

First Prize

Class C

1912

The Legends and Traditions of Wales.

1912

David - J. P. Richards
County School for Boys
Barry

55 Westward Rise
Barry.

Dooker Reed.

Wales — Rhys Davies.

Gerald the Welshman —

Cymru ac America —

Mabinogion. —

Between the Bristol Channel and Liverpool Bay is attached to England the roughly rectangular country of Wales. It is a much denuded ancient plateau of old hard rock and thin infertile soils. The slopes of the land are steep and innumerable rushing mountain torrents have carved deep trenches on their way to the sea, in the north, west and south. In this land, often in many places inhospitable, one finds the ancient tongue of Wales. Although there is no frontier between the two countries, as one travels westward, one leaves the English of the plain to very shortly come into contact with people who think and speak in Welsh. Indeed there can be found in Wales people who can speak no English whatever.

From time immemorial wave after wave of invaders spread westward from Europe. As each wave had better weapons than the preceding ones the weaker peoples were pushed into the mountainous west. When the Romans came to Britain they found the Celtic tribes supreme in Wales and in spite of their military superiority the Romans failed to latinize Wales any more than the Anglo-Saxons of a latter date failed to penetrate into the inhospitable mountain land. The Celts therefore drew back into their mountain retreats, at the same time resisting, the Roman, the Saxon, the Norse and the Norman.

It is not surprising therefore that in these rocky fastnesses there grew up stories of fighting and superstition and in the shut in valleys superstitions were still believed long after they had ceased to exist on the more open plains of England. The bards tried to say that Arthur, Merlin

and Taliesin were not dead but asleep and that they would come as deliverers to free them from the hated Saxon. All the folk lore tales were not so noble and some were very primitive. In fact many of the present day legends were probably told in a primitive form around the old Britons' camp fires when they faced Caesar's armies, in the same tongue as is spoken when Cardiff Arms Park is invaded from the Welsh valleys on International Rugger Day.

During his journey throughout Wales, it was these folk tales, miracles, and marvels that seemed to have impressed him, in fact, almost as much as the effect of his own sermons. He was a great preacher, he says so himself.

Gerald seems to have believed such tales as the following:

A very strange thing happened to Elidyr a twelve year old boy from near Swansea. He was hiding under a river bank when two tiny men came to him and led him to a beautiful land under the earth. Here he played with the King's son. Sometimes he was allowed to return home to his mother who on finding out about the abundance of gold in that country persuaded him to bring her some back. One day when playing with the King's son he seized his golden ball and ran away home with it. However when Elidyr reached his doorstep he fell down and dropped the ball which was seized by two little men who had followed him. Feeling ashamed of what he had done he tried to go back to the strange country but was never again able to find the path. When he grew up he became a priest and told his story to David II. Bishop of

111

St David's. The language that Chieftain Llewelyn had learnt from these people was very similar to Greek.

The more noble tales of Wales are found in the Mabinogion, the work of an unknown man about the 12th century. The Mabinogion is a collection of twelve tales, translated into English in 1838 by Lady Charlotte Guest. The Mabinogion became a classic and the stories were retranslated from English into French and German. The word Mabinogion comes from Mabinog, a medieval bard who was trained in the laws of poetry and who was probably paid for reciting his tales. The stories Lady Guest translated are full of legend, myth and adventure. The tales of Gull, Branwen and Math are pre-Christian and a survival of ancient Celtic mythology.

Those of Masen and Lludd are of the period of Roman occupation.

The stories of Olwen, The Lady of the Fountain, Peredur and Geraint are of Arthur.

Finally Taliesin who lived at the same time as Arthur was a real sixth century bard.

Although these are the classical Welsh folk tale tales each district has its own collection and often some special one is handed down from generation to generation. One can imagine parents telling their children local folk tale during the winter nights around the large fire places. Such stories as old Megan who cheated the devil at Devil's Bridge near Aberystwyth and the true episode of the red cloaked Welsh woman at Fishguard would have delighted the children.

Folk tales may be based on fact but tradition is.

something which is part of the life of the people. Wales has traditions that distinguishes it from most other nations. It has traditions in singing, in sea faring, it has supplied great Rugby players and last but not least great preachers. Of these Wales is most famous for its singing and although it has not produced a great composer it is called the "Land of Song". Wherever he is, wherever he comes from and wherever he goes the Welshman sings. When they collect in groups they sing, always in four voices. They sing freely and harmonize beautifully. They sing for their own pleasure. If they are in chapel or crowd into a football enclosure, it just happens, they sing; they sing in Welsh, in Wales and in England, in America and in Patagonia.

One of the traditional methods of singing is that to the accompaniment of the harp. This is called "Cenillion". The harpist begins to play a simple tune and the singer starting on an off-beat, sings "against" the harp but finishes the verse with it. It is likely that the Bards of medieval times sang the ~~the~~ news and accounts of romance and bravery in this manner.

In Wales we have a great annual festival known as the Eisteddfod. This is a six day gathering of poets, singers and artists. It is competitive and thousands of people attend to view the exhibits and hear the singing. So famous is this Eisteddfod that choirs from America compete. The Eisteddfod is ruled by the Gorsedd who dressed in Druidic robes march in procession to a circle of uprightr stones called the Druid's circle.

The chief event of the Eisteddfod is the crowning of the Bard.

V:

The winning poet is conducted to the platform and is crowned with the golden oak leaves. The prize is small, about £20 but the honour is great and this has come three times to Mr J M Edwards, a Barry Schoolmaster.

At these annual meetings the massed chorul singing is one of the great items. Even at the other end of the world the "Voice of Wales" is heard for the Welsh in Patagonia hold their annual Eisteddfod — in the largest wheat lawn.

For thousands of years Welshmen have heared the call of the sea. The heart of Wales is not more than fifty miles from the seashore, and to none of its people is the sea entirely unfamiliar. Along its five hundred miles of coastline are dotted little towns and villages — Nyon, Pwllheli, Aberystwyth, Aberayron, Cardigan, Newport, Tenby — where the sea for centuries has provided almost the only profession, and where sons have always followed their fathers. In all ports of the world are found captains and officers of merchant ships from the west coast of Wales.

Thousands of years ago, before history was written down our ancestors often found it easier to travel by sea than by land. The lowland were thickly forested and swampy, and were infested by wild animals. Few were the trackways which penetrated through the forests. Invading peoples, therefore, came to Wales by the sea route, and centuries later the sea habit was not lost. In the Dark Ages little ships sailed backwards and forwards between Wales and Ireland, and many endured perils from treacherous currents in their journeyings around Land's End to Brittany.

21.

There is a legend that America was discovered by a Welshman Madoc ab Owain Gwynedd. Owain Gwynedd was a great prince of North Wales who died in 1169, and Madoc must have been a member of his "teulu," that is, his bodyguard, for we have no knowledge of a son of that name. Nevertheless a legend grew up that he became tired of the constant strife in North Wales, and that he sailed to the west with a few followers about the year 1170. Far across the ocean he discovered a new land. He returned to Wales to inform his old companions, and persuaded many of them to accompany him on a second journey. Nothing further was heard of him and his followers, and it might be assumed that they had been lost at sea, but the legend says that they settled down and made it their home. Later the Madoc legend was accepted by many English writers of the time, for example by Hakluyt in his famous Voyages, and by Sir Walter Raleigh in his History of the World.

But that was not the end of the legend of Madoc. A century later people became very much interested in everything that was strange and remote, in literature, in tales of ancient times and of distant land. The Madoc legend seized their imaginations. Besides, traders had returned with tales of white, blue-eyed Indians, who inhabited the lands of the Far West, and many assumed that these must be descendants of Madoc. Other traders had heard them speak a language they identified as Welsh. So frequent were these reports that even the most critical men had to accept the possibility that there was some truth in them. In fact we read in the "Daily Herald" in 1947 the following: -

"Indian Tribe May Be Welsh"!

Language has Celtic foundations.

Ex-councillor Lewis Phillips of Rhosce, who, with his wife, is nearing the end of a vacation in Canada, has sent us an interesting clipping from the "Welland Port Colborne Evening Tribune". The "Tribune" states:

Robert Pritchard, of the east 12ootenay town of Invermere, British Columbia, has run across a discovery ~~has run across a discovery~~ that will surprise many of his native Welshmen.

Pritchard is inclined to believe that the 12ootenay Indians may be of Welsh descent and he has more than one reason on which to base his belief.

Investigating an apparent similarity in Welsh and 12ootenay Indian language, since 1932, he has compiled a list of corresponding sounds and meanings in the two languages. However, he has run across a stumbling block - there is no written 12ootenay language. Interceded in the tradition that Prince Madoc of Wales crossed the Atlantic about 1170 and established a colony in America, he wrote about his discoveries to two well known students of the Welsh language, W A Rhodes and Eric Jones of Victoria. They both corroborated the apparent relationship.

Pritchard says that the language of the 12ootenay Indians uses the foundations of the Celtic language and cites a list of words which are all identical in sound.

They include; Horse, cow, friend and fish, and a number of simple phrases such as "good day" and "going home".

Another similarity which he notes is that the Indians do not have the high cheekbones or "Mongolian Eye". Usually associated with the native Canadian Indians.

The traditional connection of Wales with America does not end there for a Captain Jones was in charge with the Mayflower; Yale University is named after Elisha Yale, Governor of Massachusetts, a grand son of Thomas Yale and Anne Lloyd of Plas Grono near Wrescham; Sousa composer of the famous band marches was also a Welshman, Sousa - Samuel Owen, USA. Large numbers of Baptists left North Pembrokeshire and settled in America. These independent emigrants helped to make a new nation. Of the fifty six signatures to the Declaration of Independence, 18 were of Welsh descent.

Thus an ancient land, rich in folk lore, has sent her sons to help build up a new land.