

carol lloyd wood, *An Overview of Welsh Poetry Before the Norman Conquest*, Welsh Studies, Vol. 11. Lewiston, New York; Queenston, Ontario; Lampeter, Dyfed: Edwin Mellen Press, 1996. Pp. iv, 118. isbn: 0-7734-8859-6. \$69.95.

The preface to this volume makes several claims about the announced subject: that 'aesthetic taste' and 'ethical, or political taste' account for the fact that the poetry of Taliesin, Aneirin, and Llywarch Hen 'has failed to capture our imagination' (p. i); another and 'more obvious reason' for the neglect of the poetry in the last twenty years is because it is 'politically incorrect': that is, it is about 'men fighting and killing other men,' and because woman 'is nowhere to be seen in early medieval Welsh poetry' (p. ii). Another claim is that 'Anglo-Saxon expansion and settlement patterns have a great deal to do with the development of both early Welsh and Anglo-Saxon literature and form the basis...for much of Welsh heroic poetry' (pp. i-ii). The author claims too that the 'first seven hundred and fifty years of Welsh poetry' (p. i) is usually neglected, by persons not named.

It is to redress this neglect and to provide the necessary background for appreciating early Welsh poetry, presumably, that the author has undertaken the present work. Let us examine the claims. As Welsh poetry in the historical period is universally conceded to begin with Taliesin, Aneirin, Blwchbardd, Talhaearn, and Cian, named in the well-known and often quoted passage from 'Nennius' and belonging to the second half of the sixth century, 750 years would bring us to the first half of the fourteenth century. Since the Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies of the University of Wales has just completed editing the entire corpus of the Poets of the Princes (whose poetry spans a period from early twelfth century to the end of the thirteenth century) in seven large volumes, the author's claim of neglect is astray for the latter part of the period. But granted that the author is dealing with the period before the Norman conquest of England, we can limit this number to, say, 500 years: from roughly 560 to 1065.

The author maintains (p. ii) that the early Welsh poets (the *cynfeirdd*, as Welsh scholars call them, as well as the later *cynfeirdd*, though these terms are not used by the author) have been neglected by scholars for the past twenty years. It is predictable, then, that one will find no work later than 1974 (my own *The Poetry of Llywarch Hen*) referenced in the footnotes or bibliography of this 1996 publication. This claim is incomprehensible and inexplicable. A brief search of the standard bibliographies in the field will turn up a very considerable body of work. I mention only the best known and most relevant to topics treated in this book. Rachel Bromwich and R. Brinley Jones edited *Astudiaethau ar yr Hengerdd: Studies in Old Welsh Poetry* in honor of Professor Idris Foster in 1978. Its fifteen essays include studies on Aneirin's *Gododdin*, Taliesin, Llywarch Hen, and a comparison of Old English heroic poetry with early Welsh poetry (subject of chapter 5 of the present book). Professor A.O.H. Jarman's monograph on *The Cynfeirdd: Early Welsh Poets and Poetry* appeared in 1981; his edition of the *Black Book of Carmarthen* in 1982; his *Aneirin: Y Gododdin* in 1988. Professor Jarman, who does get credit for his 1967 essay on 'The Heroic Ideal in Early Welsh Poetry,' will find his name consistently misspelled as 'Jarmon'; nonetheless he doesn't make it into the bibliography at the end of the volume, for which he (Jarman) will surely be thankful.

During this 'fallow' twenty-year period there also appeared the *Guide to Welsh Literature: vol. I* (1976, rev. ed. 1992), with chapters on every topic in the book under review pertaining to early Welsh poets and the historical background of their poetry; Wendy Davies' history of *Wales in the Early Middle Ages* (1982); *Early Welsh Poetry: Studies in the Book of Aneirin* ed. Brynley F. Roberts (1988); Jenny Rowland, *Early Welsh Saga Poetry: a Study and Edition of the Englynion* (Cambridge, 1990; 688 pp!). There is also plenty of material pertinent to this period of Welsh poetry and, therefore, to the subject of this book in articles in journals such as *Llên Cymru*, *Studia Celtica*, *Cambridge [now Cambrian] Medieval Celtic Studies*, *Ysgrifau Beirniadol*, etc. etc. One thinks, for example, of the important contributions of Dr. Marged Haycock on Taliesin. Ignoring this wealth of material relevant to the study of Welsh poetry before 1066 is more than just serious oversight; to suggest that it doesn't exist is even worse.

We are told that understanding the political background—'the establishment of Wessex, a westward expansion by the Mercians, and the establishment of Northumbria,' will then allow us to approach the poetry of the period as art. I would say that this is a dubious proposition at best: that to understand the art of Welsh poetry we need to have a good command of Welsh, a knowledge of the literary tradition, and an acquaintance with the traditional metres and genres of both Welsh poetry and the Celtic tradition from which it stems. An author who writes that 'even the modern reader, unprejudiced by notions of Prince Maelgwn's wickedness [the fulminations of Gildas], is likely to find the idea of poems to praise a ruler somewhat offensive' (p. 1) is unlikely to have much of a sense of traditional Celtic genres of eulogy and elegy.

The preface closes by pointing out that 'neither the Welsh nor their poets have forgotten that period in their history when their land was invaded and taken over.' To demonstrate this she quotes two poems by the poet R.S. Thomas, whom she claims is 'Wales's greatest modern poet' (p. iii). I fail to understand the author's strategy here—is a perverse irony at work? She speaks of the English as agents of ruin and loss where the Welsh are concerned. Many would argue that it is the Welsh language that has suffered most ruin and loss at the hands of the English, and how better to demonstrate this than quote a poet who writes of Welsh woes in English? R.S. Thomas's credentials as poet and patriot are not at issue here, rather it is the author's confusion of two traditions of poetry in Wales, a Welsh one and an English one (earlier, she writes of the 'great figures' of Welsh poetry 'from Dafydd ap Gwilym to R.S. Thomas'). It would have been much more to the point being made here to quote from Welsh language poets who have written brilliantly of the Welsh sense of loss and have a profound sense of the histories and destinies of their native land, poets like Waldo Williams, Saunders Lewis, and Gwenallt.

The work is divided into five chapters, dealing with 'Historical Backgrounds,' 'Taliesin and the *Gododdin*,' 'The Llywarch Hen and Heledd Cycles,' 'The Triads, the 'Graves' Stanzas, and the *Armes Prydein*,' and 'The Welsh Influence.' The first chapter deals in some detail with the historical evidence of sources such as Gildas, Bede, 'Nennius' (I put the name in quotation marks because of the numerous problems surrounding the name and the attribution of the *Historia Brittonum*; see D. Dumville,

“Nennius” and the *Historia Brittonum*, *Studia Celtica* 10/11 (1975–76), 78–95). These are very difficult sources and a good deal of work has been done on them recently which would affect the assumptions underlying the author’s use of the material. In particular, see *Gildas: New Approaches*, ed. Michael Lapidge and David Dumville (1984), with chapters on Gildas’ education, dating in the work, geographical perspective, imagery, and, perhaps most importantly, the essay by Patrick Sims-Williams there on ‘Gildas and Vernacular Poetry.’ Wood is also apparently unaware of J.E. Williams, ‘Gildas, Maelgwn and the Bards’ in *Welsh Society and Nationhood* (Cardiff, 1984). But then there are few references to secondary sources in this chapter, and the historical survey to 1065 reads rather like an encyclopedia entry.

The second chapter is on what Welsh scholars would call the *cynfeirdd* or ‘early poets,’ to wit, Taliesin and Aneirin (the title of the chapter might lead the uninitiated to believe that Taliesin and not Aneirin was the author of *Gododdin*). The author’s principal source for Taliesin’s work is J.E. Caerwyn Williams’s translation, with some additions, of Sir Ifor Williams’s *Canu Taliesin*. This has not been superseded in print, though Marged Haycock’s 1983 University of Wales dissertation, ‘Llyfr Taliesin: Astudiaethau ar Rai Agweddau,’ should be consulted by serious students of Taliesin. In discussing Taliesin’s poem to Cynan Garwyn, the author claims that it displays ‘little of the subtlety and artistry found in other works attributed to [Taliesin]’ (p. 26). We are not given a basis for this judgment, but a few lines later we see that it apparently is based on remarks made by Professor Jarman in his 1967 essay on ‘The Heroic Ideal.’ It is a judgment that contrasts sharply with the high praise accorded the poem by its editor, Sir Ifor Williams (J.E.C. Williams, *op. cit.*, p. xxxv), the author’s source.

The section on Aneirin’s *Gododdin* suffers from lack of exposure to the wealth of scholarship on that work over the last twenty years, as I have noted above; in particular see Roberts 1988. The author repeats Kenneth Jackson’s arguments for the authenticity of the *Gododdin* (that is, that the work is a more or less contemporary account of an actual battle), one of which is that there would be no reason to fabricate such a work. In this connection, it is worth remembering that among the late medieval marginalia in *The Book of Aneirin* is one repeated virtually three times: *ymladd heb aruav yw ymryson heb y llyfr hwnn* ‘entering into poetic debate without this book is like going into combat without weapons.’ In other words, for medieval Welsh poets the *Gododdin* was test material of a sort. That doesn’t mean that it is not an authentic record of some possibly identifiable battle fought by some men most of whom are impossible to identify from other sources, but it doesn’t rule out the possibility that it was composed as a level of achievement to be reached by poets hoping to advance their standings in open competition.

Chapter 3 brings us to what Welsh scholars call the later *cynfeirdd*, a category that includes the Llywarch Hen and Heledd poems. My 1974 book took issue with Sir Ifor Williams’s theory that these poems are ‘fugitive’ verse from a lost cycle of tales about Llywarch and Heledd. My views have recently been challenged in great detail by Dr. Jenny Roland 1990 (see above), a book that *cannot* be ignored by anyone writing on this topic, but which makes no appearance here. I take this opportunity

as well to correct a misinterpretation on the part of the author of my remarks in the Llywarch Hen book on 'folk' or 'poetic' etymology. I used a discussion of that phenomenon to introduce the topic of *paronymy* as expounded by the critic Tzvetan Todorov. Paronymy is more far reaching than folk etymology, going beyond words that sound alike (including punning) to include alliteration, rhyme, and similar features of language. A related matter is the morphophonemic system of alternations in Welsh known as initial mutations. There is a rather curious reference to this linguistic feature (common to the Celtic languages) on p. 51, expanded in footnote 13 there. It is not clear to me what purpose is served by this brief expression of wonderment at the system of mutations in Welsh—or for whom such a note is intended, but since the topic is introduced there might be a reference here, or in the bibliography, to T.J. Morgan, *Y Treigladau a'u Cystrawen*.

The final chapter is only loosely connected with what would appear to be the subject of the book. True, author says in the preface that Welsh poetry 'had a greater influence on Anglo-Saxon poetry than most scholars have recognized' (p. ii). The fifth chapter deals with this supposed Welsh influence, recounting the speculations of earlier scholars (in particular, two essays published in the first decade of this century) about the existence of a saga tradition in Anglo-Saxon literature, like that of Wales, to which poems like 'Wulf and Eadwacer,' 'Deor,' 'The Wife's Lament,' and others originally belonged. The author admits that we may never know whether these poems originally came from Anglo-Saxon sagas (she might have added that we'll never know whether the Llywarch Hen and Heledd poems came from sagas either), 'but it seems quite possible that the whole *cyfarwydd* [Welsh for 'storyteller'] tradition could have been borrowed from Wales' (p. 104). Theories basing the Old English elegiac poetry on prose narratives are given very short *Schrift* indeed in Stanley Greenfield and Daniel Calder, *A New Critical History of Old English Literature* (1986), one of the most thoroughly documented studies of that literature in recent times.

Finally, I note the following errors in Welsh and Irish words and names: p. 27 *llosei* erroneously for *llosci*; *eimwne* for *eimwnc*; p. 29 l. 4, *as* for *ae*; p. 36 *neithon* for *nuithon*; *Neithon* for *Nwython*; p. 52 *byr* for *ebyr*; *diengudd* for *diengud*; p. 55 *dina* for *dinas*; p. 67 *Danaan* for *Danann*; p. 73 *aniweirac* for *aniweirach*; p. 76 *Cindéd úa Artacáin* for *Cindéd Ua hArtacáin*; p. 77 *lloeg(y)r* is England, not English people; p. 82 *Affalenu* for *Afallenau*; p. 19 (and again on p. 43). Llywarch Hen was first cousin to Urien of Rheged, *not* his brother.

It is not pleasant to write such a negative review of anyone's work. Every criticism I have leveled here could have been foreseen and avoided had the publisher found competent readers for what might then have become a most welcome addition to our deliberations about early Welsh poetry and relations between early British kingdoms and the developing Anglo-Saxon world. The obvious mistakes in transcribing the Welsh texts could have been corrected easily. The lack of acquaintance with scholarship on the subject, both in English and in Welsh, in monographs and serial publications, could have been addressed, to the benefit of both author and audience. As it stands, the work brings credit neither to author or publisher.

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