

Owen Glendower & Owain Glyn Dwr (1359?-1416?)

IT IS NOT an easy task to determine whether the facts concerning Owain Glyn Dwr are faithfully reproduced in Powys's tale, for how is it possible to establish the truth of events which have taken place six hundred years ago, some of which not really ascertained or with no irrefutable proof? There are, however, many fairly precise documents about this distant past. *Owain Glyn Dwr*, by Sir John E. Lloyd, which Powys used and mentions in the *Argument* appended to the novel and which has not been taken up in the French edition, is still considered today to be one of the best. Powys certainly studied it closely, as well as many others, before starting to write about a man who may well be considered the very first guerillero of history. I am no historian, but I tried, in a modest way, to verify certain facts by consulting a book which has just been published, *Glyn Dwr's War*¹, in which G.J. Brough follows very closely the events of these fateful years, and reading it, I was amazed by the sense of authenticity which permeates the novel, compared with the historical facts given by the historian.

Most of the time, Powys remains quite close to the "official" history of these sixteen years whether he mentions the reasons for starting the war (for it was a war, not a rebellion), its phases, the Tripartite Indenture (which divided England and Wales between Percy of Northumberland, Earl Mortimer and Glyn Dwr), the consequences of the war for Owain's family, etc. Through one of Rhisiart's friends in Oxford, a convincing portrait is offered of this fifty year-old Welsh nobleman, dating from the years before the war:

... he had heard Master Strove express the view that the elderly Baron of Glendourdy, or Glendower, who was a cautious and law-abiding subject of the late unhappy king and a great patron of poetry and scholarship, might have been the Owen of all these prophecies, had he been a younger man, or a man prepared to live a dangerous and desperate life.²

Owain had indeed been a faithful subject of the king, until a dispute arose with his powerful and ruthless neighbour, Lord Reginald de Grey, over some land. He failed to have a fair hearing when he pleaded his cause; the English parliament sent him back to Wales, making fun of the "barefooted Welsh dogs" and of their pretensions for justice. Powys is equally close to reality when he describes the people surrounding this mysterious Owain, whose dates of birth and death are still not known with any certainty. Apart from Rhisiart and Broch o'-Meifod, who are creations of his imagination, about forty of the people mentioned did really exist, as can be seen from the list given at the beginning of the novel. Powys makes us acquainted with them: Iolo Goch, Owain's bard, Crach Ffinant "the

¹ *Glyn Dwr's War*, G.J. Brough, Wales Books, 2002

² *Owen Glendower*, "The Castle", Picador, p. 8-9

prophet”, who was obliged to accompany his master everywhere, even in battle, the terrible Rhys Gethin (or Rhys the Fierce), Gruffyd Yonge (Young, in the novel) bishop of Bangor, Sir Edmund Mortimer (Owain’s son-in-law), and John ap Hywel, (the Cistercian abbot at Llantarnam Abbey), and even the touching knight Patrouillard de Trie, (brother of the French Admiral of the fleet), who seems to have sprung from *Don Quixotte*...

One can perhaps observe some distortions in *Owen Glendower*, — Rhys Ddu is in fact a less faithful ally than in the book — or even a considerable difference with historical truth, concerning for instance Daffyd ap Llewelyn — David Gam — who was one of the few real Welsh traitors and who, it seems, had a different destiny from that which Powys relates: he was ambushed and captured by Glyn Dwr in 1412, he was ransomed later that year by Henry IV.

On the other hand, the atrocious episode of the death of Hywel Sele, Baron of Nannau, one of Glyn Dwr’s worse enemies, who attempted to assassinate him, — Powys tells us that Glendower immures him, mortally wounded but still alive, in the hollow trunk of a huge oak tree — is not the fruit of Powys’ sadistic imagination, for it really took place, although historians are not sure of the date, probably late summer 1406. The place is still known as “Ceubren yr Ellyl”, “The Hollow Tree of the Devils”. Broch o’-Meifod’s impressive character may have been inspired by a man who really existed, Cadwgan of Aberochwy, nicknamed



Harlech Castle, East Gate

“Cadwgan Fwyall”, Cadogan-the-Axe, because he excelled in using this weapon against English horsemen. As for the gruesome acts supposedly perpetrated by Welsh women on English corpses after the battle of Bryn Glas (horrible mutilations which Powys mentions, after Shakespeare), they have been generally negated by Welsh historians, who judge these descriptions to be symbolic of the castration of English power in Wales.

One thing has struck me as strange, the more than reserved attitude of the Welsh with respect to Powys' book on "their" hero. *Owen Glendower* is not mentioned either by historians or in the Welsh Internet sites devoted to Owain Glyn Dwr that I consulted.³ It seems to me that there is here some reticence worth considering.

Consider for example the two important essays the Welsh poet Roland Mathias has written about Powys, *John Cowper Powys and "Wales"*⁴ and *The Sacrificial Prince: A Study of Owen Glendower*⁵. Reading these I felt a certain surprise to realise how severe is his judgment on the novel. He states very clearly that it was a mistake⁶ on the part of Powys to choose the Welsh hero's life to transform it into a fiction. Among the many criticisms made, two are rather surprising. According to Mathias, Powys was not able to incorporate the physical and, above all, historical reality of Wales into the body of the novel, since his knowledge of Wales was less than that of Wessex, described in his previous fiction. Although he was, in Corwen, close to Glyn Dwr's own residence, he would thus not have made proper use of Welsh nature or of the places evoked:

There is the ride to Mathrafal, which might be over any moorland anywhere towards a site with walls visible above ground and passages under it. Mathrafal is a name much invoked, but only in the end does it appear clearly as anything other than the ancient home of the Princes of Powys.⁷

or again:

There is, indeed, good reason for supposing that Dinas Bran provided JCP with few emanations. He appears to see it and see from it with the commoner landscape eye that many of us possess. It [his description] is couched in one of JCP's normal, if extravagant formulas. It amounts to saying, not feeling.⁸

The reader might want to compare his own impressions with this verdict, whether or not he has been able to make comparisons with the real landscapes around Corwen. I personally find Mathias' criticism unfair.

Another remark made by Mathias is that Powys' mythology, when applied to Owain, gives a false image of the rebel, endowing him with all the stereotypes of the Celt already mentioned by Julius Caesar, and — more serious still — conferring on him a strong tendency towards inaction, which for Mathias, is in complete contradiction with the reality of a man who had fought the English for thirteen years with immense success.

It is important to note here that the *persona* of Owain had struck his own

³ I expressed my surprise to the Editor of the Welsh magazine *Cambria* and Mr Henry Jones-Davies kindly answered, saying he will devote a future issue to J. C. Powys.

⁴ In *The Powys Review* 17, 1985

⁵ In *Essays on John Cowper Powys*, ed. Belinda Humfrey, Cardiff, 1972

⁶ *ibid.*, p.22

⁷ *Essays on J.C.Powys*, p.243

⁸ *ibid.*, p.241

contemporaries by the sense of mystery around him, by his reputation as a magician, by his ubiquity⁹. The description by Powys of his trances, of his momentary absences, does not seem so exaggerated. And why deny Powys the writer's right to elaborate a little on a complex character, who certainly had many facets, other than being a fearless and blameless warrior? In her introduction to *Owen Glendower*, recently re-published in Great Britain, Dr Krissdottir applies herself to describe “the mystery of story-telling”, the slow and mysterious introspective work of Powys the writer who strives, as he says in his 1939 Diary, “to indicate how out of chance & confusion a certain stream of destiny begins to move”¹⁰. Following this idea, Morine Krissdottir quotes another entry in the Diary¹¹ which mentions Phyllis's ideas on the book:

30 May 1939: ... She said I must make Owen more upset by Rhys getting Bad News — and so I will. She said my next chapter must be more personal — & best cut out any grand pageant of the Parliament — and so I will. More present reality is required.

Another grievance formulated is that the characters in the book live in an autonomous way, they are “individuals” with their idiosyncrasies, and therefore Powys does not make us witness the solidarity, “the agreement, community of purpose, social understanding”¹² which, for Mathias, are essential, if one is to understand how the whole country was united behind Owain Glyn Dwr. But should we judge *Owen Glendower* by the standards of sociological research?

In fact I wonder if it is not that the Englishman Powys dared to seize the story of the great Welsh hero which so irritates some Welsh critics! The English writer Redwood Anderson, who wrote to John Cowper Powys a 33-page long letter in December 1941 to give praise to the book, wrote this:

The story has, of course, its unity as a story, its historical unity; but the fact that all its main events, and most of its main, and many of its subsidiary characters are but “the working of one mind” — that through them all, as day through the figures of a cathedral window, shines that Light which is as darkness, gives to the whole work another and profounder unity — what I have called the Mythological Unity (I prefer this term to Metaphysical or Philosophical). It is this fact that relates this Owen to such poems as Dante's *Commedia* and Goethe's *Faust*.¹³

It is well and truly *Owen Glendower* who, from his great height, towers over this magnificent book, and it does not seem to me that one can reproach Powys in any way for endeavouring to give back to Welsh history an Owain Glyn Dwr in human guise, complex and forever mysterious.

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⁹ There were many simultaneous sightings of Glyn Dwr during all this time. This could be explained by the fact that his brother Tudor was said to closely resemble him.

¹⁰ *Petrushka and the Dancer*, The Diaries of John Cowper Powys, 1929-1939, Selected and edited by Morine Krissdottir, Carcanet Press, 1995.

¹¹ This quote is not to be found in *Petrushka and the Dancer*, although Dr Krissdottir makes use of it in her Introduction to *Owen Glendower*, new edition.

¹² *Essays on J.C. Powys*, p.138

¹³ *The Powys Newsletter* n°44