

CATHOLIC TRADITION IN WALES¹

IT is not merely because these words are penned in an hotel under the shadow of the Cathedral of Ghent that I remark upon certain associations between Belgium and Wales, certain important lessons that Wales might learn from Belgium. Recent literary researches have revealed the debt of Welsh poets of the fourteenth century to the Flemish town poetry of that period. In our own day some Belgian social works have attracted attention in Wales. Belgium like Wales is a small country, much industrialized, and Belgium has also a bi-lingual problem which it has settled or is settling in a manner that Wales would do well to study. In fact, Belgium is one of the small countries of Latin Europe from which Wales might learn some important lessons.

But more than this; Belgium is one of the most devoutly Catholic countries in Europe and in the world. Now let us suppose that my fellow-Catholics in South Wales, who are mostly, one may presume, of Irish origin and very many of whose parents came there from Ireland during the industrial expansion of the nineteenth century, had emigrated not to South Wales, but to Belgium, what would have been their history? We may assume with some confidence that they would to-day be Flemish-speaking citizens of Belgium, would have adopted Belgium as their own country, and would be enriching its civic as well as its religious life; would have become one with its people. But in Wales it has been otherwise. They have lived as separate colonies to a large extent in Wales; they have remained Irish. St. Patrick's Day, not St. David's, is still their great day of the year. They have remained in the industrial parts of Wales; the Welsh countryside, which is the Welsh-speaking part of Wales, is practically unknown to them. They have never adopted Wales as their country, and the Welsh nation has

¹ The substance of an address delivered September 9th, 1934, to a C.Y.M.S. Rally, with His Grace the Archbishop of Cardiff in the Chair.

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never made any gesture to invite them to do so. The reason for this is chiefly that they are Catholic, and Welsh Wales is Nonconformist Protestant.

In a conquered country like Wales, a nation without any of the powers of a nation, this separation between Catholic and Protestant Nonconformist is trenchant. For the only social organization which is entirely controlled by Welshmen in Wales is the religious organization. Thus by their Nonconformist religious organizations Welsh people of the industrial valleys are bound strongly to the Welsh-speaking countryside. On the other hand, the Irish immigrant Catholics in Wales have very seldom penetrated the countryside, and only through the not over-sympathetic Education Committees of local authorities do they make the barest official contact with anything obviously Welsh. The industrial concentration of South Wales, its growing and unimpeded Anglicisation in outlook and in language, have made it possible for the bulk of Welsh-speaking Wales and the whole countryside to think of Catholics as beings hardly even on the fringe of Welsh life, and have made it possible also for the majority of Catholics in Wales to be cheerfully ignorant of the history of Wales, of the whole Welsh tradition and civilization, and of its language and literature and institutions.

But to-day the era of industrial expansion in South Wales is over. We need not regret that. It has been a cruel and an uncivilizing period for Wales. Its unhappy effects are with us very terribly now. But what we have to realize is that we have already embarked on a new phase in Welsh history. Whether we wish it or not, the period of industrial contraction has set in. There is already begun the dis-industrialization of Monmouthshire and Glamorgan. The time is soon coming when we may no longer merely suffer dis-industrializing; we shall be compelled to plan it. I believe that we ought to be doing this now, and that action, not apathy, is the proper course for a nation that is desperate. But, in any case, gradual and planned dis-industrialization will have to come. Welsh people will,

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in increasing numbers, return to the land, and a new rural economy and agricultural life will be established in Wales.

Now there has not been as yet any Catholic Land Movement in Wales on the lines of the Catholic Land Movements in England. We cannot speak of any Catholic 'return to the land' in Wales, for the simple reason that the majority of the present Catholic population of Wales has never had any contact with the traditions of the Welsh countryside. In Wales a Catholic land settlement campaign, if it comes, will be practically a new immigration. Of course we have the Diocese of Menevia, and new churches are being built every year up and down Wales. But this excellent growth has up to now hardly touched the Welsh-speaking native population, or is only beginning to touch it. If, however, there should be an attempt at a Catholic land settlement in Wales—and it will have to come some time—it will be an attempt to establish a Catholic peasantry in Wales. And if that is to succeed, it must identify itself with Welsh Wales. It must become Welsh in speech, in outlook, in interest. It must link itself with the Welsh tradition and with Welsh culture and civilization.

Nor is this impossible; the Welsh-speaking rural civilization of Wales, Protestant Nonconformist, and antagonistic as it may seem to many, is not a country where Catholics need feel alien and outside. There is in Wales something that offers a link with Catholicism, something that makes every Catholic, when he finds it, feel that there he can claim a home. It is the tradition of Christendom, the civilization that is formed by the Faith.

Wales is a part of Christendom in a way that is peculiar in the British Isles. For Wales was Catholic Christian even before it was Welsh. Long before the Welsh had called themselves *Cymry*, they were Roman and Christian. Of the three literatures that exist in the British Isles, Welsh literature alone, though it is as old as English and Irish, possesses no pagan, pre-Christian poetry or literary tradition. The very slight pagan element in Welsh literature, in the four stories of the Mabinogion, is a borrowing from

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Irish. The Mass is older in Wales than anything in Welsh literature. Mr. Wade-Evans has recently suggested that the English word *Welsh* is derived from an old English word that meant *Romans*. Whether philologists accept his derivation or not, certainly Saint David and Gildas called themselves Roman citizens, and the Welsh nation are the only nation in these islands who were once a part of the Roman Empire. There is no one missionary who may be said to have brought the Faith to Wales, no St. Patrick, no St. Augustine, no St. Columba. The entire formation of Wales was Christian. Its Christian tradition is its oldest and original tradition; our Christianity, Catholic and Apostolic, was part of our heritage as citizens of Rome. There never was a Welsh paganism, and we had to wait till the early nineteenth century for the first appearance of a Welsh Arch-druid.

It is natural, therefore, and it seems inevitable that, if we examine the whole story of Wales, and consider its record, we should conclude that the greatest achievement of this country and its one indubitable glory is its Catholic literature. In the Middle Ages, the Ages of Faith, Welsh literature, I do not hesitate to maintain, was one of the three major literatures of Europe. In this connection two points call for comment. First, it is to be remarked that Medieval Welsh literature is pre-eminently a Catholic achievement. It is, in fact, almost the only complete example we have in all Europe of a literature thoroughly Christian. This may seem to contradict Cardinal Newman's declaration in his *Scope and Nature of University Education*, where he writes:

'From the nature of the case, if Literature is to be made a study of human nature, you cannot have a Christian literature. It is a contradiction in terms to attempt a sinless literature of sinful man.'

But Newman was thinking of the classics and of modern European literatures since the Renaissance. In his time there was no thorough study of the literatures of the Ages of Faith, and certainly even Dante's great poem is con-

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cerned with 'sinful man.' But there is one mediaeval poetic, one doctrine of poetic art, which is not concerned with 'sinful man.' Welsh poetry from the twelfth to the sixteenth century is the most highly metaphysical poetry that has been attempted in Christendom. It aimed at, and achieved, a theo-centric literature, a literature that was not a study of human nature, but a study of the Augustinian Ideas, the divine conceptions of the Creator in the splendours of His hierarchic arrangement. To elaborate this point would call for too long an interpretation. But if anyone question again whether a great Catholic literature is possible, a literature which is entirely praise, a literature based on the theme of *Te Deum Laudamus*, we can now point out triumphantly the mediaeval literature of Wales. It is the grand exemplar of a Catholic poetic.

The second comment to be made on that literature is that it was formed by and founded on the great philosophies of the Christian Scholastics. The Christian Platonism of St. Augustine, which was the formative philosophy of the ninth to the twelfth century, was brought to Wales and was especially associated with the teaching of the Welsh Cistercians, the most nationalist of all the orders in Wales. It was this teaching that was the basis of Welsh poetry. But later, in the fifteenth century, the greatest century of Welsh literature, the Aristotelianism of St. Thomas Aquinas came to crown and complete the Welsh poetic doctrine, and the influence of St. Thomas Aquinas made the fifteenth century poetry of Wales classic in the general popular sense of the word, and classic also because of its status in the history of Welsh literature.

A nation's literature and a nation's language contain the national tradition and the ideals of the nation. For most of the modern nations of Europe the classic periods of their literature are post-Renaissance or post-Reformation. But all Welsh scholars to-day recognize that the Catholic fifteenth century is the classic period of Welsh literature.

Modern Welsh scholarship is only to-day beginning to understand and appreciate and absorb its medieval masters,

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Welsh scholars are still largely impeded in this task of interpretation by their lack of familiarity with Catholic philosophy and with the habits of Catholic thought. That is where Catholics may yet come to the help of Wales. It is true that Catholics have greater gifts than this to bring back to Wales; there is the gift of Faith and the inspiration and example of the Supernatural Life. But the very important secular gifts are not to be neglected. What has been said of medieval Welsh literature is true of Welsh life in general. Wales since the early nineteenth century has been cut off from its own past. Anglicisation, industrialization, sectarianism, and general national disintegration have severed Welsh people from the fount and source of a noble and well-rooted social life—the traditions and the heritage of the past and the Faith that formed them. To-day we Welsh people, faced with the consequences of the divisions and alien rule and traditions imposed on us, are trying to get back, to discover the unity we have lost, to discover our own past. And that is where we need the help of Catholics, of Catholic scholarship, of Catholic habits of thought, of Catholic social philosophy, of Catholic Sacramentalism. For a thousand years Wales was Catholic; for a thousand years the Welsh language was used in daily prayer before the Blessed Sacrament. When our Catholic schools adopt that language and make it their own again, they will be bringing back to its original course one of the oldest Catholic languages of Europe.

So far, I have dealt only with the Catholic period in Welsh history and the efforts that are being made to re-discover the traditions and to interpret the achievements of that period. But I should like to add something also on the more recent, the Protestant or post-Reformation period in Welsh life. Wales is now an administrative part of England; she has lost the independence she possessed up to 1536, and she becomes more and more open to the pressure of English thought and English movements. But the story of Welsh life, of Welsh thought, of Welsh literature, from the seventeenth century to the present time is a separate

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and independent story. Her literature, though never so splendid as in the Catholic period of independence, remains nevertheless important and continuous, and there is no break in its story even for a decade. It retains also its traditions and character. That Catholic millenium which ended about 1600 had so tremendously moulded Welsh habits of thought that even in modern times Welsh literature cannot altogether break its mould. For example, there is no tradition of scepticism, of agnosticism, of Deism in Welsh literature before the twentieth century. Welsh literature up to 1914 remains an entirely Christian and Trinitarian literature. The criticism is frequently made that this literature became far too moralistic, too sermonising and too didactic in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; and that is a true charge. But there is room and there is need for a Catholic study of Welsh Protestant and Non-conformist literature. Wales to-day is drifting very swiftly from its old moorings. Compulsory English lay education is destroying the last of the Welsh traditions, and very soon there will be none left to understand and interpret the didactic, moralising, sermonising period of Welsh literature. And I believe that the only valid apologetic that may be made for it is a Catholic apologetic and a Catholic interpretation. Wales has never yet accepted a purely secular view of life. It has never attempted a purely secular literature. That is where its Catholic formation is clearly impressed on all its history. But Welsh life and Welsh literature from the second half of the sixteenth century till to-day have been robbed of the Sacraments of Catholic Christianity. It was this sacramental view of life which made Medieval Welsh poetry, even though urgently theocentric, embrace all the joys of earthly things, meat and wine and social gaiety and the nobility of laughter. These things die out of Welsh literature under the influence of Puritanism, and Welsh critics to-day, in their revolt against Puritanism, turn with impatience away from the Welsh writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. But a Catholic critic can examine this Puritan literature with more toler-

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ance and more understanding. Even in the colourless moralistic literature of the Puritan centuries he can see a certain beautiful loyalty. It is loyalty to a depleted Christianity, to a Christianity robbed of its Sacraments, a Christianity, therefore, that cannot rightly appreciate in a Christian way food and drink and social intercourse and all material things. All this Welsh Puritan literature bears witness to the Catholic basis of Welsh civilization. Where other modern literatures have completely forgotten the traditions of the Ages of Faith, have become entirely humanist, entirely secular, content with a merely worldly standard of values, Welsh literature remains morbidly chained to an anti-secular, anti-humanist philosophy, and it is morbid just because it lacks that sacramentalism that would emancipate it, that would make it free of the material creation. A study of the greatest of Welsh modern poets seems to confirm this view. There can be little dispute that Williams Pantycelyn, one of the founders of Welsh Calvinistic Methodism in the eighteenth century, is also the greatest figure in all Welsh Post-Reformation literature. But the story of Pantycelyn's development is the story of one who began his religious life in the most rigid Puritan other-worldliness, who grew more and more profoundly Christian, and ended with a view of life that was fundamentally sacramental and heroic. Pantycelyn, anti-Papist as he was, and as he remained to the end, is, I believe, a very great European poet who truly belonged to the soul of the Catholic Church.

Here, then, as in all other periods of Welsh history and in all other phases of Welsh culture, is to be seen the mark of a Catholic formation. Wales is not, indeed, a land where Catholics need feel strange and ill-at-ease. On the contrary, it is in sore need of the Faith first of all, but also the re-possession of its traditions, the re-establishment of its language, of its family life, of its national vigour, and in the recovery of all this Catholics who have been taught the nature of the Welsh tradition may yet take an important share.

SAUNDERS LEWIS.