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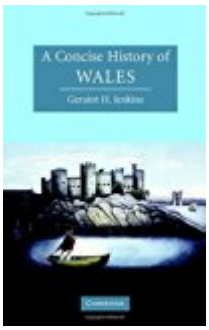
Geraint H. Jenkins. *A Concise History of Wales.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. xii + 345 pp. $75.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-82367-8.



Reviewed by Louise Miskell

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The real mission behind this book is not flaunted in the opening pages, but tucked away in a brief but reflective final chapter, "Whither Wales?" Here Geraint Jenkins declares his view that the "British history" of the 1980s onwards has not served Wales well. While acknowledging the contribution of its practitioners to the pioneering of new approaches in medieval and early modern history, he argues that it is, in other respects, "anglocentricism by another name" (p. 305). Although we have come a long way since the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*'s now infamous index entry, "For Wales, see England," Geraint Jenkins clearly regards some historians of Wales as too anxious to yoke their research to the wider debates and themes of British history. Distancing himself from this approach, he advocates researching the history of Wales on its own terms. The narrow public endorsement of political devolution in 1997 and the continuing tendency of the majority of the Welsh population to define themselves as "Welsh" more than "British," provide the justification for this modus operandi. Whether or not you agree with his stance, this volume, which traces the story of Wales from its prehistory well into the new millennium in a little over 300 pages, must be acknowledged as a major achievement.

In his preface Jenkins acknowledges the enormity of the undertaking contained in this book. As a historian whose prolific output has principally covered the early modern period, to undertake a complete history required the application of his considerable historical skills to debates, sources, ideas, and periods which had not previously come within his compass. He does not flinch from the task. The first chapter takes the reader on a journey through Wales from the Paleolithic Age to Roman times. Along the way he unearths teeth, bones, pottery, footprints, forts, and gravestones to give us a tantalizing glimpse of the people and lifestyles of a land which was still, quite literally, taking shape. The overwhelming impression conveyed in this sensitive and revealing thirty or so pages, is of an author so enthused by his material that he might be inspired to take up the archaeologist's trowel himself in a bid to uncover more of the physical evidence left behind by Wales's earliest inhabitants.

The period between the departure of the Romans and the arrival of the Normans has, as Jenkins acknowledges, proved a difficult one for historians of Wales who have had to contend with a dearth of evidence. But he rejects the term "Dark Ages" for this era and writes instead of a "Heroic Age" in which dominant figures such as Rhodri Mawr and Hywel Dda stand out and the codification of laws, the development of the Welsh language, and the missions of the Welsh saints were distinguishing features. Nevertheless, he stops short of seeing this as a period of proto-nationalism because "Welsh rulers identified first and foremost with their regional base.... They had no overarching vision" (p. 44). Not so the Welsh princes of the era of the Anglo-Norman conquests. The Treaty of Montgomery of 1267, by which Wales was recognized as a principality with Llewelyn ap Gruffydd at its head, is hailed by Jenkins as "a major historic landmark" (p. 91), and the resistance of the prince, whose status was subsequently attacked by Edward I, is described as one of the significant "exemplars of early nationalist sentiment" (p. 93).

The harsh realities of Welsh life in the post-conquest period are graphically depicted in chapter 4, as the author recounts the catastrophic effects of plague, rebellion, and famine on the Welsh population. Added to this, these were centuries when to be Welsh was to suffer the indignities of life under English rule, which stripped many of land, status, and privileges. Not until the fifteenth century were there signs of renewal in a range of spheres from religious life to domestic architecture and poetry, but the coming of Henry Tudor to the English throne in 1485 was not the watershed that the Welsh might have hoped for as they rallied to support him when he landed on the Welsh coast in a bid to claim the crown. Jenkins's portrayal of Henry as "sickly and reclusive" (p. 127) could not be further removed from his presentation of Owain Glynd?r as "an immensely attractive and accomplished leader of men" (p. 111), the would-be Welsh deliverer whose prolonged rebellion ended in failure around 1410.

The Acts uniting Wales with England (1536-43) and reactions to them are dealt with evenhandedly by the author, who identifies both winners and losers in the wake of the new legislation. Among the winners were the socially aspirant Welsh gentry and early Welsh industrial entrepreneurs, while the Acts dealt a harsher blow to the status of the Welsh language which came to be seen, in some quarters, as a hindrance to progress. But in this period some important foundations of distinctive modern Welsh identity were also laid, not least with the translation of the Bible into Welsh and the flowering of Welsh-language literature in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and, later, with the interest of a new breed of Romantic scholars in the poetry and literature and history of the ancient Britons.

Jenkins readily acknowledges that his chapters on nineteenth- and twentieth-century Wales are the lengthiest and most detailed of the book. His fifty-page analysis of Wales in the period from 1776 to 1900 is a picture of transformation in which he traces the great economic, social, linguistic, and religious changes that affected the country. The chapter embraces not just the well-known stories of the growth of iron and coal production in south Wales, but also the woolen, slate, and copper industries, the fate of Welsh communities outside Wales, and the impact of incomers and population movement within Wales on the demographic, linguistic, and national identity of the country. It is an analysis in which an empathy with the poor and those suffering social injustice looms large and is brought to life with the help of some well-chosen illustrations. The gaunt faces of the group photographed at a Denbighshire almshouse in the 1890s give a particularly graphic illustration of the rigors of life faced by the inhabitants or rural Wales in the nineteenth century (p. 196).

The opening of chapter 7 juxtaposes Edward VIII's visit to Dowlais during the Depression with the glory days of coal in the first decade of the twentieth century. This chapter takes the story of Wales from 1901-2006, an era in which, as the author admits, the task of historical research can seem daunting and overwhelming. He manages the undertaking by dividing the chapter into four (albeit very broad) themes: social and economic change, war and peace, culture, and politics. The narrow and insecure base on which Welsh industrial strength in the early twentieth century was built, with its lack of diversification and absence of secondary production, is carefully explained. With a nod to the growing consumerism of the affluent in the large coastal towns and tourist resorts, the lot of the working-class majority in 1920s and 1930s Wales is painted here as a bleak one. He pays welcome attention to the experience of working-class women in these decades and their role in fostering and preserving community spirit in the face of immense hardship. The role of Welsh politicians in the social reforms of the age is highlighted and a brief assessment is offered of the economic reforms of the Thatcher era which, the author points out, brought benefits to some and losses to others in Wales. Wide-ranging in its scope, this chapter embraces broadcasting, literature, fashion, music, and sport in its survey of Welsh social and cultural developments in the twentieth and indeed into the twenty-first century.

A Concise History of Wales has the potential to reach a readership well beyond the academic community. By eschewing notes in favor of a "sources of quotations" section and replacing a conventional bibliography with a themed "guide to further reading," a sensible compromise is found in meeting the needs of the scholarly and general reader. The final brief chapter, "Whither Wales?" reflects on the resilience of Welsh identity through the ages but questions its future survival in an age of mass population movement and cultural diversity. The author ends by exhorting historians to play their part in the cultivation and preservation of national identity, insisting that "a nation without a memory has no future" (p. 306). A volume as rich as this in its remembering of the past, promises to serve its nation well.

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