

George Borrow, *Wild Wales* walking to Llangollen...

ANYBODY WISHING to visit Wales has no need to acquire a modern travel guide, except perhaps, to help him to find pleasant inns and comfortable hotels. But he should definitely take with him a most original guide, *Wild Wales*¹, a splendid travelogue with a wide range of information on Welsh language, culture and landscapes, recounted by a no less extraordinary writer, George Borrow, whose entire work is a fascinating recreation of his life.

For those who might never have heard of him, I would be tempted to introduce him as a “wanderer, polyglot, biblical agent and writer”, as he is described in the subtitle of a valuable biography² written by René Fréchet, professor at the Faculté des Lettres at Lille and a great connoisseur of our English author. In spite of the merits of his different works, George Borrow still has not received in Britain the attention he deserves. The French poet Apollinaire speaks highly of him³, and three of Borrow’s books have been translated into French. Born in 1803 near East Dereham⁴ in Norfolk, he was one of the most astounding polyglots of his time. During the nine months his father, captain in the Norfolk regiment, was in Ireland, at the end of the war against Napoleon, the young boy, 12 years old, had mastered the Gaelic language, had learnt to ride, shoe a horse and everything relating to horses. But when the Borrowes finally returned to Norwich, he showed an even stronger fascination for the Gypsies, of whom there were about twenty thousand in East Anglia, and he soon began to accompany them in their peregrinations. He became familiar with the Romani language and would later devote several detailed books to the Gypsies, as well as *Romano Lavo-Lil*, a word-book of the Romani language. George Borrow was a very tall and handsome man, of tremendous physical strength, a gifted horseman and an adept at boxing. He liked roaming through the countryside, in the Fens in particular and could cover enormous distances. However, from time to time he suffered from terrible bouts of depression, which he called his “horrors”, but from which he always recovered. Studying had no real attraction for an independent nature such as his, and when he stopped attending school at sixteen, he obeyed his father’s wishes and was articled to a solicitor in Norwich to learn law. During his free time he was in the habit of buying old books in various languages which he chanced upon during his regular visits to second-hand bookshops and market stalls. One day in Norwich he found a Welsh translation of *Paradise Lost*, from which he began acquiring some notions of Welsh, which would enable him to study the works of the bards in the original Welsh. Later, with the help of different teachers, he also learnt French and Italian, Spanish, German, the Scandinavian languages, Arab and Hebrew, Russian, along with Persian, and Hindustani. It is believed he knew more than 40 languages and dialects, but he was, however, no strict and scientific linguist, and philology (which he never studied) was still only in its early stages. Using a method which

¹ *Wild Wales: its people, language and scenery* (first published 1862), Collins, 1955.

² *George Borrow (1803-1881): vagabond polyglotte, agent biblique—écrivain*, René Fréchet, “Études Anglaises”, Didier, Paris, 1956.

³ See *La Démocratie sociale* 1910, Apollinaire, *Œuvres en prose* III, La Pléiade, p.428.

⁴ East-Dereham, where William Cowper, the poet related to the Powyses, is buried.

brings to mind John Cowper Powys's own efforts with Greek and Welsh "cribs", Borrow used texts for which he had a translation into English or any other language he already knew, drew up vocabularies and made comparisons from one language to another.

Borrow left the solicitor's office in 1824 to try his luck in London as soon as his contract ended, two months after the death of his father. The editor of the *Monthly Magazine* had previously published several of his translations and Borrow had hoped he would publish his translations of the works of various poets, but he was not interested in poetry. Borrow undertook however various very badly paid jobs for him, including a 6-volume compilation of *Celebrated Trials*, and another editor published in 1825 his translation from German of Klinger's *Faustus*, but he continued to live in poverty. Some time around 1825 he started a long walking tour lasting several months throughout England, and then returned to Norwich. A few more years elapsed in a mysterious fashion, called by Borrowian critics "the veiled period"⁵, of which little is known.

This difficult period lasted until 1832. His life was to change radically when he became a member of the British & Foreign Bible Society, of which one of the most active branches was precisely in Norwich. He was recommended by Francis Cunningham, vicar of Lowestoft, who had been struck by the young man's personality and linguistic gifts. Francis Cunningham was an influential member of the British & Foreign Bible Society, founded in 1804, with the aim of distributing Bibles and New Testaments. It was also Cunningham who introduced Borrow to a young widow, Mary Clarke, who was to become a great friend and whom he would marry a few years later. The Society had been trying to find somebody who knew, or was willing to learn, Manchu⁶, for a Russian scholar, S.V. Lipovzoff, had translated the New Testament into that language, and had unsuccessfully attempted to publish part of his translation. Moreover, the Society had become aware that the manuscript of a Manchu translation of almost the whole Bible was the property of the bibliophile Baron Schilling de Canstadt in St Petersburg. The Society expected the person selected to travel to Russia, to transcribe Baron Schilling's manuscript, to collate it with Lipovzoff's New Testament, and to superintend publication of the latter.

Borrow arrived in London in January 1833. He was set an examination by the Bible Society and once accepted, it took him only nineteen weeks to master Manchu, whereas J-M. Amiot SJ, author of the Manchu-French dictionary, wrote: "Five or six years would be enough for a dedicated student to be able to understand books written in Manchu"⁷. Borrow left for St. Petersburg and immediately set to work. In spite of many problems with Russian bureaucracy, he managed within a year to publish the eight volumes of the full version of the Manchu New Testament on good quality paper, bound in the Chinese manner, an extraordinary achievement entailing much difficulty and effort. Hoping to be able to travel to China he requested permission to travel to Kiakhta, the only access point to China at the time, but was not allowed to take the New Testaments with him, so these were shipped to London. He remained a few

⁵ See Angus Fraser's 'The Unveiling of the Veiled Period'—a conference given in 1987, and published by The Lavengro Press as Occasional Paper 9.

⁶ The official language of China during the Qing dynasty (1644-1912).

⁷ J-M. Amiot, SJ, *Dictionnaire tartare mandchou-français*, Didot l'Aîné, 1789. It is the dictionary Borrow used.

months in Russia, almost met the great Pushkin⁸, one of his favourite poets, and visited Moscow and Novgorod. He even had the opportunity to speak to Russian Gypsies in Romani at a caravan site near Moscow, much to their surprise and joy.

When he finally came back in September 1835, his mission accomplished, to the Society's great satisfaction, he was soon asked to leave again, this time for Portugal and Spain, in order to distribute Bibles and New Testaments. These two deeply catholic countries were only just emerging from a long and cruel war against Napoleon and were in the midst of a pitiless civil war, and plunged into an especially unstable political situation. It was therefore a dangerous mission, but one which he would accomplish with courage. Today Spaniards still remember *Don Jorgito el Inglés* with admiration and fondness, as I had occasion to see when, with other members of the Borrow Society, I was happy to visit Salamanca, a city where Borrow had spent three weeks. We were welcomed with the utmost courtesy and warmth by the Rector of the University, and by the Deputy Mayor of the city. In the house-museum of the great writer Unamuno we saw in the library all the works of Borrow together with other books of international fame. It was on his return from Spain in 1840 that he married his faithful friend, Mary Clarke.

The four most eventful years George Borrow spent in the Iberian Peninsula are recounted with joy and spirit in his picaresque book *The Bible in Spain*⁹. Published in 1843, it immediately met with great success and made Borrow famous. Several editions followed in succession during the first year, and it was soon translated into French and German.

But I would now like to return to *Wild Wales*, which unfortunately has still not been translated into French. As would be the case for Powys, Wales was for Borrow a land of legend. He had already become familiar with Welsh at the age of 16, no mean feat, for the language was spoken by few people outside the peninsula, and generally held in low esteem. He translated various poems of the Welsh bards who inspired in him a passionate interest, particularly Dafydd ap Gwilym, a 14th century poet, considered by Borrow to be superior to Chaucer. He was eager to visit Wales, in order to meet the Welsh people and, by conversing with them, to put to use his knowledge of the language, but above all to visit the places associated with the lives of the poets he admired.

On 1 August 1854, accompanied by his wife and step-daughter, he began the tour described in *Wild Wales*, a real pilgrimage for, as he says, "his imagination was captured by the land of old renown and of wonder, the land of Arthur and Merlin"¹⁰. Leaving his wife and Henrietta to proceed from Chester by train to Llangollen, he sets off on foot—20 miles.

Arriving finally in Llangollen, he joins his wife and Henrietta for dinner at "the principal inn", which is probably no other than the hotel the members of both the Powys Society and of the Borrow Society know so well, the Hand Hotel—much later Powys would also have dinner at the very same hotel. In Chapter 6 of *Wild Wales* Borrow gives a detailed description of the little town which he discovers.

⁸ The Russian poet received a copy of Borrow's *Targum*, a collection of translated poems from about thirty-five different languages, and in reply wrote to Borrow: "Alexander Pushkin has received with the profoundest gratitude Mr. Borrow's book and heartily regrets that he did not have the honour of making his personal acquaintance."

⁹ *The Bible in Spain*, Nabu Press, 2009.

¹⁰ *Wild Wales*, p.350.



Llangollen in 1846

courtesy Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru – The National Library of Wales

The northern side of the vale of Llangollen is formed by certain enormous rocks called the Eglwysig rocks, which extend from east to west, a distance of about two miles. The southern side is formed by the Berwyn hills. The valley is intersected by the River Dee, the origin of which is a deep lake near Bala, about twenty miles to the west. Between the Dee and the Eglwysig rises a lofty hill, on the top of which are the ruins of Dinas Bran, which bear no slight resemblance to a crown. The upper part of the hill is bare with the exception of what is covered by the ruins; on the lower part there are inclosures and trees, with, here and there, a grove or farm-house. On the other side of the valley, to the east of Llangollen, is a hill called Pen y Coed, beautifully covered with trees of various kinds; it stands between the river and the Berwyn, even as the hill of Dinas Bran stands between the river and the Eglwysig rocks—it does not, however, confront Dinas Bran, which stands more to the west.

Llangollen is a small town or large village of white houses with slate roofs, it contains about two thousand inhabitants, and is situated principally on the southern side of the Dee. At its western end it has an ancient bridge and a modest unpretending church nearly in its centre, in the chancel of which rest the mortal remains of an old bard called Gryffydd Hiraethog. From some houses on the southern side there is a noble view—Dinas Bran and its mighty hill forming the principal objects. The view from the northern part of the town, which is indeed little more than a suburb, is not quite so grand, but is nevertheless highly interesting.¹¹

His narrative proved to be a precious mine of information when I decided to follow the adventures and peregrinations of the great Welsh chieftain Owen Glendower who is the hero of Powys' eponymous novel¹². When working on *la lettre powysienne* n°4, devoted to Wales, the novel and its hero, I had delved into *Wild Wales*, reading carefully all that Borrow revealed about Wales' troubled history, Owen Glendower's different abodes, but also about the Welsh bards, whose works Borrow knew well, and vividly depicted.¹³

¹¹ *Wild Wales*, p.41.

¹² John Cowper Powys, *Owen Glendower*, John Lane The Bodley Head, 1942.

¹³ Borrow also made numerous references to Glendower in *Celtic Bards, Chiefs and Kings*, published posthumously in 1928, but apparently written alongside *Wild Wales*, between 1857 and 1860. I would like here to thank Ann Ridler, chairwoman of the Borrow Society who read this paper and gave me precious information.

The valley of the Dee, of which the Llangollen district forms part, is called in the British tongue Glyn-dyfrdwy—that is, the valley of the Dwy or Dee. The celebrated Welsh chieftain, generally known as Owen Glendower, was surnamed¹⁴ after that valley, the whole of which belonged to him, and in which he had two or three places of strength, though his general abode was a castle in Sycharth, a valley to the south-east of the Berwyn, and distant about twelve miles from Llangollen.

Dinas Bran, which crowns the top of the mighty hill on the northern side of the valley, is a ruined stronghold of unknown antiquity.¹⁵ The name is generally supposed to signify Crow Castle, “bran” being the British word for crow, and flocks of crows being frequently seen over it...

Dinas Bran was a place quite impregnable in the old time, and served as a retreat to Gruffydd, son of Madawg, from the rage of his countrymen, who were incensed against him because, having married Emma, the daughter of James Lord Audley, he had, at the instigation of his wife and father-in-law, sided with Edward the First against his own native sovereign. But though it could shield him from his foes, it could not preserve him from remorse and the stings of conscience, of which he speedily died.

At present the place consists only of a few ruined walls, and probably consisted of little more two or three hundred years ago: Roger Cyffyn, a Welsh bard, who flourished at the beginning of the seventeenth century, wrote an englyn on it, of which the following is a translation:

*Gone, gone are thy gates, Dinas Bran on the height!
Thy warders are blood-crows and ravens, I trow;
Now no one will wend from the field of the fight
To the fortress on high, save the raven and crow.*¹⁶

Mary Borrow, his wife, had rented a little house, Dee Cottage, on the north side of the river, and the day after his arrival, the very first thing he accomplished was to go up the hill to Dinas Bran. He then came down, and went on walking for the rest of the day, discussing with people he met, as was his wont, surprising them by the fact that an Englishman should know Welsh so well. With endearing pride he displays his knowledge, explaining to the people with whom he happens to strike up a conversation the etymology of the Welsh names of the places around them. Noticing Borrow’s interest in an ancient convent used as a barn, a man tells him that about three miles away stands an old edifice, now a farm, but once a splendid abbey, called... Borrow at this point interrupts:

“The abbey of the vale of the cross,” said I, “I have read a deal about it. Iolo Goch, the bard of your celebrated hero, Owen Glendower, was buried somewhere in its precincts.”¹⁷

It was exactly there, in Valle Crucis Abbey, that Powys on 24 April 1937, in the beautiful chapter house under the ribbed vault, began to write the first page of his novel *Owen Glendower*, writing to his friend Nicholas Ross “the spirits of those Cistercian Monks were inspiring it...”.

¹⁴ “Glyn-dyfrdwy” contracting to “Glyn-dwr”. “the British tongue” is referring to Welsh.

¹⁵ “*There it was!* There before him, towering up beneath a great bank of white clouds, and against a jagged ridge of bare and desolate rock, rose the castle of his imagination.” *Owen Glendower*, p.12.

¹⁶ *Wild Wales*, pp.43-4.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.55.

On 21 August Borrow walked to Corwen “just ten miles from Llangollen and which stands beneath a vast range of rocks at the head of the valley... of the Dee water” and feeling rather thirsty stopped at an inn “very appropriately called the ‘Owen Glendower’, being the principal inn in the principal town of what was once the domain of the great Owen.”

And all along the book, Borrow takes us to the very areas which Owen Glendower had known. Reading *Wild Wales* I realised I had found an inspired guide whose help would be precious in following the great Welsh Prince, and I resolved to place my full confidence in him.

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