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Great British Journeys

Nicholas Crane

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Extract

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The hunter-gatherers who explored Britain as the ice sheets melted left no record of their extraordinary treks, and so the earliest complete account of a genuinely great British journey was not written until the twelfth century, when the garrulous son of a Norman knight undertook an epic circuit of Wales to recruit crusaders for a misguided adventure in the Middle East. Riding through a land before the age of maps. Giraldus Cambrensis – Gerald the Welshman – has been hailed as the first serious natural historian of Wales and one of the founders of British geography. Three manuscript copies of the first version of The Journey through Wales *have survived, although it is the third version (Gerald's final revision), translated by Lewis Thorpe in the 1970s, which endures today as the standard edition.*

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Rain had been falling for days and the track had turned into a flooded cesspit of mud and dung. My socks were waterlogged and I was soaked to the skin. The wind was so strong that the rain smacking the hood of my jacket sounded like gravel hitting glass. Beyond a field-gate, the track divided. As I extracted the map from an inside pocket, a gust of wind caught the sodden folds and tore Powys in half. Crouching in the slime, I took a compass bearing on each of the diverging tracks then transferred the bearings to the pieces of the map. There was no doubt about it. We were lost. How on earth, I wondered, had England's leading cleric found his way through these hills eight hundred years ago?

The earliest great British journey to be fully recorded began at the city gates of Hereford one spring day in 1188. Heading west for a little-known land was the Archbishop of Canterbury, the King's Chief Justiciar, a Bishop, the Court Chaplain, and a retinue of

episcopal attendants, servants and soldiers. The month of March was a few days old. Above the meandering Wye, vineyards slept behind sunny walls. In the fields, ploughman turned the stiff, winter soil while women and children tugged at weeds. Wagons loaded with manure creaked through the ruts, and flocks of sheep could be seen gathering for the trek to upland grazing. On the steep valley sides, the forests were taking colour.

Hindsight recognises that these were good days for England. The seasons were predictable. Planting began in April, and the months of June, July and August were reliably warm and settled. Harvests were generally dependable and winters mild. A century after the Normans stormed ashore at Pevensey to annihilate Harold's Anglo-Saxon army, England had become the stable, northern colony of Europe's most powerful 'empire' – a vast federation of Angevin dominions which stretched all the way from the Pyrenees to the Grampians. For the man in the field, life could have been a lot worse. The English economy was growing faster than at any time in the medieval period and a new breed of merchant was adjusting pleasurably to the ethos of profit. To the tinkle of silver, shiploads of wool and corn were being exported to the cities of Flanders. England's population of around three million was reproducing as never before; between 1086 and 1300 it would double. Ports were growing in the east, and towns were being created in the west. Markets were appearing. Land itself was breaking free of its feudal yoke and beginning to change hands for money. In England's richest, most populous region, East Anglia, Bishop Herbert de Losinga built a titanic cathedral. After thirty years of energetic rule under Henry II, England was secure and prosperous.

It was against this backdrop of domestic well-being that England's ruling classes decided to join the forces of the 'Holy Empire' in a crazed adventure in the Middle East. Their demon had been born in Tikrit, close to Baghdad, and he had risen to launch an Islamic jihad against the Christian presence in Palestine. When Saladin took Jerusalem in October, 1187, Henry II responded to the call for an immediate crusade. A swingeing 'Saladin tithe' was ordained, and the Archbishop of Canterbury was despatched to Wales to recruit crusaders.

As he rode westward along the Wye, Archbishop Baldwin knew that he was embarking upon a journey of some risk. His own king regarded the Welsh as 'a wild people who cannot be tamed', while an earlier Archbishop of Canterbury had complained that the Welsh were 'Christians in name only … barbarians'. Baldwin was out of his depth. A humble monk from Devon, he had become Abbot of the Cistercian house of Forde in the tranquil Axe valley before being appointed Bishop of Worcester and then – in 1184 – Archbishop of Canterbury. A gentle, sincere man, softened by the southern shires of England, he did not speak Welsh, and was not familiar with the wilder parts of Britain. He would be the first Archbishop of Canterbury ever to set foot in Wales.

Riding with Baldwin – in a role which ranged from diplomat to local 'fixer' and recruitment officer – was the Court Chaplain to Henry II. Gerald de Barri was uniquely suited to easing the Archbishop's passage through Wales. An Anglo-Norman-Welsh hybrid, his father was a Norman knight, William de Barri, and his mother was the daughter of the Welsh princess, Nest, who'd been a mistress of Henry I. Gerald had been educated in Latin and the classics at the Benedictine Abbey of St Peter in Gloucester, and after visits to Paris, he had been awarded benefices in both England and Wales, where he'd been instrumental in purging the diocese of St David's of corrupt churchmen. After being appointed Archdeacon of Brecon, he moved closer to the Angevin orbit in 1184, when he was made Court Chaplain to Henry II, who used him as a go-between when dealing with Welsh princes. But Gerald had another, more discreet, role on the Archbishop's mission. Three years earlier, he had accompanied Prince John to Ireland on a mission which had yielded material for two books, *The Topography of Ireland*, and *The Conquest of Ireland*. Now he had ambitions to write about Wales.

Towards the end of that first day on the road, the Archbishop's entourage emerged from the shadow of Hergest Ridge onto a level, triangular vale framed by rounded mountains. At the western apex of this triangle rose the great earth mound and timber battlements of Radnor, the frontier outpost built and held by the Braiose family. Climb the mound today and it's hard not to think of Radnor as a

Norman Alamo. From the grassy crown, you can look down on the roofs of the village, and the rectangular grid of Norman streets. It seems impregnable, but only eight years after Henry II's crusaders called by, the castle was destroyed by the Welsh. Radnor lay at the limit of Anglo-Norman control; the mountains which lifted the western horizon were part of the interior of 'Welsh Wales' – a vast no-go region for the likes of English Archbishops.

Some of the most powerful men in the British Isles were gathered at Radnor that evening. Waiting at the castle for the travellers was the Prince of South Wales, Rhys ap Gruffydd ap Rhys – first-cousin-once-removed of Gerald. For over thirty years 'The Lord Rhys' had played a game of defiance and submission with Henry II. He had won and lost land, but by 1188 he controlled the old kingdom of Deheubarth, a vast territory which stretched north to the Dovey and west to the coast of Pembrokeshire. To keep the peace, Henry had appointed Rhys his deputy in Wales. Having ridden with the Archbishop from Hereford, Chief Justiciar Ranulf de Glanville, was there too. An East Anglian baron, de Glanville was Henry II's right-hand man in England. Others from Wales included the Bishop of St David's, Peter de Leia, and the son of the Prince of Elfael.

To this motley group of mixed interests, the Archbishop delivered the mission's inaugural sermon and recruiting call. For the benefit of Welsh speakers, an interpreter stood beside Baldwin. No sooner had Baldwin finished, than the first man sprang forward. It was the Court Chaplain, Gerald de Barri. 'I myself,' he claimed, 'was the first to stand up … I threw myself at the holy man's feet and devoutly took the sign of the Cross.'

This seems to have been a prepared double-act, concocted in advance by Gerald and the Archbishop: 'It was the urgent admonition given some time before by the King,' admitted Gerald later, 'which inspired me to give this example to the others, and the persuasion and oft-repeated promises of the Archbishop and the Chief Justiciar, who never tired of repeating the King's words.' Lest readers doubt his sincerity, Gerald added: 'I acted of my own free will, after anxiously talking the matter over time and time again, in view of the insult and injury being done at this moment to the Cross of Christ.'

The Court Chaplain's theatrics worked, and as soon as Gerald had taken his vow, the Bishop of St David's, Peter de Leia, followed his example. Then Einion ab Einion Clud, the son of the Prince of Elfael, stepped forward to take the Cross, 'and many others too'. Conspicuously failing to take the Cross, was the Lord Rhys, although Gerald diplomatically allows that the prince 'went home quite determined to make the holy journey'. This less-than-unanimous endorsement of a counter-jihad should have warned the Archbishop that his mission would be challenging.

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Ahead of the mission lay a daunting circumnavigation of Wales. Gerald himself had estimated that Wales was about eight days travel in length and four days in its breadth. A complete circuit should therefore take twenty-four days. In fact, the mission would spend thirty-four days on the road and a further seventeen days resting and preaching. The total distance they would ride through the mud and stones of Wales would be around a thousand miles – equivalent to riding from London to Milan. Anyone attempting a feat like this today would find the day-to-day logistics a formidable adventure. Route-finding, difficult terrain, weather and procuring food for horse and rider, would be a constant preoccupation. But Gerald seldom mentions the trials of the road. To the medieval long-haul traveller, the discomforts were no more remarkable (and just as tedious) as the trials of modern air travel. Gerald is far more concerned with the nature of the land he is passing through. He refers to himself as 'a careful investigator of natural history', a universal discipline which allowed him to explore everything created by God, from archaeology, hydrology and zoology, to anthropology, geography and climatology. Gerald's was a young, dynamic world, rich with wonder. Wherever he looked, he saw evidence of God's ingenuity and wisdom. His catch-all curiosity skipped from killer-toads and the occult, to Welsh history, sea-level change and divine retribution. Travelling was an opportunity to harvest the fruits of Creation.

From Radnor, the mission rode over the hills towards the valley

of the River Wye, which they forded – probably in the shallows near Clyro – to reach Hay-on-Wye. The castle stood on a strategically-sited mound above the river-cliff of the Wye, with a ravine cut by a tributary running along one side of the mound. The mound is still there, with the tarmac road on one side, and the old cattle market on the other. Today, Hay is is a bibliophiles paradise, its narrow streets lined with so many second-hand bookshops that it's impossible not to tread its pavements without falling into a reflective trance. The sudden appearance on Hay's streets of the Archbishop of Canterbury eight hundred years ago did not have quite the same effect: 'After the sermon' reports Gerald, 'we saw a great number of men who wanted to take the Cross come running towards the castle … leaving their cloaks behind in the hands of the wives and friends who had tried to hold them back.'

Few of Hay's recruits had any idea of the perils involved in making a three thousand mile journey by land and sea, or knew what it was like to face a blizzard of arrows from Turkish horsemen, although they may well have been familiar with the fate of forebears who had taken the Cross. The Brut recorded that, forty years earlier, some pilgrims from Wales 'were drowned on the sea of Greece, in going with the Cross to Jerusalem'. At around the same time, the Brut of Gwent noted that so many Welsh pilgrims left for the Holy Land, that 'their absence was severely felt'. Once the Cross and the vow were taken, the pilgrimage was enforced by a penalty of excommunication. Only in exceptional circumstances could absolution be granted. In the flailing limbs and the screams and the shouts of loved-ones, a distant Holy War erupted in communities who knew little of the world beyond their own valley walls. Every husband who vowed to free the Holy Land – or die in the attempt – was breaking his marriage vow. Families splintered as men fell for the spell of the Cross … or took advantage of a marital exit strategy. Under canon law, wives could prevent their husbands participating in the crusade on the grounds that a prolonged absence abrogated their marriage vows. All knew that there was little chance of returning from the Holy Land.

From Hay, the mission probed deeper into the Welsh heartland.

While the Wye curled to Baldwin's right, the dark face of the Black Mountains reared up on his left. There were streams to ford, and beyond the castle at Bronllys, gentle, wooded hills which opened presently to reveal Llanddew: Gerald's archdeaconery.

Today, Llanddew is little more than a hamlet. The remains of Gerald's home stand in the garden of the old vicarage. The corner of his hall can be seen, and his doorway, and the well. Over the waving trees, one can glimpse the distant tilt of the Brecon Beacons. It is a quiet place, and still feels remote. The Ordnance Survey map carries a hint of Llanddew's former eminence, labelling its south-facing slope 'Bishop's Meadow'. When Henry VIII's topographer, John Leland, rode by in the 1530s, Gerald's archdeaconery had 'fallen douen for the more part', while the Bishop's Palace had become 'no thing but an onsemeli ruine'. Two hundred years earlier, this had been Gerald's home; the place where he pared his quill, meditated and prayed. 'I occupy a tiny dwelling-place,' he writes of Llanddew, 'convenient enough for my studies and my work, and here I pass my time in a sort of happy-go-lucky mediocrity.' To a modern suburbanite, Gerald's home wouldn't seem so tiny; the ruined gable suggests that he had room to swing more than a few cats. Gerald gives the impression that he is content with his modest seclusion at Llanddew: 'The house gives me pleasure and it is conducive to thoughts of the next world,' he muses. 'I would not change it for all the riches of Croesus.'

Not riches, maybe, but Gerald would have traded Llanddew for St David's. For over a decade, he had been manoeuvring to free Wales from domination by the Archbishopric of Canterbury, and key to this aim was the raising of St David's to an archbishopric. But first Gerald had to become the Bishop of St David's, and in this, he had been thwarted by his travelling companion, Peter de Leia, who had beaten Gerald in the election twelve years earlier. Gerald now found himself shackled by this journey to the two men – the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of St David's – who stood between him and ecclesiastical freedom for Wales.

Gerald was a dreamer, and at Llandew, he drifts off on one of his periodic digressions to a nearby mountain valley so that he can

share his favourite religious house. Established in the early 1100s, the abbey of Llanddewi Nant Honddu ('The English have corrupted the name to Llanthony') had been in the spiritual vanguard of religious reform in Britain. Gerald knew Llantony intimately, possibly even trained there. Snuggled into a valley 'no more than three arrow-shots in width', it is, sighs Gerald, better located than 'any of the other monasteries in the whole Island of Britain.' Its church, he writes, is built with squared stones and roofed with sheets of lead, which the architect in Gerald praises for being 'admirably suited to the nature of the place'. And that nature was one of contemplation. Setting up the abbey's daughter house in Gloucester as an emblem of the modern, vice-ridden, acquisitive world, he asks that the sanctuary on the Honddu be reserved for those whose minds are tuned to spirituality. Let those, he asks, who prefer books and prayers, and helping the needy, come to the Honddu, with its promise of eternal bliss and 'the concourse of angels'. Those who strive for earthly possessions, for entertainment and for the company of mortal men, can go to Gloucester and 'clamour about the affairs and the pretences of the world'. It is Gloucester's lust for greater wealth, Gerald reminds us, which causes vice 'and all of the cares which follow in its train'. Here, in Llanthony, 'let the golden mean continue to flourish'. And then he is away, strewing the page with elegant phrases plucked from Ovid and Horace, Lucan and Petronius. 'Mortal appetite for success is insatiable!' 'Why can we not learn to temper our desires and be satisfied with what we have?' Last time I visited Llanthony the snow was slanting hard against the old red sandstone of its ruined walls.

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Separating the wilder reaches of inner Wales from the fertile, colonised, Anglo-Norman valleys of the south, were the Black Mountains. Gerald is unclear whether the mission cut through the heart of the mountains to reach the Usk valley, or skirted their western flank. 'From Llanddew,' he writes, 'we made our way along the rugged pass of Coed Grwyne or Grwyne Wood, by a narrow trackway overgrown with trees.' At least two authorities have

identified the pass of 'Coed Grwyne' as the saddle at the head of the valley of Grwyne Fawr, in the Black Mountains, but it would have made far more sense to have avoided the 1,800 foot climb and simply followed the old Roman road down the Usk from Brecon to Abergavenny. Perhaps the 'Coed' Gerald refers to was a lost place-name at Blwch (Welsh for 'pass'), where the modern A40 still climbs to a tight notch in an outlying ridge of the Black Mountains. Shutting out the grunting coaches and streams of cars, it isn't difficult to imagine this as a rugged, overgrown mountain track.

Baldwin was no mountaineer, and Gerald writes that the archbishop was 'in a hurry to reach Usk Castle'. Down here, as they closed on the Anglo-Norman coastal belt, the Archbishop could expect a more positive response to his recruiting mission. And the Usk valley proved fruitful: After the sermon at Abergavenny, 'many took the Cross'; by the stone keep at Usk Castle, 'a large group of men was signed with the Cross'; at Newport, where the Usk runs into the sea, 'many people were persuaded to take the Cross'. But Gerald is coy with his numbers, and it is not until the end of his book that he finally reveals how many Welshmen responded to the invitation to fight Saladin. 'About three thousand men were signed', he claims as they end their journey, 'all of them highly skilled in the use of the spear and the arrow, most experienced in military affairs and only too keen to attack the enemies of our faith at the first opportunity'. If we are to assume that Gerald's final figure is a modest exaggeration, and that they actually recruited around 2,500, then the mission was conscripting an average of around fifty a day. At the same time in Mainz, it is said that no less than thirteen thousand took the cross in a single day. Admittedly, the gathering at Mainz was a grander affair (among others, the German Emperor was there) than one of Baldwin's back-country sermons, but it would be unsurprising if the Archbishop was not impatient to increase his tally.

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The mouth of the Usk was a turning point marked by a natural signpost Gerald calls the 'Golden Rock'. It is still there, jutting into

the Bristol Channel like a stranded hulk: 'High above the water,' writes Gerald, 'not far from Caerleon, there stands a rocky eminence which dominates the River Severn. When the sun's rays strike it, the stone shines very bright and takes on a golden sheen.'

Up on the brow of the cliff where the grass has been eroded around the modern navigation beacon, you can see stratified layers of bronze-coloured alluvium – Gerald's golden rock. In medieval times this was the most important landmark on this stretch of coast, both for shipping and for land travellers; it has survived on the Ordnance Survey as 'Gold Cliff'. Here, the Archbishop's mission joined the well-travelled 'coast road' to St David's, still ten days or so to the west. But in leaving behind the less-trodden tracks and ominous forests of inner Wales, the mission was now confronted by dangerous river crossings.

The problem was not just the width of the rivers at their outlets. The tides of the Severn Estuary have the largest range in the British Isles, and the estuaries which the coast road crossed were notorious for their quicksands, shifting sand-bars, strong currents and sudden floods. Gerald sets the scene for this litany of aquatic trials by telling a story about a notorious ford just beyond Newport. Almost facing Gold Cliff was a 'small stream known as the Nant Pencarn', which 'winds through the district called Wentloog'. The river can probably be identified as the Ebbw, on Wentlooge Level (a farmhouse close to the river is still called Pen-carn). Today, the Ebbw – or 'wild horse river' – has been broken by suburbs, factories and a motorway, but in the days before the Level was drained for farmland, the river was 'passable only at certain places and by certain fords'. It wasn't the *depth* of Nant Pencarn which posed difficulties, but 'the way in which it has hollowed out its bed and … the muddiness of the marsh-land which surrounds it'. Gerald goes on to relate that in earlier times the public road had crossed the river at a place named Rhyd Pencarn – which he translates as 'the ford beneath the overhanging rock'. Fords, like forests and passes, had many associations with calamity, and here Gerald repeats one that he got from the Scottish seer, Merlin Silvester, who prophesied that, should 'a strong man with a freckled face cross over Rhyd Pencarn on his way to lead an

invasion of South Wales', the Welsh could expect to get beaten. Gerald had cause to believe this, since his own, strong, freckled King Henry II, had indeed galloped through this ford en route to defeat The Lord Rhys in 1163. Eight hundred years on, the river can be found beyond some scrubland. Canalised between concrete, and speckled with refuse, the 'Nant Pencarn' has lost a little of its romance.

Of the various river-mouths the mission was forced to ford on its journey west, the worst by far lay just beyond the Cistercian monastery of Margam. Any fears coursing through the Archbishop' entourage, were put on hold for the evening, for Margam had the reputation of being the most charitable Cistercian house in Wales. Walls, arches and the shell of the chapter house still stand beside Junction 38 of the M4, mute on mown lawns. In 1188, the monastery was thriving in its secluded cleft below the tumuli-dotted heights of Mynydd Margam. Here, the travellers received 'the most open-handed hospitality'. But as soon as they rode from the gates, they were faced by an alarming change of scenery. Outside Margam, the broad coastal plain they'd followed from the mouth of the Usk, was pinched out of existence by a forested wall which reached to the tide line.

Anticipating difficulties, the misssion was to be guided that day by the local prince, Morgan ap Caradog ap Iestyn. Following the road along the sands below the hills, first they had to cross the Afan. Here, the riders were 'delayed for some time' as the ebbing tide combined with the flow of the river to make the Afan unfordable. Today, the river is shuttered between suburban terraces and concrete highway walls. Try to wade it (I did, and it was fast and surprisingly deep) and you realise how, and why, the crusaders ran into trouble. The Afan's unnerving turbulence is due to it falling 1,600 feet during its thirteen-mile course.

Far worse was to follow. Anxious not to be caught by the tide, the mission hurried along the coast road towards the next obstacle: the River Neath, notorious, writes Gerald, for being 'the most dangerous and difficult of access of all the rivers of South Wales, on account of its quicksands'.

Set off in Gerald's hoof-prints today, and you find the six miles of sands from Margam to Neath buried beneath the derelict site of