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WELSH LITERARY SOCIETIES.

ADDRESS

Delivered at a MEETING in BRECON, Dec. 5, 1821, by the Rev. W. J. REES, M. A. on the formation of the CAMBRIAN SOCIETY IN GWENT*.

“ MR. CHAIRMAN AND GENTLEMEN—According to the notice which has been just read from the Chair, we are met for the purpose of forming a Society in the District, for the preservation of the remains of the ancient, and the encouraging of the cultivation of the modern, literature of our country; and certainly a truly important purpose, inasmuch as, according to the attention which a nation has paid to the works of men of genius, and the patronage and encouragement, which it has given to the literary exertions of the human mind, it has prospered and become eminent, and, in proportion as this attention and encouragement have been withheld, the celebrity of states has declined, and degenerated into barbarism.

“ When we contemplate the comparatively little spot, of which the Principality of Wales consists, we are astonished at the efforts in this respect of our ancestors, whose example loudly calls upon us to preserve the remembrance of their exertions, and to do justice to our country, by patronizing the energies of its literary talent. If we carry our thoughts back for eighteen or nineteen centuries, we shall find that a very considerable portion of Europe spoke a language of a kindred stock with the Welsh; but, through the effects of conquest, and the lapse of time, this language has in a manner disappeared in all countries except our own, and the districts of Ireland, Scotland, and France, where the Irish, the Gaelic, and the Breton are spoken. While the modes of speech of the powerful states of ancient Gaul and Spain have become so in-

* We recommend this spirited and very able “ Address” to the particular attention of such patriotic individuals, connected with Wales by their rank or property, as may not already have lent their patronage to the Societies, formed for the cultivation of our national language, and of the literary pursuits associated with it; and more especially do we recommend it to the consideration of those (for unfortunately there are some of this character) who, from an unnational and renegade feeling, have endeavoured to depreciate the value of objects, so intimately connected with the best interests of Wales, as those contemplated by the several Welsh institutions.—E.D.

termixed with the Latin, and that of England and of a great part of Ireland and Scotland with the Teutonic, as to form new languages, the Celtic dialects remain in these sequestered spots in a great measure free from foreign mixtures in a wonderful manner; and, with respect to the Welsh, it has withstood the encroachments of the Saxons, the fury of the Danes, and the address of the Normans, and is written even at the present day by our literary characters in its genuine purity.

“ But, although the Celtic dialects have been preserved in some other parts as well as in Wales, yet, with respect to literature, she stands alone, paramount for ages among the nations of Europe. While darkness reigned over other countries, and other states were overwhelmed in the night of barbarism, she carefully preserved the ethereal spark, and frequently fanned it into a brilliant flame. It was from her, it is understood, that the Saxon ancestors of the English obtained their alphabet—it was from her that the renowned Alfred received instructions for civilizing and governing his kingdom—and it was from her that England procured many of her wise laws, through which she has become a mighty nation. When other countries were in a manner dead to literature, during the dark ages, her Gildas in the sixth century, her Tysilio in the seventh, and her Nennius in the eleventh, walked in, and illumined, the path of History. In the sixth century she had her Aneurin, her Taliesin, and her Llywarch Hen, pouring forth their melodious strains, and instructing and delighting their countrymen with the productions of their genius. In the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries, she had her Meilyr, her Gwalchmai, her Cynddelw, her Llywarch ab Llywelyn, her Davydd Ben-vrâs, her Gruffydd ab Maredudd, and a host of literary worthies, whose poetic works were an honour to their country. In the tenth century her Hywel Dda (Howell the Good) collected and published the laws of the nation, copies of which have been transmitted to us, and from a perusal we have not only information of the simplicity of the age, but also of the civilization and wisdom of the people.

“ But, in preserving the ancient documents of Welsh literary genius, many MSS. have, through want of care, been either lost or destroyed; some left to moulder unheeded in damp

places, some suffered to be irretrievably lost through neglect, and many consumed by accidental fires. To prevent a recurrence of such careless inattention, and unfortunate accident, and to collect what MSS. may be procured, that they may be placed in situations where they will be carefully preserved, and to print such as are worthy of publication, are among the objects of the Cambrian Societies; and surely what can be more praiseworthy? What can better indicate a true national spirit than to rescue from oblivion, and preserve from destruction, these literary productions, which have been the glory of the country, and rendered it celebrated among the nations?

“ In addition to these important objects, the Cambrian Societies promote researches into the ancient literature and antiquities of the country. In this respect, however, much has been done of late years. W. Owen Pughe, Esq. has published a copious and valuable Dictionary of the Language, and has favoured the public with a Cambrian Biography, and some valuable Prefaces to the Welsh Works he has edited; and the Editors of the Cambrian Register, and of the CAMBRO-BRITON have contributed most materially to the promoting of this interesting subject. This District has likewise great reason to be proud of what its living natives have produced in this branch of literature. In the Chancellor of the Collegiate Church of this town, born not far distant from it, and educated in its Grammar School, the District beholds the learned author of the *Celtic Researches*, and of the *Mythology and Rites of the Druids*—one who cannot be too much admired and revered for the depth of his research, the extent of his knowledge, the ingenuity of his remarks, and the classic elegance of his diction—one whose name will be noticed with respect, whenever mention is made of writers on Welsh literature. Besides this gentleman, I shall mention another, who was not only educated but also born in this town—one whom the District may contemplate with delight—one who, by publishing his *Horæ Britannicæ*, has given a species of digest of what others had previously said on the subject, and produced a work on Ancient British Literature, which both informs and entertains the general inquirer. I shall next advert to another, to whom the Welsh *literati* are under great obligations, who was born, and is resident, in a neighbouring

county in this District,—one who is a self-taught scholar, who, by dint of genius and application, has attained a considerable rank in literature—one whose whole life has, in a manner, been devoted to the subject, and who has made extensive and valuable Collections for the History of our Country*. I scarcely need mention that the person, to whom I allude, is the venerable Bard of Glamorgan, who is now engaged in editing a Work of considerable standing, and never before published, entitled *Cyvrinach Beirdd Ynys Prydain*. It is well known by those, who have paid attention to the subject, that the ancient philosophers had two classes of instruction—one containing their more mysterious and secret opinions, which were not divulged to any but to their immediate disciples—the other comprehending the principles which were made known without reserve to the common people; the first of which kind has been termed *esoteric*, and the other *exoteric* doctrines. Accordingly, because this work professes to contain what was kept a secret from the vulgar, the Editor, agreeably to the Welsh title, calls it, in English, *The Esoteric Literature of the Ancient British Bards*, a production, which, for curiosity and value, will, doubtless, be highly prized by the admirers of Welsh literature. But, notwithstanding what has been done by these and other literary individuals, there still remains much to be accomplished, and, accordingly, the Cambrian Societies offer Premiums for Essays on different branches of the subject, which are directed to be written in English for the accommodation of those who do not understand the Welsh language. These Societies also promote this important object by encouraging communications from literary characters, which may throw light on the history, literature, and manners of the Ancient British Nation, and by recommending to general notice works of merit on the subject, and encouraging their publication by promoting individual subscriptions.

“The encouraging of the cultivation of the Welsh Language is also among objects of these Societies; and, in this respect, the late proposals of the Cambrian Metropolitan Institution for

* We have had frequent occasion to allude to these “Collections,” and we gladly avail ourselves of the present, again to remind Mr. Williams of the promise which, under the patronage of the Cambrian Society in Dyved, he has made to the public in this respect.—ED.

the best Essays in the Welsh Language from the scholars of the Grammar Schools in Wales deserve the commendation of every friend to his country. For, surely, it must be of great importance to train young persons to a thorough knowledge of the language—many of whom are probably destined for the sacred profession, and may, ultimately, succeed to the care of Welsh parishes, and, the better they are acquainted with the language of the people, the better they will be able to impart spiritual instruction to their congregations.

“ The encouraging of Welsh Poetry is a prominent object of these Societies, and the intention is to stimulate the genius, and rouse the spirit, of men of talent to produce something worthy of their country. Accordingly they propose Premiums for the best poetical compositions in the language. Wales has been, in all ages, renowned for its bards and poets, and several of the poems, which the Premiums of the Societies have already elicited, have been highly to the credit of their authors, and proved that poetical genius, so far from being extinct in the Principality, abounds among us, and needs only to be roused to produce compositions worthy of any age.

“ Welsh Music is likewise a subject, which engages the attention of the Cambrian Societies, and they encourage its cultivation by proposing Premiums to the best proficient on the national instrument—the harp, and to the best vocal performers accompanying it, and by engaging the aid of superior minstrels to perform the beautiful compositions of the country for the entertainment of the members. In this respect, while the admirers of Welsh Music are under great obligations both to Mr. Edward Jones, and Mr. John Parry for their exertions in editing the Welsh Melodies, the members of these Societies are much indebted for entertainment to the professional performers of the Bath Harmonic Society, who sing the *Airs of Cambria* with a sweetness of tone, correctness of science, and chasteness of execution, which delight all who hear them.

“ As there are some persons, who feel disposed to object to these Cambrian Societies, and assert, that, so far from being a benefit, they are prejudicial, to the Principality, I propose, with your permission, to advert to the most plausible of their objections, and make a few observations respecting them. It is said, that the Welsh Language is falling into disuse, and

that the English is making rapid advances in the country, and that the zeal, evinced for the cultivation of the Welsh tongue by these Societies, will prevent the English from becoming the only language of the people, which would be for their benefit, as being more convenient for the common transactions of life, and would render the two nations more united, who are already under the same government and the same laws. Now this objection is raised on the assumption of a fact, that the Welsh has been, and is, falling into disuse to a much greater extent, and more rapidly, than is true. For upwards of ten centuries, since the reign of Offa, who made his celebrated dyke to prevent incursions of the Welsh into his territories, the Welsh language has receded, comparatively, but little within the boundary,—especially in some parts of North Wales. And in other districts, when the long lapse of time since the conquest by Edward I. and the intimate incorporation by Henry VIII. and the great encouragement, given for the attainment of the English language, are considered, it has gained much less ground than could be expected. An Englishman, travelling the public roads of the Principality, often meets with persons who speak English, and those, whom he has occasion to address at the inns, are able to accommodate themselves to his language; the Gentry, he may visit, speak English, and those, who call upon them, probably use the same tongue in his hearing; and from these slight facts, which come to his knowledge, he erroneously concludes that the English is the prevailing language of the country. It is only one, who has resided a long time in the interior, having intercourse with the common people, that can form a true estimate of the extent of the Welsh language; and such persons will readily assent to the truth of the assertion, that the Welsh is the sole living speech, not only of thousands, but of tens of thousands, and even of some hundreds of thousands, of the inhabitants of the Principality.

“ The use of the two languages, instead of one, is stated to be productive, in a *religious* point of view, of no inconsiderable evil to the country, as, in consequence of both being used in some places in Divine Service, those, who do not understand the English, are induced to leave the Church, and become frequenters of the Meeting-House. The evil, here adverted to,

certainly exists, but does not arise from the cause alleged by the objector, and is owing rather to the English part of the congregation not understanding Welsh, than the Welsh not understanding English. In the parishes, adverted to, the majority of the inhabitants, for the most part, scarcely understand any thing but Welsh; yet the Minister, frequently out of courtesy and complaisance to a few English families of consideration, who are resident, gives part of the service in the language they understand, hoping to induce them thereby to become a part of his congregation. The ultimate consequence, however, in many instances is, that, the poorer people hearing in church what they do not comprehend, several of them betake themselves to other places of worship, where the service is altogether in their own tongue, and some by degrees think, in their simplicity, that the Church is intended rather for the gentry than themselves, and that they do nothing wrong in attending where they hear what is most suitable to their understandings. In those parishes, therefore, where the English inhabitants are not sufficient to constitute separate congregations and have English service to themselves, it would be desirable for the few, who are resident, to learn the Welsh, as thereby the service would of course be altogether in one language, the native inhabitants not induced to leave their church, and the evil complained of receive a complete remedy.

“ Another evil complained of, which the Cambrian Societies are said to promote, and to be the means of continuing, is the inconvenience arising from the Laws being administered in the Courts of Justice in the English language among people who do not understand it. This evil, however, arises, and is continued, through the Laws being administered in a language not understood by those who are principally interested, which cannot be altogether remedied: as, however, witnesses are generally illiterate, and have not opportunities of learning the language of the Courts, and as the Welsh tongue is likely to remain for ages, the evil may be somewhat diminished by those, who are employed in the administration of justice, learning the language of the people. Were the judges acquainted with the Welsh tongue, they would be able to notice such nice points in the evidence, as are necessarily lost in a translation, and therefore more competent to perform the duties of their high office. Did

the counsel understand it, they would be able to examine the witnesses to better purpose, and correct the interpreter when his version of the evidence was not sufficiently accurate *. And, were attorneys always thoroughly acquainted with the language, they would better understand the cases of their clients, and conduct the legal proceedings with greater probability of doing them justice. Indeed there is no person of superior station, who resides, or has duties to perform in the Welsh, which is by far the most considerable part of the Principality, to whom an acquaintance with the language is not of importance. Without a thorough knowledge of it, the clergyman cannot become acquainted with the spiritual concerns of his parishioners, and give them proper instruction; without knowing it, the medical man cannot understand the information communicated by his patients, and therefore administer proper remedies for their diseases; without a knowledge of it, the commercial man cannot transact dealings with his customers, the landed proprietor converse with his tenants, or the Member of Parliament have communication with his constituents. The traveller on business, or for recreation, meets with great inconvenience from not knowing it, and the independent gentleman of fortune feels his happiness much diminished by not understanding the language of his neighbours.

“ But it is said, that these evils would be removed, if every encouragement were given to the English tongue, in order that it might become the sole language of the people. It may, however, be asked, what greater encouragement can be given than has already been bestowed. For several centuries, the laws have been administered in English, an acquaintance with the English tongue has been the road to honours and preferment in church and state, and the English is almost always the first language which is taught to children in the schools of the Principality. Yet, notwithstanding these discouraging

* It would be of great benefit to the administration of justice in Wales, if a regular interpreter, well experienced in the Welsh and English languages, were attached to each circuit. At present, this duty, from being taken up by any accidental attendant on the court, is, for the most part (we speak more particularly of one circuit), very ill performed, and as often through a want of accurate knowledge of the English, as from an ignorance of the Welsh tongue, though both causes have their proportionate operation.—ED.

circumstances, so long continued, the Welsh still remains the living language of, by far the majority of the people, and will, doubtless, remain so for many ages yet to come; and, as the only practicable remedy for the evil arising to the country from the use of two languages is, that those, who know only the English, should also become acquainted with the Welsh; and, inasmuch as the Cambrian Societies, without discouraging in the least the Welsh from learning the English, indirectly promote a knowledge of the Welsh tongue among the superior classes of the resident English, and the Cambrian Institution in London professedly in the Grammar schools in Wales, they surely, in this respect, merit the patronage of every person desirous to promote the prosperity of the Principality.

“With respect to the particulars of the institution of these laudable Societies, I beg leave to advert to what I have caused to appear in a provincial paper, and mention that the Principality has, for the purpose, been divided into four Districts—Dyved, Powys, Gwynedd, and Gwent,—which coincide in general terms with the four Welsh Law Circuits; and it has been thought appropriate that the societies should be instituted, and the Eisteddvods, or General Meetings for the recitation of the Prize Compositions, and the competition of the Musical Performers, held, in the principal town in the central county of these districts. Thus the Society in Dyved, or the Western portion of South Wales, was instituted, and the Eisteddvod held, at Carmarthen, as being in the county which is central with respect to those of Pembroke and Cardigan. The Society in Powys, or the Eastern portion of North Wales, was instituted, and the Eisteddvod held, at Wrexham, in consequence of its being a principal town in Denbighshire, which is central between Flintshire and Montgomeryshire; and the Society in Gwynedd, or the Western portion of North Wales, was instituted, and the Eisteddvod held, at Carnarvon, as being in the central county between those of Merioneth and Anglesea—the several counties, respectively together named, forming the three first-mentioned districts. It is with the same idea that the Cambrian Society for the District, comprehending the Eastern portion of South Wales, called for this purpose Gwent, is proposed to be formed, and the next Eisteddvod held, in this town, in consequence of its being in the central county between

those of Radnor and Glamorgan, to which, however, is added that of Monmouth, constituting, with Glamorgan, the greater part of ancient Gwent, termed the *ARCADIA* of Wales—the land of poetry and music—the country celebrated for Bardic patronage, and formerly belonging altogether to South Wales.

“ It is intended by these Societies to hold the *Eisteddvod* in either of these Districts every year, by means of which arrangement it will return to the same District every fourth year; from which circumstance, these meetings have not been inaptly called the *Welsh Olympics*, in allusion to those celebrated ones, so called, of ancient Greece, where contests of various kinds took place, and prizes were awarded to the victors, in like manner, every fourth year.

“ The *Eisteddvods*, already held under the auspices of these Societies, have met with very great success;—being numerously attended by the aristocracy, by the landed and commercial wealth, by the various respectable classes, and especially by the literary talent of the country, they have been peculiarly brilliant. That at Carmarthen exceeded the expectations of the most sanguine, the *Wrexham* meeting was, notwithstanding, better attended, and lately, at *Carnarvon*, a still more numerous *æsamblage* met on the interesting occasion. What remains to complete the Districts is the *Eisteddvod* proposed to be held in this town, which, it is anticipated, will be at least equally splendid with the preceding. And, for the obtaining of this desirable object, it is confidently hoped that the Nobility and Gentry resident in, and connected with, the District, comprehending, as before-mentioned, the counties of *Brecon*, *Radnor*, *Glamorganshire*, and *Monmouth*, will be zealous and prompt in affording patronage to the proposed Society, and that they will prove their love for their country, by giving such *éclat* to the *Eisteddvod* by their attendance, co-operation, and support, as will render it highly honourable to their patriotic feelings, and a new era in the annals of this important and interesting portion of the Principality.”