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Inaugural Lecture: In defence of Welsh ecclesiastical history

The material in this lecture may well be familiar to some members of the audience, as it touches on work I have been doing for some years. What I want to do now is to use this opportunity to start bringing it together in a synthesis. This is very much work in progress and ties in with the work of some other academics who are working along the same lines, notably Kate Olson of Bangor and Rhianydd Biebrach of Swansea. Ultimately, it has bearing on some of our cherished beliefs about who we are (as a Welsh nation) and where we have been. We use history to construct an identity for ourselves: but sometimes what we were is not what we think we should have been. We can cling to what we think ought to have happened, using history as a comfort blanket. Sometimes, though, the historian's job is to unpick these assumptions and to find other ways of looking at the past. If we can understand who we were, and why we did those things that seem strange to us now, we will be better equipped to move on.

So: what is the problem of Welsh ecclesiastical history in the late medieval and early modern period? It is partly that it doesn't suit with our perception of ourselves as radical, nonconformist, rebels, heirs of the Chartists and the Revival preachers. But neither does it fit with our desire to see ourselves as martyrs loyal to the old faith, the heirs of St Richard Gwyn and St David Lewis. We are looking at a period when Wales seems to have had no desire for reform, but no desire to resist it either. It was put most vividly by O M Edwards: 'Mute, suffering Wales, apathetic while the world around was awakening to a brighter morning, suspected by rulers who thought that its very patriotism was tinged with a smouldering rebellion, betrayed by the reformers whose selfishness and insolence had brought the spirit of the Reformation in a degraded form to its mountains.' That was of course written a century ago and we would not use quite those words now, but in our thinking we do not seem to have moved on that much.

As my past and present students will be aware, I have been edging up to this problem for many years. While I do not claim to have reached a solution, various of my research projects have at least suggested different perspectives.

I have for some years been working on a survey of medieval tomb carvings in Wales. Some way into the survey I decided the material wasn't giving me all the evidence I wanted. We have some very fine earlier medieval carving but from the late fourteenth century onwards it gets much thinner on the ground. In particular, there are very few memorial brasses – about 10 surviving, including indents (with the actual brass missing). Some English parishes have more. Also, there are not that many of the spectacular late medieval alabaster carvings from Nottingham and Derby. There is a superb and deservedly well-known collection at Abergavenny and a few elsewhere, but they are the exception rather than the rule. Inscriptions were particularly thin on the ground – have they been lost, or were they never there? This meant that, while the later medieval tombs were full of interest and well worth studying, they were not giving me the illumination I wanted on religious beliefs.

Fortunately, at that point, happenstance took a hand (as it so often does). An old fellow student, now rector of Beaumaris, asked me to write something on the tombs in his church for a church guide. As my students will know, I found that virtually everything we thought we knew about the tombs had to be revised. Of particular interest was the one that usually gets passed over, a little brass commemorating Richard Bulkeley, 'prudent merchant of this little town' as the inscription says, who died in about 1530, and his wife Elizabeth, who had predeceased him. It was fairly conventional in style but the inscription was both puzzling and exciting, because it said nothing about prayer for their souls. Attitudes to death and the dead clearly underwent radical change in the course of the Reformation. Most historians identify as the key to these changes the reformers' denial of the existence of Purgatory – described by Eamon Duffy as '*the* defining doctrine of late medieval Catholicism. Purgatory was an intermediate stage between Heaven and Hell, suggested by medieval theologians as a way of dealing with sins which had been confessed and absolved but not expiated. Purgatory was thus a place of torment where souls were purged: unlike Hell it had limits, but souls in purgatory were depicted as suffering and begging for release. Time in Purgatory could be shortened by the prayers of the living - which led A. N. Galpern to describe late medieval Catholicism as 'a cult of the living in the service of the dead'.

So the whole point of an elaborate tomb was to stimulate prayer for your soul. Why didn't the Bulkeleys want this? Looking about for comparisons I found another memorial

brass across the straits at Llanbeblig, the old parish church of the borough of Caernarfon. This commemorated Richard Foxwist, a scrivener (a professional writer – possibly the equivalent of a modern web designer) and his wife. He died in 1500, she died some time after. Much more idiosyncratic in design, it was completely traditional in its iconography: but again the inscription was all about what a wonderful people they were. There was absolutely nothing about prayer for their souls. This was very much in line with what you expect of memorial inscriptions from the later sixteenth century onwards, in Catholic as well as Protestant Europe (and actually starting in Italy well before the Reformation): it is sometimes described as the 'Renaissance cult of fame'. But what was this doing in early sixteenth-century Wales?

At this point I went back to the documentary evidence. One of our main sources for religious belief in that period is probate records. Few Welsh wills survive from that period, but of those that do, virtually all leave money to pay for for prayer for the soul of the deceased. However, as Rhianydd Biebrach has pointed out, these bequests are not generous or complex. They can be quite formulaic, with no detail, just something like '£5 for a year for prayer for my soul'. There are very few of the complex endowments for specific votive masses that you find in English wills. A few Welshmen made specific and generous provision for masses and trentals, but they were very much the exception. Rhianydd even uses the word 'tranquility' to describe the Welsh approach.

It was at this point that I realised that I may have been looking in completely the wrong place – a rather worrying thought several years into a research project! We do have in Wales an unrivalled source for beliefs and attitudes in the huge quantity of surviving vernacular poetry. Medieval Welsh poetry has a tradition of commemorative writing – the *marwnad*. And whereas elsewhere in Europe the emphasis of commemoration is on the suffering soul in Purgatory, the Welsh poetry is all about praising the deceased, pouring out of grief for our loss by their death – and the confident expectation that they will be in Heaven as we speak. One of these poets, Guto'r Glyn, anticipating his own death, wrote:

> F'un ceidwad, fy Nuw cadarn,
> Fy nawdd fydd yn nydd y farn,
> Fy noddfa, fy niwedd fyd,

Fo nef a'i gartref i gyd.
(My one saviour, my strong God,
Will be my sustenance on Judgement Day;
May my refuge at my life's end
Be Heaven and all its mansions)

Gutyn Owain's elegy to Guto'r Glyn praised his valour as a soldier as well as his skill as a poet and confidently anticipated his salvation:

A'r ail oes i gael yr aeth
Gwledd Dduw, a'i arglwyddïaeth
(and for the next life he has gone to receive
God's feast and kingdom)

My own command of Welsh was not up to dealing with the amount of poetry on this subject: but happenstance again took a hand. A Welsh teacher with a degree specialising in medieval Welsh literature and history applied to us to do a Ph D and was prepared to take the subject on. David Hale has been road-testing my hypothesis and has modified and nuanced it but the main outlines remain clear: in Wales we were much more optimistic about the afterlife than the European mainstream, and we anticipated the 'Renaissance' cult of fame (so called) by several centuries. We need to get out of the habit of assuming that developments in Wales are going to depend on and even lag behind developments elsewhere in Europe. Sometimes we were there first.

So does this help to elucidate the Welsh response to the changes of the Reformation? Attitudes to prayer for the dead were a key flashpoint for controversy and resistance. Alec Ryrie made the point (in 'Counting sheep, counting shepherds') that most people accept new ideas bit by bit and that by accepting one aspect of new thinking, 'one aligned one's life with those who were preaching in defence of what you had done, and against those who had denounced it'. So is it possible that it was the more positive approach to death and the afterlife that 'sweetened the pill' for the other changes?

But this clearly doesn't explain the whole Welsh response. Most people in Wales seem to have clung to many of their traditional practices – and somehow they got away with it. Some members at least of the monastic community at Llantarnam seem to have taken to the hills at the Dissolution of the Monasteries: in the 1550s some of them were still living at Penrhys, where their abbey had looked after the shrine of the Virgin Mary before the reformation. They were being protected by local people including the powerful Stradling family of St Donat's.

Reports from late sixteenth-century bishops suggest they were tearing their hair about the way the people committed to their charge clung to the old ways of doing things. To take just one example of many, Nicholas Robinson of Bangor reported to the Privy Council in 1567 that:

> ignorance contineweth many in the dregges of superstition ... Images and aulters standing in churches undefaced, lewde and indecent vigils and watches observed, much pilgrimage-goying, many candles sett up to the honour of sainctes, some reliquies yet caried about and all the cuntreis full of bedes and knottes.

Poor man. One wonders whether the Privy Council just told him to calm down. Were the people of north Wales rising in rebellion – well, no. Were they coming to church regularly? It seems they were, even if they brought their rosaries into the pews.

A couple of years later, Hugh Jones, bishop of Llandaff (which then covered Monmouthshire) reported:

> Concerninge the resortinge of the people to the church to the common prayers I fynde none dysobedyent. And as touchinge the receavinge of the Comunyon I fynde every man obedyent, savinge those whose names are underwrytten with theyre pretensed cause whye they have not receaved, with whom I do presentlye deale.

The recalcitrant two were from Newport, and the problem was that 'they cannot frame them sellfs as yet to be in cherytye', as they had to do before they could share the Eucharist. But Hugh Jones was clearly going to do a bit of pastoral counselling and all would be well.

Of course all this was before the papal bull Regnans in Excelsis had really taken effect, excommunicating Elizabeth and forbidding Catholics from attending the services of the established church – but even after that, open Catholics were a very small minority. This is hardly surprising, given the savage punishments that were inflicted on religious dissidents. There was of course an unknowable number of sympathisers who (in defiance of papal instructions) attended church and kept their Catholic allegiance private, and what has been described as a 'sympathetic penumbra' of individuals who were not themselves Catholics but sympathised and tried to protect their Catholic neighbours. The numbers are almost by definition unknowable. But the point is that for most people in Wales there was nothing secret about their adherence to traditional rituals. The distinctive Welsh combination of traditionalism and loyalism meant that they regarded themselves as good subjects and members of the established church even while they continued with their accustomed devotional practices.

There were of course clandestine Catholic ceremonies. In a manuscript in the British Library I came across a remarkable story of a Catholic family in Carmarthenshire which sent a day-old baby (accompanied by the midwife and a wet-nurse) on a perilous journey across south Wales, travelling on foot and sleeping in safe houses, so that the baby could be baptised by the priest Morgan Clynnog in a church in the hills above Margam. We have no idea why they had to go to such lengths: possibly it was not safe for the priest to venture to Carmarthenshire. Alternatively, in *The Reformation of the Landscape* Alex Walsham has suggested that the Catholic church was trying to create new focal points for devotion in the landscape and that Margam with its monastic history and holy wells would have been a good candidate.

But much of the Welsh adherence to traditional customs was open and even blatant. Nicholas Robinson (again, poor man – he was sorely tried by the people of his diocese) in 1570 caught the people of Beaumaris lighting candles and singing psalms round the body of a dead townsman. This was done not in the church but in dead man's house, but it involved 'the tow curates and three clerkes of ye parishe wth three singingboies in their surplises in ye howse of Lewis Roberts aforesaied singing of certaine psalmes over his deade corps, when also as certaine waxe candels were light upon ye heirse'.

In a towering rage, Robinson forced the singers to stand in penance before him while he preached 'in confutation and disalowance of such disordered service and vaine ceremonies'. Sir Richard Bulkeley, the mayor, and his 'bretherne' confessed that 'the disorder which was committed was done of mere ignorance and a folishe custome there used'and promised never to do it again: but one suspects that, once the bishop's back was turned, they would go on doing what they thought was right.

Some more light is cast on this combination of traditionalism and loyalism by my tombs project. A number of churches in south-east Wales have tombstones with carvings of crosses and inscriptions from the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. At first I thought these were medieval stones which had been reused – though even that would have been a challenge to the Protestant dislike of visual imagery in church. But more careful study suggested that these crosses were different in style from the medieval ones and that the inscriptions were often an integral part of the design. Fellow members of the Church Monuments Society have assured me that you just don't get crosses on post-Reformation memorials, but we have any number of them in south-east Wales. Some churches, like Brecon and Llantwit Major, are virtually paved with them. Gwent has plenty, at Llanwytherin, Llangattock-nigh-Usk, Abergavenny and Grosmont, to give just a few examples. North Gwent has some particularly elaborate examples with endearing little vernacular figures on either side of the cross. Even more puzzling, some also have the emblem of the Jesuits, the IHS trigram (the abbreviation for the name of Jesus) with a cross on the horizontal bar of the H.

Some of these memorials may have commemorated Catholics (for example the monument to Bodenham Gunter at Gwenddwr and possibly another Gunter at Abergavenny) but most cannot be traced in lists of convicted Catholics. There are even cross slabs (at Llantwit Major and at Brecon) commemorating members of the clergy and their families. One slab in Brecon shows exactly the combination of traditionalism and loyalism that we have been talking about: a cross with the IHS emblem and the inscription 'Fear God; honour the king' set around it.

Where does this unwillingness to challenge royal authority come from? The Welsh were of course loyal to the Tudor dynasty, regarding Henry VII and his descendants as Welsh.

They had more practical reasons for their loyalty. Whatever we may now think about the Acts of Union, they were drafted with Welsh advice and were designed to be popular in Wales. They restored law and order, emancipated the Welsh from restrictions on trade and industry, empowered the leaders of local communities and gave Wales parliamentary representation. That was a lot to sacrifice. Kate Olson has talked of the Welsh response to the Reformation in terms of negotiation and compromise, but even this may suggest too much awareness of conflict. Dealing with a rather similar society in the Orkney islands, Sarah Tarlow has described it as a 'getting on': doing what you can get away with and trying to ignore what you can't change.

All this challenges our sense of who we are, our past and our present: it is equally a challenge to those who want to find political and religious rebels and those who want to find defiant Catholic martyrs. As a historian I'm also aware of the challenge to conventional ecclesiastical histories of the period. The Welsh resist all our efforts to put them into neat little boxes, Catholic or Protestant, or even to locate them at a precise point on a spectrum of belief. They seem to have sat fairly lightly to theology – particularly the theology of salvation. They saw nothing wrong with clerical marriage; they liked having the Bible in the vernacular, but they also liked candles, pilgrimages, statues in churches; they were happy with the royal supremacy but they also wanted the help of the saints. Any overarching theory of the Reformation that fails to take people like this into account is surely inadequate: and so, surely, is any history of the great changes of the 16th century that fails to take account of the experience of Wales.