

Arthur, Merlin — and Thomas

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

For several generations after James Macpherson published his pseudo-translations of Ossian's poems in 1760-3, scholars were convinced that the hero of the poems, Fingal (*Fionn mac Cumhail*), was a historical figure of the third century AD. The fact that the genuine Ossianic ballads show him fighting the vikings, who arrived in the eighth century AD, took some explaining.

Nobody believes nowadays that Fionn existed at all. The same goes for his English counterpart, Robin Hood, though attempts have been made to link his name with historical figures such as (curiously) Robert Bruce.

Arthur, the hero of the Britons, has held out longer, thanks to an impressive alibi. Everything he is claimed to have done fits a sixth-century existence, and sixth-century Britain is a black hole in our knowledge which he very conveniently illuminates. But the edifice is crumbling. After decades of saying that Arthur may well have existed, and that, if so, he would have been a sixth-century battle-leader of the Britons against the English, scholars are at last coming to the sensible view that he was not a historical figure at all, but simply performed the same role in the mythology of British-speaking peoples as did Fionn for the Gael and (to some extent) Robin Hood for the English: that is, as leader of a band of young men who roved around outside the laws and restrictions of settled society, enjoying the hunt, giving names to features of the landscape, and winning battles against foreign invaders.

We can say more, however. Arthur is not dead, but sleeps inside a mountain, for he is 'the once and future king'. Like Fionn for all Gaelic speakers, be they of Ireland or Scotland, his stories place him anywhere and everywhere in British-speaking lands from the Grand Duchy of Brittany to the Kingdom of Strathclyde.

(Strathclyde in those days stretched from Glenfalloch at the top end of Loch Lomond in the north to Peeblesshire in the east and Cumbria in the south.) A parallel cycle of stories concerns Merlin (*Myrddin*), who is a prophet: in contrast with the universal figure of Arthur, he is strongly associated with Strathclyde.

Now if any of this is beginning to sound familiar, it is no coincidence. In this article and the next I intend to show how the Thomas the Rhymer phenomenon, both in Highlands and Lowlands, can only be understood by seeing it against the perspective of Arthur and Merlin.

So let me recap. Thomas lived from about 1225 to about 1297. That means he was born two centuries after the incorporation of Strathclyde into the expanding kingdom of Alba. I believe he sought out the last speakers of Cumbric (British, Welsh), listened to their stories of the otherworld under Eildon Hill, and put them into rhyme in his own languages, which may have included Gaelic as well as Norman French and Anglian (English, Scots).

I believe it is that connection with Cumbric, combined with the national crisis that erupted at the end of his life, that made Thomas a famous seer. I don't imagine he ever pretended to have entered the otherworld himself. That was a fame that posterity seems to have thrust upon him, in the form of the Middle English 'Romance of Thomas the Rhymer', composed about 1400. It tells how when out hunting he met the queen of the otherworld, who allowed him to make love to her, then brought him into her domain under Eildon Hill, and finally told him the future course of events in Scotland, including a series of battles against invaders culminating in a last triumph on the 'Sandy Ford' by 'a bastard from out of the west'.

Thomas was subsequently remembered in folklore all over Scotland as a spectral horse-dealer who lived under a mountain, slowly assembling cavalry for a final battle. Highland tradition added that this battle would be on the Clyde, and that Thomas himself would sally forth from Dumbuck (or, curiously, from Tomnahurich in Inverness) to win it for the Gael.

Crucially for us, the process of turning Arthur from a hero of the people into a paragon of medieval kingship had begun in the century before Thomas's birth. The aim was, by creating a national epic for William the Conqueror's son Henry I, to legitimise his new French-speaking ruling class as champions of the rights of the indigenous British in opposition to those of their previous rulers, the Anglo-Saxons. (This type of process is well known to us in Scotland and may be labelled 'the appropriation of symbols'.) It went like this:

- First, about 1136, there was Geoffrey of Monmouth's Latin *Historia Regum Britanniae* ('History of the Kings of Britain'). Geoffrey, a Welshman whose father was called Arthur, drew on traditional sources but made many additions. It has been called 'one of the greatest romantic novels of all time', and within a few years it was being avidly read all over Europe. Encouraged by his success, about 1150 Geoffrey produced a *Vita Merlini Silvestris* ('Life of Merlin of the Woods'), based on genuine Welsh poetry.
- First to jump on the band-waggon by producing a French version was an Anglo-Norman poet called Wace. His *Brut d'Angleterre* ('Chronicle of England') of c. 1155 contained 14,000 lines and added other Celtic legends such as that of Sir Tristan (whose name is Pictish).
- Next, around 1180, came Chrétien de Trois with a series of long romantic poems which added items from the Welsh stories called the *Mabinogion*, locating Arthur's court in 'Camelot' and introducing Lancelot, Guinevere and Perceval.
- Around 1200 another Frenchman, Robert de Boron, produced a poem called 'Merlin' which was the first to graft the legend of the Grail on to the Arthurian cycle.
- Finally, about 1205, a Worcestershire priest called Layamon completed his 30,000-line *Brut* ('Chronicle'), which included Wace's work with amplifications such as Sir Gawain, Sir Bedivere, and the fairies at Arthur's birth who carried him through the sky to the island of Avalon at his death.

All of these writers carefully fudged the issue of whether Arthur actually died. Geoffrey, for example, pleased his Norman readers by saying that Arthur was 'mortally wounded' (*letaliter uulneratus*) in the final battle of the river

Camblan, then pleased his British readers by saying that he was removed to Avalon ‘to have his wounds healed’ (*ad sananda uulnera sua in insulam Auallonis euectus*).

At any rate, it’s hardly surprising if Thomas the Rhymer turned to the sources around him to see if he, too, could add something to what was being called ‘the Matter of Britain’. He would have found no shortage. Today, because of the loss of the language that bore them, stories of Arthur and Merlin have disappeared from Scotland, but traces of them remain in our placenames, and nowhere do they appear to be more thick on the ground than in my adopted county of Peeblesshire, where we have Altarstone (formerly Arthur’s Stane), Arthur’s Oven, Merlindale and Merlin’s Grave.

Of course in Edinburgh there is Arthur’s Seat, which is on record from the sixteenth century. Arthur is mentioned, too, in an early (ninth-tenth-century) Welsh poem which tells how the warband of the Gododdin tribe set out from their fortress of *Din Eidyn* (Edinburgh) to meet glorious defeat at the hands of the Northumbrian English at Catterick in what is now Yorkshire. A member of the warband called Gwawddur, we are told, ‘fed black ravens on the rampart of / a fort, although he was no Arthur’.

*Gochore brein du ar uur
Caer ceni bei ef Arthur.*

Most important of all, some traditions name the sleeping warrior in the cave under the Eildons not as Thomas but as Arthur himself. It is a variant of the English tradition about Cadbury Hill in Somerset, of which Geoffrey Ashe writes in his book ‘The Quest for Arthur’s Britain’: “Rumours of a large cavern are numerous and recurrent. Somewhere there is an iron gate, or maybe a golden one, and if you come at the right moment it stands open and you can see King Arthur asleep inside. Some early archaeologists were accosted by an anxious old man who asked them if they meant to dig up the king. But Arthur does not always sleep. On St John’s Eve at midsummer, or perhaps on Christmas Eve, you can hear the hoofbeats of the horses as the king and his knights ride them down from Camelot to drink at a spring beside Sutton Montis church.”

There are other focal points for the legend, too. There is ‘Arthur’s Fountain’ at Lanark, while Perth has associations with Guinevere and Modred, and Stirlingshire boasts an earthwork rather questionably called the Round Table. Much more authentic, however, is a circular stone building near Stirling called Arthur’s Oven. It was destroyed in the eighteenth century, but not before drawings were made of it. Listing the *mirabilia* of the island of Britain in 1120, one Lambert of St Omer described the same building as ‘supposed to have been a palace of Arthur the soldier, located in Pictland, and bearing sculpted on it his deeds and battles’. It was first called *furnus Arturi* (‘Arthur’s oven’) in 1293. It has been pointed out that the prevalence of ‘Arthur’s Ovens’ dotted about the rural landscape is paralleled by Irish *fulachta*, ancient cooking-places in wild areas, often associated with Fionn and arising naturally from the hunting life pursued by his own band of heroes.

Stirling is on the edge of Pictland, but another group of Arthurian names occurs nearer the heart of Pictish territory — Arthur’s Fold, Arthur’s Stone and Arthur’s Seat, all in Angus, and Arthurhouse, a cairn at Garvock in Kincardineshire. It suggests that the Britons shared their fondness for Arthur stories with their Pictish cousins, but it may suggest even more. When we find Thomas the Rhymer associated with Tomnahurich in Inverness and Foveran in Aberdeenshire, could it be because these were major centres of Pictish power? Has Thomas taken over there from Arthur in the same way that he seems to have done in the Eildons?

I have deliberately left the main centre of British power in Scotland to the end. Marking the Highland border of Strathclyde at the head of Loch Long is *Beinn Artair*, Ben Arthur. More importantly, halfway down the Clyde from the Britons’ religious capital of Glasgow to their civil capital of Alclwyd at Dumbarton (*Dùn Breatann*, the Fort of the Britons) was the Marling, Marlin or Merlin Ford, a name preserved to this day in Marlinford Road, which runs straight down to the Clyde from the Old Renfrew Road at Hillington. The Marlingford is on record from the eighteenth century, and it may be that we need look no further for the site of that last battle on the Sandy Ford.

In his ‘History of Glasgow’ George MacGregor speaks of a tradition that Arthur established himself firmly in Strathclyde, fixing upon Alclwyd as one of his fortresses. “This place, some say, was then called *Castrum Arthuri*; while Stirling Castle is affirmed to have been his ‘Round Table’. Here he reigned from 508 till his death in 542. It is difficult to tell whether or not there is any truth, or even probability, in the tradition of King Arthur’s rule in Strathclyde; but either through that rule being a fact of history, or through the story of his exploits having strongly affected the minds of the people, many localities in the district have traditions bearing upon his career, and some places for a long time bore evidence of Arthurian nomenclature.”

Next time I will try to answer our central enigma. How did our thirteenth-century native of the Borders turn into the sleeping king, the prophet and messiah of the Gael?