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THE CULTURE OF WALES

ROYAL CHARTER FOR SOCIETY OF CYMMRODORION

From A Special Correspondent

The Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion has for its aim the promotion in every way of the study, history, practice, and development of literature, the arts, and science in so far as they are of special interest to the Welsh people. To-day is, in a ceremonial sense, the most important in its long existence, for not only is it celebrating at a reception this evening, held by royal permission in St. James's Palace, the bicentenary of its original foundation, but also its president, Sir Harold Idris Bell, is to receive from the hands of Princess Elizabeth, acting on behalf of the King, the grant of a Charter of Incorporation.

If, however, the society has a history of two centuries behind it, that history is not without its breaks and its shifts of impulse. It was in September, 1751, under the patronage of Frederick, Prince of Wales, that the society was established. The prime mover, and first president, was Richard Morris, of Anglesey, chief clerk of foreign accounts in the Navy Office, a man who rendered great service to Wales by his supervision of the Welsh texts of the Bible and Prayer Book. His brother, the poet and antiquary Lewis Morris, suggested the name Cymmrodorion, meaning "the original inhabitants."

There was also a "Chief President," an office held first by William Vaughan, of Cors-y-gedol, M.P. for Merioneth and patron of Welsh literature, who was later

succeeded by Sir Watkin Williams Wynn, fourth baronet, of Wynnstay, the friend of Reynolds and Garrick. Originally membership was confined to London Welshmen, but there were "corresponding members" in Wales, among whom were the poets Goronwy Owen and William Wynn, Evan Evans, the antiquary and correspondent of Thomas Gray, and Thomas Pennant, traveller, antiquary, and naturalist.

EARLY ACTIVITIES

Among the Cymmrodorion Society's chief activities during its first years were the promotion of religious services in Welsh and of Welsh education in London. Its early meetings were held in the London Stone Tavern and its motto was "Undeb a Brawdgarwch" ("Unity and Brotherly Love"). It supported the Most Honourable and Loyal Society of Antient Britons, a body founded in 1715, both in the relief of the Welsh poor in London and in the management of the Welsh Charity School for poor London Welsh children. This has developed into the Welsh Girls' School, an independent girls' public school at Ashford in Middlesex, where the school building was opened in 1857 by the Prince Consort, and the Society is still represented on its board of governors.

The school was, indeed, among the society's principal interests during its

early period. The schoolhouse, first in Clerkenwell Green and later in Gray's Inn Road, was used as the society's meeting place, the master was *ex officio* its clerk, and its museum and library were housed at the school which, in fact, succeeded to them when in 1787 the society temporarily came to an end. A fine banner of the society, discovered recently in a chest in the school chapel, apparently belongs to this first period. The books from the early library are now in the National Library of Wales at Aberystwyth.

Little direct publishing was done by the society in this period, and the only book of the time bearing its imprint is the Welsh Prayer Book of 1770. But several volumes of Welsh poetry by Goronwy Owen, Lewis Morris, and others were issued by publishers associated with the society, generous support was given to the revised Welsh Bible of 1752, and a special levy was devoted to the general encouragement of Welsh books.

THE SECOND PHASE

Richard Morris died in 1779 and the society then declined until, in 1787, it was dissolved. Its last assistant secretary, Owen Jones, known as Owain Myfyr, had, however, before then founded the Gwyneddigion Society, which became in fact, though not in name, a continuation of the first Cymmrodorion. Owain Myfyr, with the help of William Owen Pughe, in 1789 printed for the first time the poems of Dafydd ap Gwilym; and with another member of the Gwyneddigion, Edward Williams, whose Bardic name was Iolo Morganwg, he published between 1801 and 1807 the three volumes of the "Myvyrian Archæology," a great corpus of ancient Welsh poetry and prose.

Iolo Morganwg, a leading personality of the society in this phase, is still one of the most controversial figures in Welsh scholarship. He belonged to the eighteenth-century tradition which confused romantic invention with antiquarianism, and is believed, by many modern students of the subject, himself to have written certain of the poems attributed to Dafydd ap Gwilym (and those not the worst) and to have invented the whole Gorsedd ritual in order to uphold the standing of the South Wales bards at a time at which North Welsh scholarship was too much in the ascendant for his own liking as a Glamorgan man. It is from this period, and from the Eisteddfodau organized and financed

by the Gwyneddigion, and held in Wales from 1789, that the National Eisteddfod of Wales, as it exists to-day, directly derives.

The Gwyneddigion kept the torch of Welsh culture alight, and with its blessing, on June 24, 1820, the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion was refounded. The patron was the Prince Regent, and the president was Sir Watkin Williams Wynn, fifth baronet and son of the society's former "Chief President." Its aims were now chiefly antiquarian, and included the collecting and editing of old Welsh manuscripts, the study of the Celtic languages, and research into Welsh customs and traditions. Three volumes of *Transactions*, an edition of the works of Lewis Glyn Cothi, and Robert Williams's *Eminent Welshmen*, were published. The society met usually at the Freemasons' Tavern, which thus became the place whence sprang many important Welsh educational movements of the nineteenth century, especially that which led to the establishment of the University College of Wales at Aberystwyth.

In spite of all this, the revived society lasted only until 1843, when its important collection of manuscripts was deposited at the British Museum. In the very year of its second demise, however, the Cymmrodorion had realized one long-cherished ambition by the opening of a Welsh church in Ely Place. A gap of thirty years then followed, until on November 10, 1873, at a meeting held once again at the Freemasons' Tavern the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion was reconstituted. Once again, too, the president chosen was Sir Watkin Williams Wynn, this time the sixth baronet.

One of the motives prompting the revival was the need to organize some central body to reform and control the National Eisteddfod. In 1880, under the auspices of the society, the National Eisteddfod Association, now the National Eisteddfod Council, was formed. The society maintains its connexion with the Eisteddfod by holding a meeting of its members at each National Eisteddfod.

The resurrection of 1873 has proved effective and lasting. The society's learned journal, *Y Cymmrodor*, has appeared regularly since 1877, and since 1892 there has been an offshoot from it, the *Transactions*, for printing the comparatively short papers actually read at meetings, leaving the parent journal to print the longer contributions. In 1889 the *Cymmrodorion Record Series* began, and has since included many volumes of Welsh records. Thus the society has provided means of publication for a very wide range of Welsh scholarship. Much of the society's standing has been due to the work of the late Sir Vincent Evans, secretary from 1887 to his death in 1934, but it is under the direction of his successor, Sir John Cecil-Williams, that the recent

extraordinary rise in membership—from 750 in 1939 to 2,300 now—has taken place.

REFORMS IN EDUCATION

Another consideration leading to the re-establishment of the society in 1873 was the need to direct and coordinate Welsh attempts at educational and social reform. The plan adopted was in most cases the same—careful discussion of the subject at its meetings in the light of papers read by experts, followed by wider circulation, at the annual Eisteddfod meeting, of the suggestions made. Several times a national convention was called, or a specific body established, to further a particular aim.

In this way the project of a University of Wales was set going at a Cymmrodorion meeting in 1877 and eventually realized in 1893. The society also had a main hand in promoting the Welsh Intermediate Education Act of 1889, and in introducing the teaching of the Welsh language in Welsh schools. Again, the need of Wales for a National Library and a National Museum was first discussed at a Cymmrodorion meeting as long ago as 1876.

In 1877 the society decided to award a Cymmrodorion Medal to persons of outstanding eminence for their services to Wales. This distinction is rarely conferred and is held in high esteem and Princess Elizabeth has consented to accept it to-day.

Among the society's recent schemes is one of great importance which is approaching completion—the compilation and publication of *The Cymmrodorion Dictionary of Welsh National Biography*, a work first suggested by the late Sir John Edward Lloyd at a meeting of the society in 1938. Its preparation began almost immediately under Sir John Lloyd as

consulting editor, Professor R. T. Jenkins as editor, and (after the death of the former) Sir William Llewelyn Davies, Librarian of the National Library of Wales, as associate-editor. This book will appear in both Welsh and English, each edition being a volume of some 1,000 pages containing about 5,000 entries. The Welsh edition is likely to be published very soon, and the English edition will, it is hoped, follow in 1954. Naturally this undertaking is entailing heavy expense, but the society, besides contributing £1,000 from its own comparatively small funds, has raised from outside sources more than £20,000 to finance the issue of what is likely to prove an internationally valuable work of reference.

The society has mustered and focused the efforts of Welshmen everywhere to benefit their country and has proved a unifying and guiding force in the cultural life of Wales. The report of the Departmental Committee on Welsh Education summarized its efforts in these words: "Some of the most valuable contributions on Welsh matters have been made to the world through this society."

To-day's royal grant of a Charter is thus made to a learned society which, like several other such bodies in this island, has its origins in the eighteenth century, that century which did so much towards the organization of British thought and culture—as, for example, the Society of Antiquaries, the Linnean Society, the Royal Academy, and the Royal Botanic Gardens may in their various spheres bear witness. Among such coevals the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion stands to-day as vigorously active as at any time in its history in the cause of the ancient people for whom, and for whose still living language and distinctive way of life, it speaks.