

Penarth beach

Ici enfin! Cette fois il me semble
que c'est vrai—comment autrement
y aurait-il tant de bleu?
et que la côte en face soit maintenant
si claire ne laisse pas de doute
le rideau est levé il n'y a plus de temps

ces enfants là-bas qui jouent
sous les yeux de leur mère
et cherchent dans les galets celui
qui portera signe: le talisman rompu
dont la blessure respire
et gardera l'ouvert pendant l'écart d'une vie

ils sont à la fracture du jour
où la lumière veille la mer a ses marques
qui ont douceur de seuil et l'entrée est là
où l'amour se tient
dans la brillance de l'air
en cet aujourd'hui

Heather Dohollau
Une Suite de Matins (2005)

Poète galloise d'expression française, est venue en France en 1947 et a élu domicile en Bretagne. Elle a publié de nombreux recueils de poésie, tous aux Editions Folle Avoine, Bédée (Ille-et-Vilaine).

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Owen Glendower: Historical Novel or Romance?

IN HER HELPFUL introduction to the modern reprint of John Cowper Powys's *Owen Glendower*, Morine Krissdóttir declares that the book, "unlike his other novels, is not a 'romance' but 'a history'"¹. I am convinced, however, that the issue is not so straightforward, that it is more appropriate, to say the least, to think in terms of 'both-and' rather than 'either-or.' If we examine Powys's earliest references to the proposed new book, we find, indeed, that he originally envisaged it as a romance. As early as August 1933, when he and Phyllis Playter were still living in upstate New York, he wrote to his brother Llewelyn that he wanted to "live for the rest of my days in Wales ... and there compose my real Masterpiece in the form of a really thrilling and powerful Romance with all the Welsh Enchantments behind it!" and he refers to it a month later as "a great Prose Romance of an extraordinary nature"².

However, in September 1938, by which time he had moved to Corwen and

¹ *Owen Glendower*, Rob Stepney/Walcot 2002, Overlook Press, 2003, 'Introduction', p.xi

² J.C. Powys, *Letters to His Brother Llewelyn*, Village Press, 1975, II pp.166, 169

begun the writing, he employs the phrase “my Historical Novel”, and similar phrases are used to G. Benson Roberts in November of the same year, to Sven-Erik Täckmark in March and June 1939, and, after the book was finished, to Louis Wilkinson in January 1940.³ When it was published in 1941 in the United States and 1942 in the United Kingdom (despite the official 1940 and 1941 on the title-pages), its subtitle also read “An Historical Novel”. One wonders if his American publishers, Simon & Schuster, who were aware of the book while it was being written, may have played some part in altering Powys’s terminology. If so, it may be regarded as an unfortunate development, which resulted in possibly deflecting the attention of readers in the wrong direction.

My own view is that ‘Romance’, or perhaps ‘Historical Romance’, would have been a more accurate description, and I shall be arguing the case for this conviction in the following pages. I am proposing not so much that myth and romance take precedence over history and the historical novel, but rather that Powys is presenting an artistically justifiable—perhaps even inevitable—blending of the two extremes. There is no doubt, of course, that Powys went to considerable lengths to ensure historical accuracy. His main sources were J. E. Lloyd’s *Owen Glendower: Owain Glyn Dwr* (1931), the standard biography of its time; A. G. Bradley’s *Owen Glyndwr and the Last Struggle for Welsh Independence* (1902), and J. H. Wylie’s old but scholarly and extremely detailed *History of England under Henry IV* (4 vols, 1884-98). Anyone who, like myself, has made a close study of Powys’s book alongside these authorities, cannot help but be impressed by his determination to bolster his narrative with authentic historical detail⁴—far more, indeed, than is offered in most conventional historical novels.

There is, however, one essential difference. In most traditional novels of this kind, the historical characters themselves make fairly brief and uncontroversial appearances (e.g., Bonnie Prince Charlie in Sir Walter Scott’s *Waverley* or Napoleon in Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*). The heroes and heroines are generally fictional, become the chief focus of attention, and are presented ‘in the round’. Where Powys is exceptional is in his psychological—and disputable—presentation of a historical figure in the centre of the book and portrayed unashamedly and even ostentatiously from the inside.

Moreover, in *Owen Glendower*, the historical references are balanced—though non-Welsh readers may not be sufficiently familiar with them to register the fact—by continual allusions to and quotations from the *Mabinogion* and other ancient Welsh stories and poems. This is where the ‘romance’ associations of the book become most evident. It would be a great mistake to see such references, involving Bran, Branwen, Pryderi, Gwydion, and the like, as mere academic ballast, as Powys’s way of reminding us that he has done his homework. On the contrary, they serve as mythological equivalents in the remote past to historical events in the novel’s present. They invite us to judge contemporary actions within the context of the national heroic tradition. It is not accidental, for instance, that a phrase from the *Mabinogion* tale ‘Branwen

³ *Letters to Llewelyn*, II p.259; *Letters to G. Benson Roberts*, Village Press, 1975, p.15; *Powys to Eric the Red*, Cecil Woolf, 1983, pp.51, 56, 60; *Letters of John Cowper Powys to Louis Wilkinson*, Macdonald, 1958, pp.59-60

⁴ Readers may be interested by the article ‘*Owen Glendower & Owain Glyn Dwr* (1359?-1416?)’ in *la lettre powysienne* n°4, Autumn 2002.

Daughter of Llyr', "like a clap of thunder and a fall of mist"⁵, is slipped into the text in the final paragraph of the second chapter just as Rhisiart is making his foolhardy and dangerous but courageous and romantically motivated gesture in moving to the rescue of Tegolin and Mad Huw.

Still, the juxtaposition of realistic scenes with wildly improbable ones is not to all tastes. *Owen Glendower* has received a good deal of praise, notably from the poet J. Redwood Anderson and the critic G. Wilson Knight. However, in recent years appreciation has been tempered by the impact of an article by the Anglo-Welsh critic Roland Mathias, 'The Sacrificial Prince: A Study of *Owen Glendower*', published in Belinda Humfrey's collection, *Essays on John Cowper Powys* (1972). Mathias's strictures were soon upheld by Jeremy Hooker in his volume on Powys in the 'Writers of Wales' series. Both writers were disturbed by the fact that Powys's portrait of Glendower bears a suspicious resemblance to Powys himself. In Hooker's words, which also summarize Mathias's viewpoint, "Powys has recreated crucial events in Welsh history in accordance with the exigencies of his own life-illusion. He has taken some of the facts, the ideas and the political movement itself in order to create an image of Wales with which he can identify"⁶. These criticisms (bolstered by the fact that both appeared under the auspices of the University of Wales Press) have led to the unfortunate and unjustified impression that the Welsh response to the novel is in some way hostile.

However, both writers have since severely qualified their earlier opinions: Mathias, in 'John Cowper Powys and "Wales"' (1985) and Hooker in an excellent but little-known chapter in his *Imagining Wales* (2001) entitled 'John Cowper Powys: "Figure of the Marches"'. Mathias still expresses reservations, but describes his earlier article as "impressionistic rather than well-judged", and comments: "If that previous view was right at all (which is highly doubtful), it was so for the wrong reasons".⁷ Hooker, who had earlier confessed to a "lack of any real interest in *Owen Glendower*", still considers Mathias's argument "*in its own terms ... incontrovertible*" (my emphases), but now accepts Powys's book as "an immensely entertaining work of fiction, rich in character and psychological interest, and 'poetic' in its embodiments of conscious life in mythological landscape".⁸ Sadly, literary criticism of Powys published in the last few decades was either written before or, if recent, has ignored these significant changes of opinion.

My intention, then, is to offer arguments to counterbalance the more negative and skeptical judgments of these literary commentators. I shall concentrate on Mathias's position, which is less literary and more narrow than Hooker's, because, unlike Hooker, he displays a distinct unease with 'Romance' as a literary form. Above all, while Hooker made what amounts to a *volte face*, Mathias offered only minor modifications to his basic disapproval.

Although Mathias claimed in his earlier essay that it was no part of his thesis "to set myth and history in opposition to each other"⁹, his argument obstinately

⁵ *Owen Glendower*, 'Rhisiart draws his sword', p.37

⁶ Jeremy Hooker, *John Cowper Powys*, 1973, p.75

⁷ R. Mathias, 'John Cowper Powys and "Wales"', *Powys Review* 17, 1972, pp.5, 22

⁸ Hooker, *John Cowper Powys*, p.74; *Imagining Wales*, 2001, p.95

⁹ R. Mathias, 'The Sacrificial Prince', *Essays on John Cowper Powys*, ed. B. Humfrey, Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 1972, p.235

leads in that direction. In the later essay, he maintains that in *Owen Glendower* the constraints of history conflicted with Powys's essentially mythic imagination and that, as a result, the book suffers from an awkward tension between the two. His main strictures are offered in the final pages. Because he believes the historical and mythical aspects of the book to be incompatible, he is forced to the conclusion that, in Powys's narrative, "history pushes out mythology and emanations" (by which he apparently means insights into the spirit of place). Powys, he continues, thought of "a historical plan of time and action ... as *given*, as providing the framework *for* him", but cannot resist inserting into it his own idiosyncratic approaches and obsessions. He "chooses to ignore the heart and spirit of early fifteenth century Wales in favour of a deep-rooted theory of his own". But "history is not to be trifled with in this way—at least in what the author is pleased to call a 'historical novel'".¹⁰

My difficulty here is that I cannot see, on the basis of such an argument, how *any* historical novel would satisfy Mathias. Indeed, it is noteworthy that his other literary-critical writings suggest not only that fiction is an interest decidedly secondary to poetry, but that, within fiction, he has a definite preference for a strictly realistic approach. Apart from these two essays, the only article primarily devoted to fiction that I have discovered in his published work is one on the Welsh novelist Emyr Humphreys, who is described in the entry devoted to him in *The Oxford Companion to the Literature of Wales* as having "remained true to the realist novel which so many have deserted" and as "unable to accept the novel as life-game or fable". Significantly, in comparing *Owen Glendower* with other Powys novels, Mathias concentrates on *Maiden Castle*, which he praises as "the most closely controlled of all J.C.P. novels" and observes that it "demonstrates for the first time some of the elements of novelistic technique missing earlier—such as imagining the shape of his story from the beginning ... and curbing his authorial self-indulgence".¹¹ These are hardly preconceptions likely to stimulate appreciation of *A Glastonbury Romance* or *Weymouth Sands*—let alone *Owen Glendower* or *Porius*!

I would also suggest that Mathias's assumptions about history and historical practice are somewhat outdated. In his earlier essay he had written: "Myth is either history imperfectly remembered as a result of oral transmission or history deliberately used and shaped"¹². Perhaps so, but contemporary historiography admits that *all* history is "deliberately ... shaped", and inevitably takes the form of an invented narrative. Historians are forced either to select from an abundance of relevant material, including or omitting in accordance with their own personal judgments and predilections, or (and this is more analogous to Powys's situation here) to resort, in the absence of complete records, to unprovable probabilities or speculations in order to fill the gaps. Mathias's interpretation of *Glendower* is very different from Powys's, but it would be unwise to assume that his version is more reliable because less imaginative. Romance, I would insist, has the habit of impinging upon life just as myth impinges upon history. It is worthwhile reconsidering Powys's approach with these complicating factors in mind.

That Powys interprets *Glendower* in terms that connect with his own "life-illusion" is not to be denied. The man who admits in *Autobiography* that he

¹⁰ R. Mathias, 'John Cowper Powys and "Wales"', pp.22-3

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.6

¹² R. Mathias, 'The Sacrificial Prince', p.235

always wanted to be a magician gives Glendower a crystal ball, and makes him refer to himself constantly as “old conjurer”. In addition, Powys accepts *all* surviving records, stories, and even rumours concerning Glendower, whether Welsh or English, whether written or orally transmitted, whether soberly probable or romantically unlikely, as grist to his creative mill. Such actions are guaranteed to irritate and arouse the suspicions of traditional historians unwilling to admit undocumented speculation, but it is important to realize that Powys is not being irresponsible in his elaborations.

For example, Glendower’s magical interests and practice may not be historically provable, but it *is* true that he was regarded in his time as possessing magical powers. Thus, one of Powys’s main historical sources, J. H. Wylie, records, among the “many marvellous stories that got abroad about Owen”, one that claimed he possessed “a magical stone” by which “he could render himself invisible at will”.¹³ A more recent Welsh scholar and writer, Meirion Pennar, citing Glanmor Williams’s magisterial volume, *The Welsh Church from Conquest to Reformation*, attests to “plenty of evidence of his profound interest in divination”, and concludes: “It is beyond doubt ... that the supernatural played an integral part in the consciousness of Owen and of others”.¹⁴ And in one of the most recent historical studies of the period, Robert Moore’s *The Welsh Wars of Independence* (2005), we encounter this:



A modern Celtic bard at Trécesson castle (Morbihan),
the Breton harpist Myrdhin
photograph Klaod Ropars

Many tales became attached to his name, adding to ... his supposed mastery of all the arts of trickery and magic. Stories about both the historical and mythological Glyn Dwr can still be found throughout Wales today, and he inhabits the same realm as Merlin, Arthur, Robin Hood, Cuí Chulain, and Fionn mac Cumhaill—enigmatic and heroic characters whose historical existence or otherwise is less important than

¹³ J.H. Wylie, *History of England under Henry IV*, Longmans, 1884-98, I p.286

¹⁴ Meirion Pennar, ‘In Search of the Real Glendower’, *Powys Review* 18 (1986), pp.21,23

their myth.¹⁵

Unlike these other figures, however, Glendower belongs indisputably to history.

Moreover, the uncertain boundaries between proven fact and suspected fiction were a feature of the period not confined to the figure of Glendower. One example mentioned in the book is the widespread belief, dear to Mad Huw, that Richard II had not died at Pomfret Castle but was living and hiding in Wales at the beginning of the fifteenth century. This concept may resemble a romantic myth, but the rumour itself is an established historical fact which Henry IV's government was forced to combat. As R. R. Davies, in his excellent and thorough scholarly study, *The Revolt of Owen Glyn Dwr*, remarks succinctly: "Stories that King Richard had survived and would return to claim his throne abounded"¹⁶.

Far from the mythical element resulting in a lack of "credibility" (one of Mathias's main charges), credibility is, I believe, enhanced by the blend of myth and history, romance and reality. This blend serves, indeed, as an important principle of structure. Glendower's revolt itself represents a confrontation between patriotic aspiration and *Realpolitik* (a pattern it shares, incidentally, with the classic historical novel in English, Scott's *Waverley*). An early instance involves Rhisiart's excited approach to Dinas Bran in the opening chapter. In his first essay, Mathias argues that "Dinas Bran as a focus of myth and history is less than potent" and complains that Rhisiart's—and Powys's—evocation of the fortress is "distant from Denis Burnell's ruinous but extensive castle".¹⁷ Yet this is surely Powys's point. Ironically, Rhisiart's arrival in Dinas Bran, despite his fond dreams, is as "a 'hostage' not a conqueror"¹⁸. Insofar as *Owen Glendower*, if we concentrate on the section centred upon Rhisiart, qualifies as a *Bildungsroman*, a novel of growth and education, he must learn that the reality of the situation is very different from his romantic preconceptions.

Interestingly enough, this pattern is paralleled in the chronicle of Glendower himself. Mathias, who considers that Powys had not yet absorbed the uniqueness of the Welsh countryside, writes that the ride to Mathrafal in Chapter XII "might be over any moorland anywhere." Mathrafal¹⁹ is "a name much invoked, but only at the end does it appear clearly as anything other than the ancient home of the Princes of Powys". But "the mystic towers of Mathrafal"²⁰ are to Glendower what Dinas Bran is to Rhisiart. The two scenes are obviously related, one difference being that Rhisiart is seeing the countryside for the first time, and so pays some attention to it, even though his mental obsession is with Dinas Bran. Glendower, however, has travelled past Mathrafal many times, and in his preoccupation with an ideal has no eye for the specificities of its setting. Powys's emphasis is perfectly justifiable on its own terms, and should not be judged by equally valid but in his case irrelevant criteria.

I have quoted Mathias as claiming that Powys "chooses to ignore the heart and spirit of early fifteenth century Wales", and this may be considered fair comment so far as political trends are concerned. But other realities exist. His

¹⁵ David Moore, *The Welsh Wars of Independence*, Stroud, Gloucestershire, Tempus, 2005, pp.220-1

¹⁶ R.R. Davies, *The Revolt of Owen Glyn Dwr*, Oxford, 1995, pp.175-6

¹⁷ R. Mathias, 'The Sacrificial Prince', pp.240, 242.

¹⁸ *Owen Glendower*, 'Valle Crucis', p.213

¹⁹ R. Mathias, "The Sacrificial Prince", p.243

²⁰ *Owen Glendower*, 'Room for the Prince!', p.281

‘romance’ approach enables him to present the period in all its bewildering contradictions and contrasts, its richness and its squalor, its idealisms and its treacheries, its imaginative superstitions as well as its naturalistic earthiness. The book is large enough to contain both extremes: the chivalrous code of the French knights and the blatant savagery of Rhys Gethin and Davy Gam; an almost comprehensive variety of contemporary religious attitudes—not merely between Christianity and paganism, “by Our Lady of Valle Crucis and Saint Derfel of Edeyrnion”²¹, but the variety within Christianity itself, as represented (to name only four) by Father Rheinault, Prior Bevan, Father Pascentius, and Walter Brut the Lollard; the comparable range of love relationships, including Rhisiart’s feelings for Tegolin and Catharine, Mistress Lowri’s for Simon the Hog and his for her, the pathos of Sibli’s response to Rhisiart’s casual kiss, etc.

Above all, Powys is unrivalled in his ability to present stark contrasts between moments of calm and violence, most obviously illustrated by the chapter-title ‘Love and Shame’, but also present in other scenes where ordinary events are suddenly interrupted by unexpected acts of violence and cruelty: the killing of the English spy at Glyndyfrdwy; Glendower’s incarceration of the dying Hywel Sele in the hollow tree; the outrage to the bodies of the slain after the Battle of Bryn Glas. Yet who can say that such efforts do not represent ‘reality’ and portray aspects of life beyond the capacity of more traditional literary modes? For instance, as Hooker perceptively recognizes, Powys’s treatment of sexual behaviour points to a “main source of conflict and enchantment in human affairs”²²—a combination difficult to achieve within realistic confines.

In conclusion, I would like to suggest that the basic structure of *Owen Glendower* resembles in many respects the form of a popular pageant. In both cases, a fairly well-known historical sequence of events is illustrated by a series of dramatic and memorable climaxes. Powys, as we know, was interested in pageants, as one of the central chapters of *A Glastonbury Romance* testifies. It is therefore interesting within this context to learn from Krissdóttir that in 1939 Powys was asked to write “the Proclamation scene of Owen Glendower” for a pageant at Carrog, a small community close to Glendower’s Glyndyfrdwy²³. Pageants normally conform to a basic historical framework but elaborate imaginatively in key scenes that frequently go beyond historical certainty to stimulate popular interest and often to foster a patriotic purpose. Similarly, in *Owen Glendower* itself, the bridge-passages are generally historical while the pageant-like big scenes belong almost invariably to romance. Such scenes include Glendower’s rescue of Rhisiart and Walter Brut from Dinas Bran, Morg ferch Lug’s curse at the Meifod mill, the shameful torture of Adda ap Leurig, and the scenes involving Rhisiart, Tegolin, and Brut in the prison at Worcester. Moreover, the magnificent final chapter belongs wholly to romance—and appropriately so as the ‘real’ Glendower passes finally and indisputably into the world of myth.

Owen Glendower is a rich novel, and can be read, enjoyed, and interpreted in many ways. For some, it provokes an excuse for what Mathias calls “escaping into history,”²⁴ yet we should remember that Powys began the book during the

²¹ *Owen Glendower*, ‘Bards and Heretics’, p.137

²² J. Hooker, *Imagining Wales*, p.95

²³ M. Krissdóttir, ‘Introduction’, pp.xiv-xv

²⁴ R. Mathias, ‘John Cowper Powys and “Wales”’, p.23

Spanish Civil War, had half-written it at the time of Munich, and completed it in the early months of World War II. At the time of publication, many of the ‘romance’ scenes must have seemed remote from contemporary experience—and for some readers would have been attractive for that very reason—but its presentation of violence and treachery must have struck an immediate chord. Hooker, on the other hand, in a passage already quoted, recognized a ‘poetic’ element in the book, and it is appropriate to give the last word to the poet J. Redwood Anderson. In a wonderfully perceptive review, which Powys must have cherished and which ought to be better known, he described J. E. Lloyd’s historically accurate biography as an “able monograph” but also as “no more than the bare warp on which Mr. Powys’s genius has woven the vast tapestry rich with the glowing scenes of the romantic imagination, and deep with the half-tones and shadows of the legendary past of Wales”.²⁵ I cannot imagine a better verdict.

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²⁵ J. Redwood Anderson, ‘John Cowper Powys’s Owen Glendower’, *Dublin Magazine* (April-June 1942), p.38