

WILD WALES:

ITS PEOPLE, LANGUAGE, AND SCENERY.

BY GEORGE BORROW,

AUTHOR OF "THE BIBLE IN SPAIN," ETC.

"Their Lord they shall praise,
Their language they shall keep,
Their land they shall lose,
Except Wild Wales."

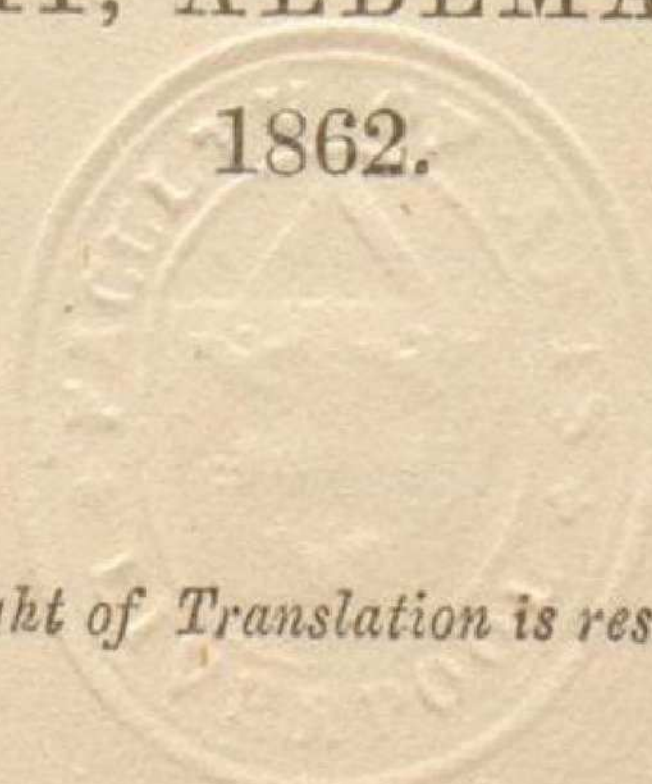
TALIESIN: *Destiny of the Britons.*

IN THREE VOLUMES.—VOL. III.

LONDON:
JOHN MURRAY, ALBEMARLE STREET.

1862.

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"There are none, sir! but there a castle once stood, and from it the place we came from had its name, and likewise the river that runs down to Pont Erwyd."

"And who lived there?" said I.

"I don't know, sir," said the man. "But I suppose they were grand people or they would not have lived in a castle."

After ascending the hill and passing over its top we went down its western side and soon came to a black frightful bog between two hills. Beyond the bog and at some distance to the west of the two hills rose a brown mountain, not abruptly but gradually, and looking more like what the Welsh call a rhiw or slope than a mynydd or mountain.

"That, sir," said my guide, "is the grand Plynlimmon."

"It does not look much of a hill," said I.

"We are on very high ground, sir, or it would look much higher. I question, upon the whole, whether there is a higher hill in the world. God bless Pumlummon Mawr!" said he, looking with reverence towards the hill. "I

am sure I have a right to say so, for many is the good crown I have got by showing gentlefolks, like yourself, to the top of him."

"You talk of Plynlimmon Mawr, or the great Plynlymmon," said I; "where are the small ones?"

"Yonder they are," said the guide, pointing to two hills towards the north—"one is Plynlimmon Canol, and the other Plynlimmon Bach. The middle and the small Plynlimmon."

"Pumlummon," said I, "means five summits. You have pointed out only three—now, where are the other two?"

"Those two hills which we have just passed make up the five. However, I will tell your worship that there is a sixth summit. Don't you see that small hill connected with the big Pumlummon, on the right?"

"I see it very clearly," said I.

"Well, your worship, that's called Bryn y Llo—the Hill of the Calf, or the Calf Plynlimmon, which makes the sixth summit."

"Very good," said I, "and perfectly satisfactory. Now let us ascend the Big Pumlummon."

In about a quarter of an hour we reached the summit of the hill, where stood a large cairn or heap of stones. I got upon the top and looked around me.

A mountainous wilderness extended on every side, a waste of russet-coloured hills, with here and there a black, craggy summit. No signs of life or cultivation were to be discovered, and the eye might search in vain for a grove or even a single tree. The scene would have been cheerless in the extreme had not a bright sun lighted up the landscape.

"This does not seem to be a country of much society," said I to my guide.

"It is not, sir. The nearest house is the inn we came from, which is now three miles behind us. Straight before you there is not one for at least ten, and on either side it is an *anialwch* to a vast distance. *Plunlummon* is not a sociable country, sir; nothing to be found in it, but here and there a few sheep or a shepherd."

"Now," said I, descending from the cairn, "we will proceed to the sources of the rivers."

"The *ffynnon* of the *Rheidol* is not far off," said the guide; "it is just below the hill."

We descended the western side of the hill for some way; at length, coming to a very craggy and precipitous place, my guide stopped, and pointing with his finger into the valley below said:—

"There, sir, if you look down you can see the source of the *Rheidol*."

I looked down, and saw far below what appeared to be part of a small sheet of water.

"And that is the source of the *Rheidol*?" said I.

"Yes, sir," said my guide; "that is the *ffynnon* of the *Rheidol*."

"Well," said I; "is there no getting to it?"

"O yes! but the path, sir, as you see, is rather steep and dangerous."

"Never mind," said I. "Let us try it."

"Isn't seeing the fountain sufficient for you, sir?"

"By no means," said I. "It is not only necessary for me to see the sources of the rivers,

but to drink of them, in order that in after times I may be able to harangue about them with a tone of confidence and authority."

"Then follow me, sir; but please to take care, for this path is more fit for sheep or shepherds than gentlefolk."

And a truly bad path I found it; so bad indeed that before I had descended twenty yards I almost repented having ventured. I had a capital guide, however, who went before and told me where to plant my steps. There was one particularly bad part, being little better than a sheer precipice; but even here I got down in safety with the assistance of my guide, and a minute afterwards found myself at the source of the Rheidol.

The source of the Rheidol is a small beautiful lake, about a quarter of a mile in length. It is overhung on the east and north by frightful crags, from which it is fed by a number of small rills. The water is of the deepest blue and of very considerable depth. The banks, except to the north and east, slope gently down, and are clad with soft and beautiful moss. The

river, of which it is the head, emerges at the south-western side, and brawls away in the shape of a considerable brook, amidst moss and rushes down a wild glen tending to the south. To the west the prospect is bounded, at a slight distance, by high, swelling ground. If few rivers have a more wild and wondrous channel than the Rheidol, fewer still have a more beautiful and romantic source.

After kneeling down and drinking freely of the lake I said:

"Now, where are we to go to next?"

"The nearest ffynnon to that of the Rheidol, sir, is the ffynnon of the Severn."

"Very well," said I; "let us now go and see the ffynnon of the Severn!"

I followed my guide over a hill to the north-west into a valley, at the farther end of which I saw a brook streaming apparently to the south, where was an outlet.

"That brook," said the guide, "is the young Severn." The brook came from round the side of a very lofty rock, singularly variegated, black and white, the northern summit presenting

something of the appearance of the head of a horse. Passing round this crag we came to a fountain surrounded with rushes, out of which the brook, now exceedingly small, came murmuring.

"The crag above," said my guide, "is called Craig y Cefyl, or the Rock of the Horse, and this spring at its foot is generally called the ffynnon of the Hafren. However, drink not of it, master; for the ffynnon of the Hafren is higher up the nant. Follow me, and I will presently show you the real ffynnon of the Hafren."

I followed him up a narrow and very steep dingle. Presently we came to some beautiful little pools of water in the turf, which was here remarkably green.

"These are very pretty pools, an't they, master?" said my companion. "Now, if I was a false guide I might bid you stoop and drink, saying that these were the sources of the Severn; but I am a true cyfarwydd and therefore tell you not to drink, for these pools are not the sources of the Hafren, no more than the spring

below. The ffynnon of the Severn is higher up the nant. Don't fret, however, but follow me, and we shall be there in a minute."

So I did as he bade me, following him without fretting higher up the nant. Just at the top he halted and said: "Now, master, I have conducted you to the source of the Severn. I have considered the matter deeply, and have come to the conclusion that here, and here only, is the true source. Therefore stoop down and drink, in full confidence that you are taking possession of the Holy Severn."

The source of the Severn is a little pool of water some twenty inches long, six wide, and about three deep. It is covered at the bottom with small stones, from between which the water gushes up. It is on the left-hand side of the nant, as you ascend, close by the very top. An unsightly heap of black turf-earth stands just above it to the north. Turf-heaps, both large and small, are in abundance in the vicinity.

After taking possession of the Severn by drinking at its source, rather a shabby source

for so noble a stream, I said, "Now let us go to the fountain of the Wye."

"A quarter of an hour will take us to it, your honour," said the guide, leading the way.

The source of the Wye, which is a little pool, not much larger than that which constitutes the fountain of the Severn, stands near the top of a grassy hill which forms part of the Great Plynlimmon. The stream after leaving its source runs down the hill towards the east, and then takes a turn to the south. The fountains of the Severn and the Wye are in close proximity to each other. That of the Rheidol stands somewhat apart from both, as if, proud of its own beauty, it disdained the other two for their homeliness. All three are contained within the compass of a mile.

"And now I suppose, sir, that our work is done, and we may go back to where we came from," said my guide, as I stood on the grassy hill after drinking copiously of the fountain of the Wye.

"We may," said I; "but before we do I

must repeat some lines made by a man who visited these sources, and experienced the hospitality of a chieftain in this neighbourhood four hundred years ago. Then taking off my hat I lifted up my voice and sang:—

"From high Plynlimmon's shaggy side
Three streams in three directions glide;
To thousands at their mouths who tarry
Honey, gold and mead they carry.
Flow also from Plynlimmon high
Three streams of generosity;
The first, a noble stream indeed,
Like rills of Mona runs with mead;
The second bears from vineyards thick
Wine to the feeble and the sick;
The third, till time shall be no more,
Mingled with gold shall silver pour."

"Nice pennillion, sir, I dare say," said my guide, "provided a person could understand them. What's meant by all this mead, wine, gold and silver?"

"Why," said I, "the bard meant to say that Plynlimmon, by means of its three channels, sends blessings and wealth in three different directions to distant places, and that the person whom he came to visit, and who lived on Plynlimmon, distributed his bounty in three different ways, giving mead to thousands at his banquets,

wine from the vineyards of Gascony to the sick and feeble of the neighbourhood, and gold and silver to those who were willing to be tipped, amongst whom no doubt was himself, as poets have never been above receiving a present."

"Nor above asking for one, your honour; there's a prydydd in this neighbourhood, who will never lose a shilling for want of asking for it. Now, sir, have the kindness to tell me the name of the man who made those pennillion."

"Lewis Glyn Cothi," said I; "at least, it was he who made the pennillion from which those verses are translated."

"And what was the name of the gentleman whom he came to visit?"

"His name," said I, "was Dafydd ab Thomas Vychan."

"And where did he live?"

"Why, I believe, he lived at the castle, which you told me once stood on the spot which you pointed out as we came up. At any rate, he lived somewhere upon Plynlimmon."

"I wish there was some such rich gentleman

at present living on Plynlimmon," said my guide; "one of that sort is much wanted."

"You can't have everything at the same time," said I: "formerly you had a chieftain who gave away wine and mead, and occasionally a bit of gold or silver, but then no travellers and tourists came to see the wonders of the hills, for at that time nobody cared anything about hills; at present you have no chieftain, but plenty of visitors who come to see the hills and the sources and scatter plenty of gold about the neighbourhood."

We now bent our steps homeward, bearing slightly to the north, going over hills and dales covered with gorse and ling. My guide walked with a calm and deliberate gait, yet I had considerable difficulty in keeping up with him. There was, however, nothing surprising in this; he was a shepherd walking on his own hill, and having first-rate wind, and knowing every inch of the ground, made great way without seeming to be in the slightest hurry: I would not advise a road-walker, even if he be a first-rate one, to attempt to compete with a shepherd on his own,

or indeed any hill; should he do so, the conceit would soon be taken out of him.

After a little time we saw a rivulet running from the west.

"This ffrwd," said my guide, "is called Frennig. It here divides shire Trefaldwyn from Cardiganshire, one in North and the other in South Wales."

Shortly afterwards we came to a hillock of rather a singular shape.

"This place, sir," said he, "is called Eisteddfa."

"Why is it called so?" said I. "Eisteddfa means the place where people sit down."

"It does so," said the guide, "and it is called the place of sitting because three men from different quarters of the world, once met here and one proposed that they should sit down."

"And did they?" said I.

"They did, sir; and when they had sat down they told each other their histories."

"I should be glad to know what their histories were," said I.

"I can't exactly tell you what they were, but I have heard say that there was a great deal in them about the Tylwyth Teg or fairies."

"Do you believe in fairies?" said I.

"I do, sir; but they are very seldom seen, and when they are they do no harm to anybody. I only wish there were as few corpse-candles as there are Tylwith Teg, and that they did as little harm."

"They foreshow people's deaths, don't they?" said I.

"They do, sir; but that's not all the harm they do. They are very dangerous for anybody to meet with. If they come bump up against you when you are walking carelessly it's generally all over with you in this world. I'll give you an example: A man returning from market from Llan Eglos to Llan Curig, not far from Plynlimmon, was struck down dead as a horse not long ago by a corpse-candle. It was a rainy, windy night, and the wind and rain were blowing in his face, so that he could not see it, or get out

of its way. And yet the candle was not abroad on purpose to kill the man. The business that it was about was to prognosticate the death of a woman who lived near the spot and whose husband dealt in wool—poor thing! she was dead and buried in less than a fortnight. Ah, master, I wish that corpse-candles were as few and as little dangerous as the Tylwith Teg or fairies.”

We returned to the inn where I settled with the honest fellow, adding a trifle to what I had agreed to give him. Then sitting down I called for a large measure of ale and invited him to partake of it. He accepted my offer with many thanks and bows, and as we sat and drank our ale we had a great deal of discourse about the places we had visited. The ale being finished I got up and said:—

“I must now be off for the Devil’s Bridge!”

Whereupon he also arose, and offering me his hand, said—

“Farewell, master; I shall never forget you: were all the gentlefolks who come here to see

the sources like you, we should indeed feel no want in these hills of such a gentleman as is spoken of in the pennillion.”

The sun was going down as I left the inn. I recrossed the streamlet by means of the pole and rail. The water was running with much less violence than in the morning, and was considerably lower. The evening was calm and beautifully cool, with a slight tendency to frost. I walked along with a bounding and elastic step, and never remember to have felt more happy and cheerful.

I reached the hospice at about six o’clock, a bright moon shining upon me, and found a capital supper awaiting me, which I enjoyed exceedingly.

How one enjoys one’s supper at one’s inn after a good day’s walk, provided one has the proud and glorious consciousness of being able to pay one’s reckoning on the morrow!

CHAPTER XXIII.

PONT Y RHYD FENDIGAID.—STRATA FLORIDA.—THE YEW-TREE.—
IDOLATRY.—THE TEIVI.—THE LLOSTLYDAN.

AND now for the resting-place of Dafydd Ab Gwilym! After wandering for some miles towards the south over a bleak moory country I came to a place called Fair Rhos, a miserable village, consisting of a few half-ruined cottages, situated on the top of a hill. From the hill I looked down on a wide valley of a russet colour, along which a river ran towards the south. The whole scene was cheerless. Sullen hills were all around. Descending the hill I entered a large village divided into two by the river, which here runs from east to west, but presently makes a turn. There was much mire in the street; immense swine lay in the mire, who turned up their

snouts at me as I passed. Women in Welsh hats stood in the mire, along with men without any hats at all, but with short pipes in their mouths; they were talking together; as I passed, however, they held their tongues, the women leering contemptuously at me, the men glaring sullenly at me, and causing tobacco smoke to curl in my face; on my taking off my hat, however, and enquiring the way to the Monachlog, everybody was civil enough, and twenty voices told me the way to the Monastery. I asked the name of the river:

“The Teivi, sir: the Teivi.”

“The name of the bridge?”

“Pont y Rhyd Fendigaid—the Bridge of the Blessed Ford, sir.”

I crossed the Bridge of the Blessed Ford, and presently leaving the main road I turned to the east by a dunghill, up a narrow lane parallel with the river. After proceeding a mile up the lane, amidst trees and copses, and crossing a little brook, which runs into the Teivi, out of which I drank, I saw before me in the midst of a field, in which were tombstones and broken

ruins, a rustic-looking church; a farm-house stood near it, in the garden of which stood the framework of a large gateway. I crossed over into the churchyard, ascended a green mound, and looked about me. I was now in the very midst of the Monachlog Ystrad Flur, the celebrated monastery of Strata Florida, to which in old times Popish pilgrims from all parts of the world repaired. The scene was solemn and impressive: on the north side of the river a large bulky hill looked down upon the ruins and the church, and on the south side, some way behind the farmhouse, was another which did the same. Rugged mountains formed the background of the valley to the east, down from which came murmuring the fleet but shallow Teivi. Such is the scenery which surrounds what remains of Strata Florida: those scanty broken ruins compose all which remains of that celebrated monastery, in which kings, saints and mitred abbots were buried, and in which, or in whose precincts, was buried Dafydd Ab Gwilym, the greatest genius of the Cimbric race and one of the first poets of the world.

After standing for some time on the mound I descended, and went up to the church. I found the door fastened, but obtained through a window a tolerable view of the interior, which presented an appearance of the greatest simplicity. I then strolled about the churchyard looking at the tombstones, which were humble enough and for the most part modern. I would give something, said I, to know whereabouts in this neighbourhood Ab Gwilym lies. That, however, is a secret that no one can reveal to me. At length I came to a yew-tree which stood just by the northern wall which is at a slight distance from the Teivi. It was one of two trees, both of the same species, which stood in the churchyard, and appeared to be the oldest of the two. Who knows, said I, but this is the tree that was planted over Ab Gwilym's grave, and to which Gruffydd Gryg wrote an ode? I looked at it attentively, and thought that there was just a possibility of its being the identical tree. If it was, however, the benison of Gruffydd Gryg had not had exactly the effect which he intended, for either lightning or the force of wind had splitten

off a considerable part of the head and trunk, so that though one part of it looked strong and blooming, the other was white and spectral. Nevertheless, relying on the possibility of its being the sacred tree, I behaved just as I should have done had I been quite certain of the fact: Taking off my hat I knelt down and kissed its root, repeating lines from Gruffydd Gryg, with which I blended some of my own in order to accommodate what I said to present circumstances:—

“O tree of yew, which here I spy,
By Ystrad Flur's blest monast'ry,
Beneath thee lies, by cold Death bound,
The tongue for sweetness once renown'd.

Better for thee thy boughs to wave,
Though scath'd, above Ab Gwilym's grave,
Than stand in pristine glory drest
Where some ignobler bard doth rest;
I'd rather hear a taunting rhyme
From one who'll live through endless time,
Than hear my praises chanted loud
By poets of the vulgar crowd.”

I had left the churchyard, and was standing near a kind of garden, at some little distance from the farmhouse, gazing about me and meditating, when a man came up attended by a large dog. He had rather a youthful look, was of the

middle size and dark complexioned. He was respectably drest, except that upon his head he wore a common hairy cap.

"Good evening," said I to him in Welsh.

"Good evening, gentleman," said he in the same language.

"Have you much English?" said I.

"Very little; I can only speak a few words."

"Are you the farmer?"

"Yes! I farm the greater part of the Strath."

"I suppose the land is very good here?"

"Why do you suppose so?"

"Because the monks built their house here in the old time, and the monks never built their houses except on good land."

"Well, I must say the land is good; indeed I do not think there is any so good in Shire Aberteifi."

"I suppose you are surprised to see me here; I came to see the old Monachlog."

"Yes; gentleman! I saw you looking about it."

"Am I welcome to see it?"

"Croesaw! gwr boneddig, croesaw! many, many welcomes to you, gentleman!"

"Do many people come to see the monastery?"

Farmer.—Yes! many gentlefolks come to see it in the summer time.

Myself.—It is a poor place now.

Farmer.—Very poor, I wonder any gentlefolks come to look at it.

Myself.—It was a wonderful place once; you merely see the ruins of it now. It was pulled down at the Reformation.

Farmer.—Why was it pulled down then?

Myself.—Because it was a house of idolatry to which people used to resort by hundreds to worship images. Had you lived at that time you would have seen people down on their knees before stocks and stones, worshipping them, kissing them and repeating pennillion to them.

Farmer.—What fools! How thankful I am that I live in wiser days. If such things were going on in the old Monachlog it was high time to pull it down.

Myself.—What kind of a rent do you pay for your land?

Farmer.—O, rather a stiffish one.

Myself.—Two pound an acre?

Farmer.—Two pound an acre! I wish I paid no more!

Myself.—Well! I think that would be quite enough. In the time of the old monastery you might have had the land at two shillings an acre.

Farmer.—Might I? Then those couldn't have been such bad times, after all.

Myself.—I beg your pardon! They were horrible times—times in which there were monks and friars and graven images, which people kissed and worshipped and sang pennillion to. Better pay three pounds an acre and live on crusts and water in the present enlightened days than pay two shillings an acre and sit down to beef and ale three times a day in the old superstitious times.

Farmer.—Well, I scarcely know what to say to that.

Myself.—What do you call that high hill on the other side of the river?

Farmer.—I call that hill Bunk Pen Bannedd.

Myself.—Is the source of the Teivi far from here?

Farmer.—The head of the Teivi is about two miles from here high up in the hills.

Myself.—What kind of place is the head of the Teivi?

Farmer.—The head of the Teivi is a small lake about fifty yards long and twenty across.

Myself.—Where does the Teivi run to?

Farmer.—The Teivi runs to the sea, which it enters at a place which the Cumry call Aber Teivi and the Saxons Cardigan.

Myself.—Don't you call Cardiganshire Shire Aber Teivi?

Farmer.—We do.

Myself.—Are there many gleisiaid in the Teivi?

Farmer.—Plenty and salmons too—that is, farther down. The best place for salmon and gleisiaid is a place, a great way down the stream, called Dinas Emlyn.

Myself.—Do you know an animal called Llostlydan?

Farmer.—No, I do not know that beast.

Myself.—There used to be many in the Teivi.

Farmer.—What kind of beast is the Llostlydan?

Myself.—A beast with a broad tail, on which account the old Cumry did call him Llostlydan. Clever beast he was; made himself house of wood in middle of the river, with two doors, so that when hunter came upon him he might have good chance of escape. Hunter often after him, because he had skin good to make hat.

Farmer.—Ha, I wish I could catch that beast now in Teivi.

Myself.—Why so?

Farmer.—Because I want hat. Would make myself hat of his skin.

Myself.—O, you could not make yourself a hat even if you had the skin

Farmer.—Why not? Shot coney in Bunk Pen Banedd; made myself cap of his skin.

So, why not make hat of skin of broadtail, should I catch him in Teivi?

Myself.—How far is it to Tregaron?

Farmer.—'Tis ten miles from here, and eight from the Rhyd Fendigaid.

Myself.—Must I go back to Rhyd Fendigaid to get to Tregaron?

Farmer.—You must.

Myself.—Then I must be going, for the night is coming down. Farewell!

Farmer.—Farvel, Saxon gentleman!

CHAPTER XX.

THE GUIDE.—THE GREAT PLYNLIMMON.—A DANGEROUS PATH.—
SOURCE OF THE RHEIDOL.—SOURCE OF THE SEVERN.—PENNILLION.
—OLD TIMES AND NEW.—THE CORPSE CANDLE.—SUPPER.

LEAVING the inn my guide and myself began to ascend a steep hill just behind it. When we were about half way up I asked my companion who spoke very fair English, why the place was called the Castle.

“Because, sir,” said he, “there was a castle here in the old time.”

“Whereabouts was it?” said I.

“Yonder,” said the man, standing still and pointing to the right. “Don’t you see yonder brown spot in the valley? There the castle stood.”

“But are there no remains of it?” said I.

“I can see nothing but a brown spot.”