THE ARTHURIAN LEGENDS

AN ILLUSTRATED ANTHOLOGY

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THE REAL ARTHUR · ARTHUR IN LITERATURE · THE GREAT MEDIEVAL TALES · THE NINETEENTH- AND TWENTIETH-CENTURY REVIVAL

For more than eight centuries, poets and writers have been telling stories about King Arthur. From lost legends and scraps of history, from facts and folklore, they have fashioned one of the greatest epics in all literature, full of the world's splendours, heroic lives and spiritual quests. This magical and mysterious world is founded on the figure of an obscure Welsh princeling, about whom we know nothing for certain. Arthur may have been the last Roman general of Britain, the first of those Welsh guerrilla fighters who defied the English until well into the Middle Ages, or a northern prince from Scotland who was later adopted by the Welsh living in Wales. If there was a real Arthur, he lived in the sixth or seventh centuries AD; he may not even have been of royal blood, but he was acclaimed as a hero or leader. That is all that we can say with any confidence about the historical grain of sand in the poetic oyster.

But this book is not about the quest for a 'real' Arthur. It is a celebration of the 'unreal' king, of his exploits in literature, of his far-famed knights and their ladies, of all the high trappings of romance. Arthurian literature tempts one to write in purple prose; yet it is much more than an escape from reality, much more than the lines on my mother's bookplate in the first version of Arthur's story that I read, with its haunting Walter Crane plates:

Here do I sit reading old Things
of knights and Lorn Damsels while the wind sings,
O dreamily sings . . .

Arthur's magic is that he is a shape-shifter; but he does so subtly and slowly, changing his form to suit the needs of each new age. It is arguable that the earliest apparently historical references to his career, in the anonymous ninth-century chronicle called *The History of the Britons*, correspond to a revival of Welsh national feeling and power, and were written to meet a demand for a hero from the past who would be an example for the present. Arthur's real fortunes were founded by a much bolder stroke of invention, however: Geoffrey of Monmouth's great imitation of history, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, written in the third decade of the twelfth century. History, for long neglected or reduced to mere chronicle, was being practised once again by English writers, taking the great classical historians of Rome as their models; and Geoffrey, seeing that there was no version of the history of Britain before and immediately after the Roman invasion, took it upon himself to make good this want. His sources are obscure; in places he used scraps of Welsh history and legend, but much of his work was pure imagination, romance in the guise of history, and nowhere more so than in his portrait of Arthur. Arthur emerges from his obscurity to become ruler of the western world, waging a series of wars which carry him, like Charlemagne, towards Rome itself, though he never reaches Rome or becomes emperor, because news of treachery at home reaches him in his hour of triumph, and he returns to meet his death in civil war.

Geoffrey's history was written in Latin, but a French version soon appeared, written for Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine by the Anglo-Norman poet Wace. Towards the end of the twelfth century, the English poet Layamon made his version, and many of the less sceptical historians of the period introduced Geoffrey's tales into their works, if only because they neatly filled a gap in their story. Geoffrey's success with historians, however, was nothing to his success in the literary world. The brilliant yet unknown court of King Arthur became the setting for all kinds of romances, many of them drawing on the same stock of Welsh stories, perhaps gathered from passing minstrels, that Geoffrey himself had used. Chrétien de Troyes, who worked for Eleanor of Aquitaine's daughter Marie de Champagne in the mid-twelfth century, was the first and one of the greatest of these writers: from his hand we have the first version of Lancelot's love for Arthur's queen, Guinevere, and the first mention of the Holy Grail. The Grail poem was never finished, leaving us without a clear idea of what Chrétien meant by the Grail, a mystery which was turned to good advantage by later writers.

Chrétien's poems are loosely linked by 'the court of king Arthur'. This was not enough for the writers of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, who now set out to tell the whole story of Arthur's career in a great series of romances which have come down to us in several versions. Already Arthur had changed his shape, from pseudo-historical king to lord of a court of heroes and lovers; now he became one of the greatest rulers the world had seen, the peer of Charlemagne and Alexander, and with his own triumph and tragedy as the heart of the cycle of stories. Geoffrey of Monmouth's version of Arthur's history contained all the necessary ingredients, hinting at Guinevere's infidelity and Arthur's mysterious end, all told in little more than bare outline. The romance writers elaborated endlessly on this, and when they had exhausted the possibilities of Arthur's own history, whole new stories were woven in. The Grail romance quickly became a central part of the cycle of tales, providing a high spiritual theme hitherto lacking; and separate romances, such as that of Tristan and Iseult, were incorporated into the cycle. Instead of taking in the new material bodily, like a patch on a cloak, the old and the new were interwoven almost inseparably, so that the storyteller could move easily from one theme to another, bringing them together like the brilliant colours of a tapestry.

For English readers, the culmination of the medieval versions of Arthur's story is Sir Thomas Malory's work, generally known as *Le Morte Darthur* from the title which William Caxton gave it when he printed it in 1485. Malory, like his contemporaries in France and Italy, edited the French manuscripts which he used as his source; but both his editing and the striking flow of his prose style were the work of a writer of genius, and it is his version that has become the Authorised Version of Arthurian legend. Throughout the sixteenth century, the romances remained popular, but the seventeenth century, pious and rational at the same time, frowned on such fripperies and fables, and Arthur's very existence, queried by a handful of doubting Thomases ever since Geoffrey of Monmouth's book first appeared, was now generally regarded as unproven. The taste for romances declined, and Arthur scarcely put in an appearance between the Restoration in 1660 and the end of the eighteenth century.

When he did reappear, it was due to the influence of the fashion for all things Gothick and medieval, and to the romantic writers such as Sir Walter Scott and Wordsworth. Yet it was only after the high tide of romanticism had passed, in the more sober atmosphere of Victoria's reign, that Arthur found his first true modern champion in Alfred Tennyson. Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* made the legends a household word in Victorian England, and a host of lesser versions followed. In Germany, a master in a different artistic field, Richard Wagner, took the stories of Tristan and Parsifal and put them into modern guise as operas. In the wake of these great works, there followed an insatiable demand for popular retellings of the original stories.

The last seventy years have seen continuing intense activity in the reworking of the Arthurian stories. In many ways they have taken the place of the classical myths which once dominated European literature, and to which poets and writers constantly referred or returned. A germ of an idea from the Grail stories gave T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* its title; and Arthur, Guinevere, Lancelot, Merlin and Galahad are as familiar in our literature as the gods of ancient Greece.

What follows is an attempt to give a reader new to the Arthurian legends some idea of their scope and range within the covers of a single volume. The extracts have been set out in approximate chronological order so that their development can be seen as well. Of necessity, some of the extracts are artistically unsatisfactory, bleeding chunks from a coherent, carefully planned work; but by and large romances lend themselves easily to such use, because they are made of many individual adventures linked by a theme or a personality. In the introductions, I have tried to set each piece in its context, both historical and literary – the artistic context can be seen in the largely contemporary illustrations – so that anyone who enjoys all or indeed part of this anthology can make his own exploration of the many and glittering treasures of Arthurian legend.

ARTHUR IN HISTORY · EARLY WELSH LITERATURE · HIS GRAVE · THE SAINTS' LIVES

We know very little about the history of Britain between AD 400 and AD 600, between the ending of Roman rule and the emergence of the Saxon kingdoms. We have no contemporary histories, only traditions and rumours and the occasional voice crying in the wilderness of a writer whose works happen to survive in this or that fragment of a manuscript. Archaeology has helped us to uncover something of everyday life, even something of the broad outline of the story of the Saxon invasions; but if we want an account of people and dates, the names of the Saxon and Welsh commanders who fought a long drawn-out succession of campaigns, there is nowhere to turn. To look for a historical Arthur in such a period is a hopeless task: the scraps of evidence are few and far between, and there is no context into which we can fit them. For instance, Gildas, a British preacher who was mainly concerned with castigating the sins of his fellow-countrymen, mentions a few names of kings or kinglets, and tells of one victory, 'the siege of Mons Badonicus' in his sixth-century book on the ruin of Britain. Because these are our only pieces of information, it is easy to overvalue them: Gildas himself implies that there were other engagements as important as 'mons Badonicus' ('mount Badon') but even three hundred years later it had become one great moment in which the tide of the Saxon invasion was stemmed.

In fact, the only thing that is generally agreed about the historical Arthur is that if he did exist, it was in the period between AD 450 and AD 650. Who he was, what he did, where he lived, are questions which can only be answered with guesses. It was perhaps only guesswork that led two unknown writers in the eighth and ninth centuries to name the hero of the 'siege of mons Badonicus' (a siege duly transformed into a battle) as Arthur. The name Arthur is very rare in Welsh sources; the fact that, like many Welsh names, it may derive from a Roman family name, Artorius, has led to all kinds of speculation; all that is indisputable is that, by the ninth century, there was a traditional hero called Arthur. The brief *Annals of Wales* tell us two things about him: he fought at Badon, something which historians have remembered but which the romancers have forgotten, and he was killed at Camlann in the same battle as a certain Medraut, the seed from which the whole 'tragedy of Arthur' was to spring in the romances, but which rarely appears in the historians. The equally anonymous author of *The History of the Britons* (usually attributed to a mythical Nennius) has a great deal more to say about Arthur's career, but he improves the history of the victor of Badon by adding a catalogue of battles, which may well have originally belonged to someone else, as a kind of prelude. An early Welsh poem has survived which lists in very similar style the battles of Cadwallawn, 'fourteen chief battles for fair Britain, and sixty encounters'. Even here the list of Arthur's battles exists in two very different versions, both of which are given below.

The real origins of Arthur as we know him lie not in fifth- or sixth-century history, but in early Welsh literature. Even here he is an enigmatic figure, partly because all that survives of much Welsh literature is rather like a newspaper where only the headlines can be read. We have a whole series of aids to memory used by the poets when they recited their stories: heroes and events are grouped in threes, for example, 'Three Generous Men of the Island of Britain'. The original versions of these occasionally mention Arthur, though many were later adapted to include him. There are other references to him in Welsh verse, including a verse about his grave:

There is a grave for March, a grave for Gwythur,
A grave for Gwgawn Red-sword;
the world's wonder a grave for Arthur.

The implication is that no grave is known for Arthur, and it would be a marvel if it were to be found. Elsewhere Arthur appears as leader of an expedition to the Celtic otherworld, Annwn, in a poem whose obscurity has baffled the best scholars. Something of this side of his character is reflected in the two *Marvels* from *The History of the Britons*.

After the ninth century, Arthur begins to acquire his best-known characteristic: he is a great ruler whose court attracts the bravest warriors of his age. The first evidence that we have of him as a great ruler rather than a great warrior comes in an amusing way. The Welsh Church, like the Irish, venerated almost all its holy men as saints, and vast numbers of saints' lives were turned out in little monasteries or cells up and down Wales, often the product of intense local patriotism. In order to emphasise the greatness of such a saint, he would be shown as superior to a great ruler, and Arthur was often cast in the role of stooge. This is what lies behind the episode from the *Life of St Carannog*, though there is a more devious motive as well, the establishment of a claim by St Carannog's monastery to the lands mentioned in the story. Such stories often contain references to stories about Arthur which have now been lost, but in this case the whole episode seems to have been invented.

The Welsh Tradition

THE ANNALS OF WALES

Year 72 (= AD 518?) The battle of Badon in which Arthur bore the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ on his shoulders for three days and three nights, and the Britons were the victors.

Year 93 (= AD 539?) Gueith (Battle of) Camlann in which Arthur and Medraut perished; and there was plague in Britain and Ireland.

THE HISTORY OF THE BRITONS

The chronology of the 'History' proceeds by a stepping-stone method, rather than by absolute dates, so that it is often unclear to what precise period the author is assigning any series of events. The following 'Arthurian' section, from the original version in the Harleian MS, is a case in point.

Then in those days Arthur fought against them[1] with the kings of the Britons, but he was a commander in the battles. The first battle was at the mouth of the river called *Glein*; the second, third, fourth, and fifth on another river, which is called *Dubglas* as is in the region of *Linnuis*;[2] the sixth battle on the river called *Bassas*. The seventh battle was in the forest of Celyddon, that is the battle of Coed Celyddon.[3] The eight battle was at *Castellum Guinnion*, where Arthur carried the portrait of Saint Mary, ever Virgin, on his shoulders; and the pagans were routed on that day, and there was a great slaughter of them through the power of our Lord Jesus Christ and the strength of the holy Virgin Mary, his mother. The ninth battle was fought in the *Urbs Legionis*.[4] The tenth battle was fought on the shore of the river called *Tribruit*. The eleventh battle was fought on the mountain called *Agned*.[5] The twelfth battle was on *Mons Badonis*, where in one day nine hundred and sixty men were killed by one attack of Arthur, and no one save himself laid them low. And he appeared as victor in all the battles. And while they[1] were being overthrown in all the battles, they were seeking help from Germany; and they were being reinforced many times over without interruption. And they brought kings from Germany to rule over them in Britain, up to the time when Ida ruled who was son of Eoppa; he was the first king in Bernicia, that is in *Berneich*.

[1]The English [2]Lindsey
[3]A forest area in southern Scotland, often referred to in Medieval Welsh literature [4]Chester, or just possibly Caerleon
[5]Some manuscripts of a lightly revised twelfth-century version add here *Cat Bregoins*, 'the battle of *Bregoinis*'

In A.D. 944 an English revisor produced a new version of the 'History' in a much less inelegant Latin style. This recension is known, again from its principal manuscript, as the 'Vatican' version. The redactor can be shown not to have worked from a copy of the original, 'Harleian', text, but from an augmented version written in Wales between ca 875 and ca 925; its new matter included some additions to the story of Arthur and his battles.

Then the warrior Arthur, with the soldiers and kings of Britain, used to fight against them.[1] And though there were many of more noble birth than he, he was twelve times leader in war and victor of the battles. He fought the first battle against them at the mouth of the river which is called *Glein*; the second, third, fourth, and fifth on another river, called *Duglas* in Welsh, which is in the district of

Linnuis; the sixth battle was on the river which is called *Bassas*. He fought the seventh battle against them in the wood of *Celidon*: in Welsh that is called the battle of Coed Celyddon. He fought the eight battle against the barbarians near *Castellum Guinnion*; in it Arthur carried on his shoulders a portrait of Saint Mary, mother of God and ever virgin; and all that day, through the power of our Lord Jesus Christ and of Saint Mary his mother, the Saxons were put to flight and many of them perished in a great slaughter. He fought the tenth battle on the river-strand which we call *Traht Treuriot*, and the eleventh on the mountain called *Breguoin* where he put them to flight; we call that the battle of *Bregion*. The twelfth he prosecuted harshly against the Saxons, on *Mons Badonis*: in it there fell in one day nine hundred and forty men before his onslaught – his alone, with God's aid, without assistance from any of the Britons. Men say that he was always victor, in all the aforementioned battles, just as many other British soldiers were too. But no courage or counsel avails against God's will: as often as the Saxons were laid low in the battles, they were unremittingly reinforced from Germany and elsewhere; and they summoned to them kings and leaders with many warriors from almost every province, and they did this up to the time when Ida reigned who was son of Eobba; he was the first king, in Bernicia and in *Cair Affrauc*[2] of the Saxon race.

[1]The English [2]York?

The 'History' closes with accounts of natural marvels of the British Isles, principally of Wales and the border. Among these are two which refer to 'the warrior Arthur'. Neither site can be identified today.

In the district which is called Buellt there is another marvel. There is a pile of stones there, and one stone with the footprint of a dog on it placed on top of the heap. When he hunted the boar Trwyd, Cafall[1] – who was the dog of the warrior Arthur – imprinted the mark of his foot on it; and Arthur afterwards assembled a heap of stones under the stone on which was the footprint of his dog, and it is called Carn Gafall. And people come and carry away the stone in their hands for a period of a day and a night, and on the following day it is found on top of its heap.

In the district which is called Archenfield there is another marvel. There is a tomb there, next to a spring which is called Llygad Amr.[2] And the name of the man who was buried in the tomb was called thus, Amr; he was son of the warrior Arthur, and the latter killed him in that place and buried him. And people come to measure the tomb – it is now six feet, now nine, now twelve, now fifteen in length. At whatever size you will measure it on one occasion, you will not again find it of the same size. And I myself have tested it.

[1]The name means 'horse' [2]'The Spring of Amr'

THE LIFE OF SAINT CARANNOG

And afterwards he (St Carannog) returned to his own country of Cardigan, to his cave, with many clergy, and there did many good deeds which cannot be related. And Christ gave him from on high a marvellous altar, whose colour no one could describe. And after that he came to the River Severn to set sail and put the altar in the sea, so that it would lead him wherever God wished him to come. In those days Cato and Arthur ruled in that country, living at Dindraithov; and Arthur came searching for a very fierce, huge and terrible serpent which had laid waste twelve parts of the fields of Carrum. And Carannog came and greeted Arthur, who accepted his blessing joyfully. And Carannog asked Arthur whether he had heard where his altar had landed, and Arthur replied: 'If you reward me, I will tell you.' And he said, 'What reward do you want?' He answered: 'Bring me the serpent which is near you, so that we can see if you are the servant of God.' Then saint Carannog continued on his way and prayed to the Lord, and the serpent came there with a great noise, like a calf running to its mother; it bowed its head before the servant of God, like a servant obeying his lord with a humble heart and downcast eyes. And he put his stole around its neck and led it away like a lamb; it did not ruffle up its feathers or its spines, and its neck was like the neck of a seven-year-old bull, so that the stole scarcely went round it. Then they arrived together at the castle, and greeted Cato, and were welcomed by him. And he led that serpent into the middle of the hall and fed him in the presence of the people; and they tried to kill it. But he did not let them kill it because he said it came by God's command to wipe out the sinners who were in Carrum and to show God's power to them. And then he went outside the castle gate, and Carannog let it go, ordering it not to hurt anyone as it left, and not to come back again. And the serpent left and held to what the man of God had commanded. And Carannog took the altar, which Arthur had thought of making into a table; but whatever was put on it was hurled a long way off it. And the king begged him to accept Carrum to hold it by charter for ever, and afterwards he built a church there.