

From Wasteland to Wonderland: Wales in the Imagination of the English Traveler, 1720-1895

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Wales. The very name conjures certain wild images in the mind. Glossy print advertisements aimed at tourists laud the “romantic beauty” and the “myth and legend” of Wales, exhorting visitors to “step back and take stock” and to “treat yourself.” As with Ireland, misty connections to druids— those darlings of the New Age movement— often crop up in relation to Wales. And mentions of Merlin and Arthur abound in the popular imagination, Wales being the seat of “true” Britons and their legendary king, Cornish counter-claims to Tintagel notwithstanding. Accommodations for travelers range from spartan and thrifty-but-comfortable caravans to cozy bed and breakfasts to five-star hotels and activities span the interests of hikers, shoppers, history buffs and beach-combers alike. Capitalizing on both natural beauty and historic landmarks— as well as a touch of mystery — the Wales Tourist Board asks:

How do you define a country? A culture? A people? Are they merely the sum of its history, surroundings and customs? There is something more to Wales. Something unique that distinguishes Wales and her people from all other countries in Britain. It is their spirit. Colourful, passionate, natural. This describes the landscape and the heart of the Welsh people. It's always been this way. Their values and outlook are as old as time itself but as refreshing and vibrant as ever.”¹

And yet, these obvious charms have not always been so obvious. As Cecil Price has noted, “before the middle of the eighteenth century, Wales was thought a foreign land, where people spoke a strange tongue and lived mainly on toasted cheese.”² This exoticism and implied poverty was not appealing to many travellers. Into the 19th century, the persistent and generally negative image of Wales as uncharted, untamed wilderness remained a vivid one in the English imagination. This perception often found expression as a form of medievalism, an impression of Wales as the “living medieval” which underwent the same anachronisms and vicissitudes as the Gothic Revival itself. When Sarah Ponsonby and Eleanor Butler (the celebrated “Ladies of Llangollen”) fled their families in Ireland to set up house together in 1778, they chose Llangollen as a safe retreat, far from the prying eyes of society. Once settled, they transformed their cottage, Plas Newydd, into a small gothic

¹Golly Slater, *Wales: Land of Nature and Legend* (Cardiff: Wales Tourist Board in conjunction with the British Tourist Authority, 1997), 1.

²Cecil Price, introduction to *Wild Wales*, by George Borrow (1862; reprint, Ruthin, North Wales: John Jones Publishing Ltd., 1998), 11.

gingerbread confection, complete with tiny spires and pointed arches. When George Borrow visited Wales nearly one hundred years later, in 1862, he recorded his impressions of “wild Wales,” an uncivilized land entirely different from England. English industrial magnates, such as Josiah Guest, who made their fortunes by raping the countryside of its natural resources of coal and iron ore, built huge medieval style castles as a symbol of a modern English conquest, this time economic rather than military. Meanwhile, Guest’s wife, Charlotte, amused herself with translating the ancient Welsh story cycle, The Mabinogion, symbolically reviving the medieval Welsh past for generations of English readers to come.

For the English, primitive Wales, strewn with atmospheric medieval relics and ruins, “evidence” of Druids, and looming, imposing castles, seemed very much like the “living” Middle Ages. Even after the invasion by English industrialists, much of nineteenth century Wales remained rural and its natives continued to cling to old-fashioned ways of life, methods of agriculture, and legends and superstitions, much like the peasants in Hardy’s Wessex. Even the language seemed to the English a throwback to an earlier time. Similarly, when the Welsh themselves began to construct a definition of *Cymru*, it was very much towards their earliest days that they looked— to the days of Owain Glyndwr and even earlier, to the times before Edward I’s conquest of 1282— and it was language that provided a nationalistic unifying force.

One important element in the creation of Wales as the “living medieval” came from the impressions left upon English travellers in Wales. Prior to the eighteenth century, few English had ventured over the border into George Borrow’s “Wild Wales,” preferring to spend their holidays on the refined Continent amid more “civilized” scenery. Part of the reason was simply that Wales, and Scotland for that matter, were too close to be interesting. People tend to ignore the exotic next door in favour of something more out of the way. Yet, conversely, Wales was also considered too “out of the way” to be of any value to fashionable English society. It was an undeveloped backwater, overrun with sheep and surly inhabitants who spoke an unintelligible language. It was difficult to navigate, and, once one managed to cross the formidable mountains, what was there except some decayed ruins and a few stone circles?

However, two events changed this attitude: the wars with France, beginning in the early 1790’s with the French Revolution, and the Romantic Movement. The first hindered safe travel to and from the Continent and, obviously, cut France off as a popular travel destination. The second slowly inspired the English to value the very qualities in Wales’ topography that they had previously maligned. Gloomy, foreboding mountains and crumbling, mouldy relics of past centuries no longer inspired disgust and repelled pampered travellers, but instead evoked awe, contemplation, and reverence of a past rich with history and rife with tragedy. After all, the Welsh struggle for independence was every bit as compelling as that of Greece. By 1850, Wales had become a major destination for tourists.³

This evolution is fully traceable in the diaries, guides, and letters of the travellers who visited Wales, beginning with Daniel Defoe’s Tour of Great Britain in 1722, and ending with A. G. Bradley’s exploration of the Highways and Byways in North Wales at the close of the

³John Davies, A History of Wales (London: The Penguin Press, 1995), 319.

nineteenth century. Defoe's response is typical of a city Englishman of his time—horrified, disdainful and often downright cranky. He was followed fifty years later by Samuel Johnson who, true to character, was often curmudgeonly but, surprisingly admits a grudging appreciation of the more spectacular elements of landscape. Still, it had better be good to impress Dr. Johnson and, for much of his trip, he finds himself disappointed with what he sees. The turning point comes with Samuel Taylor Coleridge whose very brief, but descriptive letters home in 1794 describe a different world from the one Johnson and Defoe experienced. It was “sublimely terrible,” “rugged” and “awful.” Wales had not changed, only the visitor.

By the time George Borrow walked across Wales in 1854, the tourist industry was booming and he makes it his business to visit the bustling and the backwards alike and, more importantly, interacts with the people wherever he goes. Although his account is often marred by an excess of self-praise, he provides a vivid and full-bodied narrative of life in the varied towns and regions of Wales along with a touch of historical background. Finally, Bradley, literally following in Borrow's footsteps, offers a very historically-based tour of Wales at the end of the century, demonstrating the continuing allure of the medieval revival and the perception of Wales as a land very much in touch with its own past.

In the spring of 1722, author Daniel Defoe embarked upon a Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain, which was often used, but never intended as, a traveller's guide book. With the eye of a reporter—evident also in his Journal of the Plague Year (published that same year) -- Defoe comments on the conditions of the land and commerce in each area he passes through. A Londoner, born and bred, it is perhaps only natural that he often scorns places of historic or pastoral interest in favour of what is modern, profitable, efficient. With this in mind, it is thus not surprising that he finds little to appeal to him in Wales. Defoe is initially daunted by the “frightful” mountains, which rival the Alps “in the Terror of their aspect” and would surely have stopped “Hannibal himself.”

Entring [sic] [Glamorganshire], from *Radnor* and *Brecknock*, we were saluted with *Monuchdenny Hill* on our left, and the *Black-Mountain* on the right, and all a Ridge of horrid Rocks and Precipices between, over which, if we had not had trusty Guides, we should never have found our Way; and indeed, we began to repent our Curiosity, as not having met with any thing worth the trouble; and a Country looking so full of horror, that we thought to have given over the Enterprise and have left *Wales* out of our Circuit.⁴

What is interesting is his staunch belief in the “barrenness” of the Welsh landscape. In Herefordshire, he remarks, “One would hardly expect so pleasant, and fruitful a Country as this, so near the Barren Mountains of *Wales*” and while leaving Haverford (which he found to be pleasant as well) for St. Davids, “the Country begins to look like *Wales* again, Dry, Barren, and Mountainous.”⁵ Because the majority of the land is not rich enough for

⁴Daniel Defoe, A Tour thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain Divided into Circuits or Journies, with an Introduction by G. D. H. Cole, vol. 2 (1724-26; reprint, London: Peter Davies, 1927), 467, 453.

⁵Ibid., 448, 456. See also 453, 467.

commercial farming, he sees nothing in it to be appreciated for its own sake. His one concession is a grudging admission that Brecknock is not completely useless “even to the City of London . . . for from hence they send yearly, great herds of Black Cattle, to *England*, and which are known to fill our fairs and markets, even that of *Smithfield* itself.”⁶ Indeed, his chief measure of Welsh worth is derived from its commercial usefulness or similarity to England. Of Pembroke, he notes, “This is the Largest and Richest, and at this Time, the most flourishing Town of all *S. Wales*. Here are a great many *English* Merchants, and some of them Men of good Business; . . . in a word, all this Part of *Wales* is a rich and flourishing Country, but especially this Part is so very pleasant, and fertile, and is so well cultivated, that ‘tis call’d by Distinction, *Little England*, beyond *Wales*.”⁷ Montgomeryshire he thought a “good fashionable Place” because it had “many *English* dwelling in it,” but “nothing farther worth remarking” and around Denbigh the “fruitful, populous, and delicious Vale, full of Villages and Towns, the Fields shining with Corn” made him imagine himself “in *England* again, all on a sudden.”⁸ Clearly he thinks of Wales as a different land altogether, but one less advanced in commercial development than England and, thus, inferior.

While Americans are always astounded by the great number of medieval— or at least old — buildings in England, for an Englishman like Defoe, Wales’ collection of ancient relics was enormous. And, rather typical for his time, Defoe was unimpressed. Not that Defoe was utterly devoid of historical interest. He had read his Camden and mentions the antiquarian’s work frequently. But curiously, what Defoe found in a book appears to have been far more compelling to him than seeing the actual relics for himself. At St. Asaph’s, he was underwhelmed by the Cathedral, bored by the monuments (“none of any Note”), and annoyed that the inscriptions were in Welsh.⁹ In Bangor, “a Town noted for its Antiquity,” he describes the Cathedral as “old, mean looking, and almost despicable.”¹⁰ Defoe seems to barely suppress a yawn when he visits Anglesey, famous for its stone circles and standing stones. Because they lacked inscriptions— a sign of reasonableness, communication, and modern thinking— he discounts them, mentioning only that there were also circles larger than Stonehenge to be seen, but he did not go.¹¹

He also comments on the legends of Arthur and Merlin associated with Carmarthen, including the existence of Arthur’s throne, although he completely discounts their veracity.¹² Legends in general, unless validated by Camden, leave him cold. Furthermore, as lack of commercialism was a strike against Wales in his mind, the peoples’ interest in their own

⁶Ibid., 452.

⁷Ibid., 456.

⁸Ibid., 459, 464.

⁹Ibid., 464.

¹⁰Ibid., 463.

¹¹Ibid., 462.

¹²Ibid., 455.

history was further proof of their backwardness: “They value themselves much upon their Antiquity: the Antient Race of their House, and Families, and the like; and above all, upon their Antient Heroes: their king *Caractacus*, *Owen ap Tudor*, Prince *Levellin*, and the like Noblemen and Princes of *British* Extraction . . . The Stories of *Vortigern*, and *Roger of Mortimer*, are in every old Woman’s Mouth here.”¹³ As a visitor in this strange land, Defoe finds the easiest path to cooperation from the Welsh is to patronizingly agree with them that their country is pleasant and fascinating, an opinion he seems dubious about at best.¹⁴

Although his commentary is generally negative, what is important to note is that Defoe cannot escape history when touring Wales, even though this is not his interest. He admits that “there are more Tokens of Antiquity to be seen every where in *Wales*, than in any particular part of *England*, except the Counties of *Cumberland*, and *Northumberland*.”¹⁵ Not only are there visible “tokens,” but there is the living history of memory. Through their emphasis on genealogy and nationalism, the Welsh keep the ancient tales alive from generation to generation.¹⁶ Such traditionalism may not have been valued in the Age of Reason, but a later generation would find those very qualities laudable, rather than despicable.

However, attitudes were slow to change and, fifty years after Defoe during his visit in the summer of 1774, Samuel Johnson reports a similar generally negative experience. Although at times he is a little more positive about the craggy rocks and famous waterfalls (and is not nearly so conscious of mercantile pursuits), like Defoe, Johnson finds the ancient buildings to be “mean” and “neglected.” In other words, the natural wildness is gaining in appeal in tangible response to the Romantic movement, but in these years prior to the medieval revival, old mouldy relics still hold little interest for the “foreign” traveller. Johnson finds the “sound of the Welsh” to be “not unpleasant,” and even encourages the revival of the language, suggesting the “republication of David ap Rhees’s *Welsh Grammar*.”¹⁷ Johnson does seem to base some of his judgements on towns on how much English is spoken there, particularly in the churches. True to his reputation as a curmudgeon, his overall impression of the country was reported later by his travelling companion. In a burst of temper about the lack of hospitality found at the house of Sir Thomas Wynne in Caernarfon, Johnson said of Wynne’s wife, “That woman. . . is like sour small beer, the beverage of her table, and produce of the wretched country she lives in: like that, she could never have been a good thing, and even that is a bad thing spoiled.”¹⁸

¹³Ibid., 467, 463.

¹⁴Ibid., 467-68.

¹⁵Ibid., 452.

¹⁶Ibid., 453, 467.

¹⁷Samuel Johnson, “Diary of a Journey into North Wales in the Year 1774,” in *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, by James Boswell, vol. 4 (1816; reprint, London: George Bell and Sons, 1884), 401, 399.

¹⁸Ibid., 404.

How different, then, is the impression left on Coleridge during his visit a mere twenty years later. He spends a good deal of time mooning over a lost love; indeed he admits, “I had been wandering among the wild-wood scenery and terrible graces of the Welch mountains to wear away . . . the Images of the past!”¹⁹ True to his melodramatic temperament—so much the reverse of that of Johnson and Defoe—he finds solace in both the untamed countryside around him and in the atmospheric ruins of medieval castles, which speak of tragedy and heartbreak over many centuries. Writing to his friend Robert Southey in July, 1794, he comments that the Cambrian Mountains, between Llangynog and Bala were “most sublimely terrible! . . . The rugged and stony Clefs are stupendous—and in winter must form Cataracts most astonishing.” Because he was travelling in July, he found the weather “scorchingly hot” and the cool mountain water he found to quench his thirst gave him the opportunity to wax poetic on the “draughts of Water cold as Ice, and clear as infant Diamonds in their embryo Dew!”²⁰ Far from disparaging the quality of food as Johnson had done, Coleridge revels in the hearty simplicity of “hash’d mutton, Cucumber, Bread & Cheese and Butter and . . . two pots of Ale” as well as the ease on his purse of “16 pence for both of us!”²¹

Denbigh Castle—upon which neither Johnson nor Defoe commented at all—is a revelation to him: “it surpasses everything I could have conceived.” He spent an hour and a half, just exploring the ruins at twilight, enjoying the moodiness of the crumbling edifice against the darkening sky. The ambience is soon spoiled, however, by the clash of the modern with the medieval world. He writes:

Two well drest young men were walking there – Come – says one – I’ll play my flute – ‘twill be romantic! Bless thee for the thought, Man of Genius & Sensibility! I exclaimed – and pre-attuned my heartstring to tremulous emotion. He sat adown (the moon just peering) amid the most awful part of the Ruins – and – romantic Youth! Struck up the affecting Tune of *Mrs Casey!* – ‘Tis fact upon my Honour!²²

Coleridge may have had his own experience marred, but the effects of his poetry, as well as that of his Romantic compatriots, helped to generate interest in crumbling ruins for their own sakes. Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey,” for instance, and Grey’s “Last of the Bards” both warmed imaginations to specifically Welsh subjects. Later, novels like Sir Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe* (1819) would create a greater interest in the medieval history of Great Britain in general. As Wales was fairly brimming with both, it soon became a popular destination for people with a fascination for things medieval. As the Gothic Revival blossomed, so did tourism and even when travel on the continent became safe once more, Wales remained a thriving tourist destination. Towns like Llandudno, for instance, grew into holiday seaside resorts, like Bournemouth and Bath, during the Victorian era, the streets

¹⁹Samuel Taylor Coleridge to Henry Martin, 22 July 1794, in *The Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, vol. 1, Earl Leslie Griggs, ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), 92.

²⁰Samuel Taylor Coleridge to Robert Southey, 13 July 1794, *Letters*, 88.

²¹*Ibid.*

²²*Ibid.*, 89.

nearly literally paved with tourist pounds. By the sea, especially, Wales became a fashionable destination even for those uninterested in history. But for many, it was a treasure trove of preserved, mildly exotic relics of the days before a unified Britain, when knights gallantly clashed on ancient battlefields and when English princesses were wed to native Welsh princes to create “foreign” alliances.²³

One such traveller was George Borrow, a man with an insatiable curiosity for ancient languages and people with an aura of mystery about them. One of his more famous excursions was among the gypsies, who, like the Welsh, were another abused minority in England. Through his willingness to learn their language and listen to their legends, he found himself befriended and accepted by the gypsies. He has a similar experience with the Welsh, who in his account constantly proclaim their amazement that an Englishman would care to learn their language or, indeed, anything about them as a nation. Not merely curious, Borrow is unabashedly worshipful of Wales’ historic heroes and bards (not to mention brewers of a fine pint of ale). It is this love of history that permeates his description. In a manner much more concrete than Coleridge was able to express, Borrow sees the past alive before him in Wales. It is not only the past of recent memory – an idealization of the way things were at the time of his own childhood, a curious yet common phenomenon among many nineteenth century medieval enthusiasts. It is instead a keen perception of the hallowed nature of places themselves because of their association with events and people in Wales’ medieval past.

Certainly Borrow, who all but refuses to ride a train anywhere, so much does he despise this noisy modern invention, romanticizes the good old days, “when farmers’ daughters did not play on pianos and noblemen did not sell their game, were in the habit of offering to both high and low, and drinking themselves.”²⁴ What he looks back to so fondly is a simpler, more rustic time when the rural population– both noble and peasant– did not put on airs. He does not refer to it by this term and indeed he seems to imply the day was in his own living memory, but it is the same sort of simple, hail-fellow-well-met, happy peasants and may pole medieval ideal to which romanticizers like the Young Englanders and William Morris hearkened. Borrow not only sees this in some of the more removed “Welsh” areas of Wales, but he sees two other phenomena that make Wales like the living Middle Ages to him. On the one hand, he describes the destruction of this placid world through the onslaught of industrialism. Jolly, well-fed peasants have become base, surly, animalistic colliers, retaining the tongue of their fathers, but speaking of prosaic things. In other words, they have begun to lose touch with their own past and, in so doing, they are losing touch with the unique and poetic Welsh spirit. He realizes fully that this is through English greed, but he also seems to blame Progress itself, the motto of so much Victorian political and economic enthusiasm. As many Victorians believed failure to continuously move forward meant decline, whether it be technologically, imperialistically, or morally, progress was eating away at the very fabric of traditional English, or rather British, society.

²³For instance, King John’s illegitimate daughter Joanna married Llewelyn Fawr and, two generations later, Llewelyn ap Gruffydd would marry Eleanor, daughter of Simon de Montfort, England’s *de facto* king from 1264 To 1265.

²⁴Borrow, 220.

For those like Borrow who shuddered at smelly, noisy modernity, the visible cost of progress was in the dull faces of Welsh colliers, the ancient stock of noble bards reduced to filthy living conditions, pub room brawls, and no understanding of Welsh poetry or history. The most damning evidence of progress for Borrow is that they seemed to be losing their language as well. Merthyr Tydfil, Wrexham, and Glamorgan (to a lesser degree) all seem to trouble him in this regard, all areas of industrialism that Defoe would have hailed as promising pockets of progress.

However, areas remain where the rural Welsh are deeply in touch with their own past. Here, like Defoe 130 years before him, Borrow finds stories of the past in everyone's mouth. Even uneducated peasants retain a firm hold on Welsh history as an expression of national culture. After talking with a miller's sons about the Welsh poet Huw Morris and other points of Welsh history, he remarks to his wife, "what a difference . . . between a Welshman and an Englishman of the lower class. What would a Suffolk miller's swain have said if I repeated to him verses out of Beowulf or even Chaucer, and had asked him about the residence of Skelton."²⁵ His derision of the English is noticeable throughout and, at times, he seems ashamed to call himself one. He adopts the term "Saxon," itself a medieval usage, when a Welsh speaker refers to an Englishman.²⁶ Borrow is stung at times by anti-English hostility as when one Welsh woman pretends not to understand him because he is an Englishman speaking Welsh.²⁷ However, he realizes the hostilities run deep and are certainly, from a historic point of view, justified. "All conquered people are suspicious of their conquerors. The English have forgot that they ever conquered the Welsh, but some ages will elapse before the Welsh forget that the English have conquered them."²⁸

Borrow also sees so many sites connected with Welsh history that, travelling on foot as he does (in itself quite a medieval mode for someone of his social status), he is continually arrested by the knowledge of past events, their evidence clearly alive in the hearts and minds of the people and even the land itself in the more rural areas. Gazing on Dinas Bran in the rain, he fancifully muses "It put me in mind of some old king, unfortunate and melancholy but a king still, with the look of a king, and the ancestral crown still on his furrowed forehead."²⁹ Later, looking back on the Cambrian Mountains – the same mountains that had inspired Coleridge – he exclaims, "Oh, the wild hills of Wales, the land of old renown and of wonder, the land of Arthur and Merlin."³⁰ Unlike the more cynical Defoe, Borrow is far more open to believing tales of Arthur, despite their weak evidence in the history he knows so well. He writes matter of factly – even blithely – of Llewarch Hen, a sixth century prince who "is said in one of the historical triads to have been one of the three consulting warriors

²⁵Ibid., 107.

²⁶See Ibid., 19.

²⁷Ibid., 80-82.

²⁸Ibid., 263.

²⁹Ibid., 311.

³⁰Ibid., 350.

of Arthur” and who attained the ripe old age of 140 or 150 years.³¹ Of Snowdon he writes first of its natural beauty and second of its historical connections, with Vortigern and Merlin (the latter of whom he names “the son of a Roman consul by a British woman”) and later to Llewelyn ap Gruffydd and Owain Glyndwr. Indeed he asks rhetorically, “Who when he thinks of Snowdon does not associate it with the heroes of romance, Arthur and his knights?” because it is from this very “connection with romance that Snowdon derives its chief interest.”³² Actual figures merge in his mind with legendary and his romantic heart is powerless to separate the two. So caught up in the romance around him is Borrow that he is willing to give myth equal weight with historic “fact” because, in the end, the myth is half of what provides Wales with its charm. The suspension of disbelief, in Borrow’s mind as well as the minds of the Welsh themselves, creates a particular national character and it is to this that Borrow responds and thus makes reality.

At other points in his journey, he has what might nearly be described as visions of the past before him, so strongly is the history he has read imprinted upon the land. Looking across the isle of Anglesey, he thinks so vividly of the Druids who once inhabited it that he sees their slaughter at the hands of the Romans in AD 60. “I thought I heard groans, cries of rage, and the dull, awful sound of bodies precipitated down rocks. Then as I looked towards the sea I thought I saw the fleet of Gryffith Ab Cynan steering from Ireland to Aber Menai.”³³ Later, during his visit to the tiny town of Treff y Talcot (Village of the Tollgate), he demonstrates how little every day life had essentially changed over the centuries. He is passed by two English girls speaking in their native language and “For a moment I fancied myself in the times of Owen Glendower, and that I saw two females whom his marauders had carried off from Cheshire or Shropshire to toil and slave in the Welshery, walking together after the labours of the day were done, and bemoaning their misfortunes in their own homely English.”³⁴

It is this very connection with the realities of human life – past and present – that makes Borrow’s narrative so engaging. At times, he leans toward hyperbole in his adoration of the land and his disparagement of his own English heritage. However, through his combination of human insight, his interaction with the people he meets on his journey, and his deep connection with the past, a feeling of Wales as a land where time has stood still emerges. A. G. Bradley, in his own tour through Wales, taken about forty years after Borrow’s, lacks this human element. But what he lacks in human interaction he certainly makes up for in devotion to Borrow and attention to historical detail. Following many of the same paths taken by Borrow, Bradley in fact states his purpose as “merely to gossip along the high roads, where the present life and the past history of the country chiefly gathers, and to linger here and there in some sort of endeavour to fill up a little bit of the great blank which, except in mere physical outline, Wales as a country represents to the

³¹Ibid., 359.

³²Ibid., 161.

³³Ibid., 223.

³⁴Ibid., 255.

average Englishman.”³⁵ More so even than Borrow before him, Bradley’s account is filled with historical incidents that Welsh sites and buildings suggest to his vivid imagination. He comments “It is indeed hard work to get about North Wales in this garrulous fashion, with anything like expedition.”³⁶ Bradley too feels a pang of nostalgia for the “halcyon days before the railway came.”³⁷ However, his main goal is not so much mourning the past as making it come alive by describing it as something still intimately connected to the present. In his loving description of the Valle Crucis monastery, Bradley speaks of the peace still to be found within the ruins, and the attraction of the place even to the many tourists who visit, knowing nothing of Welsh history. “Once admitted, you may wander here at will and unimportuned, over the velvet turf that now spreads over the floor of the roofless nave . . . or try and build up again in fancy, if you choose, the broken fabric piece by piece, and fill the chancel once again with tonsured, white-robed monks, and the nave with the motley figures of a countryside that spent half its days in war.”³⁸

Like many travellers in Wales before him, Bradley is struck by the vast amount of history around him. “Every condition of the country seems in a conspiracy to keep alive the embers of a past, more remote than, as a rule, one’s fancy lingers over in England.”³⁹ By this he does not simply mean the obvious remains of ruined castles and stone circles. Far from the response of Defoe, who found nothing of interest in the naked rocks, this is where Bradley finds the fuel of his imagination. “It is only upon memories that are real flesh and blood, and before stones that speak that I feel any temptation to linger here, and Wales is full of such.”⁴⁰ Evidently inspired by the Waverley novels, he yearns for a Welsh Scott to adequately paint the portrait in words of Wales’ finest heroes. For, “What finer picture, for instance, is there in all history than that of the last Llewelyn, standing with his back against the Snowdon Mountains, which are now by the way looming high in front of us, and defying a power strong enough to crush France, as it was soon to do!”⁴¹

Bradley happily accepts the many legends connected with Wales as each ancient tale only heightens the mystery of the place. He writes that the “footprint of King Arthur” is in Rhuthun, where a stone marks the spot where Arthur beheaded a subject, and that there is a mark on the vestry door of a church in Pen Pigyn where Glyndwr flung a dagger in a fit of anger.⁴² Part of Bradley seems to realize that these legends are just romance, but he nonetheless prefers to abandon the blinders of skepticism because to wear them would serve

³⁵A. G. Bradley, *Highways and Byways in North Wales*, (1898; reprint, London: Macmillan, 1909), 7, 22.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 183.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 36.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 57.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 183.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 184-85.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 118-19, 95.

only to neutralize the country's special magic. And when he is confronted with real historical evidence to illustrate legend, he is deeply moved. In Llanrwst, for instance, he writes:

But there is something here, resting on the stone floor, that should awaken livelier emotions than the names of any mere country barons, whether Welsh or English, and this is the stone coffin of Llewelyn ap Iorwerth, or the Great. It was brought from the original tomb at Aberconway to Maenan Abbey, when the whole establishment was moved under Edward I., and from Maenan hither at the dissolution, or soon after. Much indeed, of the interest of Llanrwst church lies in the woodwork and other treasures that were conveyed hither from the royal and ancient house. A recumbent effigy in full armour of Howel Coetmor, a noted soldier in his day, and lord of the valley before the advent of the Wynnes, seems to strike an earlier note, and tell of another epoch from that of the Tudor and Jacobean monuments that lie around and beneath it. For he led, we are told, a hundred men of Denbigh, to the field of Poitiers, and fought there valiantly, falling afterwards in Flanders.⁴³

Even the walls of Conwy inspire him to imagine himself in the Middle Ages in a way that the walls of York or Chester cannot and in a way that he obviously enjoys. For Bradley, "It is hard . . . to lay the phantoms of the past that spring upon us in the valleys of the Dee and Clwyd at the lightest whisper of the days of old, and clog our path with perplexities" but in feeling the past alive around him, he is able to relive history in a way he never could from a comfortable armchair in an English library.⁴⁴ History thus lives in a real and tangible sense in the untouched byways of the Welsh landscape.

What these five travellers show us is a definite shift in the perception of Wales, one which mirrors intellectual and cultural movements of the day. Defoe visited at a time when Enlightenment principles of reason and logic were the fashion. Untamed nature was repellant and anyone who was anyone holidayed on the Continent. However, with the rise of Romanticism and the growth of the Gothic Revival, intellectuals and other travellers began to seek out just the sort of places that Wales epitomized— wild, lofty, awe-inspiring, and filled with atmospheric relics of earlier times. For some, like George Borrow, the very ancient nature of the Welsh tongue itself made the country appealing. Here one could be surrounded by medieval things and primeval forests, and listen to people converse in a language straight out of the Middle Ages. The study of history itself had become more fashionable as well with the appointment of history chairs at Oxbridge, and so Wales took on the further aspect of being a place for the very Victorian notion of the improving leisure activity. As academic history still appeared dominated by historical novelists like Charles Kingsley, or literary masters like Carlyle and Macaulay, it is no wonder that Victorians sought the past in a "living" form. A historical novel could be improving yet entertaining. How

⁴³Ibid., 231. In an interesting comment on the malleability and living nature of legend, on my own trip to Llanrwst in 1998, the common belief of locals was that this effigy was of Dafydd ap Llewelyn.

⁴⁴Ibid., 187, 231.

much better was it to visit the preserved Middle Ages of a neighbouring land? And so, tourists flocked to the Welsh seaside and took in a bit of history on the side. How different are we today, “history” as an academic pursuit is considered dull, but films and novels about the past proliferate. With this in mind, imagine walking, or biking, or perhaps riding, through the back roads of Northern Wales, with Bradley’s guide in hand, taking in the refreshing air, enjoying unspoilt nature, and learning about history as it happened, where it happened. Even without the strong powers of fancy of these later writers, it is still a pleasant thought indeed.