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The Welsh Revival and English Medievalism

Yuri Fuwa

The Welsh Revival movement in the eighteenth century had an important English dimension. The leading Welsh scholars provide links between the antiquarian and literary activities in England and Wales, and contributed much to enhancing knowledge of ancient Welsh history and literature among English antiquarians. Lewis Morris is the key figure. The printing house he established in Holyhead, Anglesey in 1735 produced the first Welsh periodical, *Tlysau yr Hen Oesoedd* [= Gems of past ages]; Evan Evans's interest in Welsh antiquity, to quote Aneirin Lewis, "arose from a close association with Lewis Morris and his literary colleagues."⁽¹⁾ As well as encouraging his Welsh colleagues in their study, Morris also positively welcomed English enquiries about Welsh subjects. His list of correspondents includes illustrious English antiquarians such as Thomas Carte, Thomas Percy, Richard Hurd, Thomas Warton, Thomas Gray and William Mason. The last two names will recur frequently in this paper.

One of Morris's legacies in England was the establishment by his disciples, known collectively as the Morrisonian circle, of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion in London in 1751. The Society's main purposes were to cultivate "the British language," that is, the Welsh language and to print ancient British Manuscripts, with critical and explanatory notes. It also gave Englishmen access to Welsh culture. Thomas Pennant, noted for his precursory picturesque

tourbook, *Tour in Wales*, is listed as a corresponding member in the records of the Society; Robert Southey and Walter Scott were once honorary members.

Evan Evans, one of the best Welsh scholars of the day, was sought after by Thomas Percy. Their correspondence, which began in July 1761, had important results: Percy encouraged Evans to publish a book entitled *Some Specimens of the Poetry of the Antient Welsh Bards* in 1764. This book is a monumental work as “the first substantial selection of early Welsh poetry”⁽²⁾ accessible in English, and it became an influential source book for English antiquaries towards the end of the eighteenth century. It provided Gray, for example, with materials which enabled him to prepare his fragmentary Welsh poems “The Triumphs of Owen” “The Death of Hoel” “Caradoc” and “Conan.”

Percy’s eagerness for Welsh materials for his own book, *Reliques of the Antient English Poetry*, is manifest in the letters he wrote to Evans in 1764. Evans informed Percy about Arthurian romances and provided detailed notes on Arthurian figures. A letter from Percy dated 10 April of the same year shows his misreading the spelling of St Greal as St Great, revealing that he was still unaware of the legend of the Holy Grail at the time.⁽³⁾ There can be no doubt of Percy’s immense debt to the Welsh materials Evans passed on to him; in turn Percy’s *Reliques* helped greatly to lend impetus to the antiquarian interests in England, and so eventually to English medievalism.

Prior to the acquaintance between Evans and Percy in 1761, there was one other recorded case of interaction between Welsh and English scholarship. Evans wrote to Richard Lewis on 23 April 1760, saying that Thomas Gray admired Gwalchmai’s Ode to Owain Gwynedd, and would soon read Evans’ “Dissertation on the ancient Welsh Bards.” And in June 1760 Gray says in his letter he had already read the manuscript of

Evans' "Dissertation."⁽⁴⁾

Gray's *The Bard* was published in 1757 and William Mason's *Caractacus* in 1759. While they were engaged in the works, the two of them worked closely together : Gray sent Mason his draft of *The Bard*, asking his honest opinion on it ; Mason constantly sent his manuscripts to Gray, who assiduously replied with his comments and corrections, which Mason faithfully adopted in his work.⁽⁵⁾

Gray's notes, which are called the Commonplace Book, are now in Cambridge. One of these notebooks, entitled *Cambri*, reveals that he researched deeply into Welsh poetry. He refers to various sources which he thinks may shed light on the history of Welsh poetry : for example, Camden's *Britannia*, Thomas Carte's *History of England*, Giraldus Cambrensis's *Cambrian Itinerary*. Also he quotes Lewis Morris, the scholar mentioned above, as an authority upon Welsh matters, specifically on ancient Welsh rhyming.⁽⁶⁾ It is not known exactly when Gray started his study of British poetry, but it may be assumed that he started his researches as preparation for *The Bard*, as well as for the history of English poetry which he intended to write jointly with Mason. Arthur Johnston has suggested that his interest in the projected history of English poetry reached its peak between 1758 and 1761.⁽⁷⁾ However, Hurd wrote to Gray in August 1757, asking after the project and requesting of him, not to forget "your design for a history of the English poetry."⁽⁸⁾ This implies that the project was at least inchoate and that it had been announced by the beginning of 1757. Furthermore, in a letter of March 1755 Gray says that he has already started part of *The Bard*. This further pushes back the date of his study of Welsh poetry.

The central motif of *The Bard* is the massacre of the bards by Edward I, for which Gray's source was Thomas Carte's *History of*

England. This book was published in four volumes, and the volume that includes the relevant episode was not published until 1750. Since his notebook contains a quotation from the book, we have a clear terminus a quo of 1750 ; at the same time, his preparatory studies were evidently completed when he started writing *The Bard* in March 1755. It must therefore be dated to early 1755 or, possibly 1754. It was also in 1754 that Gray and Mason ventured to enter upon the daunting project of a history of English poetry. This project was eventually completed by Thomas Warton, who published his *History of English Poetry*, about twenty years later, in 1774. The point is that Gray and Mason's preliminary studies had already taken them, in the 1750s, into the literary territory quite unknown to their contemporaries.

The Bard is in several ways an experimental work : Gray not only made use of Welsh materials but also tried to follow the Welsh stanza form, called Gorchest Beirdd. The poem takes the form of prophecies, foretelling the misfortunes of English kings, successors of "ruthless king, Edward the first." The ensuing misfortunes are said to be the result of Edward's atrocious deeds, the retribution caused by Cambrian curses and tears (l. 9). The figure of the fearsome and defiant bard seems to be almost druidical : he is also endowed with foresight and presented as the champion of the Cambrian cause, namely that of the conquered natives.

The same perspective underpins the dramatic poem *Caractacus*, written by Gray's biographer William Mason in 1759. The work is set in Britain a century after Caesar's invasion. Caractacus is the British king who fought against the Romans for nine years but was defeated by a Roman general, Ostorius. Mason begins with a description of the ancient oak grove in the Isle of Mona, Anglesey, when a Roman

general, Aulus Didius first stepped on the island.

Behold yon *oak*,
How stern he frowns, and with his broad brown arms
Chills the pale plain beneath him : mark yon altar,
The dark stream brawling round its rugged base,
These cliffs, these yawning caverns, this wide circus,
Skirted with unhewn stone : *they awe my soul*,
As if the very Genius of the place
Himself appear'd, and with terrific tread
Stalk'd through his drear domain. And yet, my friends,
(If shapes like his be but the fancy's coinage)
Surely there is a hidden power, that reigns
'Mid the lone majesty of *untam'd nature*,
Controlling sober reason ; tell me else,
Why do these haunts of *barb'rous superstition*
O'ercome me thus? *I scorn them, yet they awe me.*⁽⁹⁾

(my emphases)

Such expressions as “untam'd” and “barb'rous superstition” reflect the conventional, rational, Roman, standard of judgement on ancient Britain. Ancient Britain, with its druidic atmosphere, which Mason skillfully draws here, gives the Roman general a strong sense of wildness, and is depicted as nature beyond control. This overwhelms even the Roman general, who has controlled and subdued other parts of the world. Indeed, the last line “I scorn them, yet they awe me,” is the honest response of a stranger stepping for the first time into an unfamiliar environment. However, there is a premise here that the Romans--the conquerors of the world and ancestors of a sophisticated civilization--should naturally scorn and despise the native as barbarians and regard them as lesser beings than themselves. Yet

Mason does not continue to apply this seemingly accepted pattern of “civilized nation” versus “barbarous natives”; instead he adopts the Britons’ point of view in attempting to explore the conflict between the conquering and the conquered.

One of the main reasons the Roman thought the Britons barbarous was the human sacrifices practised by the druids. Tacitus’s *Annals* and Caesar’s *Gallic War* remain our principal sources for the religion of ancient Britons. Mason is indebted to Tacitus, particularly in the following section from the *Annals*, Book XIV :

[XXIX] Britain was in the charge of Suetonius Paulinus. . . . He prepared accordingly to attack the island of Mona, which had a considerable population of its own, while serving as a haven for refugees. . . .

[XXX] On the beach stood the adverse array, a serried mass of arms and men, with women flitting between the ranks. *In the style of Furies, in robes of deathly black and with dishevelled hair, they brandished their torches* ; while a circle of Druids, lifting their hands to heaven and showering imprecations, struck the troops with such an awe at the extraordinary spectacle that, as though their limbs were paralysed, they exposed thier bodies to wounds without an attempt at movement. Then reassured by their general, and inciting each other never to flinch before a band of females and fanatics, they charged behind the standards, but down all who met them , and enveloped the enemy in his own flames. *The next step was to install a garrison among the conquered population, and to demolish the groves consecrated to their savage cults : for they considered it pious duty to slake the altars with captive blood and to consult their deities by*

means of human entrails.⁽¹⁰⁾

(my emphases)

Tacitus, by referring to the “savage cults” and the bloody religious rites practised by the druids, seems to give an explanation and justification for the massacre. However, Mason gave his own, rather different explanation of human sacrifice: First, Caractacus declares the different attitudes of the Romans and Britons towards their captives.

Barbarians though ye call us,
We know the native rights man claims from man,
And therefore never shall we gall your necks
With chains, or drag you at our scythed cars
In arrogance of triumph. (*Caractacus*, 159.)

Caractacus claims there are fundamental human rights for winners and losers, and suggests it is the Roman, who inhumanly treats captives as slaves, who is barbarous. In another place he also says “that you are captives is the chance of war: Yet captives as ye are, in Britain’s eye/ Ye are not slaves” (159). Mason portrays the Romans as “tyrant” and applies to them such expressions as “insolent,” “Roman ambition,” “vulgar,” “impious,” constantly denouncing the self-centred arrogance of the Roman’s desire to conquer the world. Caractacus also says “Nor ’till taught By Rome (what Britain sure should scorn to learn)/ Her avarice, will we barter you for gold” (159).

Mason lived up to the principles set out here. As Precentor of York and rector of Aston, he preached a sermon specifically intended to support of a petition to Parliament for the abolition of the African slave trade. In his sermon, he appealed to the audience as true Christians, never to lend themselves to arguments in favour of slave trade.

I should think that I surrendered the principles of

Christianity, if I condescended to answer any of their political reasoning [about slave trade] ; or . . . the disadvantages which might result from the prohibition of this *inhuman barter*. Still more should I think that I did dishonour to myself, as a preacher of the gospel of Christ, if . . . I should for a moment allow the intellectual faculties of the African to be naturally inferior to those of the European, and then philosophically argue, that as plants may be meliorated and become more vigorous by transplanting them into a richer soil, so it might be possible, by the culture of education, to improve the intellects even of an African Savage.⁽¹¹⁾ (my emphasis)

This argument implies that there *was* a political rationalization of the slave trade, and an English prejudice against Africans as inferior and savage. Mason must have been well aware of such arrogance in the attitudes of European towards Africans, and flatly asserts that it contradicts Christian doctrine. This sermon was preached in 1788, and it made Alexander Chalmers and S. W. Singer call Mason “one of the first anti-slavery agitators.”⁽¹²⁾

In *Caractacus*, perhaps, we can see Mason already agitating against slavery thirty years before his sermon. He exposes the fallacy that might is right, the weak are wrong; that the cultivated are superior, the barbarous are inferior, doomed--and indeed happier--to be subject to the superior's control. Mason attributes to the Romans the same arrogance he must have witnessed in his contemporaries' arguments for the slave trade.

Mason proceeds to give another rationalization of human sacrifice. Although the captives will be treated respectfully as human beings, they cannot be freed for the sake of Britain's security, nor can

they be sold into slavery, which only avarice would allow. Then follows the next argument :

We give you therefore to the immortal gods,
To them we lift you in the radiant cloud
Of sacrifice. They may in limbs of freedom
Replace your free-born souls, and their high mercy
Haply shall to some better world advance you
... Does there breathe
A wretch so pall'd with the vain fear of death
Can call this cruelty? 'tis love, 'tis mercy.⁽¹³⁾(159)

In justifying human sacrifice, Mason skilfully made use of the Celtic belief in immortality and transmigration of souls. Instead of selling the captives for gold like cattle, claims Caractacus: their motive is not cruelty; the druids sacrifice them out of love.

Interestingly, in the original version Mason gave the Druid a counterargument against Caractacus's reasonings. The druid says that the druids in Britain have never previously practised human sacrifice. He dismisses the charge that there was ever human sacrifice in the past, and moreover he rejects the possibility that druids in Britain will ever do it in the future. Mason even calls the practice "deeds of horror, that shocked humanity," and carefully differentiates druidic practice in Britain from that in France.

Tis true, that Gaul,
True too that Briton, *by the Gauls mistaught,*
Have done such deeds of horror; deeds, that shock'd
Humanity, and call'd from angry Heav'n
These curses on our country. (160, my emphases)

Mason freed the druids in Britain from the charge of "inhuman superstition" Tacitus laid against them. Although he did not actually

describe the massacre of the druids by the Romans in the drama, Mason did suggest it.

Near each a white-rob'd Druid, whose stern voice
Thunder'd deep execrations on the foe.
Now wak'd our horrid symphony, now all
Our harps terrific rang : Meanwhile the grove
Trembled, the altars shook, and through our ranks
Our sacred sisters rush'd in sable robes,
With hair dishevell'd, and funereal brands
Hurl'd round with menacing fury. (157, my emphases)

The verbal correspondence of Mason to Tacitus quoted above reminds the reader of the ensuing tragedy, the massacre of the druids. As Mason eliminates Tacitus's explanation of the Romans' motives for the massacre, there is no way to justify the killing of the druids. Instead, the degree of the Romans' injustice and vulgarity is strengthened. It is reasonable for Mason to call the Romans "impious" because he believes the Christian God will not accept such an unjust treatment of the natives, "tyrannical" and "avaricious" because the Romans only force their prejudices on the natives and pursue their own gain.

The notion that the druids were militant patriots, and champions of liberty, according to A.L. Owen, "arises from Caesar's comment that their teaching" of the immortality of the soul supplied "'the greatest incentive to valour,' and it is supported by Tacitus's description" quoted above. This idea attracted the interest of other men of letters, besides Mason. Among his eighteenth-century predecessors, James Thomson wrote a poem entitled *Liberty* in 1734-36, in which the druids are summoned, and in 1747 William Collins published an "Ode to Liberty" where the druids appear as patriotic and gallant bards and priests. In

1758, a year before the publication of *Caractacus*, “the Druids were called on to support the foreign policy of Pitt the Elder.” ⁽¹⁵⁾ Mason himself composed a number of Odes, whose themes are all directed to a call for liberty. There is no doubt that this concept of patriotic druids appealed to Mason. It is more interesting when we take the historical context into consideration. *Caractacus* was written in 1756–59, a period during which France and England were on uneasy terms. In 1756 there was a threat of a French invasion of England, and in Europe and America England was badly defeated at the time. The letters of Mason, Gray and Horace Walpole show that they were all keenly interested in foreign affairs, an interest which naturally transformed itself into patriotism in time of war.

Gray’s letters written between June and August 1757 show that he had much trouble with the last lines of his poem. He implored Mason, “Pray, think a little about this conclusion, for all depends upon it.” As alternatives to the final version of “To triumph, and to die, are mine,” Gray suggested: “Lo! to be free, to die, are mine.” or “Lo! Liberty and Death are mine.”⁽¹⁶⁾ In both versions, Gray presented the Bard explicitly as a spokesman of the oppressed and a champion of liberty in Britain.

In Mason’s case, it is no wonder he also found the druids and *Caractacus* a useful means of expressing his political views in his drama. Mason took an active part in other political affairs, besides the anti-slavery campaign mentioned above. Later, in the 1770s, after he resigned as King George III’s chaplain, he developed talent as an acute satirist. Horace Walpole said to him: “You have a vein of irony and satire that the best of causes bleeds for having wanted.”⁽¹⁷⁾ It might therefore be possible that when the druid replied to *Caractacus* by saying that the British druids, unlike their counterparts in France,

never practiced human sacrifice, he was insinuating that this inhuman conduct was due to the evil influence of France.

When Gray's *The Bard* and Mason's *Caractacus* were first published, they did not attract much critical attention. Gray was obliged to add explanatory notes to *the Bard* in the 1768 edition. A review of *Caractacus* appearing in *Critical Review* in 1759 also betrays ignorance of the druids.⁽¹⁸⁾

However, Edward D. Snyder points out that knowledge of druidism was already common by 1800.⁽¹⁹⁾ As we have seen earlier, various Celtic materials became available to the English reader, and readily accessible in English, but only after Gray and Mason published their works. For more than ten years later, in the 1770s, both of the works were reissued almost every year. Their success is eloquent testimony to the gradual but increasing popularity of works based on Welsh and British antiquity, notably those featuring druidism and bardism. Welsh-based themes, with their accompanying language of druidism, were revived and popularised, perhaps ironically by Gray and Mason, English men of letters. Later from the 1790s to the nineteenth century, druidism further developed and functioned as an outlet for Welsh nationalistic feelings, as voiced by Iolo Morganwg ; but English medievalists shrank away, and after the shock of the French Revolution, turned increasingly to the reassuring Toryism of King Arthur.

Gray was ahead of his time. While contemporaries like Richard Hurd and Thomas Warton parroted Dryden's criticism of Chaucer as a barbarous poet, who had no understanding of metrical regularity, he pioneered appreciation of the great medieval poet.⁽²⁰⁾ Equally important was his discovery, made during his researches into English poetry, that Welsh poetry was not barbaric, but full of sophistication. His

judgement, that it “appears both for variety and accuracy to equal the invention of the most polish’d Nations” ⁽²¹⁾ is in the context of its time amazingly precocious.

Mason was also remarkable in presenting the native British in terms such as “sophisticated native king” and “sagacious druids,” instead of “barbarous British king” and “fanatic druids.” The revisionist approach which Gray and Mason adopted toward the British past was, I believe, a vitally important stimulus to the growth of medievalism.

NOTES

- (1) *The Correspondence of Thomas Percy and Evan Evans*, ed. Aneurin Lewis (Baton Rouge, Louisiana : Louisiana University Press, 1957) vii. Hereafter abbreviated as *Correspondence of Thomas Percy*.
- (2) *The Oxford Companion to the Literature of Wales*, compiled and ed. Meic Stephens (Oxford and New York : Oxford University Press, 1990) 187-88.
- (3) *Correspondence of Thomas Percy*, 80.
- (4) *Correspondence of Thomas Gray*, ed. Paget Toynbee and Leonard Whibley (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1935) 2 : 680. Hereafter abbreviated as *Correspondence of Thomas Gray*.
- (5) *Correspondence of Thomas Gray*, 2 : 465, 467, 501-07, 527-30 et al.
- (6) Roger Martin, “Cambri,” *Chronologie de la vie et de l'oeuvre de Thomas Gray* (London : Oxford University Press, 1931) 170-99. Hereafter abbreviated as *Chronologie*.
- (7) Arthur Johnston, “Gray’s ‘The Triumphs of Owen,’” *The Review of English Studies*, n. s. 11 (1960) : 275-85.
- (8) *Correspondence of Thomas Gray*, 2 : 517.
- (9) *The Works of William Mason*, 4 vols., (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1811) 2 : 81. Hereafter abbreviated as *Works*.
- (10) Tacitus, *The Annals*, trans. John Jackson, vol. 5 (1937 ; London: William Heinemann ; Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 1969) 153-57.
- (11) *Works*, 4 : 181-82.

- (12) J. W. Draper, *William Mason : A Study in Eighteenth-century Culture* (New York : New York University Press, 1924) 108.
- (13) There seems to have been controversy over Mason's treatment of human sacrifice. Richard Hurd and especially William Warburton objected to the passage but Mason was reluctant to erase it. *The Early Letters of Bishop Richard Hurd 1739-1762*, ed. Sarah Brewer (Woodbridge, Suffolk : Boydell Press, 1995) 320, 337.
- (14) A. L. Owen, *The Famous Druids* (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1962), 138.
- (15) *The Famous Druids*, 141.
- (16) *Correspondence of Thomas Gray*, 2 : 504.
- (17) *Horace Walpole's Correspondence with William Mason*, ed. W. S. Lewis, Grover Cronin, Jr. and Charles H. Bennett (London : Oxford University Press, 1955) 1 : 77.
- (18) *Critical Review* 8 (1759): 11-16. *Caractacus's* reception was mixed and did not enjoy the same immediate popularity as Mason's other dramatic poetry *Elfrida* did: *Elfrida* was reissued ten times during the eighteenth century.
- (19) Edward D. Snyder, *The Celtic Revival in English Literature* (1923 ; Gloucester, Mass. : Peter Smith, 1965) 180.
- (20) William Powell Jones, *Thomas Gray, Scholar* (New York : Russell and Russell, 1965) 86.
- (21) *Chronologie*, 172.