

The Once and Future King Thomas?

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IN this article I want to try to suggest an answer to what I called last time the ‘central enigma’ in the story of Thomas the Rhymer — how did this thirteenth-century native of the Borders turn into the sleeping king, the prophet and messiah of the Gael?

The argument has to do with how Arthur combines with Merlin, and folklore with literature. But let me take each of the three identities in turn, starting with the Sleeping King.

As I pointed out last time, the folklore of the British-speaking peoples — that is, the Cornish, the Welsh, the Britons of Strathclyde, and seemingly also the Bretons and the Picts — viewed Arthur as a universal British hero of the past who sleeps inside a mountain somewhere, waiting for the time to come when he will sally forth to save his people in battle. William of Malmesbury, writing an account of Wales about the year 1125, remarked that ‘Arthur’s grave is nowhere seen, whence antiquity of fables still claims that he will return’, and sure enough a line of verse in the Black Book of Carmarthen informs us of: *Anoeth bid bet y arthur*. “The world’s wonder, a grave for Arthur.” An Anglo-Norman poem of about 1145, ‘The Description of England’, says of the Welsh:

*Apertement le vont disant . . .
Ka la parfin tute lauerunt;
Par Arthur la receuuerunt . . .
E Bretaigne lapelerunt.*

(‘Openly they go about saying . . . / that in the end they will have it all; / by means of Arthur they will have it back . . . / and they will call it Britain again.’)

We have confirmation of the prevalence of this belief on the ground from an account of a journey to Britain in 1113 by nine canons of Laon in France. These cultured Frenchmen had been sent on a tour to raise funds for their monastery after a fire the previous year. Somewhere between Exeter in Devon and Bodmin in Cornwall they were shown the ‘seat’ and ‘oven’ of king Arthur, renowned according to the legends of the British. Then, while they were at Bodmin, carrying out cures in their medieval way by means of relics, prayer, herbs and a little bleeding to raise funds for their house, an argument arose. A local man had come to have his withered arm healed. He declared that Arthur was not dead, ‘in just the same way,’ the monks reported, ‘as the Bretons are in the habit of arguing against the French on King Arthur’s behalf’.

There is no knowing how the conversation arose. Perhaps it was because of the sights the canons had seen on their way from Exeter. At any rate, someone in their entourage was rash enough to scoff at this local belief. The discussion swiftly spread among the bystanders, and became heated. In fact it would have led to a riot if a local cleric called Algar had not intervened. The point of narrating the episode then appears: the argument must have displeased Our Lady of Laon, because the man ‘who had raised a riot on Arthur’s behalf’ (*qui pro Arturo tumultum fecerat*) failed to receive a cure for his withered arm from her relics.

Now for the Prophet. The same British-speaking peoples who viewed Arthur as the Sleeping King viewed Merlin — or rather Myrddin — as a man who had gone crazy at the battle of Arfderydd (Arthuret, just north of Carlisle), and had run off to live in *Coed Celyddon*, the Caledonian forest. Also known as Lailoken (Llallochan), he was befriended by Kentigern, the patron saint of Glasgow. Being mad, he was as much of the other world as of this, and thus had the gift of prophecy. Tradition places his grave at Drumelzier on the Tweed in what is now Peeblesshire. (All the places I have mentioned in this paragraph were in Strathclyde; Thomas the Rhymer came from Earlstoun, just east of the Strathclyde border.)

The legends of Arthur and of Myrddin were quite separate. The first person to bring them together was Geoffrey of Monmouth. Geoffrey coins the name Merlin for Myrddin — presumably, as has been pointed out, because ‘Myrddin’ would have reminded his largely French-speaking readership of *merde*. In his ‘History of the Kings of Britain’ (completed in 1136) he makes Merlin responsible for Arthur’s conception; it was his literary successors who integrated Merlin further into the Arthur story by (for example) introducing the sword in the stone which the boy king pulled out.

Geoffrey of Monmouth also published an alleged translation from Welsh of Merlin’s prophecies. These were hugely obscure and in some ways rather revolting. They were full of stuff like this: “The Charioteer of York will soothe the people. He will throw his master out and climb up into the chariot which he is driving. He will draw his sword and threaten the East, and he will fill with blood the ruts made by his wheels. Next he will turn himself into a Sea-fish and mate with a Snake which has attracted him by its hissing. As a result there shall be born three Bulls, which shall glitter like lightning.”

This rubbish was hugely popular and spawned an entire literature in which numerous writers sought earnestly (and no doubt profitably) to interpret it.

Interestingly, after he had published his ‘History’, Geoffrey seems to have discovered a lot about Merlin which was previously unknown to him. In the ‘History’ he had made Merlin a native of Carmarthen in Dyfed, which is in Welsh Caerfyrddin — ‘the Fort of Myrddin’. Now he published a poem of 1,500 lines called ‘Vita Merlini’ which presented a Merlin much more in line with genuine Welsh verse and tradition. Of course he justifies his original presentation by making Merlin king of the Demetae, or men of Dyfed. But then he goes straight off to the north. Merlin supports Peredurus (Peredur, king of Gwynedd) and Rodarchus (Rhydderch, king of Cumbria) against Guennolous (Gwenddolau, king of Strathclyde). They meet in battle, and Merlin

goes mad — not from cowardice, but from grief for the loss of three brothers — and flees into the Caledonian forest.

A. O. H. Jarman summarises the poem in his ‘Legend of Merlin’. There is a great deal in it about Merlin’s life in the forest, which is hard in winter but idyllic in summer. His sister Ganiada (Gwenddydd) seeks him out, helps him to recover temporarily and brings him to Rodarchus’ court. A yearning for the wild life possesses him again, however, and he returns to the woods. After many incidents a house is built for him with seventy windows and seventy doors and seventy secretaries to record his prophecies. He is visited by Telgesinus (the Strathclyde poet Taliesin) and they engage in a long and learned conversation. Ultimately Merlin drinks the waters of a mountain stream and his reason is restored to him.

This, it seems to me, is the kind of story that underlies the tale of Thomas the Rhymer’s visit to the otherworld under the Eildons.

So far I have shown that as the Sleeping King of folklore Thomas resembles the Arthur of folklore, and that as the man who enters the otherworld and returns with the gift of prophecy, he evokes the Myrddin of folklore and the Merlin of twelfth-century literature. What then about Thomas as the Messiah of the Gael?

First of all it seems likely that, thanks to the Anglo-Norman literature that brought Merlin and Arthur together, these two figures had become thoroughly confused — perhaps because in Scottish tradition Myrddin was clear and Arthur was shadowy, while in the popular new poems and stories their roles were the other way round.

Secondly, we have to consider their role as a rallying cry. The tenth-century Welsh poem ‘Armes Prydein’ (‘The Prophecy of Britain’) was aimed at mustering British and other forces to attack the English: it makes no use of Arthur as a rallying call, though it does use other legendary figures, including Merlin. The problem with Arthur as a rallying cry was that his universality made him simply not credible. It has been pointed out that the common folklore motif of the ‘sleeping hero’ or ‘culture hero’ who will return is generally attached to historical personages — Charlemagne is one, Frederick Barbarossa another, and there are others in later medieval Irish and Welsh history and further afield.

What seems to have happened, then, is that the roles of both Arthur and Merlin — through the fusion of folklore and literature in an area that had strong traditions of Merlin and weaker ones of Arthur — devolved upon Thomas the Rhymer, presumably because Thomas took it upon himself to translate stories of Merlin and Arthur from Cumbric (Welsh, British) into Anglian (English, Scots), Latin, Norman French, or Gaelic. Stories of Arthur sleeping in Dumbuck or in Tomnahurich became stories of Thomas the Rhymer sleeping in Dumbuck or in Tomnahurich, because Thomas was an interpreter, a man of letters, a man of business, and above all a man who had influence in the thirteenth-century Highlands.

The likelihood that Thomas was not a Gael becomes curiously irrelevant when one considers that Arthur, the hero of the British in their struggle against the English, was ultimately transformed by literature into a hero of the English themselves. Such people represent unity in diversity.

And what of Fionn? In some accounts, it is he, and not Thomas, who sleeps in Tomnahurich. This can be linked with the twelfth-century story ‘Acallam na Senórach’, which tells how Fionn’s two companions, Oisín and Caoilte, return in St Patrick’s time to tell him tales of their adventures, many generations before. Why then is Tomnahurich the only place in Scotland or Ireland where Fionn has ever been said to lie asleep? Presumably because, just as Arthur had given way to Thomas as the Britons faded from the scene, so was Thomas now giving way to Fionn in the Gaelic heartland.

It was a process that was never completed.