

The Marches of Wales

By Clive Jenkins (1966)

The word March, a “border,” misleadingly evokes a notional pencil line on a map. The Welsh Marches were far more than that both territorially and as a historical phenomenon. Initiated by the Normans’ resumption of the forward policy of expansion at the expense of the Welsh which had been abandoned by the Mercians long before, the Marches rapidly (if precariously) grew from 1067.



Their frontiers, fluctuating with the fortunes of Lords both Welsh and Anglo-Norman, eventually extended either side of the present border southwards from Chester, then swept west along the channel littoral to St David’s Head. The Marches formed a great historical entity that is a great historical mess, until they were rolled up, belatedly, by The Acts of Union of 1536 and 1543. So, for such a – literal – shambles their dates of juridical existence are surprisingly precise: near 470 years: the entire High Middle Ages and beyond.

The template was forged at the outset: in 1067 the Conqueror set up three Marcher earldoms: Chester, Shrewsbury, and Hereford. William Fitz Osbern, Earl of Hereford, was, with the Conqueror’s half brother, Odo, one of his two top men; not the D-list sleb or hungry fighter you might expect to be sent to prove himself on the frontier. He built a castle at Monmouth and a massive stone one at Chepstow – most castles were of wood – which remained the great base for advance into Wales. And into the lowlands of Gwent the Normans duly advanced, shattering that ancient little Kingdom by 1081.

The Marches remained important throughout as a problem and as an opportunity. A Wales still independent was thought dangerous but also worth having. Here the Monnow valley in the Southern Marches was crucial: a break in the natural defensive ramparts of the Welsh

Hills: an *entrée* into the fertile lowlands stretching ever westwards. *Y Tair Tref*, the castles comprising the Gwent Trilateral, were meant to defend the first, eastern, slab of these and so be a springboard for advance into the Vale of Glamorgan (reached in the early 1090s). The later attempts to reduce Ireland and Scotland did not live up to expectations: Wales was more achievable, completely conquered at last in the 1280s. Hence important people were sent to this large, tempting region – or went willingly, as did lesser lights to make their fortune.

The King wanted the Marchers to contain, and if possible push back, the Welsh and, in return, gave them a blank cheque: they could rule whatever they could grab as autonomous little principalities on the indigenous, Welsh, model. This policy boomeranged time and time again. The Marcher Lords, if rich and powerful already, were swollen still further, while the self-made were predictably arrogant and self-reliant. They had achieved their position by the sword and were now – literally – laws unto themselves. They had often been seised at the outset of grim fortresses which could be used against the King and against each other just as effectively as against the Welsh. The highly trustworthy Fitz Osbern had died in 1071; and, by 1075, his son, Roger de Breteuil, had been imprisoned and deprived of all lands and honours for rebelling against the King.



A. G. Bradley's 1905 contrast between an endemically violent Marches and an endemically peaceful middle England is grossly simplistic. But he got one half about right: localised Marcher warfare over territory and tribute was perpetual. On notable occasions this escalated to marching East with a view to overthrowing the King himself: achieved 1326/7, 1485; nearly achieved in the "reign" of King Stephen 1135-54, in the 1260s, the de Montfort coalition against Henry III, and in the early 1400s, the Glyndwr

revolt. The latter at least revived the theme of the King trying to lead/unite Marcher lords against a common enemy. Otherwise this had vanished with the final conquest of the remains of independent Wales in the 1280s. In one way this had worsened the threat

Marcher violence posed to *central* stability. The Lords could now with impunity turn east, where since Fitz Osbern the greater of them had retained estates/interests in any case.

So one ingredient was internecine fighting among the very people who were supposed to be pulling together against the Welsh: the barons and the King. A second was, naturally, the Welsh themselves. They held on well: surprisingly so given the great, strategically placed castles of general renown supplemented by hundreds of lesser ones whose fragments are still scattered around the fields – or reduced to depressions in the ground.

It is less surprising given the anarchic, centrifugal, piecemeal nature of the Anglo-Normans' advance, their constant infighting, that the Welsh at all levels below the great comital families remained in the decided majority, that the invaders' success in the lowlands was generally stymied in the hills. There the Marchers usually left the Welsh gentry *in situ* merely exacting a face-saving nominal suzerainty. Even in the lowlands, Anglo-Norman magnates had plenty of Welsh-gentry vassals, notably Davy Gam's family in Brecon. On occasions Anglo-Normans wormed their way in by marrying the heiresses of Welsh lords: it saved the expense and risks of fighting. Having taken over a going concern, Welsh Law continued to apply.

Intermarriage was the most obvious, intimate, and, for the individuals thereby begotten, ineluctable aspect of the increasing cultural fusion. Understandably racial demarcation was clearer in the first century: a *revanchiste* grandson of Caradog, last King of Gwent, ambushed and killed a de Clare, Richard Fitz Gilbert, in Coed Grwyne, Vale of Usk, in 1136. Abergavenny, future host town of Rudolf Hess, saw its own Night of the Long Knives or Katyn in 1175: William de Braose, lord of the castle, invited over 70 Welshmen, headed by Seisyllt ap Dyfnwal, to a Christmas feast of reconciliation and then massacred them: a literal stab at ethnic cleansing of the local native leadership.

Intermarriage plus more informal interbreeding, however, had got under way much earlier with King Henry I (reigned 1100–1135) setting a right royal example: he took the beautiful Nest of Dyfed (born c 1085) as his mistress, with the result of a son in 1103. Nest was then married to Gerald Fitz Walter.

This couple's grandson, Giraldus Cambrensis (1146–1223) is the most renowned product of such mingling, and a cultural icon: a patriotic and invaluable recorder of life and customs on the Southern Marches. The Welsh could not simply be crushed, so they had to be accepted as players in a complex because muddled, incoherent, power struggle: alliances marital and military.

By 1400, therefore, things were fairly thoroughly fused – or confused – cousinly, culturally, and militarily, although the nationalistic, large-scale Glyndwr revolt of 1399 to c.1412 then occluded this for a time. But the great patriot himself was up to his neck in English connections ramifying far beyond what Shakespeare renders the most renowned of innumerable Welsh-Marcher marriages: of Edmund Mortimer to one of Glyndwr's daughters. And Richard II had recognised Edmund's elder brother (died 1398) as his heir, so Owain naturally recognised this deceased Mortimer's son, a boy currently detained by Henry IV, as the rightful King of England.

The rival territorial claims of the greatest Marchers could climb no further. Each side in the "revolt" was headed by a Marcher Lord: Glyndwr from the far North, and Henry IV himself. When Henry's father, John of Gaunt (d 1399), became Duke of Lancaster in right of his wife, the huge apauage included lands centred on Grosmont. And in the 1380s Henry became Lord of Brecon in right of *his* wife, the de Bohun heiress, obtaining thereby the loyalty of Davy Gam whose thoroughly Welsh family had held lands in Brecon off the de Bohuns since the thirteenth century. So Davy privileged feudalism over nationalism and clove to his liege lord, now the King, earning Glyndwr's undying enmity. The King's son, "Harry of Monmouth", who eventually led the campaign against Glyndwr, thoroughly and successfully exploited his birth-place and the family Marcher lordships. The legend runs that, at Agincourt in 1415, Davy saved the now King's life at the expense of his own; and so Henry V hastened to knight him as he lay dying. This at least points up Davy's reputation for loyalty.

Blood ties overlapped strongly with personalised feudal loyalties, feuds and considerations of noble/princely rank. These all traverse or mutate the undoubted nationalism of Llewelyns the Great and Last, and later of Owain Glyndwr. The diverse Marches elite were integrating

among themselves. After all the “Normans” had long disappeared by 1400 as an entity separate from both Welsh and English which slightly simplified matters. Mediaeval nationalism is more problematic than today’s.

This is not to imply a rosy multiculturalism: the Marchers as one big happy family; simply that both sides in any given conflict would be a mixed bag ethnically: so indeed would be many individual participants. What you could rely on was not purity of blood, but frequent and copious effusion of blood. If no major conflict was going on, the Marchers could always rustle up a local one.

But, just over forty years after Glyndwr, major fighting *did* flare up again and continued intermittently for thirty years in the Wars of the Roses (1455–85) with the Marches as a major theatre. The great man whom the bards urged to exploit the anarchy to become a second Owain was, ironically, the maternal grandson of Davy Gam: William Herbert (1423–69).

Because of the Glyndwr revolt, Welsh gentry whose fathers had chosen the “right” side did very well in fifteenth-century Gwent: Henry V and his son’s regents actively built up these loyalists. From 1461 the Yorkists did likewise. And of these Herbert rose highest – to the earldom of Pembroke in 1468. He and his father, William Ap Thomas (d.1445), built the magnificent Raglan Castle. Given the luscious fruits of royal favour, Herbert seems wise to have resisted any sirenic to emulate Glyndwr. He stayed loyal to the King; but the problem then was “Which King?” A Yorkist, he had the misfortune to be captured and then executed by Warwick’s forces in 1469 during the brief Lancastrian restoration.

The seizure of the throne by the Lancastrian claimant Henry Tudor in 1485 could be presented as the last and most successful revolt of Marcher lords. Henry was heir to Uncle Jasper, the *Lancastrian* claimant to the earldom of Pembroke. Appropriately, therefore, Pembroke was where they landed and rapidly gained support.

In the person of Henry VII (reigned 1485–1509) the *King of England* was now the icon of Welsh nationalism: risible surrealism hitherto. And he himself was the greatest Marcher lord

inheriting on all sides. So he saw no need to depart from his usual policy of leaving established structures in place: the Marcher polity, like the monasteries, lingered on.

Henry VIII (reigned 1509–1547) also enjoyed Welsh support, but was not Welsh by culture. He distrusted the jurisdictional privateering of the Marcher Lords with its persistent, if now lower-level, feuding and freebooting, fearing it would yet again produce an over mighty subject. In any case, its rationale had long gone. The Acts of Union of 1536 and 1543 abolished this ancient, tarnished autonomy in favour of the *Council* for Wales and the Marches, a proto-modern bureaucracy, directly dependent on the King, which aimed to stamp *central* rule on this Wild West. The time-honoured, if sanguinary, institutions of the medieval Marches got the *coup de grace*, leaving no direct heir.

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