

Review: *Gerald of Wales: New Perspectives  
on a Medieval Writer and Critic* (Henley and  
McMullen)



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**DIAS**

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makes some good points in favour of a date towards the very end of the thirteenth century, though none of them are really decisive: the tale's pointed references to the borders of Powys and (possible) implicit criticism of Powys's rulers are not precise enough to rule out other contexts. Moreover, if the tale were so critical of the ruling elite, that raises the question of who its intended audience was, a consideration that needs to be addressed in any solution to the problem of the tale's context.

Many other points for debate could be picked out from a book as rich as this one, but the overall achievement is huge. As a native of southern Powys, this reviewer is bound to sympathize with David Stephenson's rehabilitation of Powys as a land with its own identity. The place of Powys in the medieval Welsh world has now been triumphantly asserted.

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*Gerald of Wales: New Perspectives on a Medieval Writer and Critic*. Edited by Georgia A. Henley and A. Joseph McMullen. Cardiff: University of Wales Press. 2018. Hardback ISBN 978-1-78683-163-7. £90. Paperback ISBN 978-1-78683-164-4. £29.99.

For such a well-known writer, Gerald of Wales is surprisingly underrepresented in scholarship. The re-editing of his works has been so sporadic that most of them, including some of the most famous ones, still have to be read in the antiquated and unwieldy Rolls volumes. Translations have been quite scarce too. The Welsh works, *Itinerarium Cambriae* and *Descriptio Cambriae*, can be read in Lewis Thorpe's Penguin translation, though for readers who know Welsh, Thomas Jones's *Gerallt Gymro* (Cardiff, 1938) is a good alternative. For the *Topographia Hibernica* J. J. O'Meara's translation is still in use. Of Gerald's Welsh and Irish works, only the *Expugnatio Hibernica* has a modern edition and translation. The state of his less-well-known works is correspondingly worse, though the *Speculum Duorum*, *Vita S. Hugonis* and, very recently, the *De principis instructione*, have been made available. Editing and translating are specialist and time-consuming tasks, and there are many other medieval Latin texts deserving of attention, so the slow progress here is not

wholly surprising. However, the modest size of the secondary literature is striking. The only full scholarly study in English of Gerald as a writer remains Robert Bartlett's, published in 1982. Journal articles appear at a rate of a handful a year, as the notes in this volume attest, but Gerald tends to appear in discussions of particular topics, such as the conquest of Ireland or the St Davids dispute, and his works are rarely considered in the round.

That makes this new volume all the more welcome. The contributors have set out to cover a wide range of Gerald's writings, and not just the Irish and Welsh works. Thus there are essays here on the *Gemma ecclesiastica*, the *Vita S. Hugonis* and a work newly confirmed to be by Gerald, the *History of Llanthony Priory*. They cover also a range of topics, from Gerald's use of sources to later writers' use of Gerald, and passing (in the case of Bartlett's contribution) via Gerald's use of Gerald as well. The chapters are based on presentations from a conference held at Harvard in 2015. The authors seem to have been kept on a tight leash, for all the chapters are quite short. Naturally, in these circumstances, coverage is uneven, and some of Gerald's works receive little or no attention. The book is not, however, conceived as an introduction to Gerald but rather as an invitation to further research, in which role it succeeds well.

The first section is devoted to 'Appropriating the past'. Huw Pryce, a long-time commentator on Gerald, explores both the general question of Gerald's interest in the Welsh past and some specific material bearing on the history of St Davids. The survey of Gerald's sources is valuable and highlights the importance of oral testimony, for instance memory of miracles that took place in particular churches or testimony about events deriving from members of Gerald's prominent and far-flung lineage, as well as written sources like Gildas, Bede and Geoffrey of Monmouth. The specific material from St Davids is full of problems, as Pryce's treatment shows. Pryce offers a perceptive account of the differing emphases between Gerald's early works, the *Itinerarium* and *Descriptio Cambriae*, and his later tracts focused on the metropolitan dispute, the *De invectionibus* and the *De iure et statu Menevensis Ecclesiae*. More problematic is the question of the lists of archbishops and bishops of St Davids in the *Itinerarium*, and especially the differences between the list in the first two editions of the work from the 1190s and the list in the third edition, which was made long after the end of the metropolitan dispute and Gerald's retirement from the fray. Pryce treats the lists as separate documents discovered by Gerald on different occasions, but the differences between them do not seem to me to overstep the bounds of the kind of tinkering to which Gerald was, as is well-known, exceedingly prone, and it cannot be ruled out that there was only one original list. Note in particular that one addition in the later list concerns Bishop Morgenau's sin of eating meat, and compare the remarks of Bartlett in this volume, pp. 90–1, on monastic strictures against meat as a Giraldian theme. Nor am I completely confident that Gerald found such a list ready-made rather than that he himself was the compiler; as Pryce notes (p. 31), apparent references to such lists outside of Gerald's works are far from certain. The textual cruces of these lists need to be resolved, if possible, in a

new critical edition of the *Itinerarium*. Furthermore, all versions of the list incorporate the doctrine that St Davids lost its pallium when Bishop Samson took it to Dol in Brittany. This is a very important theme in all Gerald's writing on the St Davids question and it is troubling that the only mentions of it earlier than Gerald are in two letters that are themselves only preserved in Gerald's own *De invectionibus*. Pryce is well-aware that these letters are not above suspicion (cf. p. 29) but they continue to be crucial to reconstructions of the St Davids case before Gerald. This is a long-noted, nagging problem that needs more work.

In the second chapter in this section, Ben Guy tackles Gerald's Welsh sources. His incisive analysis shows that Gerald had access to two written documents, one a version of the Latin origin legend and genealogical tract, *De situ Brecheniauc*, the other a genealogy of the rulers of Gwynedd and (implicitly) in Welsh. Furthermore, both were relatively recent creations in Guy's view, especially the Gwynedd genealogy, for which he provides solid arguments that it could only belong to the period 1138 × 1170. The chapter contains important criticism of the idea of 'Welsh tradition', as least when that phrase is used in a vague sense without reference to specific textual manifestations. Gerald did not follow 'Welsh tradition': rather, he used two documents whose nature we can discern in some detail, and like all documents these were composed in a particular time and place for a particular purpose. What is more, the information which they contained had been reshaped and updated for contemporary needs. I am reminded of David Dumville's famous complaints about the term ('What is "tradition"? Whose tradition? Monastic, legal, craft tradition? And once we begin to ask questions of this sort, we are forced to ask ourselves about the processes of transmission, with all the further questions and critical judgments which that implies' ('Sub-Roman Britain: history and legend', *History* 62 (1977), 173–192, at 192)). The third paper in this section takes us to the border region, as Joshua Byron Smith discusses Gerald's account of the 'Anglo-Saxon history of Lydbury North', an estate of the bishop of Hereford, the story of whose acquisition by the bishops was also told by Walter Map. Smith has published an important study of Map, and the thrust of his essay is to insist that Gerald's account was not taken from Map, but was substantially his own version of a pre-existing outline, and this argument is broadened into a defence of other passages in Gerald's works which look similar to parts of Map. In Smith's view, the two men shared a close association and similar outlooks, and this is sufficient to account for the similarities; in any case the concept of plagiarism needs to be problematized in a medieval context.

Section 2, 'Gerald the writer: manuscripts and authorship' is rather disparate. Robert Bartlett makes a convincing case that Gerald wrote the *History of Llanthony Priory*, a little-known and not fully published work that Bartlett attributes to Gerald's final years. His case has the great merit of being much simpler than other hypotheses that rely on the premise that an anonymous author plundered Gerald's works. Catherine Rooney, author of an important PhD thesis on the manuscripts of Gerald's works, focuses on a number of

manuscripts which she argues, again convincingly, were produced in close proximity to Gerald himself. It would be satisfying if, in future, one of the hands could be identified as that of Gerald himself. The remaining two papers in this section, Michael Faletra on the various versions of Gerald's account of the habits of the beaver, and Simon Meecham-Jones on 'Style, truth and irony', are more speculative. Faletra rightly identifies the beaver passage as one which Gerald tinkered with on numerous occasions, and speculates further that the animals' behaviour was meant as a negative foil to Gerald's presentation of the Irish and a positive comment on the Welsh. As Faletra acknowledges, there is no explicit signposting of this in any of the works in question. Meecham-Jones has interesting things to say about our modern difficulties in reading Gerald, beyond the simple requirement that we master medieval Latin, but it is not entirely clear why the differences between Gerald and 'Goliardic' poets are surprising, given the huge difference in their genres of writing, while the discussion of Ciceronian and Quintilian paradigms of rhetoric is not as textually anchored as it might have been. The idea that Gerald's infamous suggestion of ethnic cleansing in *Descriptio Cambriae* was meant ironically is, like Faletra's interpretation of the beaver passages, a reminder of how difficult it is to pin down Gerald's thought.

Section 3 covers 'Gerald the thinker: religion and worldview'. The first essay, by Peter Jones, analyses Gerald's sense of humour. Gerald's lifetime, in Jones's account, coincided with a reassessment of humour in courtly and church circles: humour moved from being a marginally acceptable or even morally problematic force to a 'powerful political and saintly virtue' (p. 148). This was perhaps a shift in literary and theological attitudes rather than in the behaviour of kings and aristocrats, but undoubtedly Gerald is an important exponent of the joke and Jones's careful analysis explores both the targets of Gerald's wit and its limits. Like other contemporaries, so it is argued, Gerald saw humour as a powerful moral weapon against turpitude in the church. Peter Raleigh's chapter discusses Gerald's opposition of royal and episcopal power in his *Vita S. Hugonis*. Rejecting previous views of the Life as a thin and cursory work, Raleigh shows how Gerald constructed an uncompromisingly negative view of the Angevin kings with whom Hugh had to deal, and that his portrait of Hugh brings the saint as close to the pattern of Thomas Becket as was possible given that Hugh was not himself martyred. The Life emerges as a highly partisan view of the relationship between the kings and the English bishops that reflects similar concerns to Gerald's other works. Suzanne LaVere surveys Gerald's *Gemma ecclesiastica* and locates it within discourses of the time on the importance of the clerical role, and especially of clerical continence. She outlines also how Gerald's vision of the ideal priest reflects a contemporary restructuring of masculinity (among some clerical authors) that privileged bodily self-control over sexual performance. It becomes clear that the intended audience of the tract was wider than the Welsh clergy for whom Gerald claimed to be writing, although the direct impact of the *Gemma* on the clerical reform movement remains uncertain. Finally in this section, Owain Nash investigates Gerald's scientific views on the nature

of the human body, arguing that they were more strongly and systematically held than has been understood in the past; in particular, Gerald's understanding of the bodily humours and the effects of different climates on human temperaments and behaviours was a pervasive influence on his ethnographical writing. Interesting differences between his views of the Welsh and the Irish come to the fore in this approach, among other things.

The final section covers 'reception'. Georgia Henley, a co-editor of the volume, surveys *Claddedigaeth Arthur*, an account of the discovery of Arthur's grave at Glastonbury derived from Gerald's *Speculum Ecclesiae* and *De principis instructione*. As the only passage from any of Gerald's works ever translated into Middle Welsh, *Claddedigaeth Arthur* is of interest for Welsh reception of Gerald, and it is significant that it is a work that speaks to particular needs – specifically interest in the figure of Arthur and in prophecy – that are not otherwise much served by Gerald's writings. Henley argues, justifiably, that the absence of any other translations of his works, notably the *Itinerarium* and *Descriptio Kambriae*, into Welsh reflects their irrelevance for medieval Welsh audiences, as a biased 'outsider's look' (p. 234). It is also worth considering the absence of any place for these genres within medieval Welsh writing. The *Itinerarium* and the *Descriptio* are not narrative, romance or history, nor are they devotional works, which are the main spheres within which Welsh translation prose was produced. They are texts that offer entertaining information, or informative entertainment, depending on one's perspective. Translation of such texts – *Imago Mundi*, or the *Travels of Brother Odoric* – did occur, but it was much more sporadic and ad hoc than the translation of historical and would-be-historical narratives, and those that were translated tend towards exoticism, bringing the world beyond Wales into Welsh rather than treating local topics. It is hard to think of a prospective audience for Gerald in later medieval Wales who could not read him in Latin – if they wanted to read him at all.

The last two chapters turn their attention to the afterlife of Gerald's Irish works in Ireland. Caoimhe Whelan examines the fifteenth-century Hiberno-English translation of the *Expugnatio Hibernica*. Some of its popularity can be gauged by the fact that there are eight manuscripts of the work. Whelan explores the meaning for the work in its context, pointing to the troubled status of the English colony and its defensive posture in the fifteenth century. She also finds evidence in other sources of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries for authors resorting to Gerald's authority, and argues that the English version of the *Expugnatio* was an important conduit for this influence. This links naturally with the last paper in the volume. Brendan Kane here poses the problem of the influence of Gerald on early-modern colonial discourse about Ireland. While acknowledging well-known instances of Gerald's influence and continuing reception, Kane points to the remarkable absence of obvious references to or echoes of Gerald in treatises on the governance of Ireland from the Tudor and early Stuart periods, posing the question of how influential Gerald was, or indeed how easily available his works were in the period before they were printed in 1602. Furthermore he raises questions

about how relevant some of Gerald's vision would have been for writers of this period, notably his interest in the marvellous and his religious standpoint. This is an intriguing chapter that raises more questions than it answers, and by design.

The volume ends with a brief 'afterword' expressing the hope that research on Gerald of Wales will continue. Judging by the contributions here, there is plenty more to be done, and it is heartening that moves appear to be afoot to make a serious inroad into the lack of proper, up-to-date editions and translations of his works (see now the announcement of a major project at <https://www.history.ox.ac.uk/the-writings-of-gerald-of-wales>). One question that obtruded from more than one chapter here is how popular an author Gerald actually was. His prolific output tends to survive in small numbers of manuscripts and often in single copies, which moreover show signs of close association with Gerald himself, as Rooney argues convincingly. The number of extant manuscripts is not a completely reliable guide to the popularity of medieval works, but it cannot be safely ignored either. In his efforts at self-promotion, which were prodigious by his own account, Gerald was battling not merely against philistine or personally unsympathetic recipients but against the inertia imposed by medieval technology. The manuscript book, laboriously compiled by hand, and the difficulty of communication over long distances, did not lend themselves to making any author a 'best-seller'. Today's scholars can cast their eyes over a great range of textual material (even if it is only a small proportion of what was produced), but pre-modern readers had little chance of encountering more than a fragment of what might have been available to them in theory. It remains to be clarified how successful Gerald was within these constraints, that is, in comparison with other Latin writers of his time in the Anglo-Norman realms. Undoubtedly, however, the essays in this volume support the assessment of its editors, that Gerald was 'a thoroughly self-conscious and careful crafter of argument, deliberate in his use of sources and intended impact' (p. 6).

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*Lorg na Leabhar: A Festschrift for Pádraig A. Breatnach.* Edited by Caoimhín Breatnach, Meidhbhín Ní Úrdail and Gordon Ó Riain. National University of Ireland, Dublin, 2019. xiv + 520pp. 65€. ISBN 978-0-901510-77-8.

This substantial volume contains some 22 articles (one in German, five in Irish, and the remainder in English) arranged broadly in chronological order of subject treated. Only a brief summary of the contents can be attempted here.

After some preliminaries and Alexandre Guilarte's list of the honorand's publications, the Festschrift proper begins with Jürgen Uhlich's paper '*Loch nEchach n-án*: Nasalierungsübertragung in den altirischen Glossen und