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The Last Native Prince of Wales

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It is tradition in British royalty that the firstborn son of the reigning monarch receives the title “Prince of Wales”. Prince Charles, who is the son of Queen Elizabeth II, currently holds the title. All who hold the title must be of an English family and the English crown. However, at one time, there were princes of Wales who were of Welsh descent. The holders of the title “Prince of Wales” did not become completely English until around the year 1415. This is when the last Welsh-born Prince of Wales vanished. This man, who brought almost all of Wales under his control, was Owain Glyndŵr.

Owain Glyndŵr, occasionally anglicized as “Owen Glendower”, was born sometime between 1349 and 1359 in the northeast of Wales, in what today would be in either the county of Powys or Wrexham. One might say that Owain’s destiny was determined before he was even born. John Davies notes that “Owain Glyn Dŵr was born about 1354, and there were by the 1380s men in Wales who were grooming him for the role of the second Cadwaladr.”¹ Cadwaladr was a great Prince of Wales who was romanticized in stories by the scribe Geoffrey of Monmouth. Those who knew Owain felt that he was to take the position of Cadwaladr and rule Wales as a great warrior, pushing back the English from the borders.

This expectation of Owain came in part from a prophecy, supposedly of Merlin, recorded by Geoffrey of Monmouth. In this

prophecy, it is said there will be “a Wolf that will come out of the West, who will begin war against the aforesaid Mole in his side.”\textsuperscript{2} In this supposed prophecy, the “wolf” is perceived to be Owain Glyndŵr, while the “mole” is perceived to be Henry IV, the King of England who would fight Owain in a number of battles. Owain Glyndŵr was descended from a line of kings of Powys and Deheubarth, so he was expected to live up to his family’s history of kingship. However, even those who knew this could not anticipate just how much of Wales he would bring under his control.

Owain Glyndŵr spent the first forty years of his life in anonymity, not claiming any English land or challenging Henry IV. This changed in 1400, when Glyndŵr was proclaimed the rightful “Prince of Wales” by a small group of his friends and family. After this, the small group raided a number of the lands of north-east Wales controlled by the English, along with other towns such as Ruthin, Rhuddlan, Flint, Denbigh, and Oswestry.\textsuperscript{3} However, these first attacks would be short-lived, ultimately unsuccessful, and unfortunately harmful to the nation of Wales as a whole.

Henry IV led a short attack in Wales that took back a number of towns. While Henry IV was not able to capture Owain, he did quell Owain’s rebellious attacks for the next few years. Henry IV further reacted by confiscating much of Owain’s land, as noted in Henry IV’s proclamation on 8 November 1400, “Confiscation of Owain’s Lands”. He states that “Be it known that we, by our special grace, have given and granted to our beloved brother John, earl of Somerset, all the

\textsuperscript{3} Graham J. Jones, The History of Wales (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1998), 42.
manors, lands, and tenements that previously belonged to Owain Glyndŵr, both in South Wales and North Wales…on account of the high treason against our royal majesty…”4 However, this was not the end of Henry IV’s actions in Wales.

Henry IV was not satisfied to simply punish Owain and his followers - Henry chose to persecute Wales as a whole for these perceived acts of treason. In response to the uprising, large amounts of money were demanded from the Welsh population. In 1401 certain laws were passed that prohibited Welsh citizens from obtaining land in England or in the numerous English towns within Wales. Welsh citizens were also prohibited from being enrolled as representatives of municipalities (burgesses), while the English were protected from being convicted by Welshmen in Wales.5 These actions against the entirety of Wales, along with the rebellious actions of Glyndŵr himself, encouraged more Welshmen to join Owain’s revolt against English rule.

Welshmen living in Wales were not the only ones to join Owain. Many Welshmen in England were returning home to their families and joining Glyndŵr. An account taken down in the London Parliament on 21 February 1401 notes that “now Welsh scholars who had been residing in the universities of Oxford and Cambridge had left for their country; and that also Welsh labourers who had been living in various parts of the English realm had suddenly fled the said realms for their same country of Wales, and had strongly equipped themselves with arms, bows, arrows and swords and other weapons of war, such as

5 Jones, The History of Wales, 42.
they had not done at any time since the conquest of Wales.”6 The increased number of people supporting Owain, along with the increased number of weapons, were great inspiration in the second, much more successful revolt of Owain Glyndŵr.

With an increased number of followers and motivation, Owain began to attack various Welsh towns, taking over a great portion of north Wales from English rulers. The Welsh were known to completely ransack areas controlled by the English. They destroyed churches, homes, livestock, and various other pieces of property owned by Englishmen. The Welsh fighters were originally keen to avoid pitched battles (battles where both sides agree beforehand on a location for the fight to take place), preferring random attacks, which would keep the English from having any advantage.7 However, pitched battles were not always possible to avoid.

Throughout the year 1401, Owain predominately attacked castles and other forts held by the English. Owain seized Conwy Castle near Easter of 1401, and held that while he attacked other castles of north Wales such as Caernarfon and Harlech. Owain also used this time to seek out help from other countries, and even within England itself. He made various agreements with the royalty of Scotland and France, who had long shared animosity toward the English.8 Thus, while the majority of Owain’s soldiers were Welsh, he did gain foreign aid beginning in 1401 in promise for various pieces of land and influence in England should he prevail.

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8 Jones, The History of Wales, 42.
It can be argued that Owain’s revolt had its greatest success in 1402. The first occurred in February, when Owain captured one of his greatest local enemies, Reginald Grey. Grey was responsible for carrying out the orders of the English Crown in north Wales, and thus capturing Grey prevented a great deal of English interference in north Wales. Glyndŵr eventually released Grey later the same year, for a ransom of 10,000 marks (equivalent to £6,666). Although Grey was now free, he played no further role in carrying out the will of Henry IV in Wales, giving Owain, as well as the general population of north Wales, much more liberty.

While being successful in a number of battles and events such as the capture of Reginald Grey, what is often considered to be the greatest victory of Owain’s revolt is that of the Battle of Bryn Glas, near the Powys town of Knighton, on 22 June 1402. Bryn Glas is located on the eastern edge of Powys, in the middle of the county, near what is now the England-Wales border. While the Welsh were outnumbered four to three, the tactics used by Glyndŵr and his men insured victory. They used various goading tactics to tire the English soldiers and cut slowly through English lines. Furthermore, they had numerous archers stationed on hills, in order to fire down upon the English. One of the greatest advantages, however, was the fact that many soldiers loyal to Owain had infiltrated the English ranks, and so instead of firing their arrows at the oncoming Welsh, they fired them into the backs and sides of the Englishmen around them. These tactics ensured the Welsh victory at Bryn Glas.

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This event, along with being a great victory from a military perspective, was also a great political victory. It created a number of political ties, and helped further the destabilization of the English throne. The English throne was already contested by two groups - those supporting Richard II and those supporting his cousin, Henry IV. Henry IV had taken over the throne, deposing Richard II. At the battle of Bryn Glas, Owain Glyndŵr captured the leader of the English forces, Sir Edmund Mortimer, who also had claim to the throne through various relatives.

While Sir Edmund originally supported his cousin Henry IV, Henry betrayed him after he was captured by Owain, forbidding Edmund’s family from offering ransom, and seizing a great deal of Edmund’s wealth and lands. After this, Sir Edmund joined Owain’s revolt, with Owain promising to restore Richard II to the throne if he lived, or Sir Edmund’s nephew (also named Edmund Mortimer), if Richard was dead. Ultimately, Sir Edmund married Owain’s daughter Catrin, becoming Owain’s son-in-law. Thus, the battle of Bryn Glas created political ties with the supporters of Richard II, and marital ties with Richard’s family.

Although Henry IV betrayed Sir Edmund Mortimer, in public he used Edmund’s capture as a rallying point to attack Owain and his forces in the next month. In a proclamation issued by Henry IV on 25 June 1402, just three days after the battle, Henry states that, because Owain had taken his “very dear and well beloved cousin” Edmund Mortimer, the men should “be ready with us, armed, mounted and arrayed according to their rank and standing at our city of Lichfield with all due speed, so that in the end they may be…ready to go with us to the said region to resist and combat the wickedness of our aforesaid

rebels…” 12 Thus, the English continued to attack Owain’s army throughout the year, never successfully capturing or completely defeating them.

Throughout 1403 and into 1404, Owain and his soldiers attacked various Welsh towns and castles held by the English, such as Aberystwyth, Kidwelly, Caernarfon, and Harlech. Owain even received great support in southeastern Wales, in the areas of Monmouthshire and Gwent, counties heavily controlled by Englishmen. Throughout the next months, there were a number of battles, such as those of Shrewsbury, Hereford, and Chester, where the weather became too atrocious for the armies of Henry IV to fight. The fact that the weather kept Owain safe from a number of battles caused people to think he was some kind of magician that could control the weather. This view of Glyndŵr as a wizard also came from his supposed ability to materialize from nowhere, and the fact that his companion bards were known to recite incantations, and were thought by the English to be reincarnations of ancient druids. 13 These factors contributed to Owain’s prestige and fearsomeness throughout Wales and England.

After the battles of Shrewsbury and Chester, Owain returned to western Wales for a short period of time. Here he made his home in the area between Aberystwyth and Harlech Castles, establishing his court at Aberystwyth. It was in this area, in the town of Machynlleth, that Owain summoned his first cynulliad (often translated as “gathering” or “parliament”). This cynulliad was for all of Wales, and was completely independent of the Parliament in London. At this

parliament, Owain was officially crowned as Prince of Wales, and declared his goals for the country. These goals included complete independence from England, complete home rule for Wales, for Welshmen to be treated fairly, for a separate Church of Wales, and for two universities to be established in the country.

Also during this parliament, agreements were made between Owain and Charles VI of France. In this pact, “the said lords the King and the prince shall be mutually joined, confederated, united, and leagued by the bond of a true covenant and real friendship, and of a sure, good, and most powerful union against Henry of Lancaster.”

Charles VI, who himself was having trouble with the English, felt this agreement was a great method of keeping Henry busy and depleting his forces, without needing to use the entire army of France. Due to this contract, Charles VI agreed to send soldiers and equipment to Wales, to help Owain and his men fight Henry IV’s forces. They followed through with this promise a few months later when France sent 2,600 men with arms to Wales to help Owain’s revolt.

Another agreement was also made at this time, but on a local level. On 28 February 1405, the Tripartite Indenture was signed by Owain Glyndŵr, Edmund Mortimer, and Henry Percy, First Earl of Northumberland. In this Indenture, the three agreed to a friendly union, to always help each other in times of conflict, and agreed on who would receive the land of England and Wales, should Owain win his rebellion and depose Henry IV. According to the Indenture, Owain was to receive all of Wales, Henry Percy, the Earl of Northumberland, was to receive northern England, and Edmund Mortimer was to receive

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Southern England. With the arrival of French soldiers and weapons in the summer of 1405, a number of battles were fought between Owain’s men and those of England. The first was that of Haverfordwest, a town in the county of Pembrokeshire, in western Wales. Even with French help, Owain and his men were not able to take the castle or town. Instead, they took a smaller castle in Haverfordwest, Picton Castle, and continued through Pembrokeshire to Tenby. While this was a noticeable loss for Owain and his men, it would not be the greatest loss that Owain would face that year.

The second great loss for Owain and his army was at Pwll Melyn, an area within the town of Usk, Monmouthshire, in southeastern Wales. This was a devastating loss for Owain’s and is often considered to be the turning point in the battle for Welsh independence, where England began to gain the upper hand. In this battle, not only were numerous Welsh soldiers killed, but over 300 were captured and executed at a later time. While the defeat experienced at Pwll Melyn was devastating, the true harm to Owain occurred when his son was captured and taken in the Tower of London, and his brother, Tudur, was found among the dead of the battle.

After this battle, the willingness of Owain and his men to attack outright waned. Owain returned to his court and held a second cynulliad at Machynlleth. Here he wrote a letter to Charles VI of

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France, further stating his hopes for an independent Wales.\textsuperscript{17} Even with these hopes, and the treaty between Wales and France, Wales would receive no more aid from the French. They refused to send soldiers to help Owain keep his own lands secure, much less to help him take over new lands.

In the next two years, Owain and his men roamed Wales and even some parts of England, fighting local Englishmen and succeeding in taking over a number of small areas held by the English, but the success and motivation experienced before the battle of Pwll Melyn had vanished. During this time, under the influence of Henry IV’s son, Prince Hal, the English began to attack Wales economically. They reclaimed a number areas and castles taken by Glyndŵr. However, it was in 1407 that the English decided to truly strike back at Owain.

In that year, English forces began attacking Aberystwyth Castle, bombarding the castle with large cannons, although Owain was not present at the beginning. While the castle initially surrendered, Owain returned in time to save the castle from being overrun by English forces, successfully fighting them back. Aberystwyth Castle was ultimately besieged for over a year before it finally fell to English forces. From there, the English forces moved to Harlech Castle, the second of Owain’s two principle castles. Harlech fell to the English in 1409, and Owain’s wife and daughters, who resided there, were taken to the Tower of London as prisoners.\textsuperscript{18} However, Owain still could not be caught.

After the siege of Harlech Castle, Owain fled to the mountains of north Wales with his few remaining soldiers for the next five years. Until 1413, Owain and his men continued to go throughout north

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 22 -23.
\textsuperscript{18} Davies, \textit{A History of Wales}, 197.
Wales, attacking places held by Englishmen. However, no more battles were fought between Owain and the English forces. Owain made money by capturing and ransoming various men in north Wales, such as Dafydd Gam, who were loyal to the King of England. Owain remained a wanted prince, but he and the rest of Wales were no longer considered a threat to England, and were left alone for the most part.

When Henry IV’s son, Prince Hal, succeeded him as king in 1413, he offered two pardons to Owain and his men. However, they must “offer themselves to our obedience and grace, and, in our name, to admit and receive all things…”19 In other words, if Owain were to swear loyalty to Henry V, admit his rulership, and admit his own wrongdoing, he would be pardoned by Henry. However, while some of Owain’s men accepted the pardon, Owain refused both the pardons offered to him.

Ultimately, it is not known what happened to Owain Glyndŵr. After 1413, he simply vanished from public eye. His year of death and burial location are still argued over and searched for to this day. Regardless of when and how he died, his life is celebrated today by many in Wales, especially those that want to see an independent Wales, separate from the United Kingdom, and a revitalization of the Welsh language that was spoken by all Welshmen of Glyndŵr’s time. Only time can tell if, even symbolically, the “Prince of Wales” will be a native Welshman once more.

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