

# “Ancient Cymric” Medicine

Medicine

SIR EWEN MACLEAN, president, British Medical Association, in *The Lancet*:

A thousand years ago King Hywel the Good caused the laws of Wales to be codified, and it is in these codes that we get the first authentic glimpses of our profession and the manner of men who practised it in tenth-century Wales. This monarch had a court physician who was given place and prestige in his presence, had a grant of free land and a horse, and received his linen clothing from the Queen and his woollen clothing from the King. His seat in the hall within the palace was at the base of a pillar near to the King, and his lodging was with the chief of the household. It was his duty to administer medicine without charge to all within the palace, and to the chief of the household. It would appear that he was a whole-time officer, with intervals when, on the basis of a moderate tariff, he was allowed to enjoy the stimulating freedom of private practice. He had to accompany the armies, but ordinarily he was never to leave the palace without the King's permission, when he was free to take any road or route with the messenger of the sick. In those days it was lawful for anyone to take another's horse to procure a medical man for a person in danger, without being required to make amends. The same principle applied today in respect to motor cars might lead to serious misunderstandings.

The chief interests of these early codes, from a medical point of view, lies in the way they assessed legal damages for injuries and laid down standard fees for treatment. The thumbnail, for instance, was worth 30 pence. One front tooth was equal to a finger; one molar tooth to a thumb.

## Mediæval Traditions

The old laws are interesting as showing us something of the state of the Welsh *meddyg* under the Welsh tribal system in the tenth century. The eleventh century brought with it great changes in Welsh history. A great new formative influence came then into the life of Wales—that was the Norman. The Norman affected profoundly the whole course of Welsh life and politics. Under the walls of his castles

there grew up townships, markets, forts. Once more, as in the days of the early wandering Celtic missionaries Wales came into touch with the rest of Europe and the world. For not in Wales and England only, but in Ireland, in France, in Spain, in Sicily, in Palestine even, on the threshold of immemorial East—there too were the castles of the Norman. Pilgrim and Crusader, merchant, monk and friar, errant knight and troubadour, all whose activities helped to render knowledge fluid and international throughout the Holy Roman Empire, must have helped towards the building up of a native medical tradition in mediæval Wales, a tradition which has left behind as its monument a fourteenth century manuscript, the older of the two manuscripts known as the “Books of the Physicians of the Myddfai.”

It was but natural that the tradition of the physicians of the Myddfai in mediæval Wales should trace its origin back to the fountain head of a legend.

In the fastnesses of the wild Fan Mountains of Carmarthenshire there is hidden away a small lake known as Llyn-y-Fan Fash. Long ago, so the legend runs, a shepherd boy named Gwyn was tending his flock on the shore of the lake when a most beautiful maiden emerged from the mirrored surface of the water. After many complications, which are so essential to a fairy tale, Gwyn and the maiden of the lake became man and wife. Three sons were born to them, but after a time the maiden disappeared again into the depths of the lake, taking with her her faery dowry of cattle and chattels. At a later day, however, she reappeared to her three sons, who kept vigil for her on the shore. The eldest son, Rhiwallon, she led aside to Pant-y-Meddygon (the Physicians' Hollow); there she revealed to him the properties of the medicinal plants and herbs which grew around them, and called upon him to dedicate himself to the art of healing. This Rhiwallon did, so that he became the physician of Rhys Grug, Lord of Llandovery and Dynevor. Tradition claims, too, that the descendants of Rhiwallon practised their art at Myddfai in unbroken lineage until the end of the eighteenth century.

Such, in brief, is the story of the physicians of Myddfai.

Interesting though these earlier figures may be, however, it is only after the Renaissance had rejuvenated Wales that we come upon the beginnings of a really brood-culture among Welsh physicians. Although not one of the outstanding physicians of Wales in Tudor and early Jacobean times had any claim to be compared to a Sydenham or a Harvey, they were yet figures commanding interest and respect in other ways. Educated, most of them that we know of, at the older English universities, their medical writings and their medical beliefs were, for their day and generation, reasonable and scientific. One striking characteristic which many of them had in common was the great breadth of their culture and their scholarly achievements in other arts besides medicine. Thus Phaer of Pilgeiran was one of the first great Elizabethan translators of the classics, while to Robert Recorde of Tenby we owe the introduction of the study of algebra into this country.

Time does not permit to follow the fortunes of the Welsh *meddyg* through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Something of their ubiquity and prominence may be gathered from the fact that the two surgeons on board Captain Cook's ship the *Resolution* in 1777 were Welshmen—Robert Davies of Wyddgrug, and David Samuel of Denbigh. Samuel later became surgeon of the *Discovery*, and he may have suggested to his captain some of the latter's very enlightened ideas regarding the relationship of scurvy to diet. At any rate, Samuel was a scientifically minded man, as shown by his treatise on the introduction of certain diseases among the South Sea Islanders. “He was,” so wrote one of his contemporaries, “extremely irritable, but one of those hearty fellows we expect a sailor to have been.”

But however true it may be that the past, even the distant past, is ever with us and must tincture our very thought and deed, the blend of the present and the immediate future is the main incentive to individual and corporate action.

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