

*From Myrddin to Merlin and Back Again**

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Two mythic figures emerged from early Celtic Britain and have survived to the present on an international basis, Arthur and Myrddin. Their names and roles have altered – Arthur was not a king in Welsh, but *pen teyrnedd*, chief of the princes, and he was much changed later on. Even more varied is Myrddin: his name becomes Merlin and his role develops remarkably, in relation to the meaning and function of knowledge *vis à vis* power in varying periods.¹ Unlike Arthur, Myrddin-Merlin is often re-created, across place and time, as Welsh, or sometimes just as Celtic, and it is possible to read the many variations of his role and identity as external representations of the varying meaning of Welshness across time and across many locations and genres.

Welsh Myrddin

Myrddin is first seen in early Welsh poetry: Alfred Jarman has established that some elements of five medieval poems that mention Myrddin were recorded in writing by about 1000.² But Myrddin in Welsh has two formations: the first comes from Cumbria, which as its name suggests was home to the Cymry before the Anglo-Saxon advance to the west. References in the poems and elsewhere speak of the ur-Myrddin as a Cumbrian noble who was traumatised in the historical battle of Arfderydd, fought in about 573 just north of Carlisle.³ In the series of stanzas from the Black Book of Carmarthen which invoke the

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¹ This is the theme of my forthcoming book, *Merlin: Knowledge and Power* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009).

² See A. O. H. Jarman, *The Legend of Merlin* (Cardiff, 1960, revised edn. 1976); ‘Rhagmadroddiad’, in A. O. H. Jarman (ed.), *Llyfr Du Caerfyrddin* (Caerdydd, 1982), xiii-lxxii; and ‘The Merlin legend and the Welsh tradition of prophecy’, in B. Roberts et al. (eds), *The Arthur of the Welsh* (Cardiff, 1991), 117-45.

³ The poems have not been edited together nor are all yet fully annotated and glossed. That quoted here, ‘Apple Tree’, together with ‘Myrddin and Taliesin’ and ‘Little Pig’, are in Jarman, *Llyfr Du Caerfyrddin*. Comment on and translations of the Myrddin poems can be found in J. K. Bollard, ‘Myrddin in Early Welsh Tradition’, in P. Goodrich (ed.), *The Romance of Merlin* (New York, 1990), 13-54. The translation given here is more literal and closer to the original. The poem ‘Afallen’ (‘Apple-Tree’) is often called ‘Afallennau’, ‘Apple-trees’, because a series of stanzas starts with the word ‘Afallen’: but only one tree is discussed throughout, and the plural title is misleading. ‘Oian’ or ‘Hoian’ (‘Little Pig’) is similarly often called ‘Oianau’ ‘Little Pigs’.

'Afallen', 'Apple Tree', he expresses his dismay and his sense of exile, physical and emotional:

Awallen peren a tif in llanerch.
y hangert ae hargel rac riev Ryderch.
amsathir in y bon maon yn y chilch.
Oet aelav vtvv dulloet diheueirch.

Nu nym car i guendit ac nim eneirch.
Oef kas gan gwassauc guaessaf Rydirch.
Ryrewineis y mab ae merch.
Aghev a duc paup pa rac nam kyueirch.
A guydi guendolev nep riev im peirch.
Nym gogaun guarvy. Nym goffvy gorterch.
Ac igueith arywderit oet eur wy gorthorch.
Kin buyf aelaw hetiv gan eiliv eleirch. (35-46)

Sweet apple tree, growing in a glade,
a treasure hidden from the lords of Rhydderch.
With a crowd round its base, a host around it,
a delight to them, brave warriors.

Now Gwenddydd loves me not, nor welcomes me,
and I am hated by Gwasawg, Rhydderch's ally.
I have destroyed her son and daughter,
death takes everyone; why does he not welcome me?

After Gwenddolau, no lords revere me,
no sport delights me, no lover seeks me out.
In the battle of Arfderydd, my torque was gold,
today I am no treasure to a swan-like girl.

It appears that his lord was Gwenddolau, now dead, and that Gwenddydd was Myrddin's sister; he participated in the slaughter at Arfderydd (c. 573 CE) and is now, like the later Irish figure Suibhne, a wretched exile, close to nature, but estranged from his past heroic world. He is rich only in natural wisdom. Other texts elaborate this figure into a critic of heroic Welsh society, and a trickster. One tells how he attended the wedding of his former wife riding a stag behind a line of animals. When the bridegroom appeared he wrenched off the stag's antlers and threw them through his rival's body.⁴ Later periods will re-use some of this material, notably the German Romantics and their successors,

⁴ The wedding visit story is told by Geoffrey of Monmouth in his 'Life of Merlin'. See B. Clarke (ed. and trans.), *Vita Merlini* (Cardiff, 1973).

but as the cultural material of the Old North, *yr Hen Ogledd*, was relocated to Wales, the knowledge of this second Myrddin was constructed not as criticism of Cumbrian and Cymric society, but as a prophecy of British defence against Saxon invasions. The knowledge function of Myrddin/Merlin will continuously be appropriated and re-appropriated by varying versions of power.

In the Welsh Myrddin poems, and even as a frame around the Cumbrian core of 'Afallen', Myrddin's knowledge now drives political prophecy against the power of the Germanic invaders:

goruolet y gimry goruaur gadev.
In amuin kyminaud clefytaud clev.
Aer o saesson ar onn verve.
A guarwyaur pelre ac ev pennev.
A mi dysgogonaf e gwir heb gev.
Dyrchafaud maban in advan y dehev. (7-12)

Rejoicing to the Welsh, very great battles,
quick swords defending Cyminod,
death to the Saxons on ashen spears
and playing ball-games with their heads
and I will speak the truth without a lie,
a youth shall rise in the region of the South.

yny del kadwaladir oe kinadyl Rid Reon.
Kinan in y erbin ef kychwin ar saesson.
Kimry a orvit kein bid eu dragon.
Kaffaud paub y teithi. llauen vi bri brython.
Kenhittor kirn eluch. kathil hetuch a hinon. (84-9)

When Cadwaladr comes to his meeting at Rhydd Rheon,
Cynan before him advancing on Saxons,
the Welsh will prevail, splendid their prince,
all will gain their rights; glad the honour of the British,
horns of delight will be sounded, a song of peace and fair weather.

This Welsh Myrddin is of course the alleged source of Caerfyrddin, but the name really comes from what the Romans called Moridunum, the fort by the sea. The onomastic etymology is itself part of the relocation of Myrddin in medieval Welsh tradition as he was redefined as a poet, one of the alleged three *cynfeirdd*, or 'early poets', along with the probably historical Taliesin and Aneurin. As a mythic bard he will be deployed by Welsh poets in their own battle against the power of princes on behalf of their bardic knowledge and also,

including in the case of Owain Glyn Dŵr, as a visionary of future Welsh liberation.⁵ But the prophetic Myrddin had other roles, outside Wales.

Merlin and royalty: Britain

When Geoffrey of Monmouth set out in the 1130s to compose a *History of the Kings of Britain*,⁶ one purpose was to establish on behalf of the new Norman rulers of Britain the antiquity and grandeur of their possessions – and also to show how the Saxons had messed it all up: Geoffrey's Welshness was in the service of new masters, and so was Myrddin's. While this origin legend went back, like Virgil's *Aeneid*, to Troy, King Arthur was its summit, as noble as the French Charlemagne, and Geoffrey used Myrddin as the facilitator of Arthur. To do this Geoffrey condensed the Welsh prophetic Myrddin, obviously well-known to him, with the British Latin story found in the ninth-century *Historia Brittonum* (formerly known as by 'Nennius'), about a wonderful boy Ambrosius, or Emrys, who advised Vortigern. Geoffrey merged prophetic knowledge with helpful royal advice, and not only does the prophet give Vortigern the bad news, he also prophesies favourably for Uther Pendragon, Arthur's father, and provides other royal assistance, including organising Stonehenge as a memorial to British war dead and Uther's fathering of Arthur.

That is all he does in Geoffrey: he never meets Arthur, and just disappears after his conception. His sudden departure appears ideological, a containing response by power to the threat of knowledge: the shades of the royal prison-house close around the figure of knowledge. This kind of speaking absence will recur in the myth.

And of course Geoffrey changes the prophet's name – Emrys and Myrddin taken together become Merlin, presumably because the early Welsh spelling Merdin would give in Latin 'Merdinus', which in Latin would mean 'shitty'. But there may be more to the name. There usually is to names in Geoffrey. No evidence emerges that the name then meant the small bird of prey, the modern merlin. I suggest it meant a figure who was both bird, French *merle*, and fish, French *merlan*. When Geoffrey's Merlin knows the flying dragons are in a pool beneath Vortigern's unstable tower, it may be because they are his own family: he is closer to the wise animals, often birds and fish, of Welsh tradition than scholars have realised.

The British prophet has been brought very close to British royalty by Geoffrey and massively empowered with magical and practical skills. Those

⁵ For the poets' references to Myrddin, see R. Bromwich, *Trioedd Ynys Prydein*, 2nd edn. (Cardiff, 1978), 471-4; on political uses, see H. Fulton, 'Owain Glyn Dŵr and the Uses of Prophecy', *Studia Celtica* 39 (2005), 105-21.

⁶ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia Regum Britanniae*, vol. 1, *The Berne Manuscript*, ed. N. Wright (Cambridge, 1984); as *The History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. L. Thorpe (London, 1966). See also the recent edition and translation by M. Reeve (ed.) and N. Wright (trans.), *Geoffrey of Monmouth: History of the Kings of Britain* (Cambridge, 2007).

powers will be developed and distanced from their Celtic origin in the European Middle Ages, but Geoffrey also did something else with Merlin, representing more fully the complexity of Welsh tradition. In about 1150 he produced the *Vita Merlini*, 'The Life of Merlin', a long poem in fine Latin verse.⁷ This shows a full knowledge of the Cumbrian Myrddin tradition, and relocates it in Wales – Merlin is a prince of Dyfed. Geoffrey also knows the tricksterish tradition and tells a folkloric story. The queen is cross with Merlin, and tries to make a fool of him. She brings in a boy and asks Merlin to predict his death. He will fall from a horse. Then she brings in the same boy in disguise. Merlin predicts he will die in a tree. Lastly, the boy is disguised as a girl. 'Girl or not,' says Merlin, 'she will drown.' The queen exults at these apparent self-contradictions. But soon enough the boy falls from his horse, catches in a tree with his head under water and drowns: the threefold death. But Geoffrey goes well beyond tricksterish wisdom: Merlin is also a European scholar and with the younger Taliesin (tutored by Gildas) he debates at great length the wonders of the natural world, especially water-related (another link with *merlan*). Finally he asks his sister to build him what we would now call a research centre, and he even gains long-term funding – for the rest of his life, through seventy doors and seventy windows, he and his colleagues will study the stars.

Geoffrey was a canon at Oxford, already a centre of learning, and having let Merlin early on be a royal supporter, he now gives him more grandeur, more power for his knowledge, and a stronger contact with Welsh tradition. Both the tricksterism and the deep knowledge of Geoffrey's Merlin will recur: these distinctively Welsh elements will be redeployed in various international contexts, sometimes consciously looking back to Wales.

Merlin and royalty: France

In medieval France, the Merlin of Geoffrey's *History* was almost entirely just a royal adviser, because the political prophecies were ignored as being of no interest outside Britain. The French verse translation by Wace in the 1150s omitted them, and the later massive Vulgate Arthuriad in early thirteenth-century French prose developed Merlin as a grand vizier, especially in battles: Arthur spends most of his time fighting in France. The portrayal of Merlin as feudal royal counsellor has its own interest and its own conflicts, but they are to do with French politics, not any Welsh or British inheritance. A striking new element which has survived to the present is the notion that Merlin can transform himself in many ways – not disguise himself: there is no underlying identity, he is all these forms of knowledge versus power. The transformations are always challenging to feudal dignity – by becoming a peasant, a boy, an old man, even a stag, Merlin represents the ability of knowledge to challenge, even

⁷ See n. 4.

humiliate, the confidence of power. That concept goes back to the Cumbrian figure, probably transmitted through Geoffrey's *Vita*, and was unforgettably reformulated through Merlin's many transformations.

There are other Welsh links for French Arthurian Merlin. When Robert de Boron in about 1200 sought to amplify and seriously Christianise the enigmatic treatment of the Grail by Chrétien de Troyes in his *Perceval*, he used Merlin as his link.⁸ He is created by the devils as their version of Christ – a half-human, half-devil who will win back for them the souls that Christ harrowed out of hell. But his mother's devotion saves him for God, and he transmits to Uther – not Arthur – the information about the need to find the Holy Grail, the sacred chalice in which Christ's blood was caught by Joseph of Arimathea. Merlin then supervises the successful quest by Perceval (from north Wales), and he even survives the collapse of Arthur's world, ending up in a scholarly retreat as he had in the *Vita*. Robert's work is deeply Christian, but that too, I suggest, had Welsh links, perhaps through Brittany. I think he knew not only Geoffrey's *Vita* but the Welsh Latin saints' lives where a holy man always opposes and humiliates Arthur as a brutish secular lord. Robert saw the parallel between the tough Celtic saints and Geoffrey's Merlin: Arthur as the king whose world is criticised in the Grail story is effectively the same as the tyrant king of the Welsh saints' lives.

Later Grail writers rejected Robert's tricksterish half-devil Merlin for more orthodox communicators of the Christian message, just as they demoted the erring human Welsh Perceval (formerly Peredur) for the super-saintly French Galahad. But if the Celtic-originated Grail-*meister* was rejected, the continuing Merlin story in French did still preserve less challenging Celtic elements. Though most scholars now reject the wide-ranging Celtic-origin identifications of R. S. Loomis, Jessie Weston and others, it is still true that Arthurian romance was based on a narrative context that feudal western Europe adopted from the Celts it encountered and conquered. The Norman French both enjoyed the cultural riches of Wales, Cornwall and Brittany and also celebrated through that enjoyment their own imperial power, like the English relishing tea and curry.

More limited links with British tradition appear. Merlin consistently sees 'his master, Blaise' – his mother's confessor in Robert de Boron, and in the French prose stories the scribe who records all Merlin's activities. This is an intriguing reference to, and literary appropriation of, the historical Bleheris, or Bledfri in Welsh – genuinely a Caerfyrddin man – who was a famous oral storyteller. Some French scholars believe his name comes from the Breton word *bleizh*, cognate of Welsh *blaidd*, a wolf, and that Blaise is a version of Cumbrian

⁸ Robert de Boron, *Merlin and the Grail: Joseph of Arimathea, Merlin, Perceval*, trans. N. Bryant (Cambridge, 2001).

Myrddin's animal familiar.⁹ It is an attractive cross-species idea, but the reality is duller: the name *Bleheris* is just appropriated to the French (originally Armenian) St Blaise.

Similarly Celtic in pattern and misrecognition is Merlin's fate, the beautiful enchantress whose name ranges from Nimianne to Vivienne with all stops in between. Early Celtologists wanted to trace her name to the word *chwifleian*, found in the Myrddin poems, but it is apparently not a name at all, just a word for 'pale wanderer' – the also-suggested source in the name Rhiannon is even less likely. But she is still Welsh in a way: Vivian first appears in the French/Breton *Lancelot du Lac* and it is most likely that the Welsh saint's name Ninian, common in Brittany, was reread, probably through Breton, as female, and then misreading of the minims in gothic script led to the *v* forms.¹⁰ She is of course used to remove Merlin, the knowledge-rich and troublesome royal adviser, from the text – another kind of containment.

English medieval Merlin

Merlin the French grand vizier was returned to Britain in English in some fairly late medieval translations, including Malory's, but there he linked up with a surviving British tradition, not as prophet of Welsh aspirations, but as a distinctly English national authority. The first sight of this drastic appropriation – one which Arthur also underwent – is in a powerful and extensive poem from about 1190. Layamon wrote in the tradition of the Anglo-Saxon alliterative epic, but his Beowulf was Arthur. At the end, appropriation is clear:

Pa wes hit iwurþen þat Merlin seide whilen:
 þat weore unimete care of Arþures forþfare.
 Bruttes ileue yete þat he bon on liue,
 and wunnien in Aualun mid fairest alre aluen;

⁹ The Bretonist Hersart de la Villemarqué, in *Myrddhin ou l'Enchanteur Merlin* (Paris, 1862), 147, supported the 'wolf' idea, but added the Breton St Loup as being hybridly behind the name; recent pro-*bleizh* arguments are offered by P. Walter, *Merlin ou le Savoir du Monde* (Paris, 2000), 138, and R. Baudry, 'La Vita Merlini ou les Métamorphoses de Merlin', in D. Hüe (ed.), *Fils sans Père* (Orléans, 2000), 175-89, see 179. A summary of the pro-Bleddri position is given by the Welsh scholar Rachel Bromwich, 'First Transmission to England and France', in Roberts et al., *The Arthur of the Welsh*, 273-98, see especially 286-8.

¹⁰ On Rhiannon as the origin of Vivian see Sir John Rhys, *Studies in the Arthurian Legend* (Oxford, 1891), 284. The pioneer Celticist Skene thought *hwimleian* (also *chwifleian*) was a woman's name and de Villemarqué argued for a French development like 'Vivleian'. See W. F. Skene, *The Four Ancient Books of Wales*, 2 vols (Edinburgh, 1868), II, 2, 336-7: he quotes the view of Rev. Thomas Price (Carnhuanaw), *Literary Remains*, 2 vols (Llandovery and London, 1854-5), I, 144. Jarman sees it as merely a compound word translatable as 'pale wild wanderer' (*Llyfr Du Caerfyrddin*, Glossary, under *huimleian*, 151). It would seem Gaston Paris was right when he traced the source to the Celtic nature of the Ninian version of the name; see his 'Introduction', in G. Paris and J. Ulrich (eds), *Merlin: Roman en Prose du XIIIe Siècle*, 2 vols (Paris, 1886), I, i-lxxx, xlv, note 1.

and lokie eueere Bruttes yete whan ArÞure cumen liÞe.
 Nis nauer Þe mon iboren of nauer nane burde icoren
 Þe cunne of Þan soÞe of ArÞure sugen mare.
 Bute while wes an witeye Mærlin ihate;
 he bodede mid worde — his quiÞes weoren soÞe —
 Þat an Ar ur sculde yete cum Anglen to fulste.¹¹ (14288-97)

Then was it brought about what Merlin said before:
 there would be untold care for Arthur's departure.
 The Britons yet believe that he is alive
 and lives in Avalon with the fairest of all elves,
 Never a man born of never so fine a lady
 knows how to say more truth about Arthur.
 But once a wise man — Merlin he was called —
 prophesied in words his sayings were true
 that an Arthur would again come to help the English.

Layamon has re-worked history. The bitter conflict for control of Britain between Celtic residents and Germanic invaders is here reconstructed as a civil war, still bloody and bitter, but somehow a family affair, and the peaceful present is the result — with the English in charge, and enjoying the benefits of Celtic culture. This idea will recur again and again and Merlin often supervises this triumph of propaganda. Benedict Anderson has theorised this kind of national fiction as 'The Reassurance of Fratricide' in the revised version of his book *Imagined Communities*.¹² This forerunner of what Ned Thomas has aptly called 'contributionism' gains strength in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as first part-Welsh and then mostly Scottish royalty takes over England.¹³ Versions of fictional civil war go further: in *Arthur and Merlin*, an early fourteenth-century poem, the enemies that the now English Arthur fights in Britain are no longer Saxons but, amazingly, Saracens.

As godfather to English propaganda, Merlin does not have much role in the story, just some telling prophecies. This may be in part because his knowledge is essentially Celtic and so troublesome, but also because as royal rule becomes administrative, not personal decision-making, grand viziers have no role. But that does not mean the knowledge dries up: it is merely reconstructed, and its Welshness diluted, for a while at least.

¹¹ Layamon, *Layamon's Arthur: The Arthurian Section of Layamon's Brut*, ed. and trans. W. R. J. Barron and S. C. Weinberg (London, 1989).

¹² B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, rev. edn. (London, 1999), 199-203.

¹³ The 'contributionism' argument was offered by Ned Thomas in 'Images of Others', in J. Osmond (ed.), *The National Question Again: Welsh Political Identity in the 1980s* (Llandysul, 1985), 306-19, see especially 307-10.

Renaissance Merlin

The wise scholarly medieval Merlin had a second life in Italy; the *Prophécies de Merlin* of c.1276 is a French-language text rewritten to discuss papal and princely politics in thirteenth-century Italy, and it was in Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* of 1516 that Merlin was reconstructed as an Italianate renaissance mage, transmitted to Britain in Sir John Harington's 1591 translation. Here Merlin's prophecy had an artistic basis as he:

... in milke white marble did engrave
 Strange stories which things future strangely taught.
 The verie images seemd life to have,
 And saving they were dumbe, you would have thought
 Both by their looks and by their lively features
 That they had mov'd and had bin living creatures.¹⁴ (26. 2, 3-8)

There is no British or Celtic connection here, but Spenser's contemporary *Faerie Queene* deploys the same figure outside Carmarthen as adviser, even instructor, to Britomart and, in royal contact still, Prince Arthur. But as Merlin regains power as a renaissance mage, so he and his knowledge are contained: while he is quite often mentioned as a prophet on behalf of both the Tudors and, by a dubious shuffle, the Stuarts, very strikingly he never foresees the future beyond the present monarch; his knowledge is just a back-dated validation of present royal power. The Welsh connection is not fully forgotten – Michael Drayton's topographical myth *Poly-Olbion* (1612) locates Merlin firmly in Wales, north and well as south – but it has no separate meaning, just support for the English national project: what we might call early contributionism.

Nor does renaissance Merlin in general have special force. His knowledge does not resist power in this period. He gave his name to popular almanacs, predicting sunset and sunrise, tides, fat stock prices, but only for one year at a time, with no trace of the visionary and even Celtic future of Merlin's past. He can have a royal-cum-national propaganda role, as in Ben Jonson's *Speeches at Prince Henries Barriers* (1610), Dryden's *King Arthur* (1691) or Blackmore's *Prince Arthur* (1695) and *King Arthur* (1697). Much less grandly, he also facilitates stage shows, often with lightly draped ladies and comic events. This is far from a challenge to power and also far from Wales and the Celtic, though it is interesting that when Queen Caroline created a real Merlin's Cave in 1735, both early Gothic and proto-feminist, it was a Welsh woman poet, Jane Brereton, who honoured him as a man of knowledge like, but junior to, Newton, in her poem 'Merlin's Cave':

¹⁴ Sir John Harington, *Ludovico Ariosto's Orlando Furioso*, ed. R. McNulty (Oxford, 1972).

Why shou'd not British Merlin , grace thy Page,
In Mathematicks, once esteem'd a Sage ?¹⁵ (5)

Romantic Merlin

The Gothic connection is to be crucial in the re-Celticising and re-politicising of Merlin, which is also the beginning of the return of Myrddin. Thomas Gray was a great classical scholar but he was also in a range of ways outside the aristocratic, militaristic masculine culture that classicism usually supported in the eighteenth century. Among his interests in the opposite of Augustan culture was Welsh tradition. In his poem 'The Bard' (1757) he mentions only Taliesin, but it is clearly a Myrddinesque figure he depicts cursing Edward I for his assault on north Wales: knowledge resists English royal power, though in a historically displaced way. In 1774 the Welsh painter Thomas Jones created his famous visual version of the figure, a condensation of bard and druid. Here Merlin for the first time has a long white beard: earlier Merlin is clean-shaven, youthful, unless he transforms as an old man to tease the king. From now on Merlin's wisdom will be represented as aged and frail – itself of course a fine way of containing the vigour of his knowledge.

After Gray, for some time the figure's force is potential rather than realised. There is little of Merlin by pro-Celtic writers from Wales around 1800 like Richard Llwyd, David Llwyd and Felicia Hemans – they use Arthur and Taliesin, though the Cornish make some use of Merlin.¹⁶ Though the English Romantics value wisdom against conformity, whether Augustan, urban or utilitarian, Merlin does not represent the moral individualism they so much valued. They all name-check Merlin the bard/druid, but never use him as a figure of value: Thomas Love Peacock is respectful of Merlin, but he had a wife from north Wales and was indeed a member of the Cymmrodorion Society. To the others, Merlin's force lacks morality. For Scott in 'The Bridal of Triermain' he is vengeful, for Wordsworth in 'The Egyptian Maid' a jealous murderer, in Richard Heber's 'The Masque of Gwendolyn' a vicious sex-pest. The first-written of Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* ('Merlin and Vivien', 1859) shows Merlin, for all his learning, which includes Darwinesque science, humiliated by the *femme fatale* Vivien, herself a figure who inspired many Victorian artists.

There were, though, Romantic writers who saw more in Merlin – but not in England. In Germany, France and America, a re-formed Welsh connection was not at all troubling. Before and after 1800 Christoph Wieland and Karl Immerman redeployed the medieval Christian visionary from their wide reading in French and German. Ludwig Uhland's familiarity with Geoffrey's *Vita*

¹⁵ Jane Brereton (as 'Melissa'), *Merlin: A Poem, Humbly Inscib'd to Her Majesty* (London, 1735).

¹⁶ On this topic see R. Gossedge and S. Knight, 'Arthur in the Sixteenth to Nineteenth Centuries', in E. Archibald and A. Putter (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Arthurian Literature* (Cambridge, 2009).

Merlini led to his influential ‘Merlin der Wilde’ (1829), re-used by other German Romantics, including Heine. This image of a wise *Naturmensch* was picked up by Ralph Waldo Emerson in his essay ‘Poetry and the Imagination’ (1844) and in several of his poems, most potently in ‘Merlin I’ (1847):

The kingly bard
Must smite the chords rudely and hard,
As with hammer or with mace;
That they may render back
Artful thunder, which conveys
Secrets of the solar track,
Sparks of supersolar blaze
Merlin’s blows are strokes of fate.¹⁷ (91)

Merlin the bardic critic of secular power is Myrddin recreated, and he still reverberates in culture. A French parallel was stimulated by the work of the Bretonist scholar Villemarqué, especially in his *Merlin ou Myrddhin l’enchanteur* of 1852, and fully deployed in Edgar Quinet’s powerful anti-monarchic novel *Merlin l’Enchanteur* of 1860. In Guillaume Apollinaire’s *L’Enchanteur Pourrissant* of 1909, Merlin represents pure art: the superb prose and poetry is further empowered by magnificent illustrations by André Derain in dramatic black and white.

Myrddin/Merlin the European Romantic hero did arrive in Britain. Tennyson’s last word as a poet is ‘Merlin and the Gleam’ (1889) where he sees Merlin as the poetic inspiration: he draws directly on the idea that Vivien’s name comes from that Welsh word *chwiflean*, here taken to mean ‘the gleam’, which he drew from W. F. Skene through the Scots poet and scholar John Veitch. This image has some currency in the Celtic twilight – Yeats has a fine dramatic poem, ‘Merlin and the Witch Vivien’, while the ballad ‘The Death of Merlin’ (1898) by the London Welshman Ernest Rhys has a nationalist ending:

Wild Merlin’s awake. The sun’s on his way;
Where the Elements heard the harp of the Stars
That Darkness let shine, as Death does thy life,
Oh Cymraec land !¹⁸ (39)

This potent and essentially Celtic Merlin, occasionally known as Myrddin, was to occupy the British and American stage in mostly uninspired pieces for some time – Rutland Boughton and Gordon Bottomley are the best of the

¹⁷ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Collected Poems and Translations*, ed. H. Bloom and P. Kane (New York, 1994).

¹⁸ Ernest Rhys, ‘The Death of Merlin’, in *Welsh Ballads and Other Poems* (London, Carmarthen and Bangor, 1898), 29–40.

writers – and even have a new one-nation propaganda use in the darkness of 1942 when in *The Saviours*, a set of radio plays by ‘Clemence Dane’ (actually Winifred Ashton), the Germans are re-cast as the Saxons and, led by Merlin, British heroes symbolically resist them, from Arthur and Robin Hood to the Unknown Soldier.

Modern Myrddin/Merlin

The main thrust of a newly Celticised and spiritually potent Myrddin/Merlin was not to be in verse or drama, but in fiction and other twentieth-century genres. Thematically he encountered two new ideas of how knowledge could be deployed in the context of power. One of these was education, the other historicity.

The idea of Merlin as Arthur’s educator is not nearly as old as some think: medieval Merlin at first never met Arthur, let alone tutored him: he only gives Christian or military advice in specific contexts. Later writers sometimes think of the advice as being developmental, as in Spenser, but the first example of Merlin the tutor is the bardic bearded Merlin of Bulwer Lytton’s 1848 *King Arthur*, an epic poem notable for its occasional comedy, its imperialist tone and its scholarly approach, which includes calling the Welsh the Kymri – not as uncommon then as it later became. The idea of an educator Merlin occupies quite a few of the minor Arthurian dramas of the turn of the century and is implied in the semi-epic *Merlin* by the American Edwin Arlington Robinson. Written in 1916-17, the poem describes Merlin surviving to view an Arthurian collapse like modern warfare:

Colder blew the wind
Across the world, and on it heavier lay
The shadow and the burden of the night;
And there was darkness over Camelot. ¹⁹(2623-6)

The major educational Merlin is in *The Once and Future King* (1958), later to become *Camelot*, film and musical, by T. H. White, himself once a school-master, where his knowledge attempts to support right against might, again in time of war. In the highly original first book, *The Sword in the Stone* (1938), Merlin educates Arthur in natural wisdom, and across the borders of animal species, but he has no specific Celtic value: indeed the second book, *The Witch in the Wood* (1940 – heavily cut and rewritten as *The Queen of Air and Darkness* in the 1958 tetralogy) seems as hostile to Celticity, mostly Gaelic, as it is to the dangers of women, especially mothers. But later the new figure of Merlin the educator is reattached to forms of Celticism, including druidry, in

¹⁹ Edwin Arlington Robinson, *Merlin* (New York, 1917).

many of the novels for adults and juveniles which were inspired by the move to historicity in fiction about Arthur and Merlin.

Though scholars from Gibbon to the *Dictionary of National Biography* were sceptical about a real Arthur, and by extension Merlin, this changed after 1936 when in a very odd sequence in the Oxford *History of Roman Britain* R. G. Collingwood suggested that Arthur was a Roman cavalry leader and his delaying of the Anglo-Saxon conquest had led to Britain being a Celtic-Germanic mix. A racially politicised version of Matthew Arnold's version of contributionism, the idea basically moderates the Germanic origins of England: the First World War is an evident motive, and the theory really boomed after the Second World War and Nazi activities. John Masfield wrote a novel on this theme, *Badon Parchments* (1947), and Rosemary Sutcliff's *Sword at Sunset* (1963) led a flood of texts which showed a part-Celtic part-Roman Arthur as founder of a Britain free of Germanic guilt. Merlin is absent in the most historically attuned authors like Sutcliff, but he often brings a druidic authority to the concept, as in Henry Treece's *The Green Man* (1966) and notably in John Cowper Powys's *Porius* (1951), where he is now a deeply Celtic Myrddin Wyllt.

Powys speaks as a self-identified Welshman, and other modern Welsh writers have made use of Merlin, but not in triumph. Leslie Norris, in 'Merlin and the Snake's Egg', refers back to the early tradition as Merlin becomes part of nature

Feathers sprout from his arms,
His nose is an owl's hooked nose,
His eyes are the owl's round eyes,
Silent and soft he flies.²⁰

But human powers, even transformed, have limits: it is the natural insight of his dog, Glain, who finds that totem of true wisdom, the serpent's egg.

For R. S. Thomas, in 'Taliesin 1952', Merlin, clearly here the early Myrddin, is equally limited as one of the voices of poetic despair:

I have been Merlin wandering the woods
Of a far country, where the winds waken
Unnatural voiced, my mind broken
By sudden acquaintance with man's rage.²¹

In *National Winner* (1971), the first part, but also the climax, of his *Land of the Living* series, Emyr Humphreys invokes Myrddin in the context of the despair of John Clyde More, lawyer, poet, pacifist, and over-sensitive modern Welshman:

²⁰ Leslie Norris, 'Merlin and the Snake's Egg', in *Merlin and the Snake's Egg* (New York, 1978), 45.

²¹ R. S. Thomas, 'Taliesin, 1952', in *Song at the Year's Turning* (London, 1955), 105.

'War drove him mad,' Mr More said. 'The sheer horror and brutality of war forced him as it were outside the human race. He lived in the woods with the trees and the animals for fifty years in a state of madness. And this was how he acquired the gift of prophecy.'

'Excuse me,' Colonel Ricks said. 'Correct me if I'm wrong. But that's not history is it?'

'It depends what you mean by history.'²²

Modern French writers with Breton sympathies have been more positive about Merlin, though their approach can seem gesturing. A local sense of resistance to modernity is coded in Théophile Bryant's *Le Testament de Merlin* (1975), focused on 'Merlin, l'immortel commandeur de la Celtie'²³ who goes so far as to kill Mordred in the final Arthurian battle and then retires to Brocéliande with Viviane. Michel Rio's novels *Merlin* (1989) and *Morgana* (1999) rework the Arthurian traditions further in the French tradition, with Merlin as a figure of love, subtlety and artistic insight, while René Barjavel in *L'Enchanteur* (1984) uses the full medieval French connection rather than its nineteenth-century Breton and aesthetic developments. Here Merlin has established the Round Table, initiated the Grail quest and (looking back to the Didot *Perceval* as well as to T. H. White) has even been *Perceval's* tutor. But Barjavel does not ignore the modern Merlin: after he finally states that the Grail knights will return, 'not in blood but in light,' and that the Grail 'always remains nearby,' in an Apollinaire-like ending he joins Vivian on an isle in the lake, among birds and flowers, to live 'since that day in an invisible room, a room of air, a room of love.'²⁴

Not all English writers liked the idea of a pro-Celtic trend in modern Merlins. Godfrey Turton's uncompromisingly titled *The Emperor Arthur* (1968), makes Merlin an untrustworthy Celt who betrays the Romans. John Gloag calls Myrddin a 'barbarous native name' in *Artorius Rex* (1977). But Merlin as a focus of native energy is clearly attractive to some American writers. They tend to get the Welsh names accurate, either through better scholarship or more attentive proof-reading, but they can also have a vaguely pan-Celtic approach, where Irish names and characters mingle with the Welsh, and the Celticising tone can be uncertain: Parke Godwin has Arthur address Merlin as 'boyo' in *Firelord* (1980).

It may seem rational for English writers to look on the Celts as their own aborigines, but among Americans this seems to be a displacement, even disavowal of interest in native Americans. One of the best of the American science fiction and fantasy writers, 'André Norton' (actually Alice Norton,

²² Emyr Humphreys, *National Winner*, vol. 6 of *The Land of the Living*, complete edition (Cardiff, 2000 [1971]), 282-3.

²³ Théophile Bryant, *Le Testament de Merlin* (Nantes, 1975), 266.

²⁴ René Barjavel, *L'Enchanteur* (Paris, 1984), 469-70 and 470-1.

recently deceased) avoids this, setting *Steel Magic* (1965) in the US, with a neat renaming of Merlin as Mr Brosius (from the Emrys/Ambrosius of 'Nennius'), and linking him with a native American hunter, Huon, so relocating the Robin Hood myth as well. Her other Merlin novel, *Merlin's Mirror* (1975), in the spirit of Wordsworth, suggests that human values, figured in Vivian, are more important than Merlin's intergalactic science.

Norton points to the important fact that in the modern world knowledge still interfaces with power, but that power now lies with the individual. Educational Merlin helps him grow and learn – and her too: Susan Cooper and Jane Yolen, for example, deal with both genders and there are some feminist Merlin texts: Welshness is often mixed in here as a sign of mystery, antiquity and naturalness.

That developmental Merlin finds a natural home in children's and juvenile fiction. But there is also a Merlinesque path to the power of the 'inner me', also drawing at times on Welshness to figure the natural and anti-rational, a position downhill from the German romantic tradition. *The Grail Myth* by Emma Jung and Marie-Louise von Franz (1970) has a chapter on Merlin both as the archetype of the wise old man and also as a figure for Jungian psychiatric wholeness: Merlin in the John Boorman film *Excalibur* (1982) derives from here. There are many less scholarly creators of the lifestyle Merlin, like R. J. Stewart and Deepak Chopra, often having recourse to hippy Celticity. Curiously, and to medievalists maddeningly, one effect of power now residing with the individual is that people seek to find the alleged original individual: in *The Quest for Merlin* (1985) Nikolai Tolstoy has hunted for the real Myrddin/Merlin and has a photo of the alleged grave of this alleged person.

Not all is so banal. In Germany the Cumbria-originated romantic tradition has had both Wagnerian resonance and a political edge, as in Gerhardt Hauptman's *Der Neue Christophorus* (1956) and Tankred Durst's Brechtian *Merlin oder das Wüste Land* (1981) in which Merlin reveals the need for a human-focused equivalent of the Grail in the brutalised world of international capitalism: closer to Welsh coalfield radicalism than ancient Cumbria.

Knowledge and power

There are always powers that want to use knowledge, and are discomfited by knowledge's understanding of the abuses of power. The figure of knowledge has always faced appropriation by power. A thirteenth-century illuminator understood: he depicts Merlin as a ragged boy addressing Arthur and his court. They all have their hands up in an apprehensive listening gesture. The boy is carrying a club – linking back to the Cumbrian Merlin and the wild power of natural wisdom.

Knowledge can be appropriated by power in both directions, good and bad. There is a body called MERLIN today – the letters stand for Medical Emergency Relief International, knowledge against the worst effects of power, natural and political. But there is also a company called Merlin that sells expensive, polluting Land Rovers. Neither of those links to Wales. But the connections exist, in myth and reality. A few years ago knowledge that the powerful thought was dangerous, about weapons of mass destruction, certainly contributed to the death, in a wood, of Dr David Kelly, a man of knowledge born in Wales. And at a level much less tragic, much more banal, but still real, it would be an unusual knowledge-worker today who has not felt some effect of the dialectic of knowledge and power.

I have argued here that the myth of Myrddin/Merlin has a good deal to do, recurrently in the past and the present, with Wales, the country of its origin, and with what Welshness has meant to many people. But speaking for myself and my colleagues, the myth is still alive: as professional practitioners of knowledge, we should be continually aware of the power we have, and the powers we face, in Britain, and even in Wales. Myrddin and Merlin and the myth are still alive because they need to be.