

DESCRIPTION OF WALES

By Giraldus Cambrensis

FIRST PREFACE to Stephen Langton, Archbishop of Canterbury

I, who, at the expense of three years' labour, arranged, a short time ago, in three parts, the Topography of Ireland, with a description of its natural curiosities, and who afterwards, by two years' study, completed in two parts the Vaticinal History of its Conquest; and who, by publishing the Itinerary of the Holy Man (Baldwin) through Cambria, prevented his laborious mission from perishing in obscurity, do now propose, in the present little work, to give some account of this my native country, and to describe the genius of its inhabitants, so entirely distinct from that of other nations. And this production of my industry I have determined to dedicate to you, illustrious Stephen, archbishop of Canterbury, as I before ascribed to you my Itinerary; considering you as a man no less distinguished by your piety, than conspicuous for your learning; though so humble an offering may possibly be unworthy the acceptance of a personage who, from his eminence, deserves to be presented with works of the greatest merit.

Some, indeed, object to this my undertaking, and, apparently from motives of affection, compare me to a painter, who, rich in colours, and like another Zeuxis, eminent in his art, is endeavouring with all his skill and industry to give celebrity to a cottage, or to some other contemptible object, whilst the world is anxiously expecting from his hand a temple or a palace. Thus they wonder that I, amidst the many great and striking subjects which the world presents, should choose to describe and to adorn, with all the graces of composition, such remote corners of the earth as Ireland and Wales.

Others again, reproaching me with greater severity, say, that the gifts which have been bestowed upon me from above, ought not to be wasted upon these insignificant objects, nor lavished in a vain display of learning on the commendation of princes, who, from their ignorance and want of liberality, have neither taste to appreciate, nor hearts to remunerate literary excellence. And they further add, that every faculty which emanates from the Deity, ought rather to be applied to the illustration of celestial objects, and to the exultation of his glory, from whose abundance

all our talents have been received; every faculty (say they) ought to be employed in praising him from whom, as from a perennial source, every perfect gift is derived, and from whose bounty everything which is offered with sincerity obtains an ample reward. But since excellent histories of other countries have been composed and published by writers of eminence, I have been induced, by the love I bear to my country and to posterity, to believe that I should perform neither an useless nor an unacceptable service, were I to unfold the hidden merits of my native land; to rescue from obscurity those glorious actions which have been hitherto imperfectly described, and to bring into repute, by my method of treating it, a subject till now regarded as contemptible.

What indeed could my feeble and unexercised efforts add to the histories of the destruction of Troy, Thebes, or Athens, or to the conquest of the shores of Latium? Besides, to do what has been already done, is, in fact, to be doing nothing; I have, therefore, thought it more eligible to apply my industry to the arrangement of the history of my native country, hitherto almost wholly overlooked by strangers; but interesting to my relations and countrymen; and from these small beginnings to aspire by degrees to works of a nobler cast. From these inconsiderable attempts, some idea may be formed with what success, should Fortune afford an opportunity, I am likely to treat matters of greater importance. For although some things should be made our principal objects, whilst others ought not to be wholly neglected, I may surely be allowed to exercise the powers of my youth, as yet untaught and unexperienced, in pursuits of this latter nature, lest by habit I should feel a pleasure in indolence and in sloth, the parent of vice.

I have therefore employed these studies as a kind of introduction to the glorious treasures of that most excellent of the sciences, which alone deserves the name of science; which alone can render us wise to rule and to instruct mankind; which alone the other sciences follow, as attendants do their queen. Laying therefore in my youth the foundations of so noble a structure, it is my intention, if God will assist me and prolong my life, to reserve my maturer years for composing a treatise upon so perfect, so sacred a subject: for according to the poet,