MERLIN'S PEOPLE

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Wales is possibly the best place in the world from which to understand and follow one of the greatest changes in human lifestyle that ever took place: the transition from wanderers to settlers.

When the English first came to Britain they did what they always do when they visit foreign lands. The Romans had not long left, and the natives were used to welcoming foreigners to their land, but they soon realized their mistake as the new lot of foreigners got off the boat. "Excuse me, young man," they said to the boy on the jetty. "We're not foreigners; we're English! *You're* the foreigners – what we call *welisc.* Don't you speak Anglo-Saxon? Oh well, you'll learn..." And I suppose they did learn, for 'Welsh' they are to this day: foreigners in their own land! Isn't that just like the English?

Of course, I personally am in a privileged position, being Welsh on my mother's side, and English on my father's side; so when I say 'we', I could just as well mean 'they', and when I say 'they', I could just as well mean 'we'. At least I can see both points of view.

When the Romans left, Britain was virtually *all* 'Wales' and the British were virtually *all* 'Welsh', but we know what the English are like. They edged the native inhabitants further and further into the unploughable hills to the north and west and never even realized that the land had not always been theirs. But we've got used to it now, and since King Offa built his dyke the Welsh have settled down in their own little corner of Britain: a place where they can retain their own distinctive foreignness, drawing their own ethnic boundary like a cloak ever closer around themselves. The Victorians tried to turn the Welsh into English and failed. The Royal Tudors tried to deny their Welsh origins and gloss over the difference, and they too failed. King Edward the First and the Normans both tried to do away with Wales and make it part of their domain, but they were fooling themselves. Wales is here to stay.

Myself, being a native on my mother's side and a colonizer on my father's, have lived and worked in forest lands from Coed-y-Goror on the English border to Gwydyr in the Snowdonia Forest Park (and in villages ranging from sheltered Pontfadog in the picturesque Ceiriog Valley to stark and stony Capel Curig beneath the bare slopes of Moel Siabod). Please don't ask me about rugby, coalmines, or politics: I am a woodland, hill and forest person – and the woodlands, hills and forests of Wales are what I hold most dear. These are the places where Merlin's people are to be found, and they are the places which the visitor ought to seek out.

Any Welsh person will tell you that, in fact, there was no such person as 'Merlin'; or at least, that the historical Merlin had a different name. Perhaps I shall come to that in a minute. Merlin one associates with King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, and the Red Dragon... But why a dragon? Does one crop up in Welsh mythology? I should point out that the English on arrival in Britain, and learning about the dragon that, in mythological terms, ruled the land, recruited an obscure hero-figure called Saint George to kill the poor beast. The Welsh, on the other hand, retained *their* dragon and, indeed, revered it. That must tell us something.

The dragon is not particularly a Celtic symbol. As far as I know, neither the Irish nor the Scots have ever recognized such a thing, and yet the Red Dragon survives with renewed vigour as a national emblem. Mystics throughout the world will tell you that the dragon is a symbol of the *passions* – a guardian of the passions, in fact: something that veneers over the top of the passions and prevents foreigners inspecting them. Look at the Chinese: they are dragon-mad, and their passions are completely veneered over, wouldn't you say? Yes: inscrutable. You can never tell what they're thinking, can you? Well, the Welsh too are like that. You can't tell what they are really thinking unless either they know you extremely well, or they blow their top. Beneath that veneer may be one of the nicest people you've ever met – or perhaps one of the nastiest. It's no use scratching the surface: that only causes the ethnic veil to be drawn ever tighter and the dragon to spread its wings a little. You'll just have to guess.

But meanwhile, take it from me. The English person seems solidly material on the outside, but is really quite soft and subtle within the English soul. The Welsh person seems quite fluid and nebulous on the outside, but deep within the Welsh soul is the hardness of granite and the strength of an oak, the hardy resistance of a wind-swept mountain. These are not the passions of the heart, these are qualities *beneath* the passions, hidden by the guardian dragon. Y Ddraig Goch, glowing red with the effort of holding those passions in check.

We British do not really care to discuss such things, the Welsh even more so than the English, or the Scots, but *I* don't mind discussing them, particularly in writing. What do the Welsh think of life after death, for instance? Are their musings on a par with those of the English? The spiritual foundation of nature is solid rock – it has to be so – and the Welsh soul is full of nature. My friend Stan Bach Colomendy (who had the nimblest wrist for wielding a cryman among the brambles of any man I've ever seen – one who had mastery over the plant kingdom) confided in me one day: "When we die, we go into animals. I've seen it in a vision - like a dream." Not particularly comforting, you might think. Not much reward for someone who has been slogging through the brambles all their life, but the connection between dreams and a possible afterlife is one which has often occupied my thoughts.

The gist is that your typical Welsh person has the world of nature in their soul, and the concept of 'soul' they see as living on a par with nature. A visitor to Wales may well be shown giant standing stones which are reputed to walk about, and visit the waterside for a drink at night. Nobody would think of that unless they were firmly convinced that stones lived on a soul level. I know of one such stone at Llanymynech, on the Shropshire border, which stomps down to the river bank quite regularly. Somebody even reported seeing it on the road halfway to Welshpool, and he was a parson too – so let's say no more about that.

Can you imagine an English person even contemplating a stone walking? No, neither can I. And that is one more fascination to be sought by the visitor to Wales. Ghosts in Wales are not diaphanous wraiths like they are in England: they are *solid.* In Wales the spark of life might inhabit, motivate and mobilize lifeless solidity.

Every land has its own brand of ghosties and ghoulies and haunting things. In Wales they tend to be solid to the point of materiality, and determined enough to conduct their own funeral rites, to organize their own processions, and to walk around in tangible if skeletal form. Throughout the Celtic fringe of the British Isles and across the Channel in Brittany, death, funerals and spectral candles are the stuff of hauntings. In Celtic Cornwall the frightful *kegrim* rises vampire-like from the tomb to terrorize the neighbours, fortunately seldom wandering too far from their home graveyard. No such nonsense in Wales itself, however. What we have in Wales is the tolaeth: the spectral funeral when the spellbound onlooker, wandering through the night, first hears the sound of sawing and hammering as the ghostly coffin is made; as his scalp starts to prickle he (or she) hears the procession starting out, a mournful dirge on spectral lips, the slow regular footsteps of the mourners, the horses' hooves striking stone, and the jingling of harness. Close to the ground, the feet and hooves and wheels can be seen. Higher up the vision disappears, but the spectral sounds continue and swell, gradually fading into the quiet sounds of night. If you find yourself at night in a wild spot of Wales, listen carefully and watch well.

There used to be a Bronze Age barrow – a crug – at Mold, known as Bryn yr Ellyllon, or Fairy's Hill, and the story attached to it indicates what a Welsh fairy is like. Not a butterfly-like tiny winged creature as you might expect to see in England, or such as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle might have expected to see, but a full human-size being, supernatural but solid. The fairy in question was said to be the ghost of a Bronze Age chieftain, clad in golden chain mail, who would appear by the side of his hill, gesturing to passers-by. As the town and its roads and suburbs spread the hill was demolished, but first excavated by archeologists who discovered the remains of a tall person fitting the description, complete with the remnants of his golden cape, now to be seen in the British Museum.

That's what Welsh fairies are like: just like you or me in fact. You will not know the difference until something remarkable happens. But I suppose we mustn't confuse fairies with ghosts. There is a real ghost in Powis Castle near Welshpool – a place which attracts hundreds of visitors as much for its famous gardens as for its beauty and long history – but you will probably not be able to stay the night in the haunted chamber and experience it for yourself, so you'll have to take my word for it.

Ghosts tend to have a certain lifespan – or should that be death-span – and never seem to survive more than three hundred years or so. Despite this perhaps the most ghostly-seeming places in Wales are the prehistoric rock tombs. These are to be found across the Celtic regions of Europe, and are said to date from the Mesolithic Period towards the close of the Stone Age, their construction continuing during the first thousand years or so of the Neolithic Period. The people built these vast chambered tombs to contain the bones and no doubt also to commemorate the lives of their dead. They are well worth a visit.

A remarkable thing about the Welsh rock tombs is the fact that, in archeological terms, after so many centuries of use they came to an abrupt end. A great tomb, you might think, is something of a materialistic symbol, as though celebrating the material aspect of human life. A long way from the simple shroud and an unmarked grave which would express a transitional stage, a mere sloughing off of the unimportant bits of life in the expectation of something unknown, unseen, but much better – some form of future life to be looked forward to, such as pious minds take for granted today. If the individual tomb marked the end of an individual cycle – or a tribal cycle perhaps, the end of the tomb-building era must have signified the end of a much larger and more significant cycle.

Hundreds of years apparently elapsed without any permanent buildings of this nature, until the next phase; the next cycle of humanity beginning to take hold. Moving huge stones and building large monuments with Stone Age tools must have taken great effort, and we might wonder why this effort apparently went by the board for so many generations. The next phase was the coming of the stone circle, which must also have taken great effort to construct, but it was effort of a different order. The fact is that something very significant in the life of the people must have happened in the interim: a whole lifestyle had changed, never to return.

Wales is possibly the best place in the world in which to understand and follow this great change in the lifestyle of a whole people – the whole of Europe in fact. To visit a prehistoric rock tomb is to glimpse the world of the hunter-gatherer. To visit a prehistoric stone circle on the other hand is to visit the dawn of farming communities, of families, tribes and races settling down in one place, a place they could call home. To take the matter further, to visit a prehistoric rock tomb is to experience an era when the earth owned the people, and the people functioned on instinct. To visit a prehistoric stone circle is to feel something of the new era, during which the people owned the earth – or at least their own little patch of it – and they functioned on thoughts rather than instincts. Tracking and trailing wild creatures had given way to understanding the nature of the soil, to rearing beasts rather than hunting them, to sowing and reaping foods rather than merely gleaning them.

The days of the rock tomb, frankly, are something of a mystery. The days of the stone circle we can relate to, especially if our own roots are in the countryside. None of this is exclusively Welsh in the modern sense, of course, but it all – stone tombs, stone circles, hill forts – predates the Welsh. To put it another way, *everybody* was Welsh in those days, certainly the whole of Britain and much of the rest of Europe was wholly 'Welsh'. Wales, I think, is simply the best place in which to feel this all-embracing Welshness, though I would have to include the adjoining border counties of England in this idea.

Geologically speaking, Wales is certainly incredibly ancient. The thing I like about geology is its disarming vagueness. It seems quite happy to pin events down to the nearest ten million years or so. It is an attitude that confers a properly respectful scale to the life of the earth. Archeology too seems happy to settle for a date that may very well be a thousand, or even two thousand years out. How can it be anything else? Stones are literally as old as the hills, so the task of finding a date – even a very approximate date – for when someone put a stone in place cannot be much more than a pretty well educated guess, but it does seem that the first of the stone circles appeared about a thousand years after the last tomb-builders had finished. They might, of course, have been a different set of people altogether, seeing how whole populations move around and take each other over. At all events, the original purpose of the great stone tombs must have been gone and forgotten by the time the circle builders got to work.

Within the British Isles it is said that about a thousand ancient stone circles still exist, or were at least known to have existed within the last century or so before becoming obliterated. Obliteration is a constantly ongoing process, both by natural means such as the build-up of peat, and by the advance of civilization, not to mention those indignant people who see them as the pagan remains of past heathen practices and worthy of destruction: not a few Christian churches have been built on the sites of stone circles. At all events, to me it is fairly incredible that any have survived at all. Most of them are fairly insubstantial when compared with something really unmovable, like the famous Stonehenge.

When you stand in an ancient stone circle and wonder at it, remember this: the earliest stone circles are thought to have been put in place during the fourth millennium BC. The earliest estimate by the famous archeologist Aubrey Burl is around 3500 BC, and the very best estimate for the building of the very last circle is around 1200BC, by which time I daresay the original use of the circles had long been forgotten, and it was just one of those customs which people blindly followed. The very oldest ones are believed to be in Cumbria, a name which, like Cambria, is a latinization of Cymru, the land of the Welsh.

To put these matters in a world perspective, the oldest circles, half lost among the heather, peat and bracken, are older by far than the great pyramids

of Egypt. They appeared around the time when the first writing evolved – the very beginning of the historical period – in the form of Mesopotamian cuneiform characters inscribed on clay tablets, and Egyptian hieroglyphics before they invented papyrus. They coincided with the earliest Minoan civilization, and the time when great Indo-European tribal migrations from east to west were taking place.

By the time the pyramids were built and the Pharaohs were at the peak of their power, when the great Ziggurat was being built at Ur of the Chaldees, these stone circles were already halfway through their functional life. By the time Abraham and his tribal followers left Ur and reached Canaan, the freshness of purpose of these circles must already have deteriorated beyond recall. At the time of the Exodus, when Moses led the chosen people through the wilderness before reaching their promised and soon to be ethnically-cleansed lands, the very last stone circles had long since been completed, and their original purpose probably quite forgotten.

By the time Solomon built his great temple, it is possible that the long-abandoned stone circles had given way to the woodland groves and valley glades of the Druids. They may too have been taken over by the Druids and under their influence given a new religious significance, because local legends frequently make the connection between 'stone circle' and 'Druids'. Almost everybody assumes that the circle must have had a *religious* significance, if not a *spiritual* one, and people have been inventing their own little quasi-religious ceremonies to perform around and between and inside the stones. Once people start doing things like this to some ancient monument you can be sure that the original purpose has gone forever. Nobody struggles to put heavy stones in place simply to dance around them. They meant something far more solid and abiding than that.

Hearing about my interest in stone circles, my friend Stan Bach offered to introduce me to a certain Mr John Jones – someone, he said, who would tell me all about them. John Jones turned out to be a local historian, and an expert not only on stone circles but, so it seemed, on every other subject under the sun as well.

We met him in the pub at Llandrillo, and after a few pints each we set off for a gentle stroll up the hillside path to join the Ffordd Gam Elin – the trace of one of the most ancient of roads across the Berwyn Hills, and well named, for it is certainly 'well crooked' – which ran very close to one of the oldest stone circles around. The Ffordd itself was not easy to see in places, and we blundered for a while through the heather and tussocky grass until we saw a familiar landmark – a sheltering belt of old and storm-bent larches, and there we located what we had come to see.

We inspected the stones for a while. "I honestly don't know what all the

mystery is about," said our guide, relieving himself into a clump of bell heather. "You can walk across the Berwyns all day long and not meet another soul. But look at that peak over there: Moel yr Henfaes, the hill of the old fields. You can't imagine any fields up there, can you? But there were at one time. The climate has changed, and so has the land use. In prehistoric times the whole place was covered with farms and mines and houses. And in those days most of their buildings were rondavels, like African huts: a central pole, low stone walls, and thatch.

We looked at the old stone circle. "And you think that's what this was? A building?"

"Well, I'd have thought it was obvious," he said. "These big stones are the only ones left, of course. They were the keystones that held the place up, dug into the ground to prevent the walls bulging outwards. All the smaller stones have long since gone, been scattered about, or taken away to build houses and walls and barns."

But some circles are very much larger, and I wondered how they could roof an area like that. Mr Jones thought it was obvious. "There would be timber uprights set in a circle at a convenient distance from the walls, and these would be joined by crossbeams. That would be no problem at all." Certainly, I have to agree that traces of postholes arranged in this way have been discovered in some stone circles. "In very large circles there would have been more than one circle of poles to link with the centre pole. Obvious, or what?"

If John Jones was right, what sort of large buildings could they have been; built for what purpose? A court house, a cathedral, a town hall, a palace, a storage barn, a youth centre: who knows? Some stone circles are closely associated with prehistoric quarry sites, places where the chipped remains of axeheads and arrowheads and various tools have been found. There is one such just over the border in Shropshire on the Powis Estate. Perhaps, after all, they were nothing more exciting than factory buildings where the local workers would clock in, work their shift fixing stone axeheads to wooden shafts, and clock off again each evening. How unromantic! After so many generations of boring old work, the roof would finally fall in, or stone axes would go out of fashion, and the stones which made up the walls would be plundered by the local peasantry, leaving the basic battered foundation stones to baffle the best brains for centuries to come.

Personally, I think that my own theory is much more likely to be correct. John was right when he said that the climate had changed over the centuries. The highest land was cultivatable in those days. And remember the long link with the rock tombs. The circle marked the first ownership of land. Forget all the theories about astrological clocks or what have you. That sort of thing might apply to Stonehenge, which has been modified over and over, and is not itself a particularly old stone circle, and is anything but typical. Land settlement: that is the clue.

The largest stone circles, we are told, tend to be the oldest. At that time large family groups or small tribes stuck together and forged their lives together; and that is what the circles represented: the family circle. This is our land, and this is our family. Strangers take note! There were large circles, and small circles (especially later on when family groups split up as farming families tend to do). Some stones were tall, others were short. Some were standing up, others lying down. Some were close together, others far apart. Suppose that is how they were intended to be seen: not haphazardly, but carefully thought out, chosen and arranged. What better permanent record could there be of a family circle? Especially when there was no way of writing it all down for posterity.

Walking over a heathery hilltop today, amid skylarks and meadow pipits, scolded by curlews and grouse; or slurping through a peat bog where ancient stone circles perhaps lie buried beneath the peat, it is hard to imagine that these were once rich farmlands amid fields and forests. A beautiful view? Well, perhaps when the circles were built the view would have been obscured by the surrounding trees, with every small glade overflowing with the dense vegetation that we now find only in the sheltered lowlands.

Imagine you are one of those early farmers of Neolithic times, or even of Bronze Age times. The soil within and around the stone circle would certainly have been of a much better quality than it is now: deeper, easily workable,

generously supportive of the lush grasses and herbs that have since retreated a thousand feet or more down the hill. Your first act upon claiming your piece of land, might well be to set up what was meant to be a permanent record of your family group, every member perhaps bringing a stone appropriate to themselves.

The idea of each stone having been carefully selected to represent an individual member of the family is an enduring and rather endearing one. It puts a whole new and very human light on the subject. The stones commemorate, or at least symbolize the commemoration of those family members: a memorial to real people that will last as long as the stones remain. No wonder people like me who visit stone circles have a sense of something very important and rather mysterious in a personal way, as though we ourselves are standing at the very tip of an unbroken line of descent, a line of inheritance spanning thousands of years: and this really is true.

As I have already mentioned, people have always been ready to ascribe their own brand of superstition and project their own religious imaginings onto their local stone circles, many centuries, of course, after their true significance was forgotten. When Christianity arrived in the British Isles (before the pagan Anglo-Saxons arrived, by the way), some of the earliest stone churches were uncompromisingly set on top of the offending circles. Some of the early Celtic buildings were later overbuilt by the Saxons, then later on by the Normans, and finally, through the combined skills arising out of the loose but liberal blending of

races which now constitute the British, rebuilt and overbuilt yet again into even more impressive structures.

It often happened along the present-day Welsh border, where some churches display a regular circularity in their surrounding churchyard. One such is Church Stoke (the Saxons called standing stones "stocks" or "stokes"). Other interesting examples of circular churchyards are at Stanton Lacy in Corvedale, and at Cardington nestling beneath Caer Caradoc (of King Caractacus's fame and one of several hill forts bearing that name). One of the most often cited examples in west Wales is the one at Devil's Bridge in Dyfed.

Overbuilt circles are those on the lower ground, by and large, the places where most of the local inhabitants live now and have lived for the past many centuries. Archeologists have always claimed that the oldest circles are the ones on the highest ground. Their carbon-dating techniques ascribe the lower-lying ones to a much later date. Of course! The uplands are where people used to live and farm during all generations prior to the Bronze Age, when the weather took a turn for the worse and forced them down onto the lower ground. The circles followed the people downhill.

Both the stone circles I have mentioned so far have their newer counterparts not far away and on lower ground. The one by the crooked road: Ffordd Gam Elin, overlooks one a couple of miles away near the banks of the Dee; but that one is a *cairn circle,* which rather explodes John Jones's theory about buildings. But look at it this way: When land is first farmed in these areas, one of the first jobs when cultivating the soil is to remove all the big stones. It could be that the original purpose of the hilltop circles no longer applied, but if they wanted to construct a memorial circle, what better use could they find for the stones they were constantly digging out of their new patch of land? They killed two birds with one stone, and got both jobs done at the same time.

And, of course, that brings me rather neatly to the subject of cairns. You cannot travel very far on foot in Wales (or indeed in other hilly regions of the world), without coming across a cairn or two. A simple pile of stones, you might suppose, is a somewhat transient construction, liable to disappear or appear almost overnight. You would scarcely expect them to last for thousands of years. Is the one that happens to have caught your attention prehistoric, or modern? All stones are ancient, of course, and a rough pile of stones is easily made – the sort of thing anyone wishing to make their own mark on the countryside might have built. It is even the custom in some places for climbers and hill walkers to add a stone of their own to the cairn which marks the peak. Some of them, however, are known to be truly ancient, and archeologists have excavated beneath them and, as often as not, found them to cover human remains, usually the charred remnants of cremation ceremonies. These truly ancient cairns have been thought to predate even the oldest stone circles, so they could be thought of as a hangover from the days of the great rock tombs.

Many more ancient cairns, usually located on some prominence where they can be well seen, are thought to have been boundary markers erected during the farming, land-owning days. The ubiquitous boundary stone, after all, gets many a mention in some of the oldest literature (the Old Testament, for example) These were the survey beacons of their day, sited where they could be seen over the trees which no longer grow so high in the hills.

But cairns have often resulted from the far more direct, utilitarian process of picking stones from a cultivated field. Farmers are still doing it today. Wherever possible of course, salvaged stones would be put to really good use, providing building material for houses, barns and walls, but where they were surplus to requirements, cairns would make their appearance. The idea of building a *cairn circle,* like the one I already mentioned near Llandrillo, could well have seemed like a brainwave at the time.

John Jones was right when he said that most of the buildings of long ago were round, probably stone-paved, and with low stone walls. The remains of huts such as these are to be seen in remote places such as the wild upland area bounded by Harlech and the coast, Trawsfynydd and Dolgellau, beneath and around the peaks of Diffwys, Y Llethr, Ysgyfarnogod, and the twin Rhinogs. I dare say a great many buildings were made of wood, wattle and daub as well as stone, but all traces of these have long gone. Even where they seem to have had no stone walls, however, they often boasted a circular surround of flat rocks to

catch and deflect the rain dripping off the thatch – the historical "eaves-drip" from which we get the expression, "eaves-drop", implying that someone is standing close enough to the hut to hear what is going on inside.

The Snowdonia National Park offers many opportunities to explore ancient Stone Age sites, the remains of villages which once flourished, where for thousands of years, perhaps, generation after generation of family members lived and died. Only when the weather became too harsh to sustain their way of life did the villages themselves falter and die. This is the basic reason why Stone Age remains of this nature seem confined to the high, rocky ground: In the lowlands and valley bottoms they have all been dug out, ploughed over, built on, and lost forever.

In Wales as in other Celtic lands, you might marvel at the extent, the sheer substantiality, of the stone walls. Mile upon mile of broad, high drystone walls running up and over the steepest of hills, separating fields and farms large or small, doubled up to mark the parallel boundaries of track, lane, or main road. They epitomize the territory of the raven and the buzzard. They do not employ neat little quarried pieces of stone such as you might see in the Cotswolds, but great, rough lumps of rock as they were turned up by the plough or spade, or dumped by a glacier, or rolled down the scree from an eroding mountain top. Wales is a small country, but the proportion and sheer impact of stone walls throughout the land is vast. What an enormous sum-total of effort accumulated over the centuries!

Several people have told me something about the history of these walls – or perhaps not history, perhaps just a folk-memory, or perhaps no more than a tongue-in-cheek yarn to fool the Saeson. But this is it: During the Bronze Age and the Iron Age, before the Romans came and built their forts, and before the Anglo-Saxons claimed Lloegr as their own, the British tribes had a great hobby, more than a leisure activity, more of a side-line profession. They raided each other. There was no malice in it, everybody did it; it was simply what they *did:* they drove off any cattle that could not be penned in time into one of the hill forts (and it was cattle in those days, not sheep as it is today), and they captured any suitable people they could find to bring them back as slaves. And why did they want to make slaves of each other? Why, to build their stone walls, of course.

But how, I wondered, could a farmer sleep soundly at night, with a gang of cut-throat slaves looking for a chance to turn the tables on him? And he would still have to feed his slaves, or they could do no work. Before long, the situation would probably be reversed. Wouldn't it be simpler just to rear one's own cattle and employ the local labour-force to build the walls? I was laughed at. Where would be the fun in that? Stan Bach made the point that there was no sense in working yourself, if you could get a slave to do it. As it said in the Good Book (or so Stan claimed): "Load your slave with chains and make the bugger work; that's what he is for".

Well, there must be more than an element of truth in it. Why else would the British have needed all those hill forts, which were certainly there long before the Romans invaded. It sounds more romantic to have the noble ancient Britons in their craggy strongholds fighting first the Romans and then the Anglo-Saxons, but in fact, the prime purpose of all those hill forts was to protect themselves and their cattle from each other. And as I told Stan, they would all have ended up taking it in turns to do the work just the same – but for someone else, and without pay. And if you believe that, you'll believe anything.

I called this piece 'Merlin's People', but so far I have mentioned Merlin only once, and that was to say that there was probably no such person. I had better expand on this to say that I'm sure there *was* such a person, but not quite of that name. I thought I would be clever one day and posed the open question: what does the name 'Merlin' conjure up for you?

"Rolls Royce," said John Jones. "Enormous twelve-cylinder engines which powered the Supermarine Spitfire, the Hawker Hurricane, and the Avro Lancaster. Helped to win the war."

"The merlin is a bird," said a young man leaning on the bar. "A fierce little falcon. I've seen them a lot on the Denbigh moors. Beautiful little creatures: one

used to perch regular on the telephone wire over the road, just by our gate. A hen it was - the brown one. The male has a grey back."

"Or perhaps you mean 'merlyn'," said someone else. "As in the song:

O merlyn, codi dy cynffon;
Cadw yr haul o'r llygad ni."

'Merlyn' is, of course, the Welsh word for 'pony', or 'little horse', and the song is the hoary old music-hall refrain:

Oh horsey, keep your tail up;
Keep the sun out of our eyes

.
But please don't tell me 'keep your tail up' should be translated as: 'cadw dy cynffon i fyni', because it won't scan.

"Merlin was a great magician," said my friend Stan. "But his name was 'Myrddin', not 'Merlin'. He was trapped in a rock by some woman. Then he escaped from the rock but got mixed up with another woman, and she got him caught up in a thorn bush. That's women for you. Like it says in the Good Book: a wicked man is better than a good woman."

A man called Griff remarked that Merlin, or Myrddin, had been responsible for floating all the giant stones to Stonehenge by magic. Some of them were floated all the way from a quarry at Mynydd Preseli, not far from Fishguard. "All that way without touching the ground! Sheer strength of mind; incredible willpower."

"Incredible indeed," said John Jones. "What a load of lol! Magic power, indeed! I suppose Merlin did the quarrying too, did he? Why does everyone nowadays think that our ancestors were helpless primitives who couldn't even move a rock unless some magician floated it through the air? They would have used heavy wagons drawn by horses or oxen, the same as everybody else. I would have thought it was only too obvious. Even in the unlikely event that they hadn't invented wheels, they would have used sledges. If they had to wait around for someone to float things around for them they could never have done anything. Never moved a rock; never cut a tree. They'd still be hanging about waiting for a magician to show up."

To Tanat Williams, another old friend of mine, Merlin was chief among ancient bards, though he could not quote from his works. I believe there have been several historical bards named Merlin, or Myrddin, though their work is obscure. If you want to hear a poet's viewpoint in Wales, you need never travel far. There is no psychological claptrap in Welsh poetry; it is not clever-clever, as English poetry sometimes is, and it never sets out to shock. It comes from the

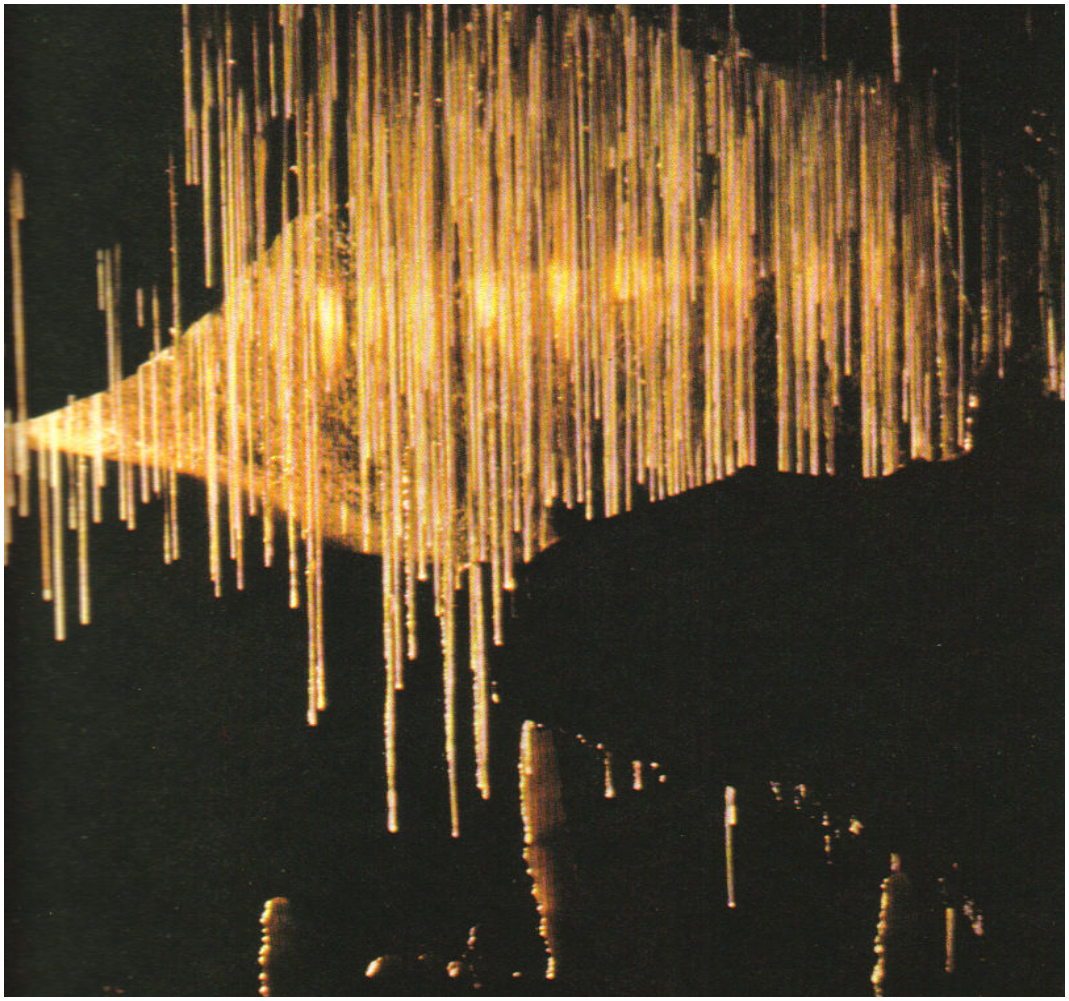
heart. Tanat was – and I hope still is – a poet. His very name is poetic: how many English people could say they had been named after a river? Especially a picturesque dipper-frequented stream like the Tanat, which rises with multiple tributaries on the wild raven-haunted heights of Trum y Fawnog and Cyrniau Nod: a stony little brook at first which swells often into a raging torrent, flowing beneath alder and oak through a narrow valley between the Berwyn hills and the peak of Das Eithin, then meandering through meadows before taking on the Rhaeadr and swelling into a sizeable river before joining the Vyrnwy near the border village of Llanymynech.

Tanat (the person, not the river) can produce a poem suitable for most occasions, and the idea of a great poet still heard faintly through the mists of time prompted him to recite some lines by fellow poet Huw Goch. Memories of Merlin the Great, he said, recalled:

"A brotherhood well versed in poetry; a country never without song."

Traditionally, of course, Merlin has been associated with the Dark Ages, as either bard or sorcerer or adviser within King Arthur's court, though neither he nor King Arthur himself can be proved to have existed. Merlin the bard is said to have died in battle, not against the departing Romans, or the incoming Anglo-Saxons, but against his own countrymen during inter-tribal violence, a feud between war-lords vying to establish themselves as the new British Supremo.

Perhaps Merlin the Seer emerged, to confirm his people in their recently acquired Christianity, and counter the background cacophony of Celtic and Roman deities still clamouring to be heard. Perhaps it is the mystical rather than the bardic or the political side of Merlin that captures the imagination most firmly: the idea of spirituality trapped within the rock of materiality. Prophets tend to appear at times when they are most needed but least wanted. Popular thinking *wants* divine truth to be hidden, waiting to be unearthed like Aladdin's cave, a source of wisdom and wealth to be opened only by guile and effort.

Inevitably, perhaps, to Merlin's power have been ascribed various hidden caves said to be lit by supernatural light, and full of treasure. One such magical cave has long been said to exist beneath the slopes of Fan Gihirych in the Brecon Beacons National Park – a good choice of site since the area is riddled with mysterious limestone caverns deeply carved by an underground river. Hidden below ground are lakes and waterfalls which can sometimes be heard roaring and rumbling beneath the hillside. Some of the caves nowadays are open to the public. The Ogof-yr-Esgyrn, or cave of the bones, is the site of archeological digs. Lower down the slope a vast complex of caves and tunnels is know simply as Dan-yr-Ogof, 'beneath the cave'. The area includes what I would call the most likely contenders for the mythical Merlin's cave. The most impressive of these is the Cathedral Cave, enormous, floodlit, and open to the public. There are still many more caves beneath the hill waiting to be discovered.

Britain as a whole is not much troubled by earthquakes, because it lies cleanly in the middle of a tectonic plate and thus escapes the 'grinding' effect around the edges. But there is one area of Britain that experiences more minor tremors – an average of twelve a year – than most other places on earth, and seismologists do not know why this should be. And where is the epicentre? Why, precisely here, in the region of these deep caves. Merlin was trapped in the rock by the enchantress Nimue, so runs the fable. Perhaps at last he is near to bursting his prison walls. A few more good shakes, a good fall of rain on the hillside, and the whole area will collapse, wash itself out, and create a new Welsh version of the Cheddar Gorge. On that day, perhaps, Merlin's secrets will be revealed.