

LIFE AND PORTRAITURE

of
CHRISTMAS EVANS

A New Translation from the Welsh
with a
Memoir of the Author

by

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The introduction of Christianity into Britain is said to have taken place about sixty-three years after the crucifixion. By whose agency it was affected, cannot now be satisfactorily determined. Tradition has ascribed it to Joseph of Arimathea. This, however; is exceedingly doubtful. It has also been attributed to the Apostle Paul. That the apostle Paul visited Britain is quite probable, from the testimony of Theodoret and Jerome. That he was the first preacher of the gospel in Britain is certainly a mistake. The weight of evidence seems to be in favor of Claudia, a Welsh lady, belonging to Caesar's household. The circumstances were these:

The Romans invaded Britain about fifty years before the incarnation. Failing to conquer the Welsh, they made peace with them, and dwelt among them in amity. Many Welsh soldiers joined the Roman army, and several Welsh families went and resided at Rome. Among the latter were Claudia and her husband. Paul was then a prisoner under Nero; dwelling, however, “**in his own hired house,**” and receiving all who came to hear the word of God. Under his ministry, Claudia was converted to Christianity. She soon returned to her native country, and scattered “the Seed of the Kingdom” among her own people. This was in the year of our Lord 63.

About a century after this, Faganus and Damincanus went to Rome, were converted there, and became “**able ministers of the New Testament.**” In the year of our Lord 180, they were sent back to Wales, to preach to their own countrymen. They were zealous and successful laborers.

They opposed the pagan superstitions of the Welsh with wonderful energy. They pursued Druidism to its dark retirements, and poured upon it the withering blaze of the gospel. Through their preaching, Lucius, king of Wales, was brought to embrace Christianity. He was the first king that ever bowed to the Prince of Peace. The royal convert was exceedingly zealous in the propagation of the truth. The Macedonian cry issued from the throne of Wales, an earnest appeal to Eleutherius for help. Then “**the word of the Lord had free course, and was glorified.**”

Under the reign of Dioclesian, about the year 300, the Welsh Christians suffered a dreadful persecution.

Their books were burned, their houses of worship were destroyed, and multitudes obtained the crown of martyrdom. The first three were Alban, Aaron, and Julius. They were all excellent men, and greatly beloved by their brethren. They died in triumph, and their blood became the seed of the church. Many others soon followed them in the same path.

Dioclesian gave strict orders for their destruction. Not a Christian was to be spared, not a Christian church, not a book or a scrap of writing that could transmit their faith and history to future generations. This was the tenth persecution. The great dragon had sent forth his flood to destroy the church. But “**mightily grew the word of God and prevailed.**” The bush still lived,

“And flourished unconsumed in fire.”

The first Christian king, we have said, was a Welshman. So, in part, was the first Christian emperor. Constantine the Great was born in Britain. His father was Roman; his mother Welsh. Having resided some time in Britain, they removed to Rome. Constantine ascended the Imperial throne. Converted, he made Christianity the religion of the empire. The intolerant edicts of his predecessors were abolished; and the absurd rites of paganism, as far as possible, suppressed.

The emperor employed all his energies and resources in spreading the gospel, but his course, if honest, was injudicious. In the end, he dishonored Christianity more by his imprudence than he glorified her at first by his zeal. He opened the door of the church so wide as to admit Antichrist himself. The “**man of sin**” came and seated himself in the temple of God.

Intoxicated with her prosperity, the church throughout the empire gradually embraced the grossest superstitions. But the Welsh Christians strenuously resisted all innovations. They adhered firmly to the primitive simplicity of Christian faith and worship. Yet they lost a portion of their spirituality. The storms of tribulation are often more favorable to the growth of vital religion, than the sunshine of prosperity. The church becomes dizzy when placed upon the pinnacle of worldly praise. The boatmen wax careless when their craft glides gently along on a smooth sea, before a pleasant gale. This is the natural tendency of the human mind, in circumstances of prosperity. It was thus with the Christians of Wales.

Other things operated unfavorably. The Pelagian controversy divided and distracted the churches, and destroyed the spirit of Christian meekness and love. The Welsh were soon involved in a civil war with the Picts and Scots. In their distress, they solicited the aid of the Saxons. The Saxons promptly responded to the call. But the ally soon became an enemy. They fell upon the Welsh, drove them to the mountains of Cumry, and took possession of their land. *

** Down to this time, the Welsh inhabited all of what is now denominated England. But henceforth they are confined to the western part of the island, called Cumry, or Wales.*

These disasters threatened the extermination of Christianity in Wales, but there were a few faithful ones, whose ark out rode the deluge. Gildas, Dyfrig, Dynawt, Teil, Padarn, Pawlin, Daniel, Codag, Dewi, and several others, stood firmly against the degeneracy of the times, and were “**valiant for the truth upon the earth.**”

Through their labors, the religion of Jesus survived among the hills of Cumry.

In the beginning of the seventh century, Austin came to Britain, under a commission from Gregory the Great, to make proselytes to popery. He succeeded well with the Saxons, but not at all with the Welsh. This is not strange. The Saxons were ignorant idolaters, and the transition was easy from Paganism to popery.

The Welsh were enlightened Christians, and it was difficult to seduce them from their allegiance to Christ.

They consented, however, to hold a large meeting on the borders of Herefordshire, and hear what Austin had to offer. His doctrine did not suit them. They rejected alike the proposals of the monk and the commands of his master. This awoke the fiend within him. He instigated the Saxons to murder them.

Twelve hundred ministers and delegates were slaughtered, and afterward many of their brethren.

Their leaders being slain, the majority of the survivors reluctantly purchased peace at the sacrifice of conscience, submitting to the creed and the usages of Rome. Yet there were some who repudiated the doctrine of the pope's supremacy, and maintained for a season the simplicity of the gospel. But they lived among the mountains, in seclusion from the world, like the inhabitants of the vale of Piedmont. We hear little or nothing of them again till the time of the Reformation.

While the Lord, through the labors of his servant Wickliffe, was preparing his way in England, Wales also was remembered in mercy, and “**visited with the dayspring from on high.**”

Walter Brute was a native of the principality. He had been at Oxford, where he had formed an intimate acquaintance with Wickliffe. He entered fully into Wickliffe's views concerning the reformation of the church. His heart was moved with compassion for his countrymen. Inspired with apostolic faith and zeal, he left the university, and returned to his native land.

He determined to resist, even “**unto blood,**” the delusions and abominations of the papacy. He soon distinguished himself as a courageous reformer. He preached in the streets, in the markets, and from house to house. He blew the trump of God throughout the principality. The temple of Antichrist began to tremble, and its gilded and pampered occupants manifested considerable uneasiness and alarm.

Everybody saw that Brute was generous and disinterested. Friends flocked around him, for the people had long since become disgusted with the corruptions of the church, and heartily sick of ecclesiastical despotism. Men of all classes gathered to his standard.

His labors of love soon elicited, of course, the hostility of the clergy. But so numerous and respectable were his friends, that all the attempts of ecclesiastical judicatures, and officers of the civil law, were ineffectual. A petition was at length sent to Richard, King of England, entreating his interference.

The king issued an order to the nobility of Wales, requiring them to assist the Bishop of Hereford in apprehending and punishing the heretic and his adherents. This was in the year 1391. Still Walter Brute went on, preaching the gospel, denouncing the papacy and exposing the corruptions of the church without material molestation, till 1393. He was then cited to appear before the Bishop of Hereford, to answer to a charge of heresy.

He appeared, defended himself against the allegation, and contended boldly that the pope was Antichrist, and the papal church Babylon.

In this argument, Brute triumphed over his accusers, and made many converts to his cause. Several of the clergy now embraced his views, and became zealous defenders of the faith. One of these, David Ddu of Hiraddug, on the border of Cardiganshire, undertook a translation of the Scriptures into Welsh. Portions of this translation were extensively circulated. Another, John Kent, D. D., of Grismond, in Monmouthshire, was a learned man and a fine poet. He labored incessantly with his pen, to expose the vices of the clergy, and promote a more spiritual religion.

These divines were variously opposed and persecuted by ecclesiastical power. They were stigmatized as magicians, and accused of intercourse with evil spirits. But all was unavailing. The zeal of Ddu and Kent was unabated, and the progress of truth was unretarded. The hand of God was with them wherever they went. Revivals occurred in the cloisters, and monks came forth from their seclusion to reinforce the reformers.

In the monastery of Margam, Glamorganshire, a large number of the monks were converted.

One of them, Thomas Evan Rhys, traveled the mountains of the principality, at the constant peril of his life, to remonstrate against popery, and recommend a purer form of Christianity.

In 1580, John Penry, an Episcopal minister, dissented from the established church, and became a Baptist. He was a man of liberal education and fine pulpit talents. After having prosecuted his ministry more than seven years, with remarkable zeal and success, he died a martyr. Penry was the first Baptist preacher in Wales after the Reformation.

In 1620, Erbury and Wroth followed his example. The confession of the latter was very singular. A nobleman belonging to his parish went to London to attend a lawsuit. Hearing that he was successful, Mr. Wroth bought a new violin, and prepared to welcome his return with music and dancing. While these preparations were going on, news came that the nobleman was dead.

The joy of the party was suddenly turned into mourning. The vicar fell upon his knees, and poured out his heart in fervent prayer to God. This event occasioned his conversion.

Erbury, his friend, was converted about the same time. Both began to preach with wonderful unction. “**Jesus Christ and him crucified**” was their constant theme. Their zeal drew down upon them a violent storm of persecution. But they were not discouraged. God owned their labors, and many were the seals of their ministry. In 1635 they were ejected from their parishes. But they “**cared for none of these things.**” They went from valley to valley, from mountain to mountain, preaching the word. The recent Welsh translation of the Scriptures proved a powerful auxiliary to their work. People read and investigated for themselves, and found that these were men of God, speaking “**the words of truth and soberness.**” Erbury and Wroth both organized Baptist churches; the former, on the plan of “strict communion;” the latter, on more liberal principles.

These were the first Baptist churches instituted in Wales, after the Reformation from popery. It is said, however, that there existed, even centuries before, many Baptists in the valley of Carleon, the Piedmont of Wales, and among the neighboring mountains. Their origin is, unfortunately, involved in obscurity.

During the ministry of Erbury and Wroth, arose that morningstar of the Baptist church in Wales, Vavasor Powell.

He was born in Radnorshire, South Wales. He was educated for the ministry of the established church. For some time he officiated at Clun, on the borders of Shropshire. While there, his conscience was awakened by a reproof from a Puritan for violating the Sabbath. He was soon afterwards converted, under the preaching of Walter Caradock, a noted preacher among the Independents.

In 1636, he joined the Baptists, and shortly became a very popular preacher among them. He was a man of great eloquence and power. Many were converted under his ministry. But the red dragon was roused to pursue him. In 1642, he fled his native land for the safety of his life. In four years, however, he returned, and preached boldly throughout the country. The people flocked to hear him, by thousands, to the market-houses, to the fields, the woods and the tops of the mountains. His ministry was wonderfully blessed to the salvation of souls.

After the death of Cromwell, in 1658, Charles U. returned to England. Now commenced a dreadful persecution of the Baptists in Wales as “Hundreds of them were taken from their beds at night, without any regard to age, sex, or the inclemency of the weather; and were driven to prison, on foot, fifteen or twenty miles; and if they did not keep up with their drivers on horseback, they were most cruelly and unmercifully whipped; and while their drivers stopped to drink at the taverns, they were beaten like cattle, during the pleasure of the king's friends; and all their property was forfeited to the king, except what was deemed necessary to defray the expenses of their drivers. But all this was only the beginning of sorrows, and nothing to what they suffered for the space of six-and-twenty years afterward.”

In these persecutions, Vavasor Powell bore his part. He was immured, at different times, in thirteen prisons. Indeed, he was a prisoner most of the time till his death, which happened in 1670. On his tomb is this inscription: — “He was, to the last generation, a successful preacher; to the present generation, a faithful witness; to the next generation, an excellent example.”

Contemporary with Vavasor Powell, and immediately succeeding him, were many faithful laborers in the cause of Christ in Wales. One of them was the noted Roger Williams, who subsequently removed to New England, and founded the Baptist sect in America.

But after the death of Powell and his coadjutors, the revival in Wales declined, and the churches gradually settled into a spiritual deep, in which they remained a century, when they were roused by the trumpet-tongued eloquence of Harris and Rowlands.

Harris and Rowlands were Methodists. While Whitefield and Wesley were rekindling the fires of the Reformation on the altars of England, these men of God were scattering some sparks of it among the mountains of Wales.

Under their labors commenced such a revival as was never known in that country before. They adhered to the established church; and, on that account, were, for a season, but little opposed. When the blessed fruits of their ministry began to be developed in the conversion of thousands of souls, the wrath of Satan and his emissaries arose against them, but, as Christmas Evans remarks, it was now too late.

The sword of the Spirit was drawn; the gates of the city were opened; the fires was kindled in the stubble, and not all the floods of persecution could stay the progress of the flame. Harris and Rowlands went forward in their work of love, “**clothed with power from on high.**” A great and effectual door was opened to their ministry, and the leaven spread rapidly through the lump.

The Baptists shared largely in this work of grace. It was the rising of a new sun upon them, which had been heralded a hundred years before in the powerful ministry of Vavasor Powell. The revival developed whatever of talent and energy lay dormant in the denomination. Many a David went forth to meet the Philistine, and returned in triumph.

One of these, and the most successful of them all, was Christmas Evans. “He was a man of God,” says Dr. Cone, and eminently useful in his generation.” His natural talents were of the highest order, and his Christian graces have not been surpassed in a century. The celebrated Robert Hall regarded him as the first pulpit genius of the age. “Had he enjoyed the advantages of education,” writes one who knew him well and often sat under his ministry, “he might have blended the impassioned declamation of Whitefield with something of the imperial opulence and pomp of fancy that distinguished Jeremy Taylor.”

His two celebrated “*Specimens of Welsh Preaching*” have been read throughout Protestant Christendom; and ranked, by universal suffrage, among the most splendid introductions of sanctified genius.

Who that has seen them does not wish to know more of so remarkable a man? To gratify this desire is a secondary object of the present publication; the primary, is the religious benefit of mankind. The matter of the following memoir and portraiture is compiled from several authentic sounds of information. May the perusal afford the reader as rich a harvest of profit and delight as their preparation has afforded the writer!

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