Elvish and Welsh

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What Elvish is, I shall come round to eventually – it is probably safe to assume that the readership of *Mallorn* has some idea of the Tolkienian concept of Elves (though even you, Gentle Readers, may be in for the odd surprise about their languages). But what Welsh is, and who the Welsh are (and were), may be less well known.

The Welsh are of course Celts. It is widely acknowledged that Celts are a feckless yet fey people, usually endowed with The Sight and other such mystical attributes – dreamy, poetic, unworldly, yet possessed of subtle and supernatural powers, as can be observed in people with Celtic names like Morgan, Williams, Parry, Powell and Doughan .... how different from their stolid, dreary, materialistic English neighbours and oppressors! And like most widely-acknowledged facts, this is of course pernicious nonsense. Tolkien describes the widespread myth of the opposition between "the wild, incalculable poetic Celt, full of vague and misty imaginations, and the Saxon, solid and practical when not under the influence of beer." Tolkien continues: "Unlike most myths this myth seems to have no value at all"[1]. In fact, the whole idea of "Celtic" peoples and languages is relatively modern, going back no further than the eighteenth century when scholars like Edward Lhuyd of the Ashmolean were systematising the study of the Brittonic and Goidelic languages (before this, the word "Celtic" was used simply as a synonym for "Gaulish"). What we think of as the stereotypical idea of The Celt only really became current towards the end of the eighteenth century when the Romantic movement was gaining ground; the economically and politically oppressed, and culturally deprived, communities of the north and west of these islands naturally played up to an image which not only attributed a cultural value to them (however erroneously), but one which the more enterprising among them could even make money out of. By the early twentieth century, the mystical "Celtic twilight" overshadowed everything, epitomised as it was by the works of Yeats and "Fiona MacLeod" – a pseudonym used by the not notably Celtic William Sharp[2] for such works as the notorious *Immortal Hour* which in its operatic version by the equally Saxon Rutland Boughton had in the 1920s the sort of success nowadays associated with Andrew Lloyd Webber. Particularly prevalent was the idea of the *Tuatha Dé Danann*, Fiona MacLeod's "lordly ones who live in the hills, in the Hollow Hills – they laugh and are glad and are terrible", which appears to have contributed more than a little to Tolkien's conception of both the Elves and the Valar.

But despite rather forced equivalences between these folk and the *Tylwyth Teg* (the Fair Folk of Welsh popular culture), all this really has little to do with Welsh. Despite popular belief, Welsh myths are not the same as Hebridean Irish myths, and the Welsh language is most emphatically not the Irish language. The two have never been mutually comprehensible, at least in historical times, and though they share a common ancestor, this has to be sought a good three thousand years ago, at a time when a group of what seem to have been Celtic peoples was living around Bohemia, before they spread out over Europe and at least part of Asia Minor, to the dismay of anybody in their path. By the time the Romans took a serious interest in North-Western Europe, the majority of its inhabitants spoke Celtic languages[3]. Those Celtic

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[1] *English and Welsh* p.172.

[2] Sharp reputedly used to dress in women's clothes when writing in his Fiona MacLeod persona – "Did he?" said the usually charitable W.P. Ker on hearing of this – "The bitch!" (Lucas, E.V. *Reading, writing and remembering*).

[3] Celtic languages had already had some influence on Latin, probably dating to the period in the early fourth century BC when the Romans were briefly the subjects of an aggressive nation of "Gauls" – the word *gladius*, for example, is probably of Gaulish origin.

languages which have survived the Roman and Germanic impacts, the "insular" Celtic languages, fall into two broad groups. The languages of Ireland, Scotland and the Isle of Man are closely related to each other, and are usually referred to by the general names of "Goidelic" or "Gaelic" – derived from the Welsh "Gwyddeleg", meaning Irish. Welsh, Cornish and Breton are also related to each other (though they are far from mutually comprehensible), and are descended from the language spoken by most British people when the Romans arrived – the Ancient Britons, in fact. The distinction between the Irish and British groups is often called "p-Celtic" and "q-Celtic". What this mysterious formula means is simply that a lot of Irish words have a *c* where Welsh ones have *p* – for example, the Irish numeral 5 is *coic*, while its Welsh equivalent is *pump*. Unfortunately this only applies to certain groups of words – for example, the Welsh for 100 begins with a c (*cant*), as does the Irish (*céad*). The *p / c* equivalence was known well enough by med-iaeval Irish monks to confuse them in instances like this; when they came across Irish records of a Welsh saint called Cybi, they assumed (understandably but wrongly) that earlier Irish chroniclers had adapted the name to Irish practices, and it should really have been "Pybi" – which is why mediaeval Irish chronicles written in Latin mention an otherwise unknown holy Welshman called Pubeus (let this be a warning to those who meddle in the affairs of com-parative philologists, for they are subtle and quick to bugger you up entirely). Thus, Tolkien confounds confusion still further by taking Quenya, a language based on Finnish (which is not even Indo-European, let alone Celtic), and makes it into a "q" language with a relationship to Sindarin resembling that between Irish and Welsh ....
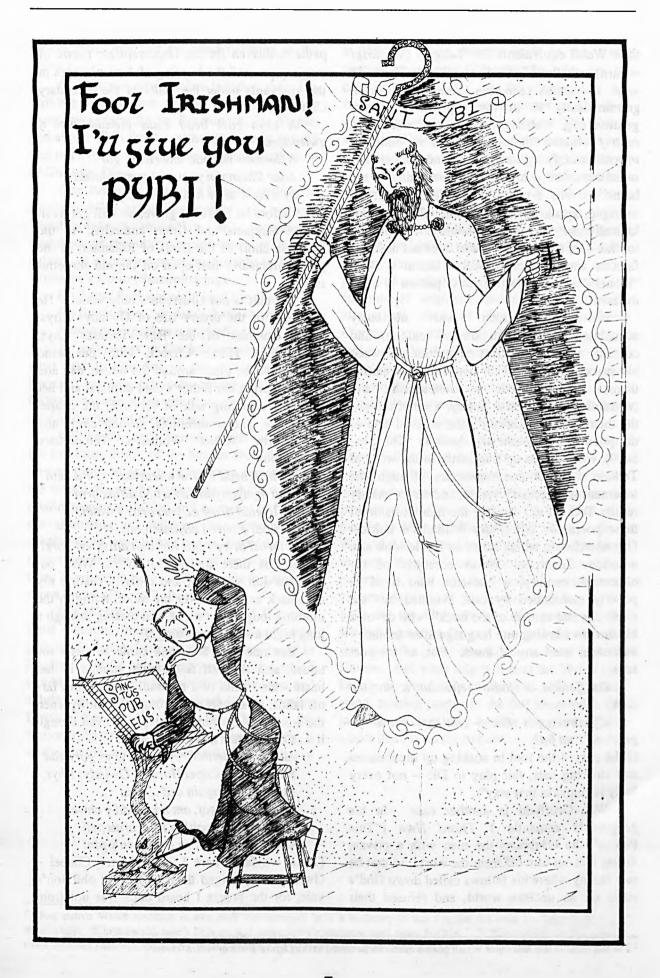
Be that as it may, we have reached the conclusion that the Welsh are fundamentally Ancient Britons who speak with a *p*. However, this *p* may become a *b*, or a *ph*, or even, in certain circumstances, an *mh* – for a distinguishing feature of the Celtic (and not least the Welsh) languages is what is called "consonant mutation". This is a rather involved subject; in effect, it means that in certain circumstances, either for grammatical purposes or for word–formation, the initial consonants of words change in certain predictable ways – which is very interesting, but sheer hell for a learner trying to use a Welsh dictionary. Tolkien generally followed similar forms of mutation to those used in modern Welsh, but with definite differences even in Sindarin (the most Welsh of the Welsh-style Elvish languages). Those who are interested may refer to the comparative schemes of Welsh and Sindarin mutations set out on page 9. (Irish and Scottish mutations differ markedly from these in detail, and Breton mutations are actually *even more* complicated!) Welsh spelling, on the other hand, is far more consistent than that of most languages (certainly than English) – once you know the rules, you discover that divergences from them are extremely few. Stress is also very simple and straightforward; with the exception of a very few highly predictable groups of words which are end-stressed, all Welsh words of more than one syllable are stressed on the penultimate – like Italian, only much more consistently so.

As is well known, Tolkien felt a particular attraction to the Welsh language[4], surpassed only by his love of Finnish, and states outright that Sindarin "is ... constructed deliberately to resemble Welsh phonologically and to have a relation to High-elven similar to that existing between British ... and Latin"[5]. This is true up to a point; like so many of Tolkien's statements there is a wealth of fine print to be understood. In fact, unlike the Finnish-based Quenya, which in basic outline remained more or less the same for more than fifty years, the Elvish languages which Tolkien made "to resemble Welsh" (and not just phonologically), varied considerably over the decades, from the early (Goldogrin/ Gnomish), through the middle (Noldorin, Doriathrin, etc.), to the late (Sindarin, Nandorin and that extraordinarily ingenious halfway-house between Finnish and Welsh phonology called Telerin), with Sindarin being the closest of all to Welsh – though this is again more a matter of phonology and, to a lesser extent, grammar, than anything else. *Pace* Jim Allan, the only Sindarin words which at all resemble

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[4] For example, Tolkien's reference to "cellar doors", *English and Welsh* pp. 190-91.

[5] *Letters* p.219 n.

their Welsh equivalents are "Losgar" (W. *llosgi* = burn) and "lhach" (W. *llach* = lash). The main way in which Sindarin resembles Welsh grammatically is in the expression of the genitive (e.g. Welsh: *mynyddoedd* = mountains, *cartref* = home: "the mountains of my home" = *mynyddoedd fy nghartref i*; Sindarin: *ered* = mountains, *bar* = home: "the mountains of my home" = *ered e-mbar nin*). Verb forms, for example, appear quite different. Even phonologically, the resemblance should not be pushed too far – for example, Sindarin does not have the famous and distinctive Welsh lateral *l* as in "Llanelli" – and its word stress pattern is quite different.

However, Tolkien was obviously acquainted with Welsh literary culture, and certainly there are evident connections between his perceptions of Elvish concerns and certain themes which occur in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Welsh poetry. One of these is the theme of the "Looney" (the original title of the poem which eventually became "The Sea-bell"), which crops up frequently in the work of Tolkien's Welsh contemporaries (though the treatment is extremely varied, and never exactly recalls Tolkien's). Among the most notable of these poems is T.H. Parry-Williams's satirical *Dic Aberdaron*, which takes an ironic look at a notorious Liverpool Welsh eccentric of the nineteenth century, a bachelor who lived in poverty surrounded by cats, shunned by "the publicans and sinners of the dock", who devoted his time to learning one language after another – and never used any of them. But, as the poet says,

Os ffolodd ar fodio geiriadur a mwytho cath,

Chware-teg i Dic – nid yw pawb yn gwirioni'r un fath.

(If he played the fool in soaking up dictionaries and stroking cats, fair play to Dic – not everybody is stupid in that way[6]).

W.J. Gruffydd is another case. In his gorgeously romantic *Y Tlawd Hwn* ("This Pauper") he celebrates the man with a private vision that cut him off from the world, so that he saw beauty where his fellows called down God's curse on an unclean world, and refused their

paths to heaven for the imperceptible music of magic pipes and the buzzing of Arawn's bees in the vineyards under the walls of the legendary Caer Siddi:

A chyn cael bedd cadd eistedd wrth y gwleddoedd

A llesmair wrando anweledig gôr

Adar Rhiannon yn y perl gynteddoedd

Sy'n agor ar yr hen anghofus fôr.

(And before he finds his grave, he will get to sit at the banquets and listen enthralled to the invisible choir of the Birds of Rhiannon in the pearl embrasures that open on the old forgetful sea.)

But that is not Gruffydd's only vision. He also tells of the dreary life of Gwladys Rhys, eldest daughter of the Rev. Thomas Rhys, Minister of Horeb Chapel, with the wind moaning in the pines around the house, day and night enduring her father's cold dullness and her mother's unending talk of services, the chapel committee, prayer meetings, sewing circle and the North Wales Women's Temperance Association:

Pa beth oedd im i'w wneuthur? ... Pa beth

Ond mynych flin ddyheu, a diflas droi

Fy llygaid draw ac yma dros y waun,

A chodi'r bore i ddymuno nos,

A throsi drwy'r nos hir, dan ddisgwyl bore?

(What was there for me to do? ... What but constant dull yearning, and drearily casting my eyes back and forth over the moor, rising in the morning longing for night, and tossing through a long night awaiting morning?)

But one day Someone came towards the house, and she felt Something strange in her heart – the breath of a pleasant breeze from far-off lands; so she set out through the snow, when the wind was moaning in the pines, even though it was Committee and sewing night ....

Am hynny, deithiwr, yma 'rwyf yn gorwedd

Wrth dalcen Capel Horeb – Gwladys Rhys,

Yn ddeg ar hugain oed ... yma

Yn nyffryn angof, am nad oedd y chwa

A glywswn unwaith o'r gororau pell

Ond sŵn y gwynt yn cwyno yn y pîn.

(Thus, wayfarer, here I lie by Horeb Chapel – Gwladys Rhys, aged thirty ... here in oblivion's vale, for the breeze I heard once was not from

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[6] The full texts of this and other Welsh poems cited can be found in the *Oxford Book of Welsh Verse*.

far-off lands, but just the wind moaning in the pines.)

In these two poems taken together, there is a striking resemblance to the concerns Tolkien expresses variously in *Beorhtnoth*, in *Niggle*, and above all in *Smith* – although it must be said that not even *Smith* matches the bleak disillusion of *Gwladys Rhys*.

One theme in particular is most striking in its applicability to Tolkien's world – the cultured Welsh-speaker's immediate and inescapable sensation of the ultimate transience of human culture, as expressed most memorably in Waldo Williams's *Cofio* (Remembering):

> *Un funud fach cyn elo'r haul i'w orwel,*
> *Un funud fwyn cyn delo'r hwyr i'w hynt,*
> *I gofio am y pethau angofiedig*
> *Ar goll yn awr yn llwch yr amser gynt.*

(Just one minute before the sun reaches the horizon, one quiet minute before the evening follows, to remember the forgotten things lost now in the dust of former time.)

Williams's justly famous poem reflects on the forgotten things of the human race, the gods no-one prays to any more (or even remembers), the words of vanished languages which were so confident on men's lips and so sweet to hear in the chattering of children, but nobody ever speaks them now, like waves breaking on a desert beach, like the sighing of the wind where there is no ear to hear .... This surely if anything was a theme close to Tolkien's heart.

The Welsh language has one of Europe's most vigorous living poetic traditions; to take just one instance, I cannot think of any poem in English over the past fourty years at least which combines raw emotion, virtuoso technique and subtle organisation as successfully as Eynion Evans's *Ynys*, which won the Chair at the National Eisteddfod in 1983 – and which is written in the complex metres which form part of a tradition going directly back to the sixth-century court poet Taliesin. So who are the cultured Welsh who can fully appreciate this brilliant poetry? About a quarter of a million people, and the number is declining. The Welsh-speaking Welsh, the *Cymry Cymraeg*, have long been resigned to the fact that despite remissions and even occasional reversals, their mother-tongue is in terminal decline. It will probably see even the youngest of them out, but in another century it will most likely be a language found only in the history books and used only in a few cultural reserves, socio-linguistic theme parks, preserved carefully for the benefit of tourists and students of linguistic anthropology. Already almost all even of the staunchest Cymry Cymraeg are effectively bilingual – finding a real monoglot Welsh-speaker under the age of 60 is quite a task – and the language as it is used in everyday communication is full not only of English loan-words[7] but even of English turns of phrase, and idioms literally translated.

Welsh poets and linguists have been fighting this long defeat ever since 1536, and over the last couple of generations have reluctantly come to acknowledge that against the powers which have now arisen (in the West as in the East) there is, ultimately, no victory. So if the Welsh do indeed resemble the Elves, it is not in any "feyness" or supposed mystic super-naturalism, but in the bleak knowledge of cultural decline, of transience, of fading – that they are the Grey People, the people of the Twilight, pausing for one minute before the sun sets to reflect that the Elves at least had the Havens. But what ship will bear the Welsh ever back? So their only recourse is a final defiant stand, making poetry in the full knowledge that in a few years it may be like the wind sighing where there is no ear to hear.

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[7] Most native Welsh speakers in everyday conversation have a tendency to use English for even the least technical of vocabulary: "Chi'n gweld, mae'r llath yn dod miwn drwy'r stainless steel pipes fan hyn ...." "Technical", in this context, often includes numbers, especially dates: "Pan own i'n grwtyn yn nineteen-thirty-five...."