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A RATTLESKULL GENIUS. THE MANY FACES OF IOLO MORGANWG (Cardiff: University of Wales, 2009 paperback, first published 2005) pp. xviii + 515.

Reviewed by Kenneth Johnston

This remarkable volume of essays should be approached cautiously, like its subject. Who is Iolo Morganwg? Well may you ask, if you are not Welsh. (If you are, you already know.) The intention of this volume, the bellwether of several other monographs and editions that have already appeared, is to validate the claims of Iolo Morganwg (1747-1826), to be counted one of the most important founders of Welsh culture (language, literature, architecture, archaeology, folklore and more) in its established modern form. This is a tall order, but the opening arguments in the case are well made by the volume's twenty-one contributors. Still, there are several hurdles to be surmounted by the uninformed general reader.

The name, for starters. Born Edward Williams, he took the name Iolo Morganwg *ca*. 1790 to highlight his self-claimed Welsh bardic lineage. And since there are thousands of Edward Williamses in Wales, but only one Iolo, it is as well to honor his self-recreation. (It seems to be scholarly convention to refer to him by his first name.) It means, Iolo from Glamorgan—the province or shire extending north from Cardiff.

But already I feel ahead of myself, if not behind-hand. For most readers of this on-line review, nominally concerned with nineteenth-century British and American writers, neither Edward Williams or Iolo Morganwg will be a familiar name. Iolo's place in English literature is

considered by just three of the book's contributors: Mary-Ann Constantine, Damian Walford Davies and Jon Mee. They examine the literary debts and associations of Iolo's one significant English-language publication, *Poems, Lyrical and Pastoral* of 1794. Davies and Mee show close literary parallels between Wordsworth, Coleridge, Blake and Morganwg. His 1794 volume's entire project may be said to anticipate significantly Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* of four years later, especially its anti-Godwinian notes, reminding us once again how "belated" Wordsworth was. It also shares many qualities with Blake's *Poetical Sketches* of 1783, and it is highly possible that he and Blake met each other while Iolo was in London. In these three essays and others *passim.*, good parallels are established between Iolo and Blake, Burns, Clare, Yearsely and other ostensibly "primitivist" poets. Constantine is especially good at showing how the volume of 1794 is less interesting than it might have been, as Iolo deferred to his editors' and subscribers' more conventional tastes, substituting standard English poetic diction (Shenstone, Collins and Thomson) for his more concrete original drafts.

But this is not the half of it. Iolo's venture into London publishing circles was not a success, though for a brief heady time he was in the thick of things there, especially through the good offices of the admirable Joseph Johnson, mentor to many other struggling marginal writers, including Mary Wollstonecraft and the young Wordsworth. Iolo was active in celebrations at the Crown & Anchor pub following the acquittal of the defendants in the 1794 Treason Trials, having raised money, composed odes and made charitable family visits on their behalf while they were awaiting trial. For this, he became "a person of interest" to the government, and was questioned and warned about his activism. If his letters had been opened (as was common), they would have provided the government with much stronger grounds for prosecution than they had from informants about Coleridge and Wordsworth. Several of his friends did jail time for

intemperate remarks expressing their hopes for Wales in the new terms provided by the French revolution. My own interest in Iolo derives from this brief appearance on the broader canvas of British history in the 1790s, since he is an excellent example of what I call the "unusual suspects" or "lost generation" of the 1790s: young liberal writers who saw in the "dawn" of the French Revolution, and the renewed stimulus to parliamentary reform it provoked in England, a chance to dedicate their own careers to wider visions of human possibility than those on offer in Hanoverian England. But they were slapped down. First by Pitt's "Reign of Terror"—the system of spies and treason trials set up between 1792-95—and then by its hegemonic "overflow" to the end of the decade—of which the visit of the Home Office's "Spy Nozy" to Wordsworth and Coleridge in Somerset in 1797 was but a late farcical echo.

Iolo did not recover like Wordsworth and Coleridge. He disappeared into Wales and Welshness—though it is worth remembering, as Damian Davies reminds us, that Wales was an important venue in the birth-scenes of British Romanticism, when we think of Tintern Abbey, and the wishful effort of the leading on-the-run radical, John Thelwall, to establish a sort of literary "triumvirate" there with his quondam friends Coleridge and Wordsworth. When establishing their ideal Pantisocracy on the Susquehanna River in Pennsylvania began to seem impracticable, Southey and Coleridge proposed Wales as their fall-back position. Significantly, Wales provides a temporary refuge for Godwin's Caleb Williams in *Things as They Are* (also 1794), perhaps, along with Wordsworth's much-neglected Solitary of 1814, the most important fictional representation of all these men-on-the-run of the 1790s.

But Wales was the making of Iolo Morganwg. And, to the extent we accept the arguments proposed in this many-faceted volume, he was to an important degree the making of it. Here we enter into the deeper waters of this book's significance and of the claims it makes for

its prime subject. For Iolo was a forger, Iolo was fraud. By the early twentieth century, it had been indisputably established that many of the "original" manuscripts of the early Welsh bards he claimed to have discovered were his own creation, clever imitations of the few authentic ones then known—some of which were indeed discovered or preserved by him. James Macpherson's Ossian and Thomas Chatterton's Rowley are not a patch on the many-splendored cloak of deception Iolo wove round his countrymen, an imposition that lasted—though there were always doubters—nearly a century. At the personal creative level, Geraint Jenkins probably has the best measure of his man when he says "he simply could not resist tinkering with transcripts, intruding bogus data, rewriting unattractive or tedious passages and reconstructing narratives." (21) Yet the twenty-one authors of this book are putting their considerable personal and institutional credentials on the line to recuperate his reputation. Not to dispute the forgeries, but to argue that they, along with Iolo's many other pursuits, give him claim to be one of the founding cultural fathers of a modern Wales then emergent from centuries of oppression, neglect, ignorance and—to use the cant social science word—massive under-development.

To the extent that the authors, in this and other volumes in the series, can make good on their claims, Iolo Morganwg's contributions to the established independence of Welsh language and literature constitute a heroic act of Romantic creativity of a scope and significance that could stand comparison with the complete *oeuvre* of William Blake. Which is to say that this book *is* appropriate for students of Romanticism, but of the Romantic imagination construed at its furthest stretches of cultural work, including much more than literature alone. Hence the bearing of the book's serial super-title: *Iolo Morganwg and the Romantic Tradition in Wales*. (There is also a website of the same name.) Put in another, slightly different way, the claim of *Rattleskull Genius* is that the modern recovery of Wales is an act of Romantic creation, and that Iolo

Morganwg has strong claims to be placed at the forefront of the many individuals who embodied and enacted those strokes of genius. Or, yet again, that this creation of Wales is an act of "strong" Romanticism, in the terminology of Harold Bloom's "anxiety of influence," a Romanticism that subsumes and transfers the "weak" lower-case romanticism with which Wales has been long, too long, associated: the bardic-druidic mumbo-jumbo of wands and wizards and moonlight, whose never-ending popularity is still reincarnated with great success in such phenomena as *The Lord of the Rings* in all its forms.

Perhaps I have over-stated this, but these are the stakes, and the authors are persons of considerable academic authority. Seven are current or past faculty or staff members at campuses of the University of Wales, four are or have been administrators or staff members of the National Library of Wales, two are on the staffs of the Welsh National Assembly and its Historical Monuments Commission. Only two are from outside Wales, and they are faculty at Oxford; only one is without institutional affiliation. The core group are five members of the University of Wales Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies, of which Geraint Jenkin's, the volume's editor, is the director.

Hence one finds oneself, here, in the midst of a national cultural polemic, even though the authors are scrupulously careful in their scholarship and arguments. One would like to see a countering view of Iolo, though one can hardly expect to find it in this context. For example, who are the other claimants to his reputation? On the evidence of this volume, Wales was and continues to be contested ground. Even under its own chieftains and kings, from the sixth to the thirteenth centuries, it was rarely unified, and the fragmentation got worse (by design) after its various incorporations (1542, 1707, 1801) as England's first colony. Only in 1993 was its ancient Celtic language established as the national tongue, and in 1999 it won its own

independent (on most matters) National Assembly. Internecine strife was always rife, and Iolo contributed as much to its divisiveness as he did to its unity. Like many from south Wales, he viewed the north with suspicion (heartily returned from the other direction), and he never failed to advance the primary cultural claims of his own province of Glamorgan—or, when pressed, of his own neighborhood therein, the Vale of Glamorgan. Since all Wales is the size of the state of Massachusetts, and Glamorgan half the size of Rhode Island, it is not unfair to say that we are often dealing, here, with literally parochial concerns. (But, not to engage in mere size-ism, the island of Manhattan is smaller than them all.) And the cultural debates are far from over: vast stretches of Iolo Morganwg's huge collections of manuscripts, notes, editions, drafts and what-nots are only now being cataloged in the Welsh National Library.

All that said, there are many things to be learned here. Fascinating if sometimes recondite topics include Welsh language and poetry, dialects and metrics, architecture, masonry and stone carving, religious disputes (Iolo was a radical Unitarian standing against the new tide of Methodism), traditional Welsh music, slavery and colonialism (Iolo's brothers had plantations in Jamaica), feminism and sexism, opium addiction and Iolo's often-fraught relations with other pioneers in the establishment of a modern independent Welsh culture like Owain Myfyr, Edward Davies and William Owen Pughe. Willy-nilly, the contributors to the volume themselves are continuing these efforts.

But the core of the book is the national cultural status of Iolo Morganwg. Can he be rehabilitated as an acceptable founding father? It is universally accepted now that Iolo forged many supposedly ancient documents of Welsh verse, especially those he attributed to Dafydd ap Gwilym (*fl.* 1340-1370), the poet who, somewhat like Shakespeare and Goethe, created a suppler new form of his native language out of the rigidified traditions of its old strict-meter forms.

However, it is also widely accepted that Iolo's forgeries are very good, indeed excellent, by and large indistinguishable from the original. A plagiarist presents others' work as his own; a forger presents his own work as someone else's. What did Iolo gain by his dedicated, learned and expert forgeries? Little or nothing for himself (he was not forging checks), other than his cherished reputation as a chief locator and transcriber and editor of ancient (say, twelfth to sixteenth century) Welsh texts—which was also true, since he preserved many that were authentic. For Iolo, to write in English would gain him little attention, as his ill-fated 1794 volume proved. And writing in Welsh even less, except in his home communities—keeping in mind that the Welsh language was being kept and driven into obscurity by English policy. But if he wrote in Welsh *as if* he were Dafydd or others of the "Renaissance" bards, he could gain covert acclaim for himself while at the same time advancing the reputation and prestige of his country's literature. This in a way is a version of the challenge facing international writers today who choose to write in English rather than their native languages, such as V.S. Naipaul, Chinua Achebe and a host of others. Hence it could be said that Iolo Morganwg did much to raise the level of understanding of Welsh poetry among his countrymen by submerging his own identity into that of his literary precursors. As if someone were to claim to have discovered the missing *Canterbury Tales*, and get the world to accept the imitations as authentic for over a century.

This would be literary forging of a very high order, entailing craft and knowledge and a degree of genius far beyond that of any plagiarist. And yet it is immoral, especially to Welshmen trying to recover and re-establish their lost culture, often against the sneering condescension of their English masters and neighbors, one of whose hoariest prejudices is against Welsh duplicity ("Taffy was a Welshman, Taffy was a thief"). The lies had to be exposed.

But when we consider the *kind* of poetry Iolo was forging—imitating—the nature of the

fraud dwindles further. For he was not forging documents and attributing them to an individual genius such as Geoffrey Chaucer. Rather, he was imitating a poetry which *in its own practice* was ritualistic, imitative and communal. That's what the old bards did: they copied each other endlessly, making small variations on standard themes, and in verse forms of amazing complexity that took years of tutelage and examination to master. (Dafydd ap Gwilym's new "free" verse form, the *cywydd*, is described as a composition of 60-70 lines, in rhymed couplets of seven syllables per line, one ending stressed, the other unstressed, and each line employing the linguistic devices of *cynghanedd*. One can only imagine the complexity of the older strict-meter forms he was replacing.) And then they held contests, frequently, at different venues round the country, round the year. And awarded prizes and grades of achievement to each other, performing the winning entries individually and *en masse*, as the Welsh still do, in their famed choral concerts, above all their annual national arts festival, the *eisteddfod*. (Check it out: www.eisteddfod.org.uk.)

So if Iolo was a forger, he was in a sense part of a company of forgers, several centuries after the fact, but still requiring all the skill and craft of the old masters. In a way, his achievement was more impressive, for he had to do it on his own, by and large.

And if we look at this from the other direction, with post-modern eyes, his achievement becomes even more interesting. His inter-textual *jouissance* is super-human. He reverenced the old texts by manhandling them with loving care; making them sit up and beg for more. Collage, inter-cutting, made-up sequels and "prequels"—there is hardly a recipe in the post-modern textual *pharmacopeia* that he didn't try. He was a consummate trickster as well as a shameless tricker. And yet he was a quite poorly educated stone mason by trade, who learned everything that he knew on his own, on the fly, on the road, at night and between jobs. He was, in short, a

man who did Wales proud, in full knowledge that Wales would not be proud of him, if it knew. Or, from "our" perspective (non-Welsh English-language Romanticists), he was a Romantic genius of a kind and in the company of those other once-marginal figures, Robert Burns, William Blake, John Clare, Anne Yearsley, William Drennan and many others who are only now emerging into the light of common day. At the very least, "Iolo's example shows us that fakes can be at least as exciting and puzzling as true articles." (68: R.J. W. Evans)

Some of this search for—or manufacture of—deep cultural roots parallels the contemporary British reform movement's search for political precedents for a more representative parliament, in the semi-legendary Anglo-Saxon form of community governance, the *witenagemot.* This road seeking freedom was different from the Paineite rational approach, which deduced civil and individual rights from the "nature" of man, in the eighteenth-century tradition of Locke and Montesquieu (for example, "we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights"). To the extent that the Welsh could uncover and preserve the nation *they had once been*, they had a basis on which to build the nation they wished to be. Some of this searching was legitimately scientific, based on archaeological findings and manuscript evidence, to both of which Iolo contributed as much as any other Welshman of his time. But a lot of it was theoretical wishful thinking, in its determination to go "all the way down" to an indivisible bedrock of origins. Here we find such propositions as that the Welsh descended from one of the" lost tribes" of Israel, or, in another direction, that they had some "lost" tribes of their own, among the Indians of North America—centered on the unlikely hamlet of what is now Paducah, Kentucky. This was the "Madoc" craze, of which Robert Southey's poem of the same title may be the most significant cultural result—which is not saying a lot.

Along with this mania for origin-ality came the assumption that the preserved (or forged) words of these founding fathers were, not only authentic, but absolutely *true*. Hence there is in the bardic-druidic "tradition" that Iolo did much to popularize a strong connection between poetic beauty and scientific (or human) truth, as in his "Vision written in an ancient Bardic circle near Merthyr Tidvil":

> They [the bards] stand beside yon central stone,
>
> These first to British Isle were known
>
> Still offic'd, as of days of yore
>
> Conservators of bardic lore.
>
> To these of ancient right belong
>
> Truth's oral tale, the skill of song. (226)

Or, as he put it in another way: "the most authentic histories of the *Welsh* are in *verse*, and all their *fabulous* writings in *prose*." (192) He explicitly combined the political and the cultural searches for origins, finding in druidic-bardism anticipations of the "new philosophies, new politics and new religions" of Cromwell's republicanism and the French revolution (438).

There is indeed, in old strict-meter Welsh poetry of the Middle Ages a strong educative, mnemonic strain (as in many ancient poetic traditions), some of it political and social (lineages of kings and heroes), but also containing geographic, agricultural and other forms of useful knowledge. "Welsh triads" (with which every contributor to this volume assumes the whole world is familiar) are learning devices like this, and could be assembled in ways that encouraged

individual rhetorical inventiveness. For example: "Three things not easily restrained: the flow of a torrent, the flight of an arrow, and the tongue of a fool." The earliest extant collection of these dates from the 13th century. Like *haiku* and limericks, these set forms lend themselves not only to easy memorization but also to variation and individual riffs—very much the sort of thing that, as Jenkins says, Iolo loved and could not resist. (For example: "Three things not to be missed in Brussels, the medieval marketplace, the ancient guildhall, and the 6 p.m. train to Paris.")

I have over-stressed the thesis of the book to highlight its daring, something that most of its contributors are loath to do. They mostly favor more careful statements of their claims. Such as Geraint Jenkins saying that the way in which Iolo "succeeded in recreating and reinventing what he reckoned to be a more relevant, meaningful and heroic version of the past is one of the most extraordinary achievements in the entire cultural history of Wales." (22) Or, still more modestly, Moira Dearnley: "he undoubtedly deserves some recognition as a forerunner of the band of scholars who have since undertaken the 'search after truth' in respect of Iolo's writings." (442) Or Prys Morgan acknowledging that Iolo "was clearly only one of an army" of people writing about Wales in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but that "whereas most of them tended to write monographs about single aspects of Welsh history, Iolo perceived all the aspects as part of a whole, a colourful popular pageant stretching back to Celtic 'Ancient Britain' which, at that time, was the ultimate limit of knowable history." (268) On a more relativistic scale, Iolo's various projects may be seen as "one of many Romantic revivals among the smaller nations of late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe," such as Czechoslovakia and Romania. (120) But the wider, stronger claims for his significance deserve attention (including contestation), if he is to take a proper place in our critical conversations as a Romantic genius

worthy to be discussed in the same breath and at the same level as Blake, Burns and Clare. In another register, the many "faces" or facets of his genius, as they concern what might be called the cultural constitution of Wales, make him a national cultural critic of a stature similar to Coleridge's, despite the vast differences in the lexicon of their polemical rhetoric.

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