

Why All The Fuss About Geoffrey?

Geoffrey of Monmouth is the Welsh historian who wrote the “*Historia Regum Britannie*” (History of the Kings of Britain), completed in 1136. It was based on an ancient source which he did not name, at least not to the satisfaction of later historians. His work was popular in his time, but his failure to clearly name his source left him open to attack from historians who have unjustifiably thrown the entire history of the Britons, from Brutus to Cadwaller into the rubbish bin. However, the attack has not been based on any genuine pursuit of scholarship, but has been motivated by political and sectarian prejudice.

Note: In this discussion, the term “British” means “Welsh”. The Britons were driven into Wales during the Saxon invasion.

What Was Geoffrey’s Source?

Geoffrey begins his book by expressing his concern about the lack of knowledge about the kings of Britain, before the Christian era, and he describes his acquisition of a “very ancient book” as follows:

At a time when I was giving a good deal of attention to such matters, Walter, Archdeacon of Oxford, a man skilled in the art of public speaking and well informed about the history of foreign countries, presented me with a certain very ancient book written in the British language. This book, attractively composed to form a consecutive and orderly narrative, set out all the deeds of these men, from Brutus, the first King of the Britons, down to Cadwallader, the son of Cadwallo. At Walter’s request I have taken the trouble to translate the book into Latin, although, indeed, I have been content with my own expressions and my own homely style and I have gathered no gaudy flowers of speech in other men’s gardens. If I had adorned my page with high-flown rhetorical figures, I should have bored my readers, for they would have been forced to spend more time in discovering the meaning of my words than in following the story.¹

Flinders Petrie², the early 20th century archaeologist and historian identified the “very ancient book” as Tysilio’s Chronicle, although he was at a loss to explain why it had been ignored for centuries. There was an English translation by Peter Roberts, published in 1811, and a second edition in 1862, but in 1917 it had become so rare that Flinders Petrie could not find a copy to work on, and he had to get one of the British Museum copies typed out. Fortunately, it has now been made available as a

¹ History of the Kings of Britain. Geoffrey of Monmouth, 1136. Translated by Lewis Thorpe. Penguin Classics. ISBN 0-14-044170-0.

² Neglected British History. Flinders Petrie, FRS. Proceedings of the British Academy, Volume VIII, pp 251-278. Paper presented to the Academy on November 7, 1917.

facsimile reprint, for everyone to read.³ There is also a translation by Bill Cooper, based on the Jesus College MS LXI, and the complete text is available on the Anno Mundi Books website.⁴

Tysilio (c.548-640) was a monk who was at Meifod and Anglesey. He rebuilt the Abbey Church at Meifod, but then he fled to Brittany for political reasons, and founded a second monastery at St. Suliac. In the relative safety of Brittany, he wrote his “Chronicle of the Kings of Britain”, although he was not the sole author. He died in 640, but the book records the death of Cadwallan in 688, so it appears that the work was started by Tysilio and continued by the monks at St. Suliac.

The last sentence of the book is a postscript by Walter of Oxford as follows:

I, Walter, Archdeacon of Oxford, translated this book from the Welsh into Latin, and in my old age have again translated it from the Latin into Welsh.

Peter Roberts, editor of the 1811 edition which Flinders Petrie was unable to find, adds a footnote as follows:

Probably because he had given the original Welsh copy to Geoffrey of Monmouth.

Did Geoffrey Name His Source?

Geoffrey described his source as a “very ancient book” that he obtained from “Walter, Archdeacon of Oxford”. While this appears vague by modern-day standards, it would have been perfectly acceptable in his time. This was the pre-Renaissance period, before the invention of the printing press, when books were hand-written and expensive, available only to kings, aristocrats and senior priests. There were books available in the monasteries, for use by the monks, but they would rarely be moved from one monastery to another. The relative scarcity of books made them easy to identify, without the indexing and cataloguing systems that we have today. Books were sometimes named, not by title and author, but by who possessed them or the place where they were normally held. An example is the so-called “Book of Basingwerke Abbey” which appears as an alternative text in the Peter Roberts edition of Tysilio’s Chronicle.

The Good Book of Oxford

Geoffrey’s “very ancient book” (or an early Latin translation) is otherwise known as the “Good Book of Oxford”, and is referred to as such by Geoffrey Gaimar in his “L’Estoire des Engleis”.⁵ This is a poetic book written in Anglo-Norman, published

³ Chronicle of the Kings of Britain. Translated by Peter Roberts in 1811 from the Welsh copy attributed to Tysilio. Facsimile reprint by Llanerch Publishers. ISBN 1-86143-111-2. *Note:* The original 1811 edition contains some additional material from other histories that is omitted from the facsimile reprint.

⁴ Chronicle of the Early Britons. Translated by Bill Cooper, based on the Jesus College MS LXI. www.annomundi.com/history/chronicle_of_the_early_britons.htm

⁵ L’Estoire des Engleis. Geoffrey Gaimar, c.1140. Edited by Alexander Bell and re-published 1960 by B. Blackwell, Oxford, for the Anglo-Norman Text Society. Written in Anglo-Norman.

shortly after Geoffrey of Monmouth's "History of the Kings of Britain" and is complementary to it. Gaimar confirms without doubt that Geoffrey of Monmouth must have been working from a genuine source and I have dealt with this issue in a separate article on the [Good Book of Oxford](#).⁶

A Political Perspective

Although Geoffrey identified his source adequately according to pre-Renaissance standards, it is nevertheless curious that he never mentioned Tysilio, and he never identified Brittany as the place where Walter's "very ancient book" originally came from. The reason for this is possibly because Tysilio was a political exile, and Geoffrey was anxious to avoid controversy that would jeopardise his position as a Canon of the church, or might embarrass his patron, Robert, Earl of Gloucester.

Tysilio was not just an ordinary monk, he was also an absconded prince. He was the second son of Brochfael Ysgythrog and he fled his father's court at an early age and became a monk. His family never accepted his departure into monastic life, and when his brother died, he was expected to marry his sister-in-law, Queen Gwenwynwyn and take up his position as King of Powys. He refused both the marriage and the kingdom, and he fled to Brittany with a few followers when his monastery was being persecuted. The story is related in the Encyclopaedia Britannica.⁷

Why Was Geoffrey Trashed?

Geoffrey's "History of the Kings of Britain" was widely distributed, and was translated into a number of European languages. It had considerable influence on subsequent historians, and was especially popular in Wales where it became a source of national inspiration.

However, it ran into trouble during the time of Henry VIII, when a Roman Catholic priest called Polydore Vergil (c.1470-1555) published his "Anglica Historia", denouncing the entire history of the Britons with the following words:

Trulie ther is nothingse more obscure, more uncertaine, or unknowne then the affaires of the Brittons from the beginninge.

The "Anglica Historia" consisted of 25 books altogether and was published in a number of successive editions. The first edition was published in 1534, the second in 1546, the third in 1555, and a number of further editions up to 1651. Details of Polydore Vergil, and his attack on the British history, are given by McKisack.⁸

⁶ The Good Book of Oxford: www.annomundi.com/history/gaimar.htm

⁷ Tysilio, Encyclopaedia Britannica: www.britannia.com/bios/ebk/tysilpw.html

⁸ Medieval History in the Tudor Age, May McKisack, Oxford University Press, 1971, p.98-101.

There was an angry reaction from the Welsh, particularly from John Price and Humphrey Lloyd^{9, 10, 11}. See the Denunciation of Polydore Vergil.¹²

However, the question that needs to be asked is, why did the accepted history of the Britons remain largely unchallenged for four centuries, from 1136 when Geoffrey of Monmouth published his “History of the Kings of Britain”, until 1534 when Polydore Vergil published the first edition of his “Anglica Historia”. The reason for Vergil’s attack was because Henry VIII was the son of a Welshman, and he had taken it upon himself to challenge the Pope.

Polydore Vergil was an Italian priest who was given various appointments in England. In 1502, after his ordination, he was appointed as a sub-collector of Peter’s Pence (a contribution to the Pope). He was favoured by Henry VII, who invited him to write a history of England. Henry VIII began to reign in 1509, and Cardinal Wolsey rose to a position of power as the administrator of the affairs of both state and church. By 1515, Vergil had fallen out of favour with Wolsey, probably because he didn’t support Wolsey’s ambitions, and he spent some time in prison, but he was released and his position was restored. He disliked the confrontation between Henry VIII and the Pope, and he chose a very significant date for the publication of the first edition of his “Anglica Historia”. The year 1534 was the very same year when Parliament passed the Act of Supremacy, declaring Henry to be Supreme Head of the Church of England. In an early draft of his Epistle Dedicatory to Henry VIII, he describes his preparation of the “Anglica Historia” as follows:

*I first began to spend the hours of my night and day in searching the pages of English and foreign histories . . . I spent six whole years in reading these annals and histories during which, imitating the bees which laboriously gather their honey from every flower, I collected with discretion material proper for a true history.*¹³

The question is, when were the “six whole years”? If these were the six years preceding the publication of his book, we have the following chronology:

- 1527. Henry VIII made up his mind to get rid of his wife, Katherine of Aragon, because she gave him six children and the only one who survived infancy was a sickly girl, Princess Mary. He had fallen in love with Anne Boleyn, and hoped that she would give him a son who would be a suitable heir to the throne.

⁹ *Historiae Brytannicae Defensio*, John Price of Brecon (c.1502-1555), published 1573. Copy available at the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth.

¹⁰ *Historie of Cambria*, written originally in British by Caradoc of Llancarfan, translated into English by Humphrey Lloyd and augmented by David Powell. Published 1584. Reprinted for John Harding, London, 1811. See the “Description of Cambria”, written by John Price and augmented by Humphrey Lloyd. www.annomundi.com/history/denunciation_of_polydore_vergil.htm#description_of_cambria

¹¹ *Breviary of Britain*, Humphrey Lloyd. First published in Latin under the title “*Commentariolum Descriptionis Britannicae Fragmentum*” in 1572, then translated into English and published as “*Breviary of Britain*” a year later.

¹² Denunciation of Polydore Vergil: www.annomundi.com/history/denunciation_of_polydore_vergil.htm

¹³ Polydore Vergil, F.A. Gasquet, *TRHS* n.s. XVI (1902), 11. See McKisack p.100.

- 1528. Polydore Vergil started working intensively on the preparation of his “Anglica Historia”.
- 1529. Pope Clement VII refused to annul Henry’s marriage. Henry turned against Wolsey because of his failure to obtain the annulment, deprived him of his office as chancellor and arrested him on a charge of treason. He appointed Thomas Cranmer as Archbishop of Canterbury and married Anne Boleyn, in defiance of the Pope. All ties between the the English Church and Rome were broken, including the payment of Peter’s Pence.
- 1534. The Act of Supremacy was passed, and Vergil published his “Anglica Historia” in the same year.

If this chronology is correct, it means that Vergil was working on his history throughout the entire period of Henry’s confrontation with Rome. If the “six whole years” was an earlier period, for example immediately after Henry VII had asked him to write a history of England, why didn’t he publish it as soon as it was ready? Why wait until 1534? If he was just procrastinating, he could have waited longer, but no, he decided to publish in 1534 because a king of Welsh pedigree had broken away from Rome and it was time to trash the history of the Britons.

Vergil’s work was written in Latin, for consumption in his native Italy and not just in England. He made periodic visits to Italy, and finally returned to his home town of Urbino in 1550. There is a brief description of him in Encyclopaedia Britannica¹⁴ and his biography was written by Hay.¹⁵

The Consequence of Trashing Geoffrey

Vergil’s “Anglica Historia” had considerable influence, and became required reading in English schools in 1582, by order of the Privy Council.

Geoffrey’s “History of the Kings of Britain” had been equally popular in its time, so that its fall from grace, in the eyes of the establishment, meant the whole history of the Britons was out of favour, regardless of where it came from. If the affairs of the Britons were uncertain and unknown from the beginning, as Vergil claims, then every Welsh historian had to be thrown into the rubbish bin, including Nennius and Gildas. Even the memory of Claudia and others who brought Christianity to Britain during the first century had to be wiped out. (See Early British Christianity¹⁶).

This process of ethnic cleansing did not happen all at once. It happened gradually and has been assisted by the advocates of evolution who prefer to eliminate any histories that might go back to Brutus in the 11th century BC, or even as far back as the Flood in the 24th century BC (see my article on the Samotheans¹⁷). Now we are left with history books that don’t tell us anything before the arrival of Julius Caesar in 55 BC. Everything pre-Roman is just “stone age” or “bronze age”.

¹⁴ Polydore Vergil, Encyclopaedia Britannica:
www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/626042/Polydore-Vergil

¹⁵ Polydore Vergil, D. Hay (1952), pp. 1-21. See McKisack p.98.

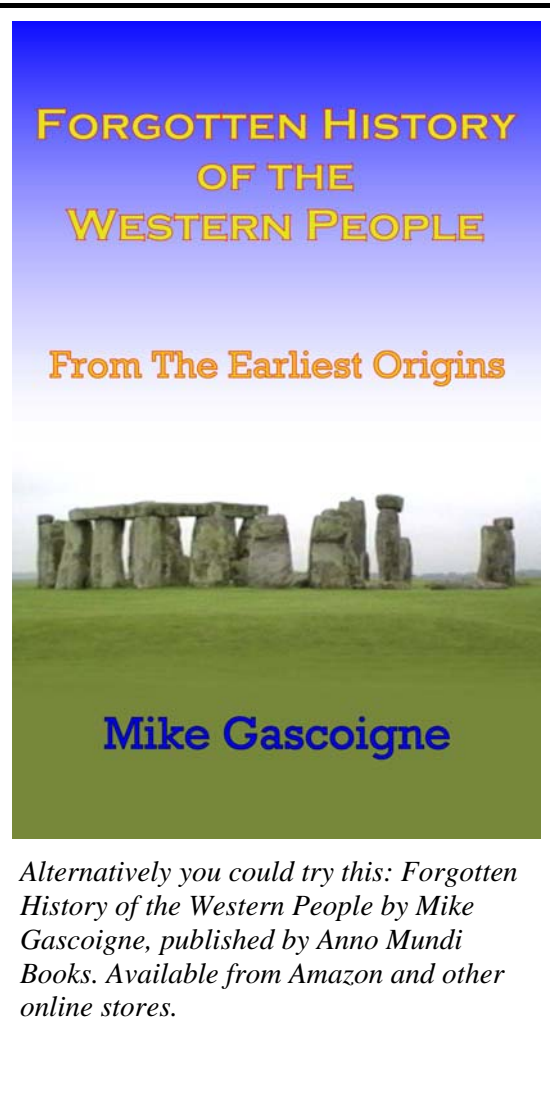
¹⁶ Early British Christianity : www.annomundi.com/history/early_british_christianity.htm

¹⁷ The Samotheans - First Inhabitants of Britain: www.annomundi.com/history/samotheans.htm

Rediscovering British History

It's easy enough to get a copy of Geoffrey of Monmouth's "History of the Kings of Britain". It's available as a Penguin Classic, but it contains an Introduction from the translator, Lewis Thorpe, who considers it to be a dubious account of history. He comes out with the familiar claim that Geoffrey's source cannot be found, and he mentions neither Tysilio nor Gaimar. The best thing to do is read the book and ignore the Introduction. The book contains the tales of Arthur and Merlin, and a fair amount of magic, but you just have to make up your own mind what you think of it. All ancient histories are like that, and you have to look for the facts behind the fantasies.

Some of the other books, mentioned in the footnotes to this article, are rather more obscure and have to be ordered from libraries or specialist bookshops. To obtain them, you might have to be persistent, but the effort is worthwhile. The rediscovery of British history has to be a collective effort, so that long forgotten books are put back onto the library shelves because people have asked for them.



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