some sixty poems credited to the bard, though scholars agree only about a dozen can safely be called his. Taliesin has been portrayed in Medieval prose as a magician who could morph into animals and could prophesy, equating him with Myrddyn, or Merlin, the prophesying conjuror in the tales of King Arthur. What is generally agreed regarding Taliesin is that he was a master technician and craftsperson whose poetic format, style, and imagery became the foundation of the Welsh bardic craft.9

Aneirin is thought to have been a younger contemporary of Taliesin.10 His name, also, was given to a book of manuscripts during the thirteenth century, but only “The Gododdin” of the *Book of Aneirin* is credited to the poet. That one poem, however, was enough to couple Aneirin with Taliesin in setting the style of bardic poetry in terms of imagery and narrative eloquence.11 “The Gododdin” is not a panegyric, though it praises its heroes, but rather a series of elegies of men lost in battle.

In the poem, the ruler of Gododdin, Mynyddawg Mwynfawr, calls together three hundred of the finest Britonic fighters to join him in stopping the Saxons from advancing northward. After a year of feasting, the war-band rides forth to Catraeth, where all but

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10 Ibid., 360.

11 In praising the artistry of the poem, Gwyn Williams notes the simple and direct style of the poem and the use of arresting contrasts “as in the very first line of the poem, where the youth of the warriors is set alongside the maturity of their virtue and again in the tremendous line *a gwedy elwch tawelwch vu* – “and after feasting there was silence.” Gwyn Williams, *An Introduction to Welsh Poetry* (Philadelphia: Dufour Editions, 1952), 25.
one die in the brutal fighting. In his poem, Aneirin mixed lamentations over the loss of
the war-band with praise of the individual men: 12

Three hundred, gold-torqued, launched the assault,
Defending the land: there was slaughter.
Although they were being slain, they slew,
And till the world’s end, they’ll be honoured….

I revere him, mighty war-lord,
Savage warrior and slasher.
He was garbed in gold
In the front line,
In war-lords’ fierce contention.

Battle’s speckled wine-steward…
War-cry’s pursuer,
Ferocious bear in attack,…
Comely was Cibno mab Gwengad.13

Y Gododdin
Taliesin

Almost seven hundred years before the coming of Edward, the Welsh bards had firmly
laid the groundwork for a cultural identity that, though it would be refined and enhanced
in the interim centuries, would remain constant throughout the Medieval period. These
books are relevant because of their content and, also, because of their timing. They
reappeared when the Welsh most needed them. The books of Taliesin and Aneirin came
in the middle of the thirteenth century, somewhere between 1250 and 1275. This period

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12 The poem has survived as two separate texts, each incomplete, each containing material not in
the other. Also, there is discussion among scholars whether the texts should be considered as a single work
or a group of elegies. In spite of all this, in reading the poem it is possible to find a powerful unity in
Aneirin’s style and intent. Clancy, Medieval Welsh Poets, 360.

13 Clancy, Welsh Medieval Poets, 68, 76. In linguistically circling around the main event of the
battle as he praises its warriors, Aneirin illustrates the unifying circle motif found in Medieval Celtic
poetry, art, and in its metalwork, such as the gold buckle found at Sutton Hoo, a tomb of a seventh-century
prince near Suffolk, and another gold buckle with the same interwoven circle pattern found in the Taplow
1982), 32, 39.
began shortly after the loss of Llywelyn the Great and extended to the reign of Lwelyn ap Gruffudd, just before his first war with Edward in 1277. Harkening back to past heroes and cultural dominance has always been a means of drawing people together to engender cultural resolve when a leader central to that culture’s psyche has died or when a people are preparing to go to war. These poems were a reminder of the unique and proud history of the Welsh people, their roots buried firmly in the origins of Britain. Centuries forward they would spark the determination and pride of the Welsh.

Following Taliesin and Aneirin were others whose powerful images continued to build the Welsh bardic craft. The Llywarch Hen saga was written sometime between the eighth and tenth centuries, describing events from the sixth century. The narrator, Llywarch, and his sons come to Powys following the destruction of Rheged. One by one Llywarch’s sons go to war, each at Llywarch’s urging.

Maenwyn, when I was your age,
No foot would trample my mantle.
None would plough my land without bloodshed. …
My choice, a warrior wearing
Armour, sharp as a thorn…

“Exhortation to Maenwyn,”

and one by one each dies and Llywarch is left alone.

Gwen at Llawen stood guard last night:
The shield on his shoulder.
Since he was my son, he was bold…
Four and twenty sons, bred of my body:

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Because of my tongue, they were slain.  
Small fame is best: they were lost.

“The Lament for Gwen,” Llywarch Hen Saga

The Heledd Saga, written in the ninth century, features many of the same techniques as the Llywarch Saga – concise speech, repetition, contrasts in imagery – but is exceptional in that the speaker is a woman. Heledd, sister of Cynddylan, a ruler of Powys, is lamenting the destruction of her brother’s kingdom and the deaths of all her brothers in the battle. Apparently lost segments explained why Heledd blames herself for the death and destruction that now surrounds her as she walks the battlefield and returns to the burnt out hall of the court. Her lamentations are especially heart-rending because they are so simply stated, as when she thinks of the carrion who will be eating the flesh of her brothers that night: “Eagle of Pengwern, grey-crested, tonight/Uplifted its war-cry,/Avid for Cynddylan’s flesh,” or when she stands in the hall:

The hall of Cynddylan is dark tonight,  
No fire, no singing,  
Cheeks wear out with weeping…

The hall of Cynddylan is dark tonight,  
Having lost its leader.  
God of mercy, what shall I do.

“The Hall of Cynddylan,”

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16 Ibid., 86-87.
17 Williams, An Introduction to Welsh Poetry, 38.
18 Clancy, Medieval Welsh Poems, 366.
19 Ibid., 91.
20 Ibid., 92-93.
These sagas are important because they reflect so starkly Welsh society prior to the tenth century – a warrior society where young men were sent to battle and, when the battle was lost, the women suffered the consequences. A connection with their ancestors was formed when these poems were sung in the halls of later Welsh rulers, heard by the men who must face the same dangers and by the women who must face the same consequences. This was part of the bardic cultural thread stretching across the generations, whose power would have been fearful to a king, such as Edward, intent on subsuming it.

The powerful King Offa of Mercia consolidated political power in what is now central England in the eighth century. Frank Stenton credits Offa with unchallenged supremacy in England during the last years of his reign and notes, “No other Anglo-Saxon king ever regarded the world at large with so secular a mind or so acute a political sense…He grasped the idea of a negotiated frontier.”

It was likely in the latter capacity that Offa decided to construct a dyke separating the Welsh kingdoms from Mercia. This extraordinary feat of engineering is traditionally considered to be the first defined border between Wales and the rest of Britain. Completed sometime in the late eighth century, it stretched some 120 miles, from the Severn Sea to the estuary of the Dee.

Whether Offa’s Dyke was defensive or an offensive gesture, on the part of such a powerful and respected king it validates the fierceness and effectiveness of the Welsh

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kings and their war-bands. This border did not define Wales absolutely, but it would serve as something of a demarcation – though not one respected by the Mercians nor the Anglo-Saxons. Nor by the Vikings, for it was during this period the Scandinavian invasions began.

The *Brut Y Tywysogion*, or *Chronicle of the Princes*, noted 795 as “when the Pagans first came to Ireland.” 23 In 787, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* seemed to have more of an understanding of the extent of the invasion’s purpose, reporting:

> And in his days came first three ships of Northmen from Hordaland: and then the reeve rode there and wanted them to go to the King’s town because he did not know what they were; and then they killed him. These were the first ships of the Danish men who sought out the Land of the English race.24

From these initial sporadic attacks grew a terror that lasted until the end of the eleventh century – with the last known attack one on a religious settlement in 1091. 25

Wales was attacked by the Northmen from the north, the Danes from the Bristol Channel, and both from Ireland.26 With the need for defense resources, the rulers of the four Welsh kingdoms and the smaller entities would have understood the merits inherent in strengthening their positions through marriage, rather than dissipating their military prowess in battles against each other. This would appear to be the case with Merfyn

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25 Previously, it was thought the destruction wrought by the Saxon invasions of the fifth century caused some Britons to flee across the sea to Western Gaul where they established Brittany. However, current archeological evidence indicates the destruction of towns and monasteries was less from Saxon invaders and more from the general decline that followed the Roman exit. Vaughan-Thomas, *Wales*, 51.

26 Williams, *Welsh History*, 147.
Frych, or Merfyn the Freckled, who became king of Gwynedd in 825. At that time access to Wales from England lay through Powys, so Merfyn married Nest, the sister of the ruler of Powys, thereby, if not blocking the access, at least making it much more difficult to gain. 27 Wynford Vaughan-Thomas notes that Merfyn was a ruler of exceptional ability and one who valued his culture, as it is thought it was during his reign many of the Old North epics were copied to be preserved. 28

This highlights the great respect with which the bardic tradition was held by Wales’ rulers, who understood that their pencerdds and teulu barddds were there not only to ensure the their fame and glory but, also, to ensure the continuation of their culture. This bespeaks a gratifying combination of military and cultural acumen in these rulers. In making his court a center for cultural creativity that would reflect well on himself and on his kingdom, Merfyn must have employed a pencerdd and a bard teulu. The fact that we do not have poems from the court of Merfyn is testimony to how much has been lost from culture of the time. However, it is likely that whatever poems were composed about Merfyn by his bards eventually did become part of the bardic canon for a time, though lost to us in the current day.

The court environment created by Merfyn must have served as an invaluable political and diplomatic apprenticeship for his son Rhodri, who faced many challenges

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27 Wales Through the Ages, ed. A. J. Roderick, “The Welsh Dynasties in the Dark Ages,” Nora K. Chadwick, 51. And in The Celts, Chadwick notes that an indication of the sophistication of the courts of Merfyn and Rhodri was “their substitution of policy for warfare…The dynasty never struck a blow, but by policy came to inherit large parts of Wales,” police in this case meaning primarily marriage. The Celts, 87.

28 Wynford Vaughan-Thomas, Wales, 71.
during his reign, from 844 to 878, but was still able to influence events and other leaders in such a way that, for a time, Wales came close to being a united entity.\textsuperscript{29}

Rhodri ap Merfyn came to be known as Rhodri Mawr, or Rhodri the Great, in part because of his military prowess, especially with his defeat of the Danes in 856, ensuring safer trade routes and production of goods within the kingdom, as well as protection for outlying areas upon which the Danes often preyed.\textsuperscript{30} Building on his father’s effective nineteen-year rule and his own political and military successes, Rhodri might have brought about a state of continued stability in Wales, but in 878, as reported by the \textit{Brut Y Tywysogion}, or the \textit{Chronicle of the Princes}, “Rhodri, and his brother [son], were killed by the Saxons.”\textsuperscript{31} Rhodri’s accomplishments were so celebrated and honored by his own people that thereafter being of his line was of primary importance for anyone wanting to rule in Wales.\textsuperscript{32}

It was following Rhodri’s death that King Alfred of Wessex obtained a political foothold in Wales. Wynford Vaughan-Thomas states this was because of concern among other Welsh rulers and landholders that Rhodri’s sons did not have the military wherewithal to defend Welsh territories from Scandinavians raiding from their Irish bases. The same year as Rhodri’s death, Alfred was defeating the Danish leader Guthrum at Edington and forcing Guthrum to make peace and be baptized a Christian. This victory

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{29} United in the sense of one powerful king, such as Rhodri, to whom other less powerful but still important kings paid tribute, while having autonomy in their own kingdoms.
\item \textsuperscript{30} Davies, \textit{History of Wales}, 79. It was this victory that brought Rhodri international attention. Wynford Vaughan-Thomas agrees, noting that the victory was hailed in the French court of Charles the Bald. \textit{Wales}, 73.
\item \textsuperscript{31} \textit{Brut Y Tywysogion}, ed. Ithel, 17.
\item \textsuperscript{32} Chadwick, \textit{The Celts}, 89.
\end{itemize}
provided a far more confident sense of security than did the son’s squabbling among
themselves. However, Richard Abels in his biography of Alfred points out that
Alfred’s original biographer, the Welsh monk Asser, presented another view when Asser
wrote, “At that time, and long before, all the countries in South Wales belonged to King
Alfred.” Asser then lists the kings who came to Alfred “that they might enjoy rule and
protection from him,” as they were “compelled by the violence of the…sons of
Rhodri.” Abels continues that this made the sons of Rhodri nervous and that at least
one of them eventually submitted to Alfred. The Welsh princes turned to Alfred for
protection, paying him tribute in return—in effect, making King Alfred overlord of large
areas of Wales. This set a precedent in the minds of English kings, specifically, an
implied sense of inferiority on the part of the Welsh, that indicated to the English that
Wales could be subsumed into the English sphere eventually.

Rhodri and his sons had ruled over a confederation of territories that came to be
called Deheubarth and covered most of south Wales. In 942, Deheubarth, Gwynedd, and
Powys came under the rule of King Hywel ap Cadell ap Rhodri, Rhodri’s grandson.
Known in later years as Hywel Dda, or Hywel the Good, this king would eventually
rule a large portion of Wales.
Nora Chadwick presents the argument that Hywel brought a southern sensibility to much of Wales during his rule. Whereas Merfyn and Rhodri had been of northern Welsh stock, where the temperament was one of fierce independence, boundless, sometimes reckless, courage, and personal loyalty to the death, Hywel was from south Wales, where the temperament was more temperate and inclined to subordinate independence to ensure a strong and well-run institutional society. The south had adopted a more modern realism and political acumen and, consequently, had been more inclined to develop strong connections with the Anglo-Saxons. Chadwick avers that the southern ideology took precedence with Hywel’s kingship and that through his relations with England Wales was able to share in the profits gained from trade with Western Europe. This argument makes sense, especially when the fact that the south had many more Roman settlements than the north is considered – a greater Roman presence indicating less economic isolation. This does not, however, preclude some trade occurring in the north of Wales: Wendy Davis writes of the discovery of oriental and Danish coinage c.930 in Bangor, in the far northwest, which pieces imply more than simple trade among the natives.

The English king with whom Hywel Dda was most closely identified was Athelstan, son of Edward the Elder, after whom Hywel named his son, and grandson of

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39 Morganwg and Gwent in the southeast were still independent. Wynford Vaughan-Thomas, Wales, 74.


41 Davis, Wales in the Early Middle Ages (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1982), 56.
Alfred the Great. Athelstan gave Hywel the title of *subregulus* and honored him by including him as witness on many of the king’s charters.

The Welsh people had good reasons to dislike, if not hate, Athelstan because of his role in the Battle of Brunanburh in 937: A poem written by an unknown writer around 930 became the spiritual anthem of the Welsh kingdoms in the early Middle Ages. *Armes Prydein*, or *The Prophecy of Britain*, foretold of the complete destruction of the Saxons in battle when the other people of Britain – that being the Welsh and the men of Cornwall and Strathclyde – would unite with the Danes of Dublin and the Irish. The poem was a rousing call to arms, as it began with the promise that the Welsh would have “wealth and property and peace,/and wide dominion and ready leaders” and continued:

> …and after the commotion, settlement in every place.  
> Brave men in battle-tumult, mighty warriors,  
> swift in attack, very stubborn in defence.  
> The warriors will scatter the foreigners…  
> and there will be reconciliation between the Cymry and the men of  
> Dublin,  
> the Irish of Ireland and Anglesey and Scotland,  
> the men of Cornwall and of Strathclyde will be made welcome among us.  
> The Britons will rise again when they prevail…

In nearly two hundred lines, the battle was described in detail, ending with the ‘foreigners’ scurrying to their ships and returning to the sea to wander in exile.44

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43 An example is a charter granting a parcel of land to the community of Malmesbury: “…serving God and St. Peter…I, Aethelstan, king of flourishing Albion in possession of the office, confirmed and subscribed this document with the mark of the holy and always to be venerated cross…I, Hywel Dda ap Cadel, subregulus…” The Electronic Sawyer, Online catalogue of Anglo-Saxon Chronicles, [http://www.esawyer.org.uk/charter/434.html](http://www.esawyer.org.uk/charter/434.html); (accessed March 21, 2014).
In 937, Scandinavians, Scots, and the Strathclyde Britons from what is now southern Scotland and northern England did unite under Olaf Guthfrithson, the Norse-Gael king of Dublin to fight the English king Athelstan. Their horrific defeat at the Battle of Brunanburh was chronicled in a poem in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle that began as follows:

Here King Athelstan, leader of warriors,  
ring-giver of men, and also his brother,  
the aetheling Edmund, struck life-long glory  
in strife around Brunanburh, clove the shield-wall,  
hacked the war-lime, with hammers’ leavings,  
Edward’s offspring, as was natural to them  
by ancestry, that in frequent conflict  
they defend land, treasures and homes  
against every foe…

and ended

Never yet in this island  
was there a greater slaughter  
of people felled by the sword’s edges,  
before this, as books tell us,  
old authorities, since Angles and Saxons  
came here from the east,  
sought out Britain over the broad ocean,  
warriors eager for fame, proud war-smiths,  
overcame the Welsh, seized the country.45

The Armes Prydein described the battle as a complete success for the Welsh and their allies, ending with a description of God who had been their champion and leader:

He will not die, he will not escape, he will not retreat,  
He will not fade, reject, nor waver, nor will He diminish.46

44 Ifor Williams speculates that establishing such an alliance would require a great deal of time and that the writer had prior knowledge of the plan. Sir Ifor Williams, Armes Prydein, xxiii.


46 Williams, Armes Prydein, 15.
This poem of prophecy would have been well-known throughout the Welsh kingdoms, including by Hywel, evoking the pride and exultation of the Heroic Age poems of Taliesin and Aneirin. In the poem, the Welsh, or Britons, led the coalition against the Saxons, but in reality the Welsh kingdoms, led by or influenced by Hywel, did not join the English forces.47

The actions that Hywel and Athelstan did not take should be noted, in view of the actions they might have taken. Hywel did not join the English side of the battle nor did he send any portion of his army to fight on the side of the English. As far as is known, Athelstan did not command Hywel to fight on the side of the English, which Athelstan, based on the relationship of king and subking. From this, it could be surmised that between them Hywel and Athelstan managed a delicate balance that profited both their kingdoms.

Hywel could not give his people the glories of the Brythonic past, but he could give them the gift of law. Hywel’s Law, as it came to be called, was not a set of newly developed laws, but rather the codification of longtime practices, with an emphasis on and a respect for kinship groups and their interactions.

47 Opinions about why Hywel did not take his kingdom to war can only be extrapolated from what is known about him: He was ruthless in war and in his dealings with political opponents, as demonstrated by his rise to power. He was perceptive in his understanding of governance, as demonstrated by his decision to codify the Welsh laws. A society cannot exist with any order or prosperity without a set of laws. He was secure enough of his authority that he felt he could leave his kingdom to go on pilgrimage to Rome. All of these indicate a king who acted not out of cowardice but out of logic. Hywel was frequently at the English court. He would have known better than most the military resources Athelstan had available and would have understood this was not a battle the coalition could win. Wynford Vaughan-Thomas, Wales, 74-75. Perhaps it is a matter of defining what submission meant at that time, in this case one king paying homage to another. Wendy Davis writes that the fact that nine Welsh kings paid homage between 928 and 956 and witnessed charters as sub-kings may have influenced the thinking of English kings. “The attitude of Edward the Confessor …has much to suggest that he considered the whole of Wales already subject….” Davis, Wales in the Early Middle Ages, 114.
In the decades following Hywel’s death in 950, calamity followed calamity for the Welsh, as attacks by the Northmen intensified, with the worst damage along the Welsh coast, where whole settlements were destroyed and the men sold into slavery. Anglesey was attacked in 987 and 993. In 988, the Northmen ravaged so many towns that Maredudd ab Owain, ruler of Deheubarth and grandson of Hywel Dda, was forced to pay them tribute. As the Brut Y Tywysogion recorded, “[A]nd Maredudd, son of Owain, paid to the black Pagans a tribute of a penny for each person. And a great mortality took place among the men through famine.”  

Between 949 and 1066, the Brut was a chronicle of the instability of the Welsh kingdoms: Thirty-five rulers had violent deaths, four others were blinded, four imprisoned. Adding to the chaos were several plagues and regular attacks along the coastline by the Danes. St. David’s was sacked four times and a bishop killed, and thousands of Welsh men, women, and children were captured and sold as slaves.  

Maredudd had conquered Gwynedd and Powys and ruled a large part of Wales, but with his death in 999, those territories changed hands yet again and the Danish raids continued. The system of tribute in exchange for security that had been in place for so long with the English kings was ineffectual because the English were dealing with similar upheaval and invasion. In 1000, the English King Aethlred sought to stop the attacks by paying the Vikings tribute, which was called Danegeld. Unfortunately, the English could not afford Danegeld and when the tribute stopped, the attacks started again.  

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48 Brut Y Tywysogion, ed. Ithel, 31.
49 Davies, History of Wales, 96.
50 “The precedent then set was followed on several occasions during the next twenty-five years, and these emergency levies were the prototypes of the recurrent Danegelds imposed by the Anglo-Norman kings.” Stenton, Anglo-Saxon England, 371.
upheaval finally resulted in King Cnut of Denmark becoming king. He would rule England for twenty years.

Out of the chaos for the Welsh came one of Wales’ most successful kings. Gruffudd ap Llywelyn was the son of the ruler of Gwynedd and Powys, but was disinherited when his father died and Iago ab Idwal ap Meurig took the throne. Sixteen years later, in 1039, Iago was killed, his four-year-old-son escaped to Dublin, and Gruffudd took Gwynedd and Powys. In 1055, Gruffudd ap Llwelyn took the throne of Deheubarth and by 1056 claimed sovereignty over all of Wales, so that for a very brief period all of Wales acknowledged at least nominally the kingship of one ruler. 51

In 1042, following King Canute’s death and some minor scrambling among the heirs, Edward the Confessor was crowned king of England. Edward was perceived as weak by Gruffudd, 52 who saw an opportunity to extend Wales beyond Offa’s Dyke. He was successful in gaining English territory until 1063, when he was defeated and pursued by Harold, earl of Wessex. When Gruffudd was murdered by his own men, Wales again was left in turmoil. The “head and shield, and defender of the Britons, “ as the Brut referred to Gruffudd, “…from beginning to end, he hounded the Pagans and Saxons in many battles, and he prevailed against them, and slaughtered them and ravaged them.” 53 For these years, the Brut serves as the history of what can be known and it is a very sparse one. It is a record, not an image, not the sound of a voice or a harp string, and it makes clear how much has been lost.

51 Davies, History of Wales, 98.

52 This was in part because the earls in Edward’s kingdom had become very powerful and were consuming vital resources of materials and manpower in internecine skirmishes that Edward could not stop. Davies, History of Wales, 98.

53 Brut Y Tywysogion, ed. Ithel, 45.
What is also clear is the pattern that had already been set by the end of the eleventh century, that being the fact that, in spite of the intermittency of strong leadership in Wales, the Welsh kingdoms continued to hold together as individual units. The only thing shared among them that was inherent in their identity as a people was their cultural heritage. If King Athelstan had decided that having Wales would be worth the resources expended, and had taken what there was to take and left the rest for the Danes, Edward I still would have had much to destroy. Yet in reading the poems of the Poets of the Princes, who were a major influence in the next historical period, it can be seen that the richness of the Welsh culture was a layered treasure that reached its perfection in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.
CHAPTER 4
“A WELSH LION HELD THEM…”
WALES: 1066 – 1240

I love, England’s bane, the bright Northland today,
And the flourishing groves by the Lliw….
I love its sea marsh and its mountains
And its wood-bordered fort and fine lands,
And its watered dales and its valleys,
And it’s white gulls and comely women.
I love its warriors and well-trained steeds
And its woods and strong men and homestead….
I love its lowlands,…
And its wide wilderness and its riches….
May I win, before my grave, new reward,
In Tegeingl, the fairest in her land.
Though I be a lover of Ovid’s kind,
God be mindful of me at my end.
A foaming white wave, bold by homesteads.

“Exultation,”
Hywel ab Owain Gwynedd

Seven warriors were we, flawless, unflurried,
Unrestrained their onslaught,…
Cedifor’s sons, noble children in union,
In the glen near Pentraeth,
They drank deep, strong of purpose,
Were cut down near their foster-brother…
Whatever wealth come of holding land, this world
Is no trustworthy home:
With a spear, ah savage Dafydd,
Pierced is war’s hawk, tall Hywel.

“Lament for Hywel ab Owain and His Foster-Brothers,”
Peryf ap Cedifor

2 Ibid., 130-133.
3 Ibid., 139.
These two poems reflect the beauty and the savagery, the possibility and the failure of the Welsh principalities between the death of William the Conqueror and the coronation of King Edward I. In the two hundred years between the coming of the Norman conquerors and the coronation of Edward, the Welsh experienced years of upheaval and forced adaptation, periods of strong leadership and relative stability contrasted with civil wars and struggles for power. And in the midst of it all came a flowering of the bardic language, format, and tradition with the Beirdd y Tywysogion, or Poets of the Princes – also called the Gogynfeirdd, or the Later Poets, to draw the connection between them and the ancient bardic order of the Cynfeirdd.

Hywel ab Owain Gwynedd was a man of his time – not typical, but certainly not impossible given the vitality of the times and the intellectual reawakening, begun in the ninth and tenth centuries, from western Europe and its influences in art, music, and crafts. Hywel was a warrior prince of Gwynedd and for a brief time its ruler, as well as an engineer and a poet, who died in a battle for power against his half-brother Dafydd.4

The thirty-one Gogynfeirdd whose works have survived are better known than earlier bards, though that still means too little information has survived.5 Over two turbulent centuries these bards were called upon to celebrate the accomplishments and lament the losses of a people whose sense of community and self-definition were being

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4 Williams, *The Poets of the Welsh Princes*, 27. Hywel is credited with bringing poems of love to the Welsh sensibility – love of a woman and love of country. Such sentiments would have been unheard of a generation earlier, but Hywel led the Welsh bardic tradition into new linguistic melodies. He could not have known that exultation over the beauty of one’s country would have gradually taken the place of exultation over the triumphant mayhem of battle in the years following 1282.

5 For the first time, with the court poets we have their names and even some biographical information. There is evidence that many of the poets were from noble families and that several fought in the battles they wrote about. Gwyn Williams, *An Introduction to Welsh Poetry*, 10.
shattered: In the three decades following 1066, the Normans had settled, in even a small degree, in every part of Wales.\textsuperscript{6} Mines and fisheries were reopened, towns and trade sprung up around castles. During a time of tremendous upheaval for the Welsh and the English, the bards remained a cultural core for their people. The Welsh had always looked to the east, fighting the Picts, the Angles, the Saxons, the English, and now the Normans to preserve the world of Urien and Rhodri and the uniqueness of the Welsh culture. The fierce pride and heritage of the Welsh people were preserved in the thousands of lines memorized by the \emph{pencerdds} and \emph{teulu bardds}, passed generation to generation like precious family heirlooms connecting present with past.

Self-definition was a necessary factor in cultural identity, and it was not always expressed in similar ways or reach the same conclusions: Following the Battle of Hastings in 1066 and the ascension of William, Duke of Normandy, to the throne of England, the \emph{Brut y Tywysogion} recorded the following:

That Harold who, at first earl, through cruelty after the death of king Edward unduly acquired the sovereignty of the kingdom of England, was despoiled of his kingdom and life by William the Bastard, duke of Normandy, though previously vauntingly victorious. And that William defended the kingdom of England in a great battle, with an invincible hand, and his most noble army.\textsuperscript{7}

The Welsh chronicle did not mention the Normans – or French, as they were called in the \emph{Brut} – again in any detail for thirteen years.


\textsuperscript{7} \emph{Brut Y Tywysogion}, ed. Ithel, 45 and 47.
In 1087, the *Brut* reported “…died William the Bastard, prince of the Normans, and king of the Saxons, the Britons, and the Albanians, after a sufficiency of the glory and fame of this transient world, and after glorious victories, and the honour acquired by riches.”

In its obituary, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* reported that, among William’s many accomplishments, he had subdued the Welsh: “Wales was in his control and he built castles there and entirely controlled that race of men.”

Almost two hundred years after the Welsh kings paid homage to Alfred, the *Brut* and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* recorded for posterity the supposed capitulation of the Welsh to the English crown. This interpretation may have come from William I’s having created a series of settlements with castles along the informal border between Wales and England within two years of his coronation. Given the political situation in Wales at the time of the Conquest, William would not have viewed the Welsh princes as lords with which he needed to be overly concerned. However, he would have been aware of their military capabilities and realized he needed to take steps to contain them, especially as he would be spending much of his time in Normandy. The Normans were concerned, also, with the possibility of Welsh and English elements joining forces to...
challenge Norman rule. William’s solution was to create three earldoms involving large tracts of land along the Welsh border. David Douglas cites the Marcher settlements “of Chester, Shrewsbury, and Hereford, which was to be a feature of the Norman settlement of England, [as] the beginning of a persistent penetration into Wales.” Between them, these three earls encroached upon much of the land around their settlements, in some cases bringing in settlers to make the arrangement more permanent. These men, in turn, granted land to their knights, who, in their dual roles as managers and defenders, followed the Norman custom of building castles. The March lords and their knights built hundreds of castles, from which could be launched offensive raids into Wales, eventually leading to hundreds of new settlements, throughout east and south Wales especially. It would be more than sixty years – not until the English civil war following the death of Henry I – that the Welsh would be able to regain significant portions of the lands lost following the Conquest.

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14 The role of the knight would change. Prior to 1066, a knight of England was one who fought for his lord, on foot, and was rewarded with property of his own. Within twenty years, a knight of England was one who fought on horseback, managed the estate of the baron for whom he fought, and owned land at the pleasure of that baron and the king. By the 1100s, the knight was a man whose land was his by heredity and whose position in his shire meant he handled judicial and other duties as well as military service, when needed. English Historical Documents, 26.

15 David Douglas points out that, in regards to the castle building, is the choices William made as to whom they were entrusted, the most important of the Norman magnates. Soon the Norman castles in England were to multiply, and what in 1068 was essentially a device of war came to be a permanent feature of the new feudal administrative order which the Normans here established.” Douglas, William the Conqueror, 217.

Equally if not more transformative than the military attacks that fostered them, writes R. R. Davies, the Norman settlements represented an emerging European way of life and commerce to the Welsh, consisting of “the exploitation of resources, the marketing of produce, and availability of money as a unit of exchange, the centrality of the town in the exchange-distribution of surpluses and the ability to sustain a large and socially differentiated population.”

Twenty years after Hastings, the Normans had followed the scents of commerce and development to the prime resources of Wales, building earthworks, mints and mills, exploiting the fisheries, and establishing working mines, primarily in southeast and southwest areas of Wales.

Among the English, William would be remembered for the destruction of their aristocracy, the redefinition of ownership of property, and the commission of the Domesday Book, which book made permanent all else. An English baron could own the land that had been in his family for generations only if William granted it to him, and that only happened if the king accepted the baron’s homage. Those English barons who had survived Hastings, their families and knights, were faced with the prospect of losing their

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17 The Normans introduced the Welsh to advanced warfare techniques, while the Welsh reminded the Normans of the advantages of short supply routes for invading armies and mountainous terrain for defending armies.


19 Ibid. The English were not so fortunate, if that is the word, as the Welsh in that after the conquest trade between English boroughs and others was disrupted. By 1071, there was no trade between England and Flanders and by 1074 none with France. The English were forced to adopt the trading preferences of the Normans. Frank Barlow, *The Feudal Kingdom of England, 1042-1216* (London: Longman Publishing Group, 1988), 120.

estates to Norman lords and the sublimation of their language to French in matters of law and government.\textsuperscript{21}

In commissioning the Domesday Book in 1086, William, however, added permanence to these arrangements in Wales and England. Not only was this survey a detailed listing of every piece of property in the kingdom,\textsuperscript{22} it was also a template of property ownership.\textsuperscript{23} The book became the basis upon which disagreements regarding property rights would be decided from that time forward.\textsuperscript{24}

William had a tremendously negative impact on Wales.\textsuperscript{25} Though it might be said the economic transformations were advantageous in the long run, the physical alterations of the Welsh countryside and villages – the few that existed before the coming of the Normans – were a searing thrust to the heart of the cultural identity of the Welsh. Hywel ab Owian Gwynedd could not have sung with such exultation if he had lived to see the Normanization of his country.

\textsuperscript{21} It would be almost three hundred years before a king of England spoke English fluently. Ibid, 100.

\textsuperscript{22} “He had it investigated so very narrowly that there was not one single hide, not one yard of land, not even (it is shameful to tell – but it seemed not shame to him to do it) one ox, not one cow, not one pig was left out, that was not set down in his record.” Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, ed. Swanton, 216.

\textsuperscript{23} By 1086, only eight percent of English land remained in the possession of an English family. English Historical Documents, ed. Douglas, 21.

\textsuperscript{24} Records did exist among Anglo-Saxon institutions, particularly churches. “If we take title-deeds and records of property transactions as an example…the texts of rather less than 2,000 writs and charters earlier than 1066 now exist…Because the Norman Conquest brought titles to property into doubt, forgery flourished…” presenting sometimes insurmountable problems when property rights were in dispute. M. T. Clanchy, From Memory to Written Record, England 1066-1307 (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 31.

\textsuperscript{25} It should be noted that William did not take any land for himself in Wales, nor any castle. David C. Douglas, William the Conqueror, 242. An interesting side note is Douglas’ admiration for William’s energy. Douglas cites his accomplishments between January 1068 and the summer of 1069 and says they can be attributed to “the phenonmal energy which he personally displayed at this time.” Douglas, William the Conqueror, 217.
During most of William’s reign, Wales was bereft of strong leadership and so it likely would have fallen to the bards to preserve the cultural core for the people, to ensure that when opportunity came again in the form of an ineffectual English king, the people would have the heart and the passion to grab it.

William II, also called William Rufus, came to the English throne in 1087 upon the death of his father. Rufus’ biographer, Frank Barlow, speaks of his remarkable career, one which involved almost continuous warfare, including three invasions of Wales. Rufus was lucky in that when he came to the throne, one of Wales strongest leaders, Gruffud ap Cynan, prince of Gwynedd, was being held prisoner in the Marches. When Gruffudd escaped in 1094, he would begin the process of rebuilding the power and influence of Gwynedd.

Paul Barbier writes that Gruffudd was the “hero of Welsh defensive warfare,” in that, following his thirteen years in prison, he seemed to have deliberately and patiently set about making Gwynedd a prosperous principality through agriculture rather than raids or war and that perhaps it was because of this prosperous and stable base Gruffudd built for Gwynedd, in the mold of the sagacious rather than the warrior ruler, that his son and eventual successor Owain Gwynedd ap Gruffudd was able to make war so successfully.

When Gruffudd died in his bed of old age in 1137, he had lived through the reigns of William II and Henry I, both of whose authority he accepted, and was at the beginning

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26 As Barlow portrays Rufus, luck seemed to come his way, in being able to step into the role of his father due to the misfortunes of his brothers. Frank Barlow, William Rufus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), xi.

of the period when England suffered a civil war between the supporters of the Empress Matilda and Stephen for the throne.

His eulogy by the bard Gruffudd ap Gwrgenau is unusual in its gentleness, with very little imagery of battle – though Gruffudd was known to be a savage and unforgiving warrior against the Normans and other Welsh rulers – and more adjectives such as ‘kindly’ and ‘worthy’. A. T. E. Matonis in his article about Welsh panegyrics notes that the gentler virtues appear more frequently in the poems of the *Gogynfeirdd* than in those of their predecessors.28 And so Gruffudd ap Cynan is praised in this excerpt:

For Gruffudd, triumph’s red spear, it hurts me,
Who gave me gold and well-trained horses,
Cynan’s descendant, piercer of vice,…
Song’s delight, no dishonor his end,
Joyful in feasting, supreme in dignity,
Of the finest princes’ lineage…
Bards led no poor life in his service…
May God not grudge my comrade in feasting
When all gather for the great judgment.

“Lament for Gruffudd ap Cynan,”
Gruffudd ap Gwrgenau29

And in the *Brut*, as follows:

…the king and sovereign and prince and defender
and pacifier of all the Welsh, after many dangers
by sea and land, after innumerable spoils and victories
in war, after riches of gold and silver and costly garments,
after collecting together into Gwynedd, his own country,

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those who had been scattered in various countries by the Normans, and after building in his time many churches and consecrating them to God…

*Brut y Tywysogion*\(^{30}\)

Note that Gruffudd was called “prince…of all the Welsh,” implying a unity that the writer then negated with “after collecting together into Gwynedd, his own country, those who had been before scattered into various countries by the Normans…” implying the principalities of Wales were separate countries. Still, though the Welsh might not be unified geographically or under one supreme ruler, the people still thought of themselves as one people, one culture. After almost three-quarters of a century of March lords making repeated attempts – some of which were successful, for a time – to conquer Wales, neither the people nor their culture had been subdued. And this would be even more true in the next century when King Edward would be faced with the incontrovertible fact.

The Welsh princes did share a concern with the English kings and that was the extensive, almost royal, powers enjoyed by the March lords. William the Conqueror had given these lords rights only those on a frontier, far from the center of power, could expect. To rule without restrictions was a necessity when attacks were frequent and decisions had to be made in time to be of any consequence. So it was that these earls had the right to settle their disputes with each other and make their own treaties with the Welsh, as well as the right to wage war. The problem was the lack of oversight, which

\(^{30}\)*Brut Y Tywysogion*, ed. Ithel, 161.
meant in areas where the March lords ruled Welsh subjects, those subjects had no recourse if they were treated unfairly.31

The Welsh had resisted the March lords since the establishment of William’s earldoms, but Welsh military acumen consisted mainly of attacking fiercely and quickly and, when finding that complete eradication of the Norman squatters could not be accomplished, grabbing portable prizes and retreating behind mountainous geography. This was effective in resisting a complete capitulation, but the Welsh commanders possessed enough military acumen to know eventually the Normans would find an answer to the puzzle of difficult terrain. Gruffudd ap Cynan and others had won decisive battles against the March lords, but as each decade passed, the Normans seemed to have become more deeply woven into the fabric of Wales. Already, some kingdoms had disappeared entirely, unable to withstand the formidable Norman war machine.32

However, there was one consistently positive factor for the Welsh: Resistance of the March lords’ expansion made it expedient for the king to enhance the powers of the March lords in order to deal with the resistance, thereby weakening the king’s power over the lords and creating a problem with his powerbase. As long as the March lords did not become too powerful, this situation worked in the Welsh princes’ favor.

31 R. R. Davies, “Kings, Lords and Liberties in the March of Wales, 1066-1272,” Transactions of the Royal Historical Society 29 (1979): 41-61, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3679112; (accessed 31/05/2013). This was somewhat the custom in Normandy, where barons did not brook too much interference from the duke. Still, the March lords honored their native custom to the extreme in Wales.

32 “The Welsh were not alone in finding these military techniques almost impossible to cope with. Similar methods swept the Normans to spectacular conquests in Sicily, in eastern Europe and, eventually, the Holy Land. The Norman knight on horseback in his coat of mail, with his sword, conical helmet and kite-shaped shield, became the champion warrior of the western world.” Wynford Vaughan-Thomas, Wales, A History, 85.
The March lords and some of the Welsh princes did find ways to cooperate through marital and economic alliances. However, these alliances did not deter the Normans from continuing to push their way west nor the Welsh from retaliating, as reported in the *Brut Y Tywysogion* for the years 1093 and 1095:

[1093]…the Britons resisted the domination of the French, not being able to bear their cruelty, and demolished their castles in Gwynedd, and iterated their depredations and slaughters among them. And the French led their armies into Gwynedd;…attacked and prevailed over them, putting them to flight, and killing them with immense slaughter…and towards the close of that year the Britons demolished all the castles of Ceredigion and Dyved, except…Pembroke and Rhyd y Gors. And the people and all the cattle of Dyved they brought away with them, leaving Dyved and Ceredigion a desert…The ensuing year, the French devastated Gower, Cydweli, and the Vale of Tywi; and the country remained a desert. And about the middle of the harvest king William raised an army against the Britons; and…returned home empty, without having gained anything…

[1094] After that the French raised an army against the Britons, meditating the devastation of the whole country; without being able to fulfil their intention, …

[1095] And then, the second time, William, king of England, assembled innumerable hosts, with immense means and power, against the Britons. And then the Britons avoided their impulses, not confiding in themselves, but placing their hope in God,…For the French dared not penetrate the rocks and the woods, but hovered about the level plains. At length they returned home empty, without having gained anything; and the Britons, happy and unintimidated, defended their country…

This predatory back-and-forth conflict served little purpose, as the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* in the entry for the year 1096. The *Chronicle* reported a number of afflictions that “[A]lso in this year, the lead men who held this land regularly sent an army into

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33 *Brut Y Tywysogion*, ed. Ithel, 57, 59, 61, 63.
Wales, and greatly afflicted many a man with that; but there was no success in that, but the destruction of men and waste of money.”

When William Rufus died in 1100, his younger brother Henry became king. Henry invaded Wales three times, and in 1105, he brought the Flemish into Wales, allowing them to displace the Welsh near Rhos, establishing a pro-Norman base in that area. Obviously, Henry felt threatened by the inability of any of his predecessors to finally and completely conquer Wales, and so, as with his predecessors, he repeatedly pounded away at it militarily. Also, he used his power – which could be considerable – heavy-handedly wherever he was in Wales, as he did in Powys with Owain and Iorwerth ab Owain. Henry released Iorwerth from prison upon a number of conditions, one of which Iorwerth explained in a message rife with humiliation and sorrow to Owain:

> God has delivered us into the hands of our enemies, and brought us down so much, that we could accomplish nothing of what might be our wish; it is interdicted to all of us Britons, to hold any intercourse with you, in respect of victuals, or drink, or aid, or support; but we must search and hunt for you in every place, and ultimately deliver you into the hands of the king, to imprison you, or to kill you, or to execute you, or to do until you whatever he would wish...

Wales would be a continuing concern to Henry, as would Gruffudd ab Cynan, who over the years was able to reclaim a great deal of the land taken by the March lords and whose raiding parties burned castles when given the opportunity.

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34 Ibid., 93 and 95.

35 It is never a good idea to psychoanalyze when that isn’t one’s field, but Henry invites it. He was the youngest son of one of history’s most famous conquerors, his one brother was a crusader, the other a fairly respectable king. Henry had not been particularly promising as a young man. He must have had his doubts. Wales presented the contradiction of the challenge he should eagerly pursue, while knowing in his heart he could not succeed where others had failed.

36 *Brut Y Tywysogion*, ed. Ithel, 97 and 99.

Gruffudd did pay homage to Henry, as did several of the other Welsh princes, but until the end of the king’s life, he would be fortifying the Welsh frontier and the Welsh would be resisting.\textsuperscript{39}

His death in 1135 was followed by anarchy, as his nephew Stephen de Blois and his daughter Empress Matilda, wife of Geoffrey of Anjou, vied for the throne. Many of the Norman barons sided with Stephen, but not all. Some did side with Matilda, which may be explained by the fact that Matilda’s brother and chief military advisor Robert of Gloucester was himself a baron. Wales was not overtly involved in the civil strife, though at one time some ten thousand Welsh mercenaries were fighting on the side of the empress. \textsuperscript{40}

This fighting among the Norman factions provided ample opportunity for the Welsh to regain large amounts of territory in the Marches, and Gwynedd’s prince took advantage. Once again, Gwynedd was ruled by a strong, able leader, Owain Gwynedd, the son of Gruffudd ap Cynan. “I praise the generous one of the stock of Aneas;/I praise the bold lion, the flash of honour;/I praise the most splendid of Britain’s princes,/and the fine kingdom of golden Owain,”\textsuperscript{41} sang his percerdd Gwalchmai ap Meilyr.\textsuperscript{42}

\textsuperscript{38} The Welsh did not always destroy the castles they captured. Some they adapted for their own defensive uses. However, they were never able to fully defeat the Norman castle system. There were too many castles, and no Welsh leader had enough men to capture, leave men behind to defend the castle, and move on to defeat another.

\textsuperscript{39} Green, \textit{Henry I}, 231.

\textsuperscript{40} Wynford Vaughan-Thomas, \textit{Wales}, 89.

\textsuperscript{41} Williams, \textit{An Introduction to Welsh Poetry} (Philadelphia: Dufour Editions, 1952), 74.

\textsuperscript{42} Gwalchmai ap Meilyr was the court poet for Owain Gwynedd. Gwalchmai was the son of Meilyr Brydydd, court poet for Owain’s father Gruffudd ap Cynan, and the father of two other court bards of Gwynedd, Meilyr ap Gwalchmai and Einionap Gwalchmai. “A line of poets and warriors thus served, for a century, a line of rulers.” Clancy, \textit{Medieval Welsh Poems}, 371.
The situation changed with the crowning of Henry II, one of England’s greatest warrior kings and military strategists. Both Henry II’s brother-in-law Dafydd ap Gwynedd and Madog ap Maredudd of Powys swore allegiance to Henry in exchange for the king’s support against other Welsh princes, harking back to the Welsh princes and Alfred and, it can be assumed, creating the same impression on the English court – that the Welsh rulers, and so their subjects, were inferior and could be bought or conquered.

However these rulers were viewed by the Norman and Angevin kings, they were viewed as strong and effective leaders by their war bands and subjects. The court poets emphasized their fierceness in battle, as in this portrait of Madog ap Maredudd by Cynddelw Brydydd Mawr:

Swift-darting spear, perfect chieftain,  
Mighty Madawg, battlefield’s champion:  
My bard’s voice, under heaven, it is not flawed;  
My bard’s words for you, not shameful, not feeble.  
Keen for war, for fortress, for splendid field,  
Thick round a bold lion, silver-giver,…  
Swift wave’s roar on shore round seagull’s feet...

“In Praise of Madawg ap Maredudd”

The political complexities and the longevity of Henry’s reign naturally suggest a complicated history with the Welsh princes. Henry II’s invaded Wales three times, clashing with two of the strongest Welsh rulers of the twelfth century: Owain Gwynedd in the north – most disastrously at the Battle of Tal Moelfre -- and Rhys ap Gruffyd in

41 Davies, History of Wales, 121.
44 Clancy, Medieval Welsh Poems, 140.
45 Gwalchmai ap Meilyr’s “The Battle of Tal Moelfre” is a masterwork of evoking the horror and suffering of battle, as in this excerpt: “Host on bloodstained host, shudder on dreadful shudder,/And at Tal Moelfre a thousand war-cries/Shaft on flashing shaft, spears upon spear,/Thrust on wrathful thrust, drowning on drowning.” It is, also, a powerful song of praise of Owain: “I celebrate a noble of Rhodri’s
the south. Henry was hampered in his quest to subjugate Wales by his often antagonistic relationships with his sons – two of whom would become king of England – and his wife, his conflicts with the church, and by difficulties in France, and so could not provide the men and resources necessary to completely subdue the Welsh. In the end, Owain and Rhys came to terms with Henry, and Wales was in a relatively peaceful state for several years.

Relations with the Welsh and English had normalized so much so that Rhys called the first Eisteddfod in 1176, to which poets and musicians from Wales, Ireland, Scotland, and England were invited. It lasted forty days, with the competition for best poetry being awarded to the bards from Gwynedd and that for music to the southern Welsh bards. The importance of the arts and the bardic tradition in particular is demonstrated by the very fact of this event, that one of Wales’ greatest rulers in conflict with one of England’s greatest kings would so recognize and respect the role of the bards. The centrality of these artists in the Medieval Welsh culture never abated, and always

46 Also known as Lord Rhys, a ruler of exceptional tenacity, described by John Edward Lloyd as “the greatest of the princes of Deheubarth, whose long and persistent struggle against Anglo-Norman power was the chief means of keeping alive in southwest Wales the idea of Welsh nationality and independence.” John Edward Lloyd, A History of Wales from Earliest Times to the Edwardian Conquest, Vol. 2 (London: Longman, Green, and Company, 1911), 226.

47 Davies, History of Wales, 122.

48 This must have been especially difficult for Rhys, as his son Marefudd spent his life in a Cistercian monastery after being blinded and castrated by Henry II while a hostage in his care. Lloyd, A History of Wales, 241.

49 The Welsh King and His Court, Robin Chapman Stacey, “King, Queen, and Edling in the Laws of Court,” 39-40.

remained a necessity rather than a luxury for the Welsh. Nora Chadwick speaks of the bards “as honoured officials in the houses of the Welsh nobility,”\textsuperscript{51} recreating after the food for the body each night the food for the soul, reminding those at the feast of their ancient roots and how the great deeds of their lord was worthy of his ancient predecessors. Through the worst of times, the Welsh could turn to this connection with the past to bolster their resolve about the future.

And at the beginning of the twelfth century, Wynford Vaughan-Thomas posits, that future came into positive focus with a revival of Welsh self-awareness, one that saw the expansion of Welsh territory and power and with it a sense that “Wales was not to be eliminated from the political maps. Welsh principalities would survive…And with survival came a new sense of pride in the old Welsh cultural heritage.”\textsuperscript{52} The Poets of the Princes were part of this revival, bringing a new awareness of the power of the bards in recording and in creating communal memories. At the beginning of the thirteenth century, the bards were singing the glories of Llywelyn the Great and the Welsh people were looking forward with confidence. By the end of that century, Wales and its bards would be adapting to a world confined by the dictates of an English king. In understanding how this shift impacted on the Welsh people, it is important to remember that at the core of the bardic tradition there were no victories nor defeats, there was only the continuum of the Welsh cultural identity, made richer and stronger by the memories that had influenced the Welsh to move forward through devastations that might have broken them, but for the endurance nurtured by the poetic litanies of the bards.

\textsuperscript{51} Chadwick, \textit{The Celts}, 287.

\textsuperscript{52} Wynford Vaughan-Thomas, \textit{Wales}, 92.
By the year of the *Magna Carta*, 1215, those litanies were recording the accomplishments of Llywelyn ap Iorwerth. 53 As ruler of Gwynedd from 1195, through conquest and inheritance, and through marriage to Joan, 54 the illegitimate daughter of King John, Llywelyn had incrementally expanded his kingdom, until he was the acknowledged overlord of the Welsh princes. It was during this time Llywelyn inserted himself into international and Church politics, forming alliances with Pope Innocent and King Philip Augustus of France during their quarrels with King John. 55 At Aberdovey in 1216, at a council he called, Llywelyn and the assembled princes partitioned the districts of Wales, allowing Llywelyn to claim the right to confer land on other Welsh rulers. Following King John’s death in 1216 and the coronation of his nine-year-old son, Henry III, the English crown recognized Llywelyn as the de facto ruler of Wales and Llywelyn prevailed upon the other Welsh princes to homage to the king, as he did. 56

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53 Historically called Llywelyn the Great. Llywelyn never claimed the title ‘Prince of Wales’. Initially, he was the Prince of Gwynedd and later Prince of Aberffraw and Lord of Snowdon, this latter title calling on “the ancient greatness [that] signaled to the Welsh steeped in the history of bygone days.” Lloyd, *History of Wales*, 326.

54 Frequently, when the king balked at Llywelyn’s acquisition of more territory, Joan acted as intermediary, “to make peace between him and the king, in any manner she might be able.” *Brut Y Tywysogion*, ed. Ithel, 269. Joan was involved in her husband’s career throughout her life.

55 Llywelyn was the first Welsh ruler to have such extensive and influential participation in international politics. Also, his relationship with King John was unlike that of other Welsh rulers with previous monarchs. Davies, *A History of Wales*, 130-133. Llywelyn was involved in John’s management of his territories when Llywelyn became the king’s bailiff in southern Wales, enforcing the terms of the Treaty of Worcester among the March lords – though not for himself. This drew him into the political tangles between the king and powerful lords such as William Marshall and Hubert de Burgh, demonstrating to the March lords that their power could not expand as long as a united Wales recognized one overlord from among its own. “After Llywelyn’s death in 1240, Henry III was able to …redress the balance of power in Wales in favour of the marchers – and the crown.” R.F. Walker, “Hubert de Burgh and Wales, 1218-11232, *The English Historical Review* 87, no. 344 (Jul., 1972), 465-494, http://www.jstor.org/stable/564059; (accessed March 29, 2014).

56 Davies, *History of Wales*, 135. Llywelyn’s extremely skillful use of his power not only in unifying other Welsh rulers into a kind of national unit but also in manipulating the English king and the March lords in ways that benefited Llywelyn and Wales could not have been unknown to Henry III’s son Edward. And Edward being politically skillful himself would have seen the pattern – that powerful rulers appeared in Wales whenever there were ineffectual kings on the throne of England. Llywelyn’s Henry’s
Llywelyn spent much of his later years going to great lengths to ensure that his son David would inherit, and keep, his kingdom, thus maintaining stability in and for Wales. David did inherit but was not able to keep his father’s kingdom. His young death contributed to renewed chaos among the Welsh princes.

Llywelyn ab Iorwerth would be extolled by the bards for generations, but even more important would be the cultural connection made between the mournful pride of defeated rulers of the past and what was heard by the Welsh in the songs of their bards as the exultant pride inherent in the accomplishments of Llywelyn the Great for Wales, for all of Wales.

Llywarch ap Llywelyn’s “In Praise of Llywelyn ab Iorwerth” was an announcement that the Welsh could look to a future built on the successes of Rhodri and Hywel and Owain and Gruffudd and Llywelyn – an announcement that no other person could have made and have had the same impact. Not another prince, not a bishop, not a great warrior – only a bard could so perfectly encompass all the emotions that were felt by the Welsh as a people as they stepped forward towards their future and Edward I:

Sorry Christmas for those allied to England:
A Welsh lion held them,
Concord’s song, guardian shield,
Even-handed, bold in battle…

Arrogant are any not bound to my lord,
Man who prizes not misers.
God made not, heaven’s high king,
Nor will make, his life, his equal.

You wish war, Britain’s mainstay, gold-speared boon,
Nor easy for your foe;
For Welshmen, Godiar’s fellow,
England’s lair was a tamed land…

hapless reign shows that, though he had 26 years as king before Llywelyn’s death in 1240 to learn from a master of governance and power, he did not. It is likely Edward did.
Llywelyn’s assault, renowned helm of Britain,
Pledge to England he spurns,
Thousand bards’ patron, praise-annointed,
Ferocious, he makes for the field…

Since you have ruled, England uprooting, the Welsh,
Seizing thousands of spoils,
Dragon’s riches, thrusting prince,
Ellesmere, mighty lord, is shapeless.

No delusion, since Mold, wolf-pack fortress,
Rhun’s descendant’s triumph:
Towers burnt, each one gutted,
Mighty flame, Alun’s folk in flight.

“In Praise of Llywelyn ab Iorwerth,”
Llywarch ap Llywelyn⁵⁷

CHAPTER 5

“AND THEN ALL WALES WAS CAST TO THE GROUND”58
LLYWELYN, THE LAST PRINCE, AND 1282

In order to eschew many diseases and mischiefs which have happened before this time in the Land of Wales, it is ordained that no waster, rhymer, minstrel nor vagabond be in any wise sustained in the land of Wales to make gathering upon the people there.59

Though the Penal Laws against Wales were not passed until 1402, during the reign of English king Henry IV, a hundred and twenty years after the conquest of Wales, inherent in the spirit of the laws are the intent of Wales’ conqueror, Edward I, as can be seen in this tenet regarding every fashion of entertainer. Bards served in the homes of the Welsh barons and gentry at this time,60 and though “waster, rhymer, minstrel” and “vagabond” seemed to have applied solely to those lesser entertainers who sang their poems on the street and tended more to rabble-rousing, the straightforward criminalization of the tradition must have had a chilling effect on storytellers of all social levels.

The passage of the act came during the Welsh revolt led by Owain Glyndwr61 in 1400 and was obviously meant to be a deterrent to people gathering to hear the songs of


60 It is indicative of the value the Welsh placed upon the bards’ role in the culture that the barons and nobles took them into their courts after 1282 and the displacement of many of the Welsh princes. The barons could just as easily have dealt with the bards as they would have a useless artifact of a forgotten culture.

61 Glyndwr was a Welsh nobleman whose father-in-law had been a judge in Richard 11’s court and who himself had studied at the Inns of Court, as well being an heir of the dismantled kingdoms of
ancient heroes or present grievances, of which there were many. The Welsh were rebelling in desperation and anger over the ill treatment they received from their English overlords. Welsh laws had been made almost irrelevant and Welsh property rights were not respected, both situations stemming from the colonization of Wales begun by Edward I following his defeat of Llywelyn, the last native Prince of Wales. “Suffering under both outside domination and collapse of the whole socio-economic system,” writes Elissa Henken, “both the free and the unfree were overwhelmed by new and excessive financial burdens, political restrictions, and recurrent outbreaks of plague.” It was the outrage towards these physical and legal displacements that fired the Welsh to go to war again to rid themselves of the English.

The bards and the culture they preserved were still viable in Welsh society, with many barons and persons of wealth employing a bard to entertain and enliven feasts and special events. Bards were still speaking for the people, also, as in Gruffudd Llwyd’s poem in praise of Glyndwr, written before the open rebellion of 1400, but no less stirring in its invocation to Glyndwr to come forward:

Sad world, fragile existence,
Everywhere under the sun.
It’s full and no one’s joyful,
Abundance on the one side
Of goods for some, not needed…
The Welsh, so great their suppression,
Sorry nation, like drunken crows,
I could, I’d crave no favor,
Call them a cauldron of guts….


Owain, I know no greater prince…
He’ll not suffer wrong or lawbreaking:
He will shine bright amidst earls.

“Owain Glyndwr”
Gruffudd Llwyd

This was the situation a hundred and twenty years after the death of Llywelyn and the triumph of Edward. Edward I’s coronation in 1274 had been the beginning of an incremental diminishment of the power of the Welsh princes. A century that had promised such possibilities for the Welsh would end with the dismemberment of their country as they knew it.

In 1254 Edward was still Prince when Henry III, his father, gave his son the March earldom of Chester. Continuing the king’s campaign to diminish the growing power of Llywelyn, prince of Gwynedd, Edward compelled him to give up the Four Cantrefs. Edward then strengthened the holdings of several of the other March earldoms. The Brut Y Tywysogion described Edward’s first appearance and what followed:

…Edward, son of king Henry…came…to take a survey of his castles and lands in Gwynedd. And then as it were about August, and after he had returned to England, the nobles of Wales came to Llywelyn, …having been robbed of their liberty, and made captives, and complainingly declared to him that they would rather be killed in war for their liberty, than suffer themselves to be trodden down

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63 Clancy, Medieval Welsh Poems, 261-262.

64 In doing so, of course, Edward was taking actions that would benefit his present but might prove troublesome to his future. The March lords certainly could see that, and would have been happy to accept largesse from their king, as long as it was to their advantage. This is not to say it was a simple exchange of gift and loyalty, in that the earls were expected to pledge funds and men when needed by Edward.
by strangers in bondage.\textsuperscript{65}

Realizing the extent of the threat Edward posed for the Welsh, in 1269 when the prince left for the crusades, Llywelyn began to prepare for what he surmised would occur upon Edward’s return, namely, an invasion either by the crown or by the March lords ostensibly acting on behalf of the crown or both.\textsuperscript{66} Llywelyn’s estimate of his overlord proved accurate. Four years later, Edward returned from the crusades, and by 1277 he and Llwelyn ap Gruffudd were at war. There had been a number of difficulties between them, the most intransient of which was Llywelyn’s refusal to come to Edward’s court to pay him homage. It seems natural to assume that Llywelyn wanted to discuss several important issues, such as what he viewed as the heavy-handedness of the March lords in their economic and legal dealings with the Welsh,\textsuperscript{67} while Edward wanted acknowledgment of his superior position before dealing with any issues.

Llywelyn was being cautious, also, knowing that he had enemies at the court, including his brother Dafydd who had tried to assassinate him.\textsuperscript{68} Edward was a king and certainly must have felt his demand for a gesture of respect from Llywelyn – one for which the king had been waiting almost three years, one which Llywelyn had agreed to give – was not an untoward demand on his part. Llywelyn’s concerns about his safety demonstrated a lack of trust that was itself an affront, implying as it did either that

\textsuperscript{65} Brut Y Tywysogion, ed. Ithel, 341. This is an early indication of both Llywelyn’s standing among the princes, that they looked to him as their leader, and of Edward’s intentions in Wales.

\textsuperscript{66} Morris, Welsh Wars, 113-114, 118.

\textsuperscript{67} Edward’s mutual dependent relationship with the March lords and the Welsh lords meant he could not simply dictate his own political terms in the region. Marc Morris, A Great and Terrible King (London: Windmill Books, 2008), 138-141; Davies, History of Wales, 142.

\textsuperscript{68} Prestwich, Edward I, 175.
Edward was dishonest or that he did not have control over what happened in his own court. Added to this misunderstanding was a complicated matter involving payments. Edward was in debt, and needed money. Llewelyn owed the English crown money from the terms of the Treaty of Montgomery, but had stopped making payments because he felt the March Lords were violating the terms of the treaty. He wanted to settle that matter with Edward before making any additional payments. Edward would not discuss any issues until Llywelyn paid him homage, and so the king and the prince continued in a circular fashion.

In late 1276 and early 1277, Edward allowed the March lords to seize territory that had been promised to Llywelyn, as he continued to demand Llywelyn appear at court to pay homage. It seems as if the king were trying to force Llywelyn into starting a war. Finally, when Llywelyn did not cooperate, Edward initiated military action against the Welsh prince.

An act of war against a Welsh prince was one which, with previous rulers, had always led inexorably to the foreign army slogging through mountainous passes while the Welsh prepared to bed down for the winter and wait for the English to go home rather than endure the winter rains. With such an efficient and able military commander as Edward on the throne of England, Wales was blessed to have an equally able commander

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69 Ibid., 174.

70 For Edward, there was no humiliation inherent in paying homage to a king, though there was no pleasure in it, either. On that point, he and Llywelyn would have agreed. However, when political or economic issues were involved, then it became a necessity, as when Edward had paid homage to the king of France Philip III only a few years earlier. Morris, *A Great and Terrible King*, 108.

71 Davies, *History of Wales*, 151.

72 As with most English kings, Edward had his issues with the pope and with the French king. Perhaps he wanted to play the victim of aggression who had no choice but to defend himself.
as the grandson of Llywelyn the Great heading the Welsh forces. Given that much of eastern and southern Wales had already been conquered by the March Lords\textsuperscript{73} and knowing he did not have the resources for long-term warfare that Edward did,\textsuperscript{74} it would have made a great deal more sense for Llywelyn to pay homage to Edward before the situation came down to a futile waste of men and resources. Still, somewhat desperately, the Welsh counted on their geography to save them once again. The \textit{Brut} describes the disaster, as follows:

\begin{quote}
And the king, having his force with him, came to the Midland District, and fortified a court at Flint, surrounded with vast dyes. From thence he proceeded to Rhuddlan, and this he also fortified, by surrounding it with dykes; and there he tarried some time… That year, in the beginning of harvest, the king sent a great part of his army into Mona, which burned much of the country, and took away much of the corn.
\end{quote}

\textit{Brut Y Tywysogion}\textsuperscript{75}

When Llywelyn learned that the crops he had counted on to support his army through the winter had been destroyed, he was forced to come to terms, as the \textit{Brut} describes:

\begin{quote}
And on the calends of winter after that, Llywelyn came to the king at Rhuddlan, and made his peace with him; and then the
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{73} R. R. Davies, “Edward I and Wales,” 1.

\textsuperscript{74} Among the best of Edward’s resources were his captains, among whom were many tested warriors from among the March lords. Morris, \textit{A Great and Terrible King}, 145. The Welsh were lucky, also, in that Edward was facing difficulties from the Scots, the French, and his own barons. If the king had been able to bring his northern army, mercenaries, and his continental levies, the war would have been a very short affair.

\textsuperscript{75} \textit{Brut Y Tywysogion}, ed. Ithel, 369.
king invited him to come to London, at Christmas, and he went there, and there he made his homage to the king.

*Brut Y Tywysogion* 76

The terms were humiliatingly severe: an indemnity of 50,000 pounds, relinquishment of all claims to the Four Cantrefs, and a limit on the number of princes who could pay homage to him. Llywelyn was, however, allowed to retain the title of Prince of Wales. 77 Perhaps most humiliating -- and disquieting -- was the oath twenty men from Gwynedd had to swear annually that they would “withdraw from the prince’s fealty, homage, lordship, and service” if Llewelyn did not fully observe the terms of his agreement with Edward. This brought the English crown into the government of a Welsh principality on the local level, thereby presenting the possibility of undermining that authority, which was a extremely troubling prospect. 78 The English had become more and more provocative in their treatment of their Welsh neighbors and tenants, particularly in the ways in which they ignored Welsh laws. 79 The mistreatment of the Welsh in English courts led to increased resentment, especially in the case of land disputes, some of which lasted in the courts for years. 80 These disputes quickly became part of the Welsh cultural

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76 Ibid.


79 The laws received either too much or too little attention and respect. In some cases, English or March Lord magistrates dismissed any reference to Welsh law as inconsequential, but Edward had made it very clear to Llywelyn that commissioners might be sent into Gwynedd to review decisions made in the prince’s courts, indicating it was thought the laws were too consequential to be left to the Welsh. This even though Llywelyn was very straightforward in his opinion of Edward’s interference, writing to the king,”The rights of our principality are entirely separate from the rights of our kingdom, although we hold our principality under your royal power.” In this, Llywelyn was going right to the core of the power struggle between Wales and England. R. R. Davies, *Domination and Conquest*, 105, 107.

resistance to the English, as they saw the disparity in property disputes as an attack on Welsh property rights and their own legal heritage.

Michael Prestwich in his biography of Edward states that in the case of land disputes “the similarity of the arguments put forward by the Welsh shows that there was a deliberate policy of making use of the law as a symbol of national identity” and that “the claim that the English were threatening the national identity of the Welsh provided a unifying theme to the various grievances and elevated the argument to a high plane.”

This theme would resonate in the war that was about to begin, and after, when Edward formerly supplanted Welsh with English law in Wales.

Though it is highly probably that Llywelyn had a court bard, we cannot be certain of it, nor of what that bard could have sung that would have placated Llywelyn’s wounded pride and regret. There are thirty-one Poets of the Princes whose poems have survived to the present day. It is not known in all cases, however, which bard wrote for which prince, so we cannot know if one of those thirty-one served Llywelyn. There are no panegyrics associated with the prince, only a eulogy that Gwyn Williams considers “one of the most splendid utterances in Western European literature.” It seems fitting that it would be this poem that has survived.

From the mid-thirteenth century on, many of the poems of the bards took on a darker tone. Lamentations, reconciliations, poems on death beds dominated the canon.

81 Michael Prestwich, Edward I, 188.
82 Williams, Poets of the Princes, 74-80.
83 Gwyn Williams, Introduction to Welsh Poetry, 93.
84 Meilyr Brydydd, the first of a family of bards who served Gwynedd over several generations, in “Poem on His Death-Bed” wrote, “King of all glory who knows me, do not refuse me/For mercy’s sake,
or at least what is known of it. It is, of course, possible that panegyrics were written but not preserved. In times of war, the bard traveled with his prince and army – and several fought for their prince -- reciting patriotic poems and elegies to the soldiers before the battle. Particularly after 1277, the bards would have had a clearly defined role, that of engendering loyalty to the prince and resentment towards the king and the March lords. This last would not have been hard, as the

In 1282, Llywelyn’s brother Dafydd, with no known previous discussion among the Welsh leadership – and, according to Llywelyn, without his prior knowledge – led a successful attack against Hawarden Castle on Palm Sunday. In the convoluted way of Medieval alliances, Dafydd had sided with Edward against Llywelyn in 1277 and, though given two of the Cantrefs as payment for his loyalty, apparently felt he had not been treated fairly by the king and now sought an alliance with his brother against Edward.

Llywelyn was sixty years old, with a young wife and a baby due. As an experienced soldier, he knew that, even if a coalition could be put together of the

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85 Gwalchmai ap Meilyr fought for Gwynedd, and later wrote about it: “Gleaming my sword, lightning its fashion in conflict,/Glittering the gold on my warshield….” Ibid., 124.

86 John Morris makes the interesting point that perhaps the transgressions of the king and his March lords were exaggerated. “When we see in the course of the war [1282] how steadily the Welsh of the march still fought on the English side…we suspect that Edward’s rule was after all not very heavy or unpopular.” It is likely English bards were presenting this point of view in their courts. Morris, The Welsh Wars of Edward I, 151.

87 Ibid., 182. Obviously, Dafydd realized he would draw far fewer allies to a war than his brother could. His attack seemed well-thought-out, so it is likely his plan was to attack without telling his brother, put his brother in an impossible situation, and hope Llewelyn would choose in Dafydd’s favor.
majority of the Welsh princes, they would still fall short in resources and men in a war with Edward. His brother was asking him to choose his people over his common sense – and over his family. If he were to die in battle, their lives would be in danger. Llywelyn did not agree to join the coalition until late June. His wife had died in childbirth. He had an infant daughter, whom he knew would be taken care of should he not return.

The Welsh bards were sometimes accused of being effusive in their praise solely for money or to provoke enthusiasm as the men charged towards the battle. Gruffudd ab Yr Ynad Coch was not exaggerating when he wrote of Llywelyn, “Strong lion of Gwynedd/Throned with honour!”

In November, as the war was not going well for the Welsh, Llywelyn entered into a series of negotiations with the Archbishop of Canterbury, John Pecham. It is unlikely that anything would have induced Edward to make peace before Wales was completely under English rule, but the negotiations afforded Llywelyn an opportunity to perhaps sense the best that could be worked out for a possible peace.

Reading two pieces of correspondence between Pecham and Llywelyn offers a chance to hear the eloquence of one of Wales’ last great rulers. When asked to delineate his reasons for fighting, Llywelyn replied:

We fight because we are forced to fight, for we, and all Wales, are oppressed, subjugated, despoiled, reduced to servitude by the royal officers and bailiffs, in defiance of the forms of the peace and of all justice, more maliciously than if we were Saracens or Jews, so that we feel, and have often so protested to the King, that we are left without remedy.

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89 Ibid., 178.


91 Lambeth Palace Archives Register of John Pecham, November 1282; 2008-02-10-1025-04.
Soon after, the archbishop suggested to Llywelyn that the king could be persuaded to grant Llywelyn an estate in England worth a thousand pounds, if he would agree to live there the rest of his life and leave his people to a just peace, as Pecham saw it.\footnote{John Davies posits that Pecham may have been prompted by the Pope, since there was a great deal of sympathy for Llywelyn in Rome. Whether this offer was known to Edward is unknown, as is whether the king would have trusted Llywelyn to keep his word and give over to a peaceful retirement in England. Davies, \textit{History of Wales}, 154-155.}

Insulted, Llywelyn responded:

Holy Father, as you have counseled, we are ready to come to the King’s grace, if it is offered in a form safe and honourable for us. But the form contained in the articles which were sent to us is in no particular either safe or honourable, in the judgement of our council and ourselves, indeed, so far from it that all who hear it are astonished, since it tends rather to the destruction and ruin of our people and our person than to our honour and safety. There is no way which our council could be brought to permit us to agree to it, even should we so wish, for never would our nobles and subjects consent in the inevitable destruction and dissipation that would surely derive from it…It would surely be more honourable, and more consonant with reason, if we should hold for the King those lands in which we have right, rather than to disinherit us, and hand over our lands and our people to strangers.\footnote{Ibid., 154-155.}

By December Llywelyn was dead, and the eloquent voice of a people was abruptly silenced.\footnote{It is generally agreed that Llywelyn was separated from his men during the fighting, killed in battle, and not recognized until later when the bodies were being examined. Morris, \textit{A Great and Terrible King}, 186.} The commander of Edward’s forces sent the king a message:

“Llywelyn ap Gruffydd is dead, his army defeated, and all the flower of his army dead.”\footnote{Prestwich, \textit{Edward I}, 193.}

His head was cut from his body and eventually placed on a pole attached to the Tower of
London for many years after. Tradition says a crown of ivy was placed on the head as a mocking gesture towards the Welsh prophecy that a Welshman would be crowned in London as king of the Britons. For a time, there was difficulty over whether the body could be buried in consecrated ground, since the Archbishop had excommunicated all the Welsh insurgents. Only when the Archbishop was convinced Llywelyn had called for a priest as he lay dying was burial in a churchyard allowed.

Gruffudd ab yr Ynad Coch’s eulogy reflected the complete desolation of the Welsh after the death of the native-born Prince of Wales:

Cold heart under a breast of fear – grieved
For a king, oak door of Aberffraw,
Whose hand dealt gold new-minted,
Whom the gold diadem befitted…

Mine now to rage against Saxons who’ve wronged me,
Mine for this death bitterly to mourn.
Mine with good cause to cry protest to God
Who has left me without him.
Mine now his praise, without stint or silence,
Mine henceforth, long to consider him.
Grief, for as long as I live, I shall have for him;
As I am full with it, so I must weep.

I’ve lost a lord, long terror is on me,…
How high I mourn, alack such mourning!...
Brave lord like a lion, directing the world…

There indeed was a man, till a foreign hand killed him,
All the privilege of his ancestry in him:
Candle of kingship, strong lion of Gwynedd,
Throned, there was need of him, with honour!...

The heart’s gone cold, under a breast of fear;
Lust shrivels like dried brushwood.
See you not the way of the wind and the rain?
See you not oak trees buffet together?
See you not the sea stinging the land?
See you not truth in travail?
See you not the sun hurtling through the sky,
And that the stars are fallen?
Do you not believe God, demented mortals?
Do you not see the whole world’s danger?

Why does the sea not cover the land?
Why are we left to linger?...

“Lament for Llywelyn ap Gruffudd”
Gruffudd ab yr Ynad Coch

As can be heard in this apocalyptic grieving, Llywelyn’s death was a cataclysmic loss for the Welsh. Though the bards knew Wales had suffered the loss of great leaders before, they probably sensed that this was a loss that would mean more than a period of chaos as the Welsh awaited a new Rhodri or Llywelyn to step forward. It cannot be known if they recognized the threat to themselves and to their culture, but it can be said that they now began to prepare for what they would need to do in the coming months and years to hold that culture together.

Edward began the colonization of Wales soon after. The castle-building he had initiated after 1277 now increased. The March lords who had served him in the war would be rewarded with additional land, echoing the displacement of the English nobility by Normans in 1066, and land grants in the coming years would bring thousands of

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96 J. E. Caerwyn Williams, The Poets of the Welsh Princes, 36-39. Peredur Lynch points out that between the initial years of Llywelyn’s successes and his death in 1282, there is a paucity of panegyrics for this great lord and that it is almost solely in death, e.g., Gruffudd ab yr Ynad Coch’s eulogy, that Llywelyn’s greatness is acknowledged. Given that poems in praise of other great rulers of Wales have not survived, this would not seem to be such an aberration, but Lynch posits another reason. “The financial implications of the Treaty of Montgomery proved to be a crippling burden and, as his reign wore on, Llywelyn…found it harder to satisfy and reward his more ambitious subjects.” Lynch notes the records show during the years 1276-77, the years in which Llywelyn was preparing for and in the initial war with Edward, Gruffudd ab yr Ynad Coch “received the princely sum of 20 pounds…for unknown services.” Charles-Edwards, The Welsh King and His Court, Peredur Lynch, “Court Poetry, Power and Politics,” 167-190. Though other bards may have deserted Llywelyn when he could not pay them, it is encouraging that Gruffudd did not and that from his loyalty we have one of the most renowned poems of the Medieval bardic tradition.
Englishmen intent on settling in newly created counties.  

New administrative systems and legal apparatus had to be developed. The long process of domination and assimilation had to be initiated, and with it the attempted domination of the Welsh culture.  

Edward realized the most effective means of finalizing his conquest was by undermining the efficacy of that culture, for Welsh cultural identity was the bond shared by all Welsh.

This process began soon after the final defeat of the Welsh in 1282, when Edward demanded and received treasured relics from the Welsh, among these the prince’s coronet and the crown of King Arthur. Wales’ most famous relic, a fragment of the true cross, was paraded through the streets of London in a triumphant procession to Westminster Abbey.

Yet, even as he was appropriating these treasured cultural artifacts from the Welsh in an effort to subsume that culture into his own, Edward had already embraced a portion of the culture on its own terms, that is, the legend of King Arthur, whom he thought had originated with the ancient Britons, or Welsh. In 1278, not long after his first defeat of Llywelyn, Edward and his court traveled to Glastonbury to what was purported to be the tombs of Arthur and Guinevere. Popularized by the twelfth-century writer Geoffrey of Monmouth in his History of the Kings of England, the story of the brave and wise King Arthur quickly grew to include continental themes courtly love and larger-

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97 Davies, History of Wales, 162-163.

98 Morris, A Great and Terrible King, 157-161.

99 R. R. Davies, Domination and Conquest, 102.
than-life heroics and quests, with a Round Table of noble knights in a place called Camelot. Just as the Poets of the Princes in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries had sought to shore up the values of the nobility by drawing parallels between them and the ancient heroes of Wales, so did Edward seek to use the cultural icon of Arthur to draw parallels for the Welsh between himself and their wise and able king. Edward believed in Arthur, as evidenced by his having multiple copies of the Arthurian romances and his taking part in the tournaments. Political theater would have stopped at Glastonbury, but passion for the mythology of a Brythonic king continued throughout Edward’s life.

Edward, it seems, knew very well the power of imagery, of legends, and of strong cultural bonds, though he would not have viewed his superstitions and boyish adoration of the Knights of the Roundtable in such a light. His biographer Michael Pestwich writes that Edward was a man of childlike faith. When a stone fell from a vaulted ceiling and landed where the king had been sitting, he attributed it to the intercession of the Virgin.

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100 Roger Sherman Loomis seminal discussion of Edward’s fascination with Arthur presented stories about Edward’s staging and taking part in staged tournaments, about he and his wife having multiple copies of the Arthur stories, and about their trip to Glastonbury. In 1278, not long after Edward’s first triumph over Llywelyn, Edward and his court traveled to the abbey purported to have a tomb containing the remains of Arthur and Guinevere. At twilight, the bones were removed from the tombs and Edward and his wife wrapped them in silk. Several Round Table feasts were described by Loomis, including one in which the feasting was interrupted by bloodied squires coming into the hall to describe the cowardly deeds of the Welsh. Loomis came to the conclusion that Edward was strongly influenced by literary tradition and “evidently liked to think of himself in the role of Arthur...” Roger Sherman Loomis, “Edward I, Arthurian Enthusiast,” 114-127. Another viewpoint is put forward by Marc Morris in his 2008 biography of Edward, A Great and Terrible King. Morris lists many of the same events as Loomis listed, and goes into detail about the Glastonbury visit, but Morris sees it as political theatre, “directed squarely at the Welsh,” for whom the Arthurian legend held out the hope that Arthur had not died, that he was asleep in a cave and would one day awaken and come back to save his people. By very openly displaying the bones, says Morris, Edward had made it absolutely clear that Arthur was dead and buried and not coming back to save anyone. Both interpretations of Edward’s actions, though one paints him as somewhat naive and the other as very clever about the use of propaganda, confirm the same fact – that Edward had a healthy respect for and, at the same time, fear of the Welsh culture, recognizing it as the most important factor in the communal identity of the Welsh and, therefore, the most imperative to destroy. Morris, A Great and Terrible King, 162-166.

Mary. He refused on several occasions to enter the gates of Oxford because of an old superstition about the penalties to royalty. He provided lavish gifts to the shrine of St. Thomas Beckett so as to allay retribution by the saint against the crown, and he had a wax image made of one of his falcons who was ill and presented it to the Beckett shrine hoping for a cure. Another cure the king used was bending pennies over the heads of his sick birds. Edward was a man of his time, and so would have had his share of beliefs in the unexplainable.

However, this is not what made him unique among English monarchs in their dealings with the Welsh. Edward was an intelligent and intentional king who deliberately and ruthlessly achieved his goals. His actions in Wales were driven by his almost instinctive insights into the nature of the Welsh culture. What had baffled and frustrated his predecessors – no central system of government, rules of inheritance that fractured kingdoms and meant having to frequently establish new relationships with leaders, the connections with heritage that were so strongly rooted there sometimes seemed only a thin veil between past and present – served to inform Edward’s understanding of Welsh cultural identity and the centrality to that identity of the bardic tradition.

The colonization of Wales – with the building of castles and surrounding towns, the measured infringement on the basics of Welsh law, including eventually the rights of Welsh officials to enforce the law in their own jurisdictions, the displacements of families and even communities to make way for English settlers – all were part of Edward’s attempt to sublimate the Welsh culture. Most damaging, however, was his theft of the cultural icons and his attempt to make the bards ineffectual by destroying the aristocracy.

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that had provided the context within which they functioned, the stature and access that had framed their influence.

Edward fully fathomed the almost visceral connection between the bards and the Welsh people, deeply rooted in the culture they shared, the ancient stories and the recurring anguish when dreams were shattered. Instead of a central government, the Welsh had a central system of disseminating, nurturing, and preserving its culture. That system consisted of men who spent some nine years learning thousands of lines of poetry in an archaic language, its rhythms and meters, followed by a lifetime of singing men to their deaths as often as singing them to great victories and always being there to see the butchery of war while having to find the uplifting words to inspire men to follow their lord into war. Theirs was a warrior society, and their sensitivities, though less sharp than those of poets today could not long survive. They were warrior poets, a seemingly contradictory expression that perfectly explains why, some three hundred years after Edward very intelligently recognized the best way to finalize his conquest was by undermining the efficacy of that culture, he had failed.

This does not mean Edward had not succeeded in temporarily eliminating the bards as active voices of political rebellion and triumph. Certainly, in the decades immediately following the conquest, the bards served in households whose purpose it was to adapt to and establish the new status quo. There were no songs of clashing swords and blood lust as the barons headed out in the morning on their way to court or trade fairs. The bards could resist in spirit, but Edward’s conquest meant that resistance in other forms was doomed to failure, for the Welsh were never again free.
Still, the very existence of the Poets of the Gentry, such as the sixteenth-century bard Tudour Aled, whose “Plea for Peace” called for an end to Wales’ divisions, bespoke a determination to move forward in their new world, but in their unique and Welsh way:

Men hate one another like this
Today, because of positions:
Before, ousting men was hateful;
Today, woe for men who make peace.
I can find here no friendship,
Nor a man to plead for good;
Trusted, truly, is no one
Except the who’s two-faced;
The wicked today’s in the right,
To the good none will listen….

“Plea for Peace,”
Tudour Aled\textsuperscript{103}

Though many of the poems in the sixteenth-century were related to love or religion, there were still those who would write to further a cause or chastise a ruler in a culture that, even though it had become somewhat assimilated to the English way, could still appreciate the bardic tradition that ensured its survival.

\textsuperscript{103} Clancy, Medieval Welsh Poems, 29.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

...HE HAD A CLAIM BY RIGHTFUL INHERITANCE OF THE KINGSHIP OF THE WHOLE ISLAND...“1

Edward, by the grace of God, king of England, lord of Ireland and duke of Aquitaine, to all his subjects of his land of Snowden, greeting in the Lord. The Divine Providence, which is unerring in its own government, among other gifts of its dispensation, wherewith it hath vouchsafed to distinguish us and our realm of England, hath now of its favour, wholly and entirely transferred under our proper dominion, the land of Wales, with its inhabitants, heretofore subject unto us, in feudal right; all obstacles whatsoever ceasing…2

This beginning to the preamble of the Statute of Wales, issued by King Edward at Rhuddlan in March 1284, explained to the Welsh what they could expect from the new king given them by Divine Providence. Castle-building was a major element of the new Wales, and there would be a number of ordinances issued in a few years that would tighten the grip even more, such as prohibitions against the Welsh gathering together without royal permission or holding land in the new towns Edward continued to build. The lives of the Welsh were very restricted after 1282.

The Poets of the Princes now became the Poets of the Barons or Gentry, as the princes lost their lands and their courts.3 This simple title change denoted a monumental shift in purpose and process. The poetry written from this period and well into the sixteenth century was written in praise of generosity and wisdom, rather than battle prowess. The bards themselves could come from the tradesmen class, which was a


3 This is speaking in generalities. Not all princes lost their land, but the aristocracy in general terms no longer existed as an influential entity in Wales.
growing faction not only of Wales but of all Europe, and did not have to be experienced in the savage imagery of battle, neither from observation nor participation, but could write with appreciation of the summer’s breeze or a lovely maiden. Instead of nature and love poems being unusual, they became the norm. The bards were no longer writing of the glorious deeds of great lords, nor were they assisting those lords in important administrative missions. Just as the Welsh people were trying to adapt to the new world Edward was thrusting upon them, so were their poets. Gwyn Williams points out the following:

…following 1282, no one system of law was generally applied throughout Wales for over two centuries, and the country fell into a state of confusion and disorder. It is not surprising that there are corresponding signs of confusion in the categories of poetry. The greatest poets are sometimes forced to a wandering way of life. The distinction between chief poet and house poet fades,…the bards try to keep up the old order, and the matter of poetry…comes closer to the wandering poets of France.4

It may well be that the imagery in Henry IV’s penal laws of minstrels wandering the streets inciting political dissent could have been the eventual fate of the bards, but from the chaos of the the fourteenth-century came poets such as Dafydd ap Gwilym, who continued the bardic tradition with eloquence and proficiency5 and found a place from which to continue in the ancient traditions. Williams avers that the original laws from Hywel Dda regarding the treatment of and responsibilities of the bards continued to be valid until the seventh century.6

4 Williams, Introduction to Welsh Poetry, 13.

5 Williams notes that from the fourteenth century on “we occasionally find women who master the rules of versification.” Williams, Introduction to Welsh Poetry, 12.

6 Ibid., 11.
The most important consideration is whether the bards survived the major and minor changes that came about following the death of the last native Prince of Wales, and they did. “There was a great battle” sang Taliesin\(^7\) and it was one that should be considered a tie. Edward successfully dismantled the mechanism by which Wales had so long fended off the encroachments of its Eastern neighbors. Yet he was never truly able to make Wales an English province, let alone a part of the English cultural identity. The poetry of the *Cynfeirdd* and the *Gogynfeirdd* and the Poets of the Princes and the Poets of the Gentry have found resonance in present day Welsh culture, where eisteddods are held every year. The culture which these poems reflected and preserved has survived, did survive throughout the reign of Edward I and, at its core, the Welsh culture down to the present day. Any society that acknowledges poetry as its soul and honors those who gift that society with reflections of itself for generations yet unborn may be transformed but will not disappear. Like Cynan and Cadwaladr, ancient heroes of Welsh memory, the bards and their poetry will always emerge from the dark of the cave to shine a victorious light on the culture they have nurtured and preserved throughout the ages.

\(^7\) Clancy, *Medieval Welsh Poems*, 42.


