

Mobile Mystery

A Paper at the Literary Club, Cincinnati

November 5, 2012

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In 1157, King Henry II of England invaded the Welsh kingdom of Gwynedd. It was ruled by Owain ap Gruffydd ap Cynan, best known in Welsh history as Owain Gwynedd. Henry's forces ravaged the eastern parts of Owain's kingdom.

They destroyed many churches. This naturally upset the local residents. Owain's men ambushed Henry's army in a narrow mountainous ravine, and Henry himself narrowly evaded capture. His fleet accompanying the invasion also was destroyed by the Welsh defenders.

In a rare near contemporary account, the priest Gerallt Cymro, known in English as Gerald of Wales, reported that Owain Gwynedd said to his troops, on the eve of battle:

"We ought to rejoice at this conduct of our adversary; for, unless supported by divine assistance, we are far inferior to the English; and they, by their behavior, have made God their enemy, who is able most powerfully to avenge both himself and us. We therefore most devoutly promise God that we will henceforth pay greater reverence than ever to churches and holy places".¹

My Welsh forebears have continued to be effectively rallied, in surprisingly similar terms, in succeeding centuries, such as the revivalist who characterized the Welsh situation as too far from God, and too close to England.

Owain, had twenty acknowledged children, several of whom vied for the kingdom when he died in 1170. Together, Dafydd and Rhodri attacked and killed their brother Hywel ab Owain Gwynedd. Dafydd drove out Maelgwn,

sending him fleeing to Ireland. Another brother, Cynan, died, removing one contender.

Dafydd captured and imprisoned his brothers Maelgwn (who had returned from Ireland) and Rhodri. He was now sole ruler of Gwynedd. And despite, or perhaps because of their recent misunderstandings, he married Emma of Anjou, sister of his dynasty's recent foe, King Henry.

Owain's son, Prince Madoc ab Owain ap Gruffydd ap Cynan, was sensitive to his uncertain prospects in these trying circumstances. He had a new plan. He set sail in 1170 on the western ocean. By fortitude, and good fortune, and to his evident surprise, **he discovered America**. He made his ostensibly improbable landfall in Mobile Bay in what now is Alabama.

He returned to Wales, and galvanized an expedition to retrace his voyage and to settle the promising new Welsh dominion he had found. He never returned from his second voyage. The bards recounted his exploits in oblique and muted references.

After 1170, little more was heard of Madoc for over three hundred years – a mere blip on the celtic timescale. It fell to his fellow Welshman John Dee, Queen Elizabeth's authority on matters classical, historical and alchemical, to retrieve the worthy exploits of Madoc from ancient myth.

Not only would this redound to the glory of her Welsh Tudor dynasty. It also would enliven contemporary politics. It was a sustainable assertion of prior British claim to the territories recently claimed by Spain after Columbus's journeys.

The Welsh claim to pre-eminence in American settlement ebbs and flows, yet is perennial. Some averred that the land mass in question took its name not from Amerigo Vespucci at all, but from the 15th century Welsh merchant Ap Meurig, anglicized to Amerike, whose ships were used by John Cabot.

Some say that the Welsh view of our history thrives on a lively blend of supposition, inspiration, and selective discernment of minimally distracting facts.

John Dee assured the queen that Prince Madoc's 12th century voyages confirmed her title to North America as heir of the Welsh kings². In the first recorded use of the term, he called these lands the "British Empire".³ In 1577, Dee heard from his friend Gerard Mercator in Duisburg, best known for the Mercator projection world map, and as the first to use the term "Atlas" for a collection of maps.

Mercator wrote to Dee, citing a lost geographical text, drawing his attention to "alleged survivors of the race of Arthur", who were still active in northern waters in the late 14th century.⁴

John Dee presented the Queen with a map, and formal "Title Royal", which said:

"The Lord Madoc, sonne to Owain Gwynedd, Prince of North Wales, led a Colonie and inhabited in Terra Florida or thereabowts".

This claim, he said, established British title to:

"all the Coasts and Islands beginning at or about Terra Florida and unto Atlantis [which was Dee's name for America] going Northerly",

and then to all the northern islands extending as far as Russia.

David Powel was chaplain to Sir Henry Sidney, Lord President of the Council of Wales. One of the earliest printed reports of Madoc's story is found in Powel's "History of Cambria" in 1584, when Anglo-Spanish relations were fast moving downhill. Powel tells us:

"Madoc left the land in contention betwixt his brethrens and prepared certain ships with men and munitions and sought adventures by seas, sailing west. He came to a land unknown where he saw many strange things...Of the visage and returned of this Madoc there be many fables, as

*the common people do use in distance of length and time, rather to augment than diminish; **but sure it is that he was there***".

These extraordinary claims served the convenient twin purpose of buttressing the standing of the Tudors, and of asserting English title in the New World. At first the account attracted minimal attention in the popular imagination.

However, this all changed when the much-traveled and imaginative Welsh envoy to Persia, Sir Thomas Herbert, published his 1634 account of his extensive travels in Asia and Africa. He liked to reference his tales with patriotic asides. He described "*Welsh remains in several exotique places of the world*". He noted that "*I have formerly in a line or two vindicated the honor of our Country, lost in the greater part by protract of malicious time*".

In the expanded 1638 second edition of his book, he added a new subtitle: "*with a revival of the first Discoverer of America*". In this chapter, he described his return home from his travels, up the Atlantic past America, and recalled that:

"Madoc ab Owain Gwynedd discovered America above three hundred yeeres before Columbus."

Herbert writes:

"After some patience and weeks saile due West, hee descried land, a land where hee founde store of good victuals, sweet water, freshe ayre, gold (and which was best) where they were a good whiles healthfull: ...Here Madoc planted, raised some fortifications for defence, left a hundred and twenty men, and after long saile arrived safely back at home, where hee recounted his mervailous successfull voyage, the fruitfulness of the soil, the simplicity of the Savages, the great wealth abounding there, and facility of conquest: a discourse that fill'd them with joy and admiration; and whereby hee drew many willing minds to return with him. In ten good Barques, loaded with all necessary provisions they advanced back, and most fortunately re-attained the same place they hoped for".⁵

Herbert assures us that “although Madoc and his Cambrian crew are dead and their memory moth-eaten; yet the footsteps and reliques of their former living there are to be traced: the language they left there, the religion they taught the Savages, manifested it”. He concludes that “the Spaniards have not so much right to those Countries...as our King has”.

Eleven years later, Thomas Herbert became best known to history as the last loyal companion of King Charles I, who accompanied the king in his last hours, and then to the scaffold in 1649. The king gave him his silver watch, and after the Restoration, Charles II created him baronet.

All that remained was to adduce evidence, and a credible framework of historical fact to demonstrate, to a skeptical world, Madoc’s self-evident enterprise and its aftermath. This was a challenge too good for my countrymen to resist.

Sir Thomas Herbert, after listing Mexican words which he suggested showed marked affinities to the Welsh, then gave the perfect prompt:

“And a certain Inhabitant of Virginia (a place subject to the King of Great Britain) stragling not long ago into the Wilderness, by chance, fell among a People who according to some Law or Custom of theirs condemned him to Death when he, in Hearing of them, made his Prayer to God in the British Tongue [that is the Welsh tongue]; upon which he was released.

The story of Madoc had faded after the Stuarts succeeded the Tudors on the English throne. Herbert’s book re-ignited it. The hunt was on for the fate of Madoc and his descendants.

Meanwhile, in 1681, William Penn wanted to call his colony New Wales, but was obstructed by Welsh officials, and failed to persuade Charles II to overrule them. On March 5, 1681, Penn wrote to his friend Robert Turner:

“...this day my country was confirmed to me under the Great Seal of England with large powers and privileges. I chose the name New-Wales...But when the secretary, a Welshman, refused to have it called New

*Wales, I proposed Sylvania, and they added Penn to it - a name the King would give it in honor to my father. Penn also being Welsh for a head, as ..Penmaenmawr in Wales, they called this Pennsylvania, which is the high, or head, woodlands. Although I much opposed it and went to the King to have it struck out and altered, he said it was passed and he would take it upon him. Nor could twenty guineas move the undersecretaries to vary the name".*⁶

So Pennsylvania it became, and remains, peopled by multiple groups of Welsh quakers, who littered the place with names like Bryn Mawr, Bala, Cynwyd, North Wales, Meirion and so on. Penn's Welsh deputy, Thomas Lloyd, first heard the stories of Welsh-speaking Indians while he still was in Wales.

Later, when in New York, Lloyd met his Oxford contemporary, the Welsh pastor Morgan Jones. Jones had quarreled with his flock over their non-payment of his stipend, and what was described as his own "ill-life and conversation". Lloyd was so astonished by the story Jones told him, that he made Jones write and sign his account.

Jones told Lloyd how he had served as military chaplain aboard vessels sailing to South Carolina. Seeking supplies ashore in the wilderness, they were captured in Tuscarora country. On speaking Welsh he was ransomed by the tribal chief, and as he recounts:

"They carried us to their town, and entertained us civilly for four months, and I did converse with them in the British tongue, and did preach to them three times a week in the British tongue."

In 1690, Edward Lhuyd, recently appointed keeper of the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, was instrumental in having the secretary of the Royal Society (one Dr. Plot) read a paper there based on the account. It proposed that Herbert's book, and Jones's tale "offered the most incontestable proof that can be desired" of the whole Madoc tradition. England, not Spain, had the just title to America, "which should have more justly been called Madocia".⁷

This provoked a crescendo of interest from travelers, dreamers, preachers and merchant venturers. This was the second flowering of Welsh awareness

of the national esteem to be had from being first to find and settle the new world.

Stone forts and mounds abound along the Alabama, Tennessee, Ohio and Missouri rivers. They were found to reflect medieval patterns of settlement, and of construction, in Wales itself. Early white settlers told of further encounters with fair-skinned Welsh-speaking Indians.

In 1810, Governor Sevier of Tennessee replied to a query from Major Stoddard of the US Army Corps as follows:

"I took the opportunity of inquiring of... the ruling chief of the the Cherokee Nation... Oconostota..., if he could inform me what people it had been which had left such fortifications in their country.

Sevier recounts the Chief's response that they were made by white people that had formerly inhabited the area. This people had waged war with the Cherokees, before they at last moved down the Tennessee to the Ohio. Oconostota informed the governor that they were a people called "Welsh, and that they had crossed the Great Water and landed first near the mouth of the Alabama River near Mobile".⁸

Also, an early Portuguese map marks territory on the Alabama as "Terra de Gales", which means land of the Welsh (though it may be a later interpolation).

In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, a flood of migrant Welsh families set out for America to escape poverty, and to seek economic, religious and civic freedoms. They settled in New York, in Pennsylvania, and in the rich lands of the Ohio and beyond, raising children such as William Bebb to be governor of the state.

My, sadly late, friend Professor Gwyn A. Williams says that "Politics in Wales begin with the American Revolution...The war turned many Welsh

Dissenters...into spiritual Americans within British society". And following the revered footsteps of Madoc, the magnet of America for his countrymen was irresistible.

Gwyn is one of the more reliable, of recent commentators. He writes with pungent effervescence, and breathes tension and pace into his treatment of this, and other, remarkable Welsh American themes.

The late 18th century saw continuing interplay of British antiquities, global instincts, freedom of worship, enlightenment philosophy, Welsh aspirations and plans for utopian settlement in America.⁹ Welshmen such as Richard Price, pioneer of life insurance, dissenting preacher, moral philosopher, friend of Franklin and keen advocate of the American cause, affirmed the ethical basis of the American revolution and advised on drafting of the American Constitution.

Many of his Welsh countrymen, and English friends of the Enlightenment, and of its successors of the Romantic period, either were setting out for America in the revolutionary fervor of the times, or making plans to do so, in search of the spiritual, economic, and political emancipation denied at home.

We now must turn to Edward Williams, whose bardic name, by which he is best known in Wales, was Iolo Morganwg. He was a towering if eccentric 18th and early 19th century genius of Welsh letters. A stonemason by trade, and inspired bard and antiquary by calling; a contemporary and acquaintance of William Blake, he was self-educated in the sophisticated and complex meters of Welsh verse.

Such was his skill in this, that he resented the supercilious claims of the northern Welsh in London to be foremost in Welsh literary accomplishment. He had unrivalled knowledge of the medieval manuscripts scattered among the homes of the Welsh gentry. He was accorded ready access to these in view of his celebrity.

Inspired in part by his studies and imagination, and in part by the laudanum habit he shared with his friend Samuel Taylor Coleridge, he produced poems of his own, in both Welsh and English.

But he also claimed to find “original works” which he attributed to the greatest of Welsh poets (the 15th century Dafydd ap Gwilym), to show Dafydd’s foremost familiarity with Iolo’s native Glamorgan, in southern rather than northern Wales. In fact, it is now clear that Iolo wrote them himself, mightily confusing learned Welsh literary commentary well into the 20th century.

The writings, attributed also by Iolo to other bards, were readily accepted as such, since Iolo was beyond doubt the foremost Welsh scholar of his time. These works would only get to be unscrambled by scholars of the Welsh national library and universities, for whose creation Iolo always was an impassioned advocate, and which eventually came into being in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He also conceived and formalized bardic procedures at Welsh national eisteddfodic festivals, which are a popular pillar of Welsh culture today.

Iolo, Coleridge and Robert Southey, shared the contemporary millennial and utopian fascination, and aspiration, to emigrate to a new emancipated home in North America.

Iolo was held in high regard by Coleridge, and by Southey, who wrote from London in May 1804 to his wife (whose sister was infelicitously married to Coleridge), back to their shared home of Greta Hall at Keswick: “Bard Williams is in town, so I shall shake one honest man by the hand whom I did not expect to see”.

Honesty would be an unlikely attribution to Iolo by 20th century scholarly descramblers of his work. Colorful perhaps, inventive, brilliant, artful?

Coleridge wrote a sonnet on their shared Pantisocratic idea of emigration to the United States. It is not directly related to our purpose, but gives a nice sense of the spirit of these friends:

No more my visionary soul shall dwell
On joys that were; no more endure to weigh
The shame and anguish of the evil day,
Wisely forgetful! O'er the ocean swell
Sublime of Hope, I seek the cottag'd dell
Where Virtue calm with careless step may stray,
And dancing to the moonlight roundelay,
The wizard Passions weave an holy spell.
Eyes that have ach'd with Sorrow! Ye shall weep
Tears of doubt-mingled joy, like theirs who start
From Precipices of distemper'd sleep,
On which the fierce-eyed Fiends their revels keep,
And see the rising Sun, and feel it dart
New rays of pleasance trembling to the heart.

They originally intended to establish a community on the banks of the Susquehanna, but by 1795 Southey doubted the viability of this, and instead proposed moving to Wales, among other things to facilitate his learning of the Welsh language. He and Coleridge were unable to agree on the location, causing the project to collapse.

In 1794 Richard Price's close friend Joseph Priestley, preacher, scientist, dissenting unitarian, researcher in gases, inventor of soda water, friend of America's founding fathers, and discoverer of Oxygen, actually did emigrate to escape threats to his safety in England. He made his new home at the Northumberland confluence of the two branches of the Susquehanna, where his house and laboratory are lovingly preserved.

According to Iolo Morganwg's contemporary biographer, Iolo reported that he attended Priestley's embarkation for America, "and was one of the last persons the Doctor conversed with upon British ground".¹⁰

In 1805 Robert Southey, already an influential man of letters in England, soon to be Poet Laureate, was moved, mainly by Iolo,¹¹ to pen his epic poem

"Madoc" .¹² We have a personal link with this work. Some years ago I was able to acquire, in an astonishing bargain, Southey's signed personal copy of the 1730 first printed edition, in Welsh and Latin, of the 10th century Welsh Laws of my namesake King Hywel Dda – Howell the Good.

Southey references this very book extensively in his poem. And he had guidance from Iolo on courtly practice in medieval Wales, which, as you might expect, was joyously inventive.

Southey's "Madoc" is lengthy – **think:** Indiana Jones in 400 pages of blank verse. It recounts Prince Madoc's journeys, his adventures, and his totally fanciful accomplishments among the native Americans. Southey's eminence ensured that Welsh enthusiasm for Madoc's exploits gained new vitality. The story went viral. The hunt was on again.

In 1792, Iolo had written to Hannah More:

"You, madam, are amongst the few to whom I communicate an account of my intended expedition into the deepest wilds of America, an excellent place for a poet..Upwards of twenty different accounts have been, within these thirty years, received of those Welsh Indians, the remains of Madoc's colony. There are now in Wales, persons that have been amongst them that understood their language and found it pure Welsh...

"There are many pious Dissenting ministers in Wales that are eager to carry the glad tidings to their poor bewildered brethren, but knowing little of those sciences that can enable them to traverse deserts of a thousand miles and mark the course of their journey, they cannot undertake such an expedition. I will go before and prepare the way for them".¹³

Iolo practised open-air sleeping and living on fruit and berries in anticipation of traversing the United States, and the wilderness beyond, with John Evans of Waunfawr in Wales, in search of Madoc's heirs among the Indians. Alas, rheumatic and other considerations intervened, obliging Iolo to change his plans, and John Evans proceeded alone.

In Cincinnati, John Evans met with Morgan John Rhys, a leader and inventive pathfinder of Welsh settlement in the United States. His aim was to found a permanent Welsh colony in western Pennsylvania, but his ventures had only spotted success.

Rhys had toured the entire republic on horseback, motivated by wanting to encourage Welsh immigration in the libertarian spirit of the times, and to locate the Welsh Indians. While still in Wales, he had printed the jacobin “Cylchgrawn Gymraeg” or “Welsh Periodical”, at the Methodist Community at Trefeca.

In a brief aside: the printer’s apprentice son at Trefeca, Nathan Hughes, became a schoolmaster in Tredegar. His son David emigrated to be a clergyman in America¹⁴. David’s son, who visited his family in Wales,¹⁵ was Charles Evans Hughes - sometime Governor of New York, presidential nominee of the Republican Party, Secretary of State, and Chief Justice, of the United States.

But back to John Evans. After meeting with Morgan John Rhys in Cincinnati, he went on to St Louis, then a one-thousand person outpost in Spanish Louisiana. In 1796, after a series of misunderstandings and confusion over his motives, he reached the modern-day Dakotas in service, now, of the Spanish empire, and in search of Madoc’s Welsh-speaking descendants among the Mandan Indians.

Hoisting the Spanish flag there and repulsing English inroads from Canada, he secured the territory for Spain whence it passed to France, and so to the United States in Jefferson’s Louisiana Purchase: an event which Gwyn Williams characterizes as a victory of major imperial significance, and wryly dubs Evans, the “the last conquistador”.¹⁶

Evans reported that he never found the Welsh Indians. By then though, his allegiance had shifted from his god to the bottle, and it was said of him that when adequately primed with drink he would hint at dark concealments which, being in Spanish service, he was not able to share. It would of course have been prejudicial to Spanish interests if Evans had confirmed that the

Welsh had indeed occupied and settled the West, some centuries before, in the name of the Welsh kings and their British heirs and successors. Evans died in New Orleans aged 29.

So what was the fate of Madoc's 12th century enterprise? Many authorities emerge from the 16th century onwards, with information about where the American landfall was effected, what became of Madoc's immigrant followers, and where they now are to be found. Being a **Welsh** mystery, the imagination of informants knew no bounds: new investigations and books appear to this day.

Writing in 1853, Thomas Stephens says:

"We have an abundance of testimony respecting the Welsh Indians; but it lacks definiteness and consistency; so that...there has been much uncertainty as to who the Welsh Indians really were, even among those who believed in their existence". ¹⁷

He concludes:

"...pretty nearly the whole of America, from Canada to Cuba, or even Peru, has been at various times claimed as the local habitation of the Madogwys: it still remains for future enquirers to determine the true name and precise locality of the Welsh Indians, while many deny that they exist anywhere."

This last assertion cost him a national eisteddfod prize. The adjudicators took the view that his essay was not in compliance with the set subject, which was: "For the best essay upon the discovery of America in the twelfth century by Prince Madoc ab Owain Gwynedd". The adjudicators judged this the best essay, but with-held the prize since Stephens denied the discovery. Major altercations, which included calling up the band, to drown out Stephens's vociferous objections, led at last to a compromise of sorts.

In 1987, Dana Olson writes, perhaps a shade anachronistically, that Prince Madoc was the founder of Clark County, Indiana. He relates the battles which

Madoc and his successors had with the Shawnees of the region. The survivors moved on up the Missouri to become the Mandan tribe. He reminds us that, after visiting and painting the Mandans shortly before the tribe's decimation by smallpox in 1837, the painter George Catlin reported as follows:

"I am inclined to believe that the ten ships of Madoc made their way up the Mississippi, and their brave and persevering colonists made their way through the interior to a position on the Ohio River, where they cultivated their fields and established a flourishing colony...They were set upon by the Indians..."

"At length, the survivors gathered themselves into a band, moved off, and increased in numbers and strength as they advanced up the Missouri River to the place where they had been known for many years past by the name of the Mandans, a corruption, or abbreviation perhaps, of Madogwys, the name applied by the Welsh to the followers of Madoc".¹⁸

General, Governor and later President William Henry Harrison, wrote of interesting archaeological remains throughout southeast Indiana. He said:

"They are the traces of a people who inhabited the basins of the Mississippi in the distant past...By whom built[?]...History is silent concerning them".

Some have **no** such doubts. In 2004, William Traxel tells us in his "Footprints of the Welsh Indians" that according to local legend, a stone fortress once stood on the Devil's Backbone across the Ohio River from Louisville, Kentucky, which had been built sometime in the 12th century by Welsh explorers led by Prince Madoc.

Before Lewis set out with Clark for the Pacific in January 1804, President Jefferson wrote to him ¹⁹:

"In my letter of the 13th instant I enclosed you a map of a Mr. Evans, a Welshman employed by the Spanish government [to discover the best land route to the Pacific], but whose original object I believe had been to go in search of the Welsh Indians said to be up the Missouri. On this subject a

Mr. Rees [that is Morgan John Rhys] of the same nation, established in Pennsylvania, will write to you".

The search for Welsh Indians was firmly part of their mission. While high in the Rockies, Sergeant Ordway's journal records meeting with a new Indian tribe September 5th 1805:

"our officers took down Some of their language: found it very troublesome Speaking to them, as all they Say to them has to go through Six languages, and hard to make them understand. These natives have the Strangest language we have yet seen. They appear to us as though they had an Impediment in their Speech or brogue on their tongue. We think perhaps they are the welch Indians".²⁰

The Mobile connection was popularized by the determined local historians Hatchett Chandler, and by Zella Armstrong of Chattanooga in her book: *"Who Discovered America? The Amazing Story of Madoc"* (1950).

In 1953, the Mobile Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution erected a marker commemorating Madoc's landing at Fort Morgan in Mobile Bay. It states:

"In memory of Prince Madoc, a Welsh explorer, who landed on the shores of Mobile Bay in 1170, and left behind, with the Indians, the Welsh language".

Some years later, a hurricane damaged the marker, and it was placed in storage. In 2007, they returned it to the DAR, where it now is proudly displayed at the chapter's headquarters in Mobile.

Who can gainsay the numinous hinge of fact, metaphor and fantasy. Who knows but that Ayn Rand's famous hero John Galt, may, at this very moment, in his remote Colorado valley, be harnessing the libertarian flair of the Madocian remnant to the re-igniting of their nation's, and their republic's greatness, on this momentous election eve?

In 1976, Gwyn Williams came to the US with a BBC camera crew to retrace the Madogwys' steps from Mobile Bay to the Missouri. They visited forts, mounds and caves, until they reached the Mandan remnant up the Missouri.

Gwyn met with Chief Ronald Little Owl, who after long discussion of tribal history, "while" as Gwyn said "we noted discrepancies and deviations, checking silently with Catlin and the anthropologists", Little Owl came at last to his conclusion. "When I die, he said, the Mandan language will be gone." Then as Gwyn tells it: "He bent his face into the television lights and said: 'The Lone Man was the founder of our people. He was a white man who brought our people in his big canoe across a great water, and landed them on the Gulf of Mexico'."

[ends]

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