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Gerald of Wales [Giraldus Cambrensis, Gerald de Barry] (c.1146–1220x23), *author and ecclesiastic*
by Robert Bartlett

Gerald of Wales [Giraldus Cambrensis, Gerald de Barry] (c.1146–1220x23), author and ecclesiastic, was the son of William de Barry, a knightly vassal of the earls of Pembroke, and Angharad, daughter of Gerald of Windsor, constable of Pembroke.

Family, education, and early career

Gerald was born in his father's castle at Manorbier, his father being the son of Odo de Barry, who had possibly served as sheriff of Pembroke and died in or shortly before 1130. His mother brought him family ties not only with Gerald of Windsor's numerous descendants (the ancestors of the Fitzgeralds) but also with the native Welsh princes, for her mother was Nest, daughter of Rhys ap Tewdwr of Deheubarth. Gerald was thus kinsman both to the leading Anglo-Norman families settled in south-west Wales and to Rhys ap Gruffudd, the Lord Rhys, who was a grandson of Rhys ap Tewdwr and the chief representative of the Deheubarth line in the later twelfth century.

Gerald had at least one sister, two full brothers, Philip of Barry and Robert of Barry, and a half-brother, Walter, who was killed in battle in Wales some time before 1189. His brothers were all raised as knights but Gerald's own destination, as the youngest son, was clear from childhood, when he supposedly built sand-churches instead of sand-castles and was referred to by his father as 'my bishop'. His clerical training and promotion were to be furthered by his uncle, David fitz Gerald, bishop of St David's (1148–76). His very earliest education seems to have been entrusted to Bishop David's clerks and he was then taught by Master Haimo at St Peter's Abbey, Gloucester, during the abbacy of Hamelin (1148–79).

Gerald's further education took place in the schools of Paris. According to his own testimony, he spent three periods of several years in Paris studying the liberal arts and eventually was himself a teacher of the trivium, winning especial praise for his talents in rhetoric. This period cannot be dated precisely, but he was certainly in Paris in the summer of 1165 when the future Philip Augustus of France was born. During this time he was supported financially by the tithes from the wool and mills of several of his relatives, which they diverted to him.

Upon his return to Wales, it was again tithes that figured in Gerald's career. During the period 1174–6, with a legatine commission from Richard, archbishop of

Canterbury, he undertook to enforce payment of the tithe of wool and cheese in the diocese of St David's. This brought him into conflict with the Flemish settlers in the county of Pembroke. Soon thereafter he was embroiled with the sheriff, who, however, had to give way and submit to corporal penance. Gerald's visitation continued with the suspension of the archdeacon of Brecon for concubinage. On his return to the archbishop, accompanied by his uncle, Bishop David, Gerald was himself appointed archdeacon of Brecon. With this new authority, he continued his campaign in the diocese of St David's, enforcing the payment of tithes, reclaiming appropriated ecclesiastical revenues and asserting his rights even against physical opposition. It was during this time that Gerald's uncle, Bishop David, died (8 May 1176). His own account of the following proceedings relates how the canons of St David's agreed to nominate their four archdeacons, expecting that the king would choose Gerald, but that Henry II was outraged at this apparent pre-emption and refused to have him, even rejecting the recommendation of Archbishop Richard on the grounds that Gerald was too well connected with the great men of south Wales. In the event Peter de Leia, prior of Much Wenlock, was elected bishop and consecrated on 7 November 1176.

Perhaps disappointed at this outcome, but certainly with the firmer financial backing of his prebends and benefices (he held Angle, Laugharne, and Mathry at this time and accumulated others later), Gerald now returned to Paris, where he proceeded to the higher studies of civil law, canon law, and theology. These occupied him for three years (1176–9) and he eventually lectured privately on Gratian's *Decretum*. He bore the title *magister* ('master') throughout the rest of his life. Upon his return to Wales, he was at first appointed administrator of the diocese of St David's while Bishop Peter resided in England, but soon fell into a fierce dispute with him, although this was finally settled. About this time, in 1183, Gerald made his first visit to Ireland, with his brother Philip. Gerald's kinsmen were among the earliest Anglo-Norman settlers in Ireland and Philip had been enfeoffed with a lordship in Munster by his uncle, Robert fitz Stephen.

Court service

Shortly after this, probably in the summer of 1184, a major change took place in Gerald's life, one which was to have important implications for his literary career. While Henry II was in the Welsh march negotiating with the Lord Rhys, he took Gerald into his service as a royal clerk. For the next twelve years or so Gerald was actively involved in royal service. He describes a conversation he had with King Henry at Clarendon in the spring of 1185, during the visit of the patriarch Heraclius of Jerusalem; he accompanied the king's son, John, to Ireland in 1185 and stayed on there as associate of Bertram de Verdon, whom he calls 'seneschal of Ireland'; in 1188 he went with Archbishop Baldwin to preach the crusade in Wales (he himself took the cross, but was absolved from his vow in late 1189); and on several

occasions he served as royal envoy to the princes of Wales, notably after Henry II's death when, according to his own report, he 'pacified the country by his arrival and intervention' (*Gir. Camb. opera*, 1.84). Like other court clerks of the Angevin kings, such as Walter Map, he was a critic as well as a beneficiary of court life and he left vivid portraits of those unpredictable, energetic, and self-willed rulers. He also became embroiled in the bitter resentments and antagonisms that court service seemed to breed, engaging in a feud with the Cistercian monk William Wibert, who accompanied Gerald on some of his diplomatic missions and sought to undermine him by accusing him of treachery.

Despite the pressure of business and the distractions of court, it was during this period of royal service that Gerald composed his first and most remarkable literary works, the *Topographia Hibernica* (1186–7), which he read aloud in public at Oxford, the *Expugnatio Hibernica* (1189), *Itinerarium Cambriae* (c.1191), and *Descriptio Cambriae* (c.1194). These four books are remarkable not only for the detailed narratives they provide of such events as the establishment of English lordship in Ireland in the years after 1169, but also for their acute comments on social customs. Indeed, in the *Descriptio Cambriae* Gerald virtually reinvented the ethnographic monograph, a genre that had largely lapsed since antiquity.

The exact circumstances of Gerald's retirement from court, probably in 1196, are not entirely clear. He claims that he decided 'it was empty foolishness to follow the court', but also seems to have been moved by the fact that 'promotions were empty foolishness, unworthy and not according to merit' (*Gir. Camb. opera*, 1.89). It seems to have been specifically his failure to obtain an English bishopric (although he says he was offered and declined Welsh and Irish ones) that soured Gerald the courtier. This disappointment about patronage may conceivably have been tied to other political factors. Gerald was an interested and opinionated observer of court politics, as his *Vita Galfridi archiepiscopi Eboracensis* ('Life of Geoffrey, archbishop of York') of c.1193 shows, with its partisan viewpoint on the infighting of 1189–93, and it may be that his political association with John made a retirement from court at the time of King Richard's return from captivity in 1194 opportune. He was not, however, in disgrace, for he continued to receive payments from the exchequer, at the rate of 5*d*. per day, until 1202.

At any event, Gerald went to Lincoln, where a former Paris acquaintance, William de Montibus, was now chancellor. There he spent several years in study. Works composed in this time include saints' lives; the *Gemma ecclesiastica*, a handbook on the sacraments and morals addressed to his clergy and heavily dependent on the work of the Parisian theologian Peter the Chanter; and probably also a first version of the *De principis instructione*.

The St David's case, 1198–1203

The death of Peter de Leia, bishop of St David's, on 16 July 1198 initiated a long period in which Gerald was completely preoccupied with the attempt to become not only bishop, but archbishop of St David's. His failure to do so turned his ingrained sense of dissatisfaction into bile and bitterness that were with him for the rest of his life.

Gerald had the support of the canons of St David's, but Hubert Walter, archbishop of Canterbury (and from 1199 chancellor), made it clear from the outset that he was quite unacceptable as a candidate. The grounds for this, as Gerald records them, were political: Gerald was too closely associated with the Welsh. It is possible, however, that his marcher ties were at least as important an objection in Hubert Walter's eyes. Moreover, the prospect of Gerald's reviving the claim of St David's to be a metropolitan see and thus of the Welsh church to be independent of Canterbury would obviously rouse the opposition of any archbishop. Gerald was indeed elected by the canons of St David's on 29 June 1199 with the understanding that he would seek consecration directly from the pope and that he would revive the St David's claims.

It is impossible to give a full account here of the intricate negotiations, court hearings, gambits, and manoeuvrings of the next four and a half years, although they are recorded in often painful detail in Gerald's own writings. The prosecution of his case involved him in three trips to Rome (1199–1200; 1201; 1202–3), where he found Innocent III not unsympathetic, though unable to offer him much. Gerald's arguments for his case drew partly on an earlier attempt to establish the autonomy of St David's by Bishop Bernard (1115–48). He also became increasingly strident in his assertion of the distinctive identity of the Welsh and his condemnation of the oppressive treatment they had received at the hands of the English. In response the native Welsh princes gave him their support. This naturally made his English opponents yet more determined. Hubert Walter received the backing of King John, who was otherwise personally favourable towards Gerald, but who now brought pressure to bear on him and his supporters. Declared an 'enemy of the lord king', Gerald found himself disavowed by the canons of St David's (*Gir. Camb. opera*, 3.201). In April 1203 Innocent III quashed his election and ordered another one, and in November and December of that year a settlement was reached in which Hubert Walter's candidate, Geoffrey of Henlaw, became bishop of St David's and Gerald promised never to raise the metropolitan issue again, while he was allowed to resign his archdeaconry of Brecon in favour of his nephew and namesake.

Later years

Gerald lived for almost twenty years after the formal renunciation of his case. He

spent two years (1204–6) in Ireland with his relatives and made a fourth visit to Rome, purely as a pilgrimage, in 1206. Thereafter he probably lived mainly in Lincoln. During this time he continually went over the St David's case in his mind and produced a substantial polemical–apologetic literature on the subject (*Invectiones*, *De rebus a se gestis*, *De jure et statu Menevensis ecclesie*) and a similarly self-justifying work on his quarrel with his nephew that dragged on for many years from 1208 to c.1213 (*Speculum duorum*). This period also saw the composition of his life of Hugh of Lincoln and completion of the *De principis instructione* and *Speculum ecclesie*. He was also continually revising his earlier works, for example issuing a third redaction of the *Itinerarium Cambriae* c.1214. He was thus busily engaged in writing as well as squabbling throughout these years. The attempt in 1216 by Louis of France, in alliance with the rebel barons, to replace King John was warmly supported by Gerald, who wrote a poem welcoming the French prince. He was still active in 1220, for the preface to the *Speculum ecclesie* refers to a papal bull of November 1219, but was dead by 1223, when his benefice of Chesterton, Oxfordshire, was filled. Certification of his death on that occasion was given by the dean of Hereford and it thus may have been in that city that he ended his days.

Gerald's literary works

Gerald's *œuvre* is large, running to about ten volumes in modern printed editions, and covers a great variety of subjects. He produced poems, letters, and saints' lives, as well as polemic and treatises. It has also been suggested that Gerald was responsible for a surviving schematic map of Europe based on a portion of a contemporary *mappa mundi*. His style was something he justly prided himself on. His Latin is vigorous, fluent, and often striking; the influence of Roman authors is pronounced and his prose is full of citations from them (although his use of anthologies has also been amply demonstrated). Horace, Ovid, and Virgil are the most commonly cited Roman poets; Cicero, Caesar, Sallust, and Seneca figure prominently among the prose authors; and there are many quotations from patristic authors, notably Augustine. Gerald criticized the tendency apparent in his own day for literary training to be neglected in favour of logic and he belongs to the world of *belles-lettres* rather than that of systematic thinking. His general observations are always veering off into anecdote, a form at which he excelled.

Gerald was sharp, critical, and occasionally savage. His vanity and his disappointed ambitions could make him solipsistic and obsessional. In Powicke's words, 'Gerald lived every day an existence of dramatic egotism' (Powicke, 114). A large part of his output was dedicated either to proving himself right or to castigating the vices of others. Sometimes this was in the context of his own quarrels, as in the works on the St David's case or on his dispute with his nephew. Sometimes he adopted a moral, quasi-pastoral stance, as in the *Gemma ecclesiastica* or the *Speculum*

ecclesie, which was concerned primarily with criticisms of the monastic orders. In the *De principis instructione* it was the Angevin kings who were the targets of Gerald's vitriol, as he created an image of damned and violent rulers whose replacement by the serene Capetians of France would be a blessing for England.

Yet the enduring impression left by reading Gerald is of that of a man with a powerful and curious eye, who was willing to focus his attention on new subjects and record them with an unusual preciseness and concrete detail. The works on Ireland and Wales reveal more of the natural and the human patterns of those countries in his time than can usually be extracted from medieval authors. The *Expugnatio Hibernica* is, of course, written from the viewpoint of the conquerors—or at least of one party of them, Gerald's relatives—but its vivid and credible picture of twelfth-century warfare and colonial expansion means that it is much more than propaganda. The *Itinerarium Cambriae*, framed by the tale of Gerald's journey through Wales in 1188, is a rich and diverse picture of that half-conquered region, where groups of different languages and traditions lived side by side. The *Topographia Hibernica* and *Descriptio Cambriae* contain not only important observations on the terrain and fauna of Ireland and Wales but also sustained and perceptive characterizations of the native Irish and Welsh, the former admittedly less sympathetic than the latter, but both full of an alert interest in the social patterns and behaviour of other peoples that can only be called ethnographic. Gerald notices everyday details, such as the way the Welsh clean their teeth, but also has a sense of the coherence of the societies he describes, noting the genealogical pride, rough egalitarianism of the warrior class, and political disunity of the Welsh, creating a credible image of their society and social psychology. In the case of both the Welsh and the Irish, it is, in Gerald's view, their pastoral way of life that marks them out most distinctly from their more agrarian and urbanized neighbours, and he is even ready to interpret this in the framework of evolutionary stages—they have remained in the pastoral stage, while other peoples have moved on. Gerald's observations on the language, warfare, music, and social customs of the Welsh and Irish form one of the most significant bodies of source material for medieval Irish and Welsh history. The concluding chapters of the *Descriptio Cambriae*—'How this people may be conquered', 'How they may be ruled when conquered', and 'How they may effectively resist and rise up'—represent very well both Gerald's powerful skill as an analyst of geography, military affairs, and social organization, and the complex and unresolved pattern of his identities and loyalties.

As the manuscript evidence reveals, the four books on Wales and Ireland were Gerald's most successful and widely read works. The same is true today: he is remembered not as a vain and disgruntled clerical careerist but as a pioneering observer of the Celtic lands and peoples.

ROBERT BARTLETT

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