

Review: *Arthur in Early Welsh Poetry* (Jones)



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Celtica 32 (2020), 280–282

DOI: 10.58480/SCS-ajfpu-dwbz6

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Arthur in Early Welsh Poetry. Edited by Nerys Ann Jones. MHRA Library of Medieval Welsh Literature 4. Cambridge: Modern Humanities Research Association. 2019. 248 pp. ISBN: 978-1-781889-08-4 (hardback), 978-1-781889-09-1 (paperback). £24.99 (hardback), £12.99 (paperback).

This new volume, published by the MHRA, is an excellent contribution to Arthurian studies and to the study of early Welsh poetry. This is a book which, above all, foregrounds the sources in their surviving manuscript contexts, and in doing so, provides an up-to-date, reliable introduction to the Welsh poems containing references to Arthur dated before 1300.

The format is somewhat different from that found in other books in the same series. Rather than a discrete introduction, edition, glossary, and notes, this book mixes editions and discussions of texts or extracts from texts. Manuscript images are generously and comprehensively provided and are in almost all cases legible (except on p. 187 where the poor condition of

Wynnstey MS 1 is to blame). These images are accompanied by transcriptions of the relevant section of the text, an edition, a translation (in most instances), copious notes and a glossary. The careful transcriptions and translations do not shy away from the difficulties and ambiguities of the text in question. Certain poems, such as *Pa gur*, are split up into short sections so that text and manuscript image can be viewed together. While this layout initially feels unfamiliar, it is a useful way of looking in great detail at a small section of text. This edition is the closest readers can get to the poems without consulting the manuscripts themselves.

The manuscript context of the poems is given great prominence and provides the basis for the book's division into five chapters as follows: 'The Black Book of Carmarthen'; 'The Book of Aneirin'; 'The Hendregadredd Manuscript' (also comparing related witnesses); 'The Book of Taliesin'; 'Poems in Other Manuscripts'. The generally late manuscript dates are foregrounded and this provides a useful corrective to the traditional focus on the earliness of these Welsh Arthurian references. This manuscript-based structure highlights how references to Arthur in *hengerdd* (traditionally viewed as earlier) and in the work of *Beirdd y Tywysogion* to some extent overlap in codices like the Black Book of Carmarthen. The chapter on 'Poems in Other Manuscripts' provides a particularly valuable discussion of often neglected texts and should open avenues for even-handed and sympathetic treatments of the development of the poems in question in later manuscripts.

Jones rightly takes the poems themselves as the focus of inquiry rather than attempting to map them on to a vision of who Arthur may have been. It is successfully highlighted that Arthur himself is more commonly not the main focus in the early Welsh poems in which his name is invoked. The volume includes an up-to-date bibliography and engages carefully with the complex issue of dating. The contested question of whether the texts pre-date Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (1138) could still be pursued further. Detailed and useful footnotes throughout highlight relevant critical discussion.

This edition enables engagement with a wide range of issues, particularly in its admirable presentation of the manuscript evidence on which it is based. The following mostly minor corrections and suggestions could also be noted. As indicated elsewhere in the book, remnants of Old Welsh spelling are not proof of a date before 1100, and thus the date-range of c. 900–1100 suggested for *Mi a wum* on p. 15 appears uncertain. On pp. 21–2 in discussing the Geraint *englynion*, a *chin rillethid-ve* is better translated as 'and although they were killed / should be killed' than 'and although they had been killed' to avoid suggesting that the warriors continued to fight after death. Perhaps *ry* is more suggestive of possibility than perfective here, given the imperfect subjunctive form. The scribe of the Black Book of Carmarthen was himself responsible for the manuscript's rubrics, rather than a separate rubricator as stated on p. 29 (I am grateful to Dr Myriah Williams of the University of California, Berkeley, for confirming this to me). The rubricated title in question (fol. 52r) is for a poem attributed to Cynddelw Brydydd Mawr. There *p'dit*

should probably be expanded to *pridit* rather than *prydit* as in the transcription here (compare *p'wieith* on fol. 52v). Some inconsistencies in the notes are an inevitable result of an edition compiled over a period of time. On p. 66 *trig-ant* is described (perhaps questionably) simply as a 'hapax' but on p. 68 the term is again used and here defined: 'The form *guernor* is a hapax legomenon (a form which occurs only once) in the Welsh language.' Another possible interpretation of *Ymddidan Arthur a'r Eryr*, l. 23 (p. 174) would be to emend *lit* to *llit* and translate 'anger is no deliverance', which would cohere with the focus on the inevitability of death found in the final four *englynion* extant in later manuscripts and would represent a smaller emendation than those suggested, although the line is still short. It is perhaps worth noting in this context the use of <l> to represent /h/ in Old Welsh orthography. Although there are again metrical difficulties, *ar ben meint* (*Dialogue between Melwas and Gwenhwyfar*, *englyn* 7, p. 195) works well semantically as a mocking reference by Gwenhwyfar to Melwas's diminutive stature. The images of Llanstephan MS 122 on pp. 199–200 appear to be in the wrong order. The volume contains a number of intriguing suggestions that could be pursued further, such as the possibility that Geoffrey may have sourced Arthur's patronym from a collocation of 'Arthur' and the Welsh adjective *uthr* (p. 16, n. 40).

The aim of this book is not to provide a synthesis of how Arthur was presented in early Welsh poetry and how this compares with other traditions. Rather, the detailed textual work and notes here will enable Arthurianists to push such research further. In its admirable detail, the book also provides a useful and current introduction to the manuscripts of early Welsh poetry and how the scribes organized the material we have surviving. Future scholars will thus find themselves deeply in Nerys Ann Jones's debt.

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Medieval Wales, c. 1050–1332: Centuries of Ambiguity. David Stephenson. Rethinking the History of Wales series. Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2019. pp. xxx + 210. £16.99. ISBN 978-1-78683-386-0.

Medieval Powys: Kingdom, Principality and Lordships, 1132–1293. David Stephenson. Studies in Celtic History, 35. Woodbridge, Boydell Press, 2016. pp. xxii + 339. €70. ISBN 978-1-78327-140-5.

David Stephenson is perhaps the most prolific historian currently working on medieval Welsh history. He is the undisputed master of narrative history, but 'kings and battles' do not exhaust his repertoire, for one of his seminal early works was a monograph on the administration of the kingdom of Gwynedd in the thirteenth century (recently updated and reissued as Stephenson 2014), while in recent years he has also done fundamental work on source-criticism (the Welsh chronicles) and is not afraid to venture into the field of material