

4 Books: Welsh Icons United

In 1868, a Scotsman called William Forbes Skene (1809-92) published the contents of what he considered to be the four most important early Welsh manuscripts. He entitled his work *The Four Ancient Books of Wales containing the Cymric poems attributed to the bards of the sixth century*.

Skene's four Ancient Books were:

- The Black Book of Carmarthen
- The Book of Taliesin
- The Book of Aneirin
- The Red Book of Hergest.

During Skene's time, the first two books were in the library of W.W.E. Wynne at Peniarth, Merioneth; the third was in the library of Sir Thomas Phillipps at Middle Hill, Worcestershire; and the fourth was in the library of Jesus College, Oxford. All four are incomplete manuscripts, written on parchment, and, apart from the Red Book of Hergest, they were probably written by monks.

Skene's interest in these manuscripts resulted from his passion for Celtic studies, and especially for early Scottish history, inspired by his father's great friend, Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832). Although a busy practising lawyer, Skene spent much of his time researching Scottish history. He realised the importance of the early Welsh poems contained in these manuscripts as they related to northern England and southern Scotland.

Although Skene's work is no longer used by students, his *Four Ancient Books of Wales* was at one time the most reliable book on early Welsh literature. The texts were eventually superseded by the editions of J. Gwengvryn Evans, and the analysis by 20th century scholars such as Sir Ifor Williams.

The four manuscripts chosen by Skene have been exhibited separately at the National Library of Wales in the past, and are now united for the very first time.

The Black Book of Carmarthen

The National Library of Wales's Black Book of Carmarthen is the earliest surviving collection of Welsh poetry, and deserves its status as the most iconic of all Welsh manuscripts.

It was written by one scribe, during different periods of his life, before and about the year 1250. He wrote on eight gatherings of strong parchment, and may possibly have intended to create a number of volumes, not one. The contents of the Book suggest that it was compiled in south-west Wales, possibly at Whitland or Carmarthen.

There are three main categories of poems in the Black Book:

- religious poetry, such as the *Dialogue Between the Body and the Soul*
- secular praise poetry, such as Cynddelw's *Elegy on the Death of Madog ap Maredudd* (last ruler of a united Powys, who died in 1160)
- poetry from early Welsh tales, particularly those relating to the Myrddin Legend.

The 6th century figure of Myrddin who appears in the Black Book poems known as *Yr Afallennau* and *Yr Oianau* is very different from the Merlin portrayed by Geoffrey of Monmouth, and developed in later continental Arthurian Legend. Here, he is a pitiful creature living wild in the woods of Northern Britain following defeat in battle. He converses with an apple tree and a pig, and proclaims the future of his people in the form of prophecy.

Other striking poems in the Black Book include

- a dialogue between Arthur and a gatekeeper named Glewlwyd 'of the Mighty Grasp'
- verses associated with the tale of Seithenyn and the drowning of a land called Cantre'r Gwaelod
- grave stanzas, mourning ancient heroes with references to their final resting places.

In comparison with the Books of Taliesin and Aneirin, there are no poems in the Black Book that can be dated to a period earlier than three centuries or so before its compilation.

The manuscript was once owned by Sir John Prise (1502?-1555) of Brecon, agent of king Henry VIII at the Dissolution of the Monasteries, and he obtained it from the Treasurer of St David's Cathedral before 1541. It was stated then that it came from the Priory of St John the Evangelist and Teulyddog, Carmarthen.

The volume was known as the 'Black Book' in the 16th century, probably in reference to its leather covering, which may have been original, and which has not survived. The manuscript was rebound in black leather at the National Library in 1976.

The Book of Taliesin

Although written during the first half of the 14th century, the National Library's Book of Taliesin may contain the earliest surviving poetry in Welsh. It is also the earliest surviving compilation of poems ascribed to one poet.

Not all of the sixty or so poems in the manuscript were written by a poet called Taliesin Ben Beirdd ("Chief of the Poets"). Some were ascribed to him because they contained the kind of native or Latin learning associated with such a figure. However, the work of scholars such as Sir Ifor Williams during the 20th century identified at least 12 poems in the Book which may indeed have been composed by Taliesin, a poet who was active towards the end of the 6th century.

At the time of the 5th century Roman withdrawal from Britain, the present day north of England was a collection of indigenous Brythonic (or early Welsh) kingdoms. They were gradually losing their territory to the advancing Angles, or English-speaking warriors. In the Book, Taliesin praises Urien and his son Owain ab Urien, rulers of a territory known as Rheged in northern England. The poems refer to battles between these Brythonic rulers and the English settlers who were expanding their influence westwards in this area.

Other poems in the manuscript include:

- *Armes Prydein Fawr*, a 10th century prophecy, including the earliest surviving references to *Kymro* and *Kymry*, describing Welsh people
- *Preiddeu Annwfn*, referring to king Arthur's ill-fated voyage to the Otherworld to win a cauldron
- elegies to Cunedda and Dylan Eil Ton (a legendary figure)
- the earliest Western reference to the feats of Hercules and Alexander.

The manuscript was written by one scribe, probably in south Wales, and possibly in Glamorgan. He was also responsible for writing four other surviving volumes, all of prose, of which two are held at the National Library of Wales.

'The Book of Taliesin' is a late title, possibly the invention of Robert Vaughan of Hengwrt, the 17th century owner of three of the four *Ancient Books of Wales*.

The Book of Aneirin

Owned by Cardiff Council, and on long-term deposit at the National Library, the mid-13th century Book of Aneirin may also contain some of the earliest poetry composed in Welsh, and is the only one of the *Four Ancient Books* believed to have been written in North Wales.

The manuscript was the work of two monks, possibly at the Cistercian abbey of Aberconwy, before the end of Welsh independence in 1282. However, the archaic poetry they copied was old even then, and belonged to the late 6th century Welsh-speaking territory known as *Yr Hen Ogledd* ('The Old North'), well beyond the present boundaries of Wales, in present day southern Scotland and northern England.

Around A.D. 590-600, Mynyddog Mwynfawr, the king of Manaw Gododdin (present day Edinburgh), sent a choice band of 300 mounted warriors to repel the Angles at the strategic site of Catraeth (present day Catterick, Yorkshire). However, they were vastly outnumbered, and nearly all perished in battle.

One of those who survived the catastrophe was the poet Neirin (or Aneirin), who composed a series of short poems in Welsh, not describing the battle, but rather praising the heroic dead Brythonic warriors, who had died faithful to their lord. Mynyddawg Mwynfawr had given hospitality and sustenance to his retinue for a year before they travelled to Catraeth, and one of the main themes of the poem is that the warriors 'paid for their mead', i.e. with their lives:

*The men who fought, they leapt forward together,
short-lived, drunk over their strained mead –
the retinue of Mynyddawg, famed in battle.
They paid for their feats of mead with their lives.*

The name of the tribe became the title of the poem, and it is as 'the Gododdin' that the Aberconwy monks wrote the elegies. This is the only surviving early copy; its original form could have been composed as far as 1400 years ago.

In strange contrast, the Book of Aneirin also contains a lullaby in which a mother sings to a child called Dinogad of the hunting exploits of his father. The contents suggest that the poem was also composed in the territory known as the Old North.

The Book of Aneirin shared shelf-space with the Black Book of Carmarthen and Book of Taliesin at the Hengwrt library until it was stolen during the 1780s. It was eventually purchased by Cardiff Free Library from the collection of Sir Thomas Phillipps of Middle Hill, Worcestershire in 1896, and now shares temporary accommodation with its former shelf-mates at the National Library.

The Red Book of Hergest

The magnificent Red Book of Hergest, owned by Jesus College, Oxford, is regarded by many as the high-point of medieval Welsh manuscript production. The largest in size of all medieval Welsh-language manuscripts, and containing a large number of prose texts and poetry, it is a self-contained, one-volume library. It last visited Wales for an exhibition here at the National Library in 1982, that visit believed to be its first return to Wales since 1701.

The manuscript was written by three scribes who worked together between *c.* 1382 and 1410. It contains five poems addressed to Hopcyn ap Tomas ab Einion (*c.* 1330-1408) of Ynysforgan, near Swansea. The main scribe is Hywel Fychan ap Hywel Goch of Builth, who wrote other manuscripts for Hopcyn ap Tomas, and whose hand may also be seen in the White Book of Rhydderch and in the Red Book of Talgarth. It is likely, therefore, that the Red Book of Hergest was written for, or under the direction of, Hopcyn ap Tomas, who owned a library of Welsh manuscripts.

The Red Book is notable for containing almost all Welsh literature before 1400, with the exception of:

- the early poetry of the Book of Taliesin and the Book of Aneirin
- religious and legal texts
- the 14th - century compositions of Welsh poets known as *cywyddwyr*.

Among other texts, it contains:

- a complete copy of the Four Branches of the Mabinogi
- Arthurian tales such as *Culhwch ac Olwen*, *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* (the only copy), *Owein* and *Peredur*
- a medical tract attributed to the Physicians of Myddfai
- the poems of the Llywarch Hen saga
- the poems of the Welsh court poets, known as the *Gogynfeirdd*.

Following the involvement of Hopcyn ap Tomas's grandson, another Hopcyn, in a failed insurrection against king Edward IV in the mid-15th century, the family's possessions were seized and given to the loyal Sir Roger Vaughan of Tretower, Breconshire. A branch of the Vaughan family lived at Hergest, near Kington, Herefordshire, and it was during the manuscript's residence there during the 16th century that its importance was realised. Because of the colour of its leather covers, and its home, it became known as 'The Red Book of Hergest'.

By the end of the 17th century, the Red Book was in the hands of the antiquary Thomas Wilkins, rector of Saint Mary Church, Glamorgan, who died in 1699. His son of the same name presented the volume to Jesus College, Oxford in 1701, over a hundred years before any public library had been established in Wales.

More than Four Books?

Today, it could be argued that there are more than four ‘Ancient Books of Wales’. Obvious candidates for inclusion would be the White Book of Rhydderch, similar in contents to the Red Book, and containing the earliest complete *Mabinogi*, and the Hendregadredd Manuscript, the most important collection of Welsh court poetry.

However, when Skene published his work in 1868, the importance of the White Book of Rhydderch had not been realised, and the Hendregadredd Manuscript was still missing (it was discovered in a wardrobe in Porthmadog in 1910).

There are other ‘ancient’ books that could be added to the list, such as

- The 8th century gospel-book of St Chad (from Llandeilo Fawr) at Lichfield cathedral
- The 11th century Ricemarch Psalter (from Llanbadarn Fawr) at Trinity College, Dublin
- Or the 12th century gospel-book and cartulary known as the Book of Llandaf (held at The National Library of Wales).
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Of Welsh-language treasures, one could add the Book of the Anchorite of Llanddewibrefi, now at Jesus College, Oxford; the Bodorgan Manuscript of Welsh Laws, still in private ownership in Anglesey; or the Boston Manuscript of the Laws of Hywel Dda, the National Library’s most recent acquisition.

Other ‘iconic’ volumes worthy of inclusion are *Yn y lhyvyr hwnn* (1546), the first book printed in the Welsh language; William Morgan’s translation of the Bible into Welsh (1588); and Mary Jones’s Bible (1799), now kept at Cambridge University Library.

What would you choose?

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