

Wild Wales by George Borrow, 1862

only say: Lord have mercy upon you! Then getting up I flung the children some money and departed.

'We do not want your money, sir,' screamed the woman after me; 'we have plenty of money. Give us God! Give us God!'

'Yes, your haner,' said the man, 'Give us God! we do not want money'; and the uncouth girl said something which sounded much like Give us God! but I hastened across the meadow, which was now quite dusky, and was presently in the inn with my wife and daughter.

CHAPTER V

WELSH BOOK-STALL—WIT AND POETRY—WELSH OF CHESTER—BEAUTIFUL MORNING—NOBLE FELLOW—THE COLLING SERPENT—WREXHAM CHURCH—WELSH OR ENGLISH?—CODIAD YR EHDYDD

On the afternoon of Monday I sent my family off by the train to Llangollen, which place we had determined to make our head-quarters during our stay in Wales. I intended to follow them next day, not in train, but on foot, as by walking I should be better able to see the country, between Chester and Llangollen, than by making the journey by the flying vehicle. As I returned to the inn from the train I took refuge from a shower in one of the rows or covered streets, to which, as I have already said, one ascends by flights of steps; stopping at a book-stall I took up a book which chanced to be a Welsh one—the proprietor, a short red-faced man, observing me reading the book, asked me if I could understand it. I told him that I could.

'If so,' said he, 'let me hear you translate the two lines on the title-page.'

'Are you a Welshman?' said I.

'I am!' he replied.

'Good!' said I, and I translated into English the two lines which were a couplet by Edmund Price, an old archdeacon of Merion, celebrated in his day for wit and poetry.

The man then asked me from what part of Wales I

came, and when I told him that I was an Englishman was evidently offended, either because he did not believe me, or, as I more incline to think, did not approve of an Englishman's understanding Welsh.

The book was the life of the Rev. Richards, and was published at Caer-lleon, or the city of the legion, the appropriate ancient British name for the place now called Chester, a legion having been kept stationed there during the occupation of Britain by the Romans.

I returned to the inn and dined, and then yearning for society, descended into the kitchen and had some conversation with the Welsh maid. She told me that there were a great many Welsh in Chester from all parts of Wales, but chiefly from Denbighshire and Flintshire, which latter was her own county. That a great many children were born in Chester of Welsh parents, and brought up in the fear of God and love of the Welsh tongue. That there were some who had never been in Wales, who spoke as good Welsh as herself, or better. That the Welsh of Chester were of various religious persuasions; that some were Baptists, some Independents, but that the greater part were Calvinistic-Methodists; that she herself was a Calvinistic-Methodist; that the different persuasions had their different chapels, in which God was prayed to in Welsh; that there were very few Welsh in Chester who belonged to the Church of England, and that the Welsh in general do not like Church of England worship, as I should soon find if I went into Wales.

Late in the evening I directed my steps across the bridge to the green, where I had discoursed with the Irish itinerants. I wished to have some more conversation with them respecting their way of life, and, likewise, as they had so strangely desired it, to give them a little Christian comfort, for my conscience reproached me for my abrupt departure on the preceding evening. On arriving at the green, however, I found them gone, and no traces of them but the mark of their fire and a little dirty straw. I returned, disappointed and vexed, to my inn.

Early the next morning I departed from Chester for

Llangollen, distant about twenty miles; I passed over the noble bridge and proceeded along a broad and excellent road, leading in a direction almost due south through pleasant meadows. I felt very happy—and no wonder; the morning was beautiful, the birds sang merrily, and a sweet smell proceeded from the new-cut hay in the fields, and I was bound for Wales. I passed over the river Allan and through two villages called, as I was told, Pulford and Marford, and ascended a hill; from the top of this hill the view is very fine. To the east are the high lands of Cheshire, to the west the bold hills of Wales, and below, on all sides a fair variety of wood and water, green meads and arable fields.

'You may well look around, Measter,' said a waggoner, who, coming from the direction in which I was bound, stopped to breathe his team on the top of the hill; 'you may well look around—there isn't such a place to see the country from, far and near, as where we stand. Many come to this place to look about them.'

I looked at the man, and thought I had never seen a more powerful-looking fellow; he was about six feet two inches high, immensely broad in the shoulders, and could hardly have weighed less than sixteen stone. I gave him the seal of the morning, and asked whether he was Welsh or English.

'English, Measter, English; born t'other side of Beeston, pure Cheshire, Measter.'

'I suppose,' said I, 'there are few Welshmen such big fellows as yourself.'

'No, Measter,' said the fellow, with a grin, 'there are few Welshmen so big as I, or yourself either, they are small men mostly, Measter, them Welshers, very small men—and yet the fellows can use their hands. I am a bit of a fighter, Measter, at least I was before my wife made me join the Methodist connection, and I once fit with a Welshman at Wrexham, he came from the hills, and was a real Welshman, and shorter than myself by a whole head and shoulder, but he stood up against me, and gave me more than play for my money, till I gripped him, flung him down and myself upon him, and then of course 'twas all over with him.'

THE COLLING SERPENT

'You are a noble fellow,' said I, 'and a credit to Cheshire. Will you have sixpence to drink?'

'Thank you, Measter, I shall stop at Pulford, and shall be glad to drink your health in a jug of ale.'

I gave him sixpence, and descended the hill on one side, while he, with his team, descended it on the other.

'A genuine Saxon,' said I; 'I dare say just like many of those who, under Hengist, subdued the plains of Loegr and Britain. Talesin called the Saxon race the Colling Serpent. He had better have called it the Big Bull. He was a noble poet, however; what wonderful lines, upon the whole, are those in his prophecy, in which he speaks of the Saxons and Britons, and of the result of their struggle—

'A serpent which coils,
And with fury boils,
From Germany coming with arm'd wings spread,
Shall subdue and shall enthrall
The broad Britain all,
From the Lochlin ocean to Severn's bed.

'And British men
Shall be captives then
To strangers from Saxonia's strand;
They shall praise their God, and hold
Their language as of old,
But except wild Wales they shall lose their land.'

I arrived at Wrexham, and having taken a very hearty breakfast at the principal inn, for I felt rather hungry after a morning's walk of ten miles, I walked about the town. The town is reckoned a Welsh town, but its appearance is not Welsh—its inhabitants have neither the look nor language of Welshmen, and its name shows that it was founded by some Saxon adventurer, Wrexham being a Saxon compound, signifying the home or habitation of Rex or Rag, and identical, or nearly so, with the Wroxham of East Anglia. It is a stirring, bustling place, of much traffic, and of several thousand inhabitants. Its most remarkable object is its church, which stands at the south-western side. To this church, after wandering for some time about the streets, I repaired. The tower is quadrangular, and is at least one hundred feet high; it has on its summit four little turrets, one at each corner, between each of which are three spirelets, the middle-most of the three the highest. The nave of the church

is to the east; it is of two stories, both crenelated at the top. I wished to see the interior of the church, but found the gate locked. Observing a group of idlers close at hand with their backs against a wall, I went up to them and addressing myself to one, inquired whether I could see the church. 'Oh yes, sir,' said the man; 'the clerk who has the key lives close at hand; one of us shall go and fetch him; by the bye, I may as well go myself.' He moved slowly away. He was a large bulky man of about the middle age, and his companions were about the same age and size as himself. I asked them if they were Welsh. 'Yes, sir,' said one, 'I suppose we are, for they call us Welsh.' I asked if any of them could speak Welsh. 'No, sir,' said the man, 'all the Welsh that any of us know, or indeed wish to know, is Cwryw da.' Here there was a general laugh. Cwryw da signifies good ale. I at first thought that the words might be intended as a hint for a treat, but was soon convinced of the contrary. There was no greedy expectation in his eyes, nor, indeed, in those of his companions, though they all looked as if they were fond of good ale. I inquired whether much Welsh was spoken in the town, and was told very little. When the man returned with the clerk I thanked him. He told me I was welcome, and then went and leaned with his back against the wall. He and his mates were probably a set of boon companions enjoying the air after a night's bout at drinking. I was subsequently told that all the people of Wrexham are fond of good ale. The clerk unlocked the church door, and conducted me in. The interior was modern, but in no respects remarkable. The clerk informed me that there was a Welsh service every Sunday afternoon in the church, but that few people attended and those few were almost entirely from the country. He said that neither he nor the clergyman were natives of Wrexham. He showed me the Welsh Church Bible, and at my request read a few verses from the sacred volume. He seemed a highly-intelligent man. I gave him something, which appeared to be more than he expected, and departed, after inquiring of him the road to Llangollen.

I crossed a bridge, for there is a bridge and a stream

too at Wrexham. The road at first bore due west, but speedily took a southerly direction. I moved rapidly over an undulating country; a region of hills or rather of mountains lay on my right hand. At the entrance of a small village a poor sickly-looking woman asked me for charity.

'Are you Welsh or English?' said I.

'Welsh,' she replied; 'but I speak both languages, as do all the people here.'

I gave her a halfpenny; she wished me luck, and I proceeded. I passed some huge black buildings which a man told me were collieries, and several carts laden with coal, and soon came to Rhiwabon—a large village about half-way between Wrexham and Llangollen. I observed in this place nothing remarkable, but an ancient church. My way from hence lay nearly west. I ascended a hill, from the top of which I looked down into a smoky valley. I descended, passing by a great many collieries, in which I observed grimy men working amidst smoke and flame. At the bottom of the hill near a bridge I turned round. A ridge to the east particularly struck my attention; it was covered with dusky edifices, from which proceeded thundering sounds, and puffs of smoke. A woman passed me going towards Rhiwabon; I pointed to the ridge and asked its name; I spoke English. The woman shook her head and replied 'Dim Saesneg.'

'This is as it should be,' said I to myself; 'I now feel I am in Wales.' I repeated the question in Welsh, 'Cefn Bach,' she replied—which signifies the little ridge, 'Diolch iti,' I replied, and proceeded on my way.

I was now in a wide valley—enormous hills were on my right. The road was good, and above it, in the side of a steep bank, was a causeway intended for foot passengers. It was overhung with hazel bushes. I walked along it to its termination which was at Llangollen. I found my wife and daughter at the principal inn. They had already taken a house. We dined together at the inn; during the dinner we had music, for a Welsh harper stationed in the passage played upon his instrument 'Codiad yr ehedydd.' 'Of a surety,' said I, 'I am in Wales!'

hill. There were nearly twenty of them, men and women, and amongst the rest was a man standing naked in a tub of water with two women stroking him down with clouts. He was a large fierce-looking fellow, and his body, on which the flame of the fire glittered, and nearly covered with red hair. I never saw such a sight. As I passed they glared at me and talked violently in their Paddy Gwyddel, but did not offer to molest me. I hastened down the hill, and right glad I was when I found myself safe and sound at my house in Llangollen, with my money in my pocket, for I had several shillings there, which the man across the hill had paid me for the work which I had done.'

CHAPTER XV

THE TURF TAVERN—DON'T UNDERSTAND—THE BEST
WELSH—THE MAIDS OF MERION—OLD AND NEW—
RUTHYNN—THE ASH YGGDRASILL

WE now emerged from the rough and narrow way which we had followed for some miles, upon one much wider, and more commodious, which my guide told me was the coach road from Wrexham to Ruthyn, and going on a little farther we came to an avenue of trees which shaded the road. It was chiefly composed of ash, sycamore and birch and looked delightfully cool and shady. I asked my guide if it belonged to any gentleman's house. He told me that it did not, but to a public-house, called Tafarn Tywarch, which stood near the end, a little way off the road. 'Why is it called Tafarn Tywarch?' said I, struck by the name which signifies 'the tavern of turf.'

'It was called so, sir,' said John, 'because it was originally merely a turf hovel, though at present it consists of good brick and mortar.'

'Can we breakfast there,' said I, 'for I feel both hungry and thirsty?'

'Oh, yes, sir,' said John, 'I have heard there is good cheese and cwtw there.'

We turned off to the 'tafarn,' which was a decent

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public-house of rather an antiquated appearance. We entered a sanded kitchen, and sat down by a large oaken table. 'Please to bring us some bread, cheese and ale,' said I in Welsh to an elderly woman, who was moving about.

'Sar?' said she.

'Bring us some bread, cheese and ale,' I repeated in Welsh.

'I do not understand you, sar,' said she in English.

'Are you Welsh?' said I in English.

'Yes, I am Welsh!'

'And can you speak Welsh?'

'Oh yes, and the best.'

'Then why did you not bring what I asked for?'

'Because I did not understand you.'

'Tell her,' said I to John Jones, 'to bring us some bread, cheese and ale.'

'Come, aunt,' said John, 'bring us bread and cheese and a quart of the best ale.'

The woman looked as if she was going to reply in the tongue in which he addressed her, then faltered, and at last said in English, that she did not understand.

'Now,' said I, 'you are fairly caught: this man is a Welshman, and moreover understands no language but Welsh.'

'Then how can he understand you?' said she.

'Because I speak Welsh,' said I.

'Then you are a Welshman?' said she.

'No, I am not,' said I, 'I am English.'

'So I thought,' said she, 'and on that account I could not understand you.'

'You mean that you would not,' said I. 'Now do you choose to bring what you are bidden?'

'Come, aunt,' said John, 'don't be silly and ceffgenus, but bring the breakfast.'

The woman stood still for a moment or two, and then biting her lips went away.

'What made the woman behave in this manner?' said I to my companion.

'Oh, she was ceffgenus, sir,' he replied; 'she did not like that an English gentleman should understand Welsh;

she was envious; you will find a dozen or two like her in Wales; but let us hope not more.

Presently the woman returned with the bread, cheese and ale, which she placed on the table.

'Oh,' said I, 'you have brought what was bidden, though it was never mentioned to you in English, which shows that your pretending not to understand was all sham. What made you behave so?'

'Why I thought,' said the woman, 'that no English-

man could speak Welsh, that his tongue was too short.' 'Your having thought so,' said I, 'should not have made you tell a falsehood, saying that you did not understand, when you knew that you understood very well. See what a disgraceful figure you cut.'

'I cut no disgraced figure,' said the woman: 'after all, what right have the English to come here speaking Welsh, which belongs to the Welsh alone, who in fact are the only people that understand it.'

'Are you sure that you understand it?'

'I should think so,' said the woman, 'for I come from the Vale of Clwyd, where they speak the best Welsh in the world, the Welsh of the Bible.'

'What do they call a salmon in the Vale of Clwyd?' said I.

'What do they call a salmon?' said the woman.

'Yes,' said I, 'when they speak Welsh.'

'They call it—they call it—why, a salmon.'

'Pretty Welsh!' said I. 'I thought you did not understand Welsh.'

'Well, what do you call it?' said the woman.

'Eawg,' said I, 'that is the word for a salmon in general—but there are words also to show the sex—when you speak of a male salmon you should say *cemyw*, when of a female *hwylf*.'

'I never heard the words before,' said the woman, 'nor do I believe them to be Welsh.'

'You say so,' said I, 'because you do not understand Welsh.'

'I not understand Welsh!' said she. 'I'll soon show you that I do. Come, you have asked me the word for salmon, in Welsh, I will now ask you the word for salmon-

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trout. Now tell me that, and I will say you know something of the matter.'

'A tinker of my country can tell you that,' said I. 'The word for salmon-trout is *gleisiad*.'

'I see you know something about the matter,' said she; 'there are very few hereabouts, though so near to the Vale of Clwyd, who know the word for salmon-trout in Welsh, I shouldn't have known the word myself, but for the song which says:

'*Glan yw'r gleisiad yn y llyn.*'

'And who wrote that song?' said I.

'I don't know,' said the woman.

'But I do,' said I; 'one Lewis Morris wrote it.'

'Oh,' said she, 'I have heard all about Huw Morris.'

'I was not talking of Huw Morris,' said I, 'but Lewis Morris, who lived long after Huw Morris. He was a native of Anglesea, but resided for some time in Merioneth-shire, and whilst there composed a song about the Morwynion bro Meirionydd or the lasses of County Merioneth—a great many stanzas, in one of which the *gleisiad* is mentioned. Here it is in English:

'Full fair the *gleisiad* in the flood,
Which sparkles 'neath the summer's sun,
And fair the thrush in green abode
Spreading his wings in sportive fun,
But fairer look if truth be spoke,
The maids of County Merion.'

The woman was about to reply, but I interrupted her. 'There,' said I, 'pray leave us to our breakfast, and the next time you feel inclined to talk nonsense about no Englishman's understanding Welsh, or knowing anything of Welsh matters, remember that it was an Englishman who told you the Welsh word for salmon, and likewise the name of the Welshman who wrote the song in which the *gleisiad* is mentioned.'

The ale was very good and so were the bread and cheese. The ale indeed was so good that I ordered a second jug. Observing a large antique portrait over the mantelpiece I got up to examine it.

gentleman in a long wig, and underneath it was painted in red letters 'Sir Watkin Wynn 1742.' It was doubtless the portrait of the Sir Watkin who in 1745 was committed to the Tower under suspicion of being suspected of holding Jacobite opinions, and favouring the Pretender. The portrait was a very poor daub, but I looked at it long and attentively as a memorial of Wales at a critical and long past time.

When we had dispatched the second jug of ale, and I had paid the reckoning, we departed and soon came to where stood a turnpike house at a junction of two roads, to each of which was a gate.

'Now, sir,' said John Jones, 'the way straight forward is the ffordd newydd and the one on our right hand is the hen ffordd. Which shall we follow, the new or the old?'

'There is a proverb in the Gerniweg,' said I, 'which was the language of my forefathers, saying, "ne'er leave the old way for the new," we will therefore go by the hen ffordd.'

'Very good, sir,' said my guide, 'that is the path I always go, for it is the shortest.' So we turned to the right and followed the old road. Perhaps, however, it would have been well had we gone by the new, for the hen ffordd was a very dull and uninteresting road, whereas the ffordd newydd, as I long subsequently found, is one of the grandest passes in Wales. After we had walked a short distance my guide said, 'Now, sir, if you will turn a little way to the left hand I will show you a house built in the old style, such a house, sir, as I dare say the original turf tavern was.' Then leading me a little way from the road he showed me, under a hollow bank, a small cottage covered with flags.

'That is a house, sir, built yn yr hen dull in the old fashion, of earth, flags and wattles and in one night. It was the custom of old when a house was to be built for the people to assemble, and to build it in one night of common materials, close at hand. The custom is not quite dead. I was at the building of this myself, and a merry building it was. The cwrw da passed quickly about among the builders, I assure you.' We returned to the

road, and when we had ascended a hill my companion told me that if I looked to the left I should see the vale of Clwyd.

I looked and perceived an extensive valley pleasantly dotted with trees and farm-houses, and bounded on the west by a range of hills.

'It is a fine valley, sir,' said my guide, 'four miles wide and twenty long, and contains the richest land in all Wales. Cheese made in that valley, sir, fetches a penny a pound more than cheese made in any other valley.'

'And who owns it?' said I.

'Various are the people who own it, sir, but Sir Watkin owns the greater part.'

We went on, passed by a village called Craig Ychfan where we saw a number of women washing at a fountain, and by a gentle descent soon reached the vale of Clwyd.

After walking about a mile we left the road and proceeded by a footpath across some meadows. The meadows were green and delightful and were intersected by a beautiful stream. Trees in abundance were growing about, some of which were oaks. We passed by a little white chapel with a small graveyard before it, which my guide told me belonged to the Baptists, and shortly afterwards reached Ruthyn.

We went to an inn called the Crossed Foxes, where we refreshed ourselves with ale. We then sallied forth to look about, after I had ordered a duck to be got ready for dinner, at three o'clock. Ruthyn stands on a hill above the Clwyd, which in the summer is a mere brook, but in the winter a considerable stream, being then fed with the watery tribute of a hundred hills. About three miles to the north is a range of lofty mountains, dividing the shire of Denbigh from that of Flint, amongst which, almost parallel with the town, and lifting its head high above the rest, is the mighty Moel Yamagh, the mother heap, which I had seen from Chester. Ruthyn is a dull town, but it possessed plenty of interest for me, for as I strolled with my guide about the streets I remembered that I was treading the ground, which the wild bands

of Glendower had trod, and where the great struggle commenced, which for fourteen years convulsed Wales, and for some time shook England to its centre. After I had satisfied myself with wandering about the town we proceeded to the castle.

The original castle suffered terribly in the civil wars; it was held for wretched Charles, and was nearly demolished by the cannon of Cromwell, which were planted on a hill about half a mile distant. The present castle is partly modern and partly ancient. It belongs to a family of the name of W—— who reside in the modern part, and who have the character of being kind, hospitable and intellectual people. We only visited the ancient part, over which we were shown by a woman, who hearing us speaking Welsh, spoke Welsh herself during the whole time she was showing us about. She showed us dark passages, a gloomy apartment in which Welsh kings and great people had been occasionally confined, that strange memorial of the good old times, a drowning pit, and a large prison room, in the middle of which stood a singular-looking column, scrawled with odd characters, which had of yore been used for a whipping-post, another memorial of the good old baronial times, so dear to romance readers and minds of sensibility. Amongst other things, which our conductor showed us, was an immense oen or ash; it stood in one of the courts and measured, as she said, pedwar y haner o ladd yn ei gwmpas, or four yards and a half in girth. As I gazed on the mighty tree I thought of the Ash Yggdrasill mentioned in the Voluspa, or prophecy of Volu, that venerable poem which contains so much relating to the mythology of the ancient Norse.

We returned to the inn and dined. The duck was capital, and I asked John Jones if he had ever tasted a better. 'Never, sir,' said he, 'for to tell you the truth, I never tasted a duck before.' 'Rather singular,' said I. 'What, that I should not have tasted duck? Oh, sir, the singularity is, that I should now be tasting duck. Duck in Wales, sir, is not fare for poor weavers. This is the first duck I ever tasted, and though I never taste another, as I probably never shall, I may consider myself

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a fortunate weaver, for I can now say I have tasted duck once in my life. Few weavers in Wales are ever able to say as much.'

CHAPTER XVI

BAPTIST TOMB-STONE—THE TOLL-BAR—REBECCA—THE GUITAR

THE sun was fast declining as we left Ruthyn. We retraced our steps across the fields. When we came to the Baptist chapel, I got over the wall of the little yard to look at the grave-stones. There were only three. The inscriptions upon them were all in Welsh. The following stanza was on the stone of Jane, the daughter of Elizabeth Williams, who died on the second of May, 1843:

Er myn'd i'r oerlyd anedd
Dros dymher hir i orwedd
Gwyd i'r lan o'r gwely bridd
Ac hyfryd fydd ei hagwedd.

which is

Though thou art gone to dwelling cold
To lie in mould for many a year,
Thou shalt, at length, from earthy bed,
Uplift thy head to blissful sphere.

As we went along I stopped to gaze at a singular-looking hill forming part of the mountain range on the east. I asked John Jones what its name was, but he did not know. As we were standing talking about it, a lady came up from the direction in which our course lay, a John Jones touching his hat to her, said:

'Madam, this gwr boneddig wishes to know the name of that moel, perhaps you can tell him.'
'Its name is Moel Agrik,' said the lady, addressing me in English.

'Does that mean Agricola's hill?' said I.

'It does,' said she, 'and there is a tradition that the Roman general Agricola, when he invaded these parts, pitched his camp on that moel. The hill is spoken of by Pennant.'

'Thank you, madam,' said I; 'perhaps you can tell