

NOTES ON THE LIFE OF ST. DAVID,
THE PATRON SAINT OF WALES.

BY HOWEL W. LLOYD, M.A.

(Read before the Society, February 24th, 1887.)

THE time when St. David lived belongs perhaps to the most obscure period of the history of this country. It is that in which the King Arthur of romance is said to have flourished ; who, though a certain place in history has been accorded to him by some writers, is stated to have fought and defeated the Saxons in twelve battles, neither the site nor the date of which have hitherto been ascertained with certainty ; whence, some have gone so far as to deny that they ever were really fought, or that the hero of them had any real existence. It may, therefore, well be conceived difficult, if not impossible, to fix the date of St. David's birth, as well as of his death ; although both may be reached approximately, and with sufficient accuracy to enable us to gain in succession a knowledge of the principal circumstances of his career.

It is universally agreed by his biographers, and indeed in all the ancient documents that relate to him, that he was a person of noble, nay, even of princely birth. His father, whose name is given variously as Sant, Sandde, Sanctus, and Xanthus, but all referring clearly to the same individual, is called the son of Ceredig, son of Cunedda Wledig. His mother, the wife of Sandde, was Non, (called by Ricemarchus, his biographer, Nonnita) the daughter of Gynyr of Caer Gawch,² the petty prince of a district in what is now the

¹ Gynyr of Caer Gawch appears to have been the chieftain of a district in Pembrokeshire, since called Pebidiog, or Dewsland, in which

County of Pembroke, by his second wife, Anna, who was the daughter of Vortimer, surnamed by his countrymen "the Blessed", one of the three sons of Vortigern, the British king whose name has been traditionally execrated by his countrymen for his traitorous dealing with their Saxon enemies. St. David was therefore fifth in descent from Vortigern, and fourth from Cunedda. Cunedda was himself partly of British, and partly of Roman descent; for some of his ancestors, as *Edern*, his father, and *Padarn Peisrudd*, his grandfather, bore names indicative of Roman origin, *Æternus* and *Paternus* in Latin. The scarlet robe of Paternus implies that he was high in authority under the Romans, as has been acutely observed by Professor Rhŷs; who has also inferred from the term "*Gwledig*", attached to the name of Cunedda, that he was invested with supreme authority over them by the Britons, when the Romans had left them to take care of themselves. The title is never found in connexion with any except royal names, and those of persons possessing the highest authority; and we know, from the Elegy on Cunedda, by Taliesin, that he died gloriously on the Great Wall from Tyne to Solway, which he guarded when resisting an invasion of the Picts. Possibly it was this very disaster which finally impelled his subjects to despair, when they sent

the town of St. David's is situated; and he probably rose into power upon the reduction of the Gwyddyl Ffichti by Clydwyn. His first wife was Mechell, daughter of Brychan, by whom he had issue a daughter called Danadlwen; whose husband, Dirdan, is included in the Catalogue of Saints, but no churches are ascribed to him. The second wife of Gynyr was Anna, daughter of Gwrthefyr Fendigaid, or Vortimer (son of Vortigern), King of Britain; and the fruit of this union was a son, named Gistlianus (in *W. Gweslan*), together with two daughters, Non, the mother of St. David, and Gwen, the mother of St. Cybi. From confounding Anna, the daughter of Gwrthefyr Fendigaid, with Anna, the daughter of Uther Pendragon, arose probably the legendary story that St. David was related to King Arthur, but this tale is at variance with all the pedigrees.—From Rees' *Essay on the Welsh Saints*, p. 162.

their famous letter entitled "The Groans of the Britons," to Aëtius, imploring the Romans to return and protect them, since "the barbarians were driving them to the sea, and the sea to the barbarians."

The sons of Cunedda, no longer able to hold their own against the Picts in the North, migrated to the West, where they would be hospitably received by their maternal relatives, the descendants of Maximus, a Roman, but, on his mother's side, of British blood, who ultimately usurped the Imperial purple, and was slain at the battle of Aquileia, by his successor, Theodosius. Here tradition ascribes to their valour the expulsion of the Gwyddyl, who had either survived in those parts from the original occupation of the island by their race, or had invaded it from Ireland. The lands thus subdued they seized, and occupied: and thus it appears that Ceredig, the grandfather of St. David, became master of the country, since called from him, Ceredigion, and now Cardigan. Hence it is natural to expect that we should find in that region, or its neighbourhood, the birthplace of St. David. This was in Dyfed, or Dimetia, and, according to Giraldus, on the spot known afterwards as St. David's, but, according to Ricemarchus, at a place still called Hên Fynyw in Cardiganshire, which appears to be on the whole the best supported tradition.

All the biographers agree that his birth was predicted by St. Patrick, a chapel dedicated to whom still exists in Rhôs, near St. David's, where, they say, the prediction was made. His religious education was completed by St. Paulinus, (Pawl Hên), who had been a disciple of St. Germanus, and had a school, or monastery, at Ty Gwyn ar Dâf (the Holy House on the Taff) now Whitland, in Caermarthenshire. There he remained for a period not less than ten years. He had been baptised, according to one account, by "Beluc, Bishop of the Menevians"; by another, at a place called Porth Clais, in

that neighbourhood by Albeus, Bishop of Munster, who by Divine Providence had arrived at that time from Ireland, a not very probable story. His education commenced at Hên-meneu,¹ or Vetus Rubus, which was probably St. David's, or perhaps Hên Fynyw in Cardiganshire, and there, according to Ricemarchus, he was ordained a priest, before he went to the school of Paulinus. If so, he probably was consecrated by St. Dubricius (Dyfrig), then Archbishop of Caerleon-upon-Usk. While at Whitland he is said to have wrought a miracle on the eyes of his master Paulinus, who had lost his sight from a malady which affected them, but recovered it instantly at the prayer and blessing of his disciple.

On quitting St. Paulinus, David is said to have undertaken a distant journey,² during which he established no fewer than twelve monasteries. First he came to Glastonbury, where he built a church; also Rhaglan, Colfa, and Glasgwm, in Radnorshire, Erging, in Monmouthshire, Llangyfelach³ in Gower; and Kydweli in Caermarthenshire, whence he returned to Hên Fynyw. From thence he removed to Hodnant in Glyn

¹ Meneu is said to have signified a *bush* in old Irish, but the word is connected with "Manaw" by Skene, in his Preface to the *Four Ancient Books of Wales*.

² To this portion of his life is applicable the statement in the Welsh Triads, to the effect that Dewi, Padarn, and Teilo were the three *gwesteion gwynfydedig* (Blessed Visitors) of the Isle of Britain; so called because "they went as guests to the houses of the noble, the plebeian, the native, and the stranger, without accepting fee or reward, or victuals or drink, but taught the Faith in Christ to all without pay or thanks. To the poor and needy they gave gifts of their gold and silver, raiment, and provisions."

³ This church derives its name from Cyfelach, who, according to the Chronicle of the Princes of Wales, was a suffragan Bishop of Glamorgan, slain in A.D. 756, in a battle in which the Welsh defeated the Saxons. But a church may have previously been founded by St. David on the spot. In the list occur also the names Cowlan and Repitwn, which seem to stand for Crowland, or Croyland, and Repton in Yorkshire, places, however, too distant to admit of a probability that St. David should have visited them.

Rhosyn, or Vallis Rosina, with his disciples, the place from which St. Patrick is related to have withdrawn by the divine command, in order to give place to St. David, then unborn. Here he and his disciples were troubled by a chieftain of the Gwyddyl, named Boia, and his wife, whose opposition, says the legend, was at length miraculously overcome. The story, whether true or not in its details, is important as supporting the tradition that portions of South Wales were at that time occupied by Gwyddyl, perhaps invaders from Ireland, perhaps the remnant of a race who preceded the Cymry in the occupation of this island.

Having obtained from the Irish Pagan chieftain Boia the free possession of the land, St. David proceeded to build upon it a great monastery. After which, "all things being completed," proceeds Ricemarchus, his biographer, "the Holy Father decreed such rigour of monastic rule, that each of the monks passed his life in toiling for the community by the daily work of his hands; 'For who laboureth not,' saith the Apostle, 'let him not eat.' For knowing that lazy repose is the fomentor and mother of vices, he subjected the shoulders of the monks to divine labours; for those who subject their heads and minds to indolent tranquility, generate an unstable spirit of wantonness and restless incitements to inordinate desires. Therefore, with hand and foot they work zealously at their tasks; they lay the yoke upon their shoulders, with untiring arms they fix poles and stakes in the ground, with holy hands they carry saws and hooks for cutting. By their own strength they provide all things necessary for the Community; they refuse possessions, reject the gifts of the unjust, abominate riches; no care of oxen is brought in for ploughing. Each one is wealth to himself and his brethren, each is an ox. Work over, not a murmur was heard, no colloquy more than needful held; but every one, either praying or truly meditating, performed the work enjoined him.

“Their field work done, they returned to the monastic enclosure, and passed the whole day to the evening in reading, or writing, or praying. When evening was come and the bell-ringing was heard, every one left his study; for whoever it was who heard the sound of the bell, they rose ere the letter, or even the half or the point of the letter, was written; and left their own duties; and so, with silence, and without any talkative gossip, they make for the Church. The canticles of the Psalms completed with intention of heart and voice accordant, they continue to kneel until finally the day is brought to a close with the appearance of the stars in the sky; then, when all have gone out, the father would pour forth alone a secret prayer for the good estate of the Church. Lastly, they meet at table; and refresh, each one, his wearied limbs with the refectation of the meal he partakes of, but not to excess. For satiety, though it be only bread, begets luxury. But then each one takes his meal according to the varying condition of body or age; not dishes of different flavour, not the more dainty meats are set before them, but bread and herbs seasoned with salt; after eating, they quench the heat of their thirst with a temperate kind of drink. They then procure for the sick, or advanced in age, or those even wearied by a long journey, some more agreeable food that would please them, for all are not to be provided for in equal measure.

“Having said grace, they go to the church at the canonical ringing of the bell, and there for about three hours devote themselves to watchings, prayers, and genuflexions. And as long as they were praying in the church, none might lawfully dare to gape, sneeze, or expectorate. This done, they compose their limbs to slumber; but awaking at cock-crow, they give themselves to kneeling in prayer, and pass the whole day afterwards without sleep from morning till night, and so they serve during the other nights.

“ From the night of Saturday until the first light after day-break has shone forth in the first hour of Sunday, they devote themselves to watchings, prayers, and genuflexions, except for that one hour after matins of Saturday ; they make known their thoughts to the father, they ask leave of the father for things even which nature requires. All things were common, in nothing was there any *meum* and *tuum*—mine and thine. For whoever spoke of a book, or anything else, as ‘ mine’, he was subjected at once to severe penance. They were clothed in mean garments, chiefly skins ; obedience was unailing to the father’s command ; excessive perseverance in the doing of actions was forbidden in all. For any one who, desiring participation in the holy rule, demanded entrance into the society of the brothers, remained ten days before the doors of the monastery before he was rejected, and was also proved by reproachful words. But if he displayed the exercise of patience well until the tenth day, he was first received under the senior who happened to be appointed to preside, and for a long time toiling hard, and broken in spirit by many trials and crosses, he was at length deemed worthy to enter the society of the brothers. Nothing superfluous was possessed, voluntary poverty was beloved ; for whoever desired their company, the father would take none of his substance, which he had abandoned when he renounced the world, or, so to speak, a single penny for the use of the monastery ; but he was received naked, as one escaping from shipwreck, lest by extolling himself in any way he might exalt himself among the brothers, or, supported by his own substance, decline to enter upon equal labour with the brothers ; nor, while wearing the religious habit, extort by force what he had left to the monastery, and stir up a firm patience to anger.

“ But the father himself, overflowing with daily streams of tears, redolent with the whole burnt offerings and incense of

prayers, and burning with the ardour of a twofold charity, was wont to consecrate the due oblation of the Lord's Body with pure hands, and so would proceed alone after the hours of Matins to angelical converse.¹ Immediately afterwards he went into cold water, by remaining in which for a length of time, by cooling down, he subdued all the heat of the flesh. After that, he would pass the whole day, steadfast and unwearied, in teaching, praying, kneeling, taking care of the brothers, and also in feeding a multitude of orphans, wards, widows, poor persons, sick, infirm, and pilgrims. So he began, continued and ended. But the rest of his rigorous discipline, though necessary for imitation, the brevity laid down for this compendious narrative forbids us to set forth. But he led a life like that of the Egyptian monks, and in imitation of them."²

To the period of St. David's life as Abbot of a monastic community belongs an incident, which must be mentioned as being related by all his biographers, but has been rejected by Professor Rees in his *Essay on the Welsh Saints* as too improbable to merit serious acceptance. One night, according to Ricemarchus, an angel appeared to him, and enjoined him on the next day to gird on his sandals, and to set out on the journey, which he had been desirous of undertaking, to Jerusalem. He was to take with him two other travelling companions, Teilaw, also named Eliud, who had been a monk in his monastery; and afterwards succeeded him as Archbishop, and Paternus, or Padarn, who was afterwards Bishop of Llanbadarn Fawr, now the parish church of Aberystwyth. These

¹ *I.e.* mental prayer and meditation.

² Under St. Anthony, who first established a religious community in the Desert of Egypt. St. David may very possibly have visited St. Benedict when in Italy, and have conferred with him on the subject of his monastic rule, instituted in 529, to which his own bears, in fact, a striking resemblance.

he met, at a distance of three days' journey from the abode of each of the three. Thence they journeyed together, being of one heart and one mind, praying and weeping as they went. Passing over into Gaul, St. David found himself endued with the Apostolic gift of tongues, whereby he was enabled to confirm in the Faith the different nations of people through whose countries they travelled. On arriving at Jerusalem they were most honourably received by the Patriarch, who had already been forewarned by an angel of the coming of three Catholic men from the bounds of the West, whom (said the angel) you will receive with joy and hospitality, and consecrate to the episcopate. The Patriarch did so, and prepared for his guests three seats of honour, and advanced St. David to the Archiepiscopate. By his invitation they then preached to the Jews, many of whom they converted to the Christian Faith. The Patriarch dismissed them with presents. To David he gave an altar of silver; a bell endowed with miraculous powers¹; a staff similarly endowed; and a tunic of cloth of gold. That they might not be burdened with them on their journey, these were transported by angels to their homes; where they found them on their return. Those of St. David are said specially to have been received by him at the Monastery of Llangyfelach, already mentioned.

It may be doubted whether Professor Rees is absolutely justified in wholly rejecting this account. We know that, before this time, pilgrimages to Jerusalem were made from distant

¹ This, perhaps, was the bell endowed with miraculous powers, said by Giraldus to have been preserved at the Church of Glaswm in "Elvein (qu. Elfael?) and called 'Bangu', the wrongful detention of which, by the garrison of the fortress of Rhaiadr Gwy, built by Prince Rhys ab Gruffydd, was, he tells us, the cause of the whole town being consumed by fire that same night, the wall only excepted on which the bell was hung."—*Itin. Camb.*, c. i, 82.

countries. We know, too, that the three Saints were contemporary; and the silver altar brought by St. David from Jerusalem is stated by William of Malmesbury to have existed at Glastonbury Abbey in his own day; his description of which varies slightly from that in the text of Ricemarchus. But the promotion of St. David to the Archiepiscopate at that time is an anachronism; nor, under any circumstances, would the Patriarch of Jerusalem have been possessed of jurisdiction to consecrate Bishops for Wales. This part of the story may have originated with the dispute, in the reign of Henry I, respecting the jurisdiction of the Archbishop of Canterbury over St. David's.

We learn from the Life of St. David that the Pelagian heresy had not been thoroughly extinguished in Britain by Saints Germanus and Lupus, who, by commission from Pope Celestine, had come for that purpose in A.D. 431, and the former again in 443. To determine the matter finally a Council was assembled at Brevi in Cardiganshire, now called, after St. David, Llan Ddewi Brefi, attended, according to Ricemarchus, by no fewer than one hundred and eighteen bishops,¹ besides a vast number of people of all classes and grades. So vast was the multitude that, humanly speaking, it would be impossible that a single preacher could make himself heard by them all. It was agreed, therefore, by the Bishops that any preacher, who should receive from Heaven the grace to enable himself to be clearly heard by the whole assembly, should receive the dignity of Metropolitan Archbishop. This was attempted by several, but without success, although they spoke from a piled-up heap of clothes. Then one of the

¹ This number would seem to be a mere flourish of romance, as, even if *chorepiscopi* were intended, or priests having a certain limited episcopal jurisdiction over country districts, the number is probably exaggerated.

Bishops, Paulinus, whose disciple St. David had been, counselled that he should be invited to come there. "He is," said he, "a man of eloquent speech, full of grace, of handsome countenance, of a commanding person, and in stature six feet high."

To St. David, accordingly, messengers were sent, but to no purpose. "Let no one tempt me to think," was his reply, "that such a one as I would be able to do what they cannot themselves; I acknowledge my lowliness, go in peace." A second, and a third deputation was sent; still he complied not. At last, when Daniel¹ and Dubricius, two men pre-eminent in faith and holiness, are sent to him, he consents to accompany them. On their way a cry of mourning is heard near the river Teivi, which is found to proceed from a mother lamenting the recent death of her son. She implores the aid of St. David, who takes pity on her, and obtains from God the restoration to life of her boy, who follows him to the Council. Arrived there, he refuses to mount the pile of clothing; but bids this boy, but now raised to life, to spread his own napkin under his feet. Standing upon it, he "expounds the Law and the Gospel", as though from a trumpet; a snow-white dove from Heaven is seen sitting on his shoulder during his discourse; the earth under his feet becomes a hill, from which he is seen and heard alike by all present, far and near, and on which the church is afterwards built; the heresy is cast out; the Faith is confirmed in the hearts of the faithful; all are of one accord, and give thanks to God and St. David. Then, "magnified and blessed by every tongue, with the consent of all the bishops, kings, princes, nobles, and all ranks of the whole British nation, he is made Archbishop; moreover, the city is dedicated as

¹ If by Daniel the first Bishop of Bangor in Caernarvonshire is intended, the introduction of this name is an anachronism.

the mother city of his whole native country, so that whoever ruled it should be held to be its archbishop."

Ricemarchus proceeds to say: "The heresy, therefore, being cast out, the decrees of the Catholic and Ecclesiastical Rule are confirmed, which, from the frequent and cruel irruption of enemies, vanished away into non-observance, and became forgotten. After which, as though awoke out of a deep sleep, they begin to vie in fighting the Lord's battles, accounts of which are found in most ancient writings of the father, in part penned with his own most sacred hand. Afterwards, in the course of time following, another Synod is assembled, whose name is Victoria; wherein a number of Bishops, Priests, and Abbots being assembled, renew, with severe examination, the things confirmed in the former one, and add also some matters of utility. From those two Synods, then, all the churches of our native land have received their method and rule by the Roman authority; whose decrees, which he had orally confirmed, the Bishop himself alone committed to writing with his own sacred hand."¹

Ricemarchus then describes the closing years of St. David's life; how, not his church only, but his diocese, became endowed with the privilege of asylum for transgressors, not in Wales only, but the whole Kingdom, nay, any field anywhere that belonged to him; and how he lived honoured and revered by all, and by tacit consent invested during his lifetime with the supreme management of all affairs, spiritual and temporal. He died at the age of 147, having predicted the time of his death, and being consoled in his last moments by a vision of our Lord Himself. His biography tells of other miracles wrought by him during his lifetime; among them the discovery, through the intervention of an angel, of an attempt by three brothers of the monastery to poison him, a story which greatly resembles a similar one told of St.

¹ *Cambro-British Saints*, p. 139.

Benedict; and some are referred to as wrought by him after he had been translated to Heaven.¹

Ricemarchus was himself a successor of St. David in the See of Menevia, of which he was Bishop in the year 1088; so that his life of the Saint cannot be dated earlier than the eleventh century, that is to say, some five hundred years after the events took place which it professes to record. He is careful, however, to tell us that it is a compendium, gathered from much larger materials, which he found scattered in most ancient writings in his native country, and chiefly in the city itself (of St. David's), and which had been considerably moth-eaten, worn, and corroded in the lapse of so many centuries, yet still were partially extant, written in the ancient style of their ancestors. Pity that he did not state precisely what these writings were, who their authors, and what their date: pity, too, that the Acts of the Council held by St. David, "written by his own hand", and extant in the eleventh century, have not been preserved to us! Besides this "Life" by Ricemarchus, the original MS. of which has been printed in the *Lives of the Cambro-British Saints*, by the Society for the Publication of Welsh MSS., from the original copy in his handwriting in the British Museum, there is another by his contemporary, Giraldus, one by John of Teignmouth, one by Leland, and one in Welsh, of the fifteenth century. All these appear to agree in the main facts, with some variations of colouring and detail, especially in relation to accounts of miraculous events, which would seem to rest partly on popular tradition, and partly to be embellished by the style or colouring of the writers, who, it must be remembered, belonged to an uncritical age, and were indisposed to subject to a rigid examination things which they had heard or read, and which, to their simple imaginations, tended to the glorification of their hero, or to the edification of their readers.

¹ *Cambro-British Saints*, p. 143.

Besides these biographies there are some scanty notices of St. David, in *The Antiquities of Glastonbury*, by William of Malmesbury, and his *Book upon Bishops*; and also in a chronicle of St. David's entitled *Annales Menevenses*, quoted by Professor Rees. Lastly, there is extant, and printed in the *Myvyrian Archaiology of Wales*, a curious poem, written in South Wales by Gwynvardd Brycheiniog, in the twelfth century, in which several churches are named as dedicated to St. David, and as possessing some of his relics. The principal portion of these were removed from St. David's to Glastonbury, with the view to their protection from an invading enemy, in the reign of Edgar, A.D. 962.

The precise dates of the birth and death of St. David cannot be fixed with certainty, but the former was in or about the year A.D. 462. The first Council took place in 517, or perhaps earlier, in 512; and the second, called "Victory", at Caerleon, in 519. The death of St. Dubricius is fixed by Professor Rees in the year 522, who also considers that St. David did not live beyond the age of eighty-two.

It is historically certain that St. Dubricius resigned the Archbishopric of Caerleon in favour of St. David, and retired to end his days in Bardsey Island. St. David was himself succeeded in the Archbishopric of Caerleon by St. Teilo, who removed the See to Llandaff, as St. David had removed it to Menevia.

From his time to the Norman Conquest, however, the question of the primacy of this See over the other Welsh dioceses has been surrounded with a certain halo of uncertainty, which subsequent investigations have failed entirely to dispel.

Three Canons of St. David, printed by Messrs. Haddan and Stubbs, have been preserved in the Royal Library at Paris. One of these prescribes penance to those who should have broken their fast before ministering at the celebration of the Holy Sacrifice of the Altar.

It does not appear to have been hitherto determined with certainty, whether any connection existed between the custom of wearing a leek on St. David's Day, and the Saint himself. Probably there is none. It originated, as is commonly believed, in the plant being plucked, and placed in their caps, by some Welshmen during a battle with their own countrymen, to distinguish them from the enemy. It has been asserted that the plant was not the ordinary garden-leek, but one which is found growing wild in great quantity in certain localities, one on the river Wye, near Monmouth.

Among the stanzas entitled "Englynion y Clywed", containing each a saying ascribed to a Saint or a Bard, is this of St. David:—

" A glywaist di a gant Dewi,
Gwr llwyd, llydan ei deithi,
Goreu denawd daioni."

"Hast thou heard what St. David sang?
The blessed man of wide perfections?
The best allurements is goodness."

St. David, though manifestly venerated as a Saint by his countrymen from the time of his death, and even during his life, was not canonised authoritatively by the Church until A.D. 1120, in the reign of Pope Callixtus II. The Biographies of Ricemarchus and Giraldus may, with great probability, be regarded as preliminary to that event, and as intended to furnish a basis for the act of canonisation, by gathering up all the facts that were known to history and tradition respecting him.

St. David's, called by the Welsh Tŷ Ddewi, or House of David, was formerly a celebrated place of pilgrimage. Stones, marked with sculptured crosses, were set at convenient intervals on the road leading thither, along the heights above the sea from Fisgard, both as guides to the traveller, and as stations for prayer during the journey. Three royal person-

ages are named in history as having visited it in pilgrimage, —William the Conqueror, Henry II, and Edward I, besides innumerable votaries from this as well as from foreign countries. Special privileges would seem to have been attached by the Church to this pilgrimage, as intimated by the saying: “Roma semel quantum, dat bis Menevia tantum,” meaning that by going twice to St. David’s as much spiritual profit might be gained as by going once to Rome.
