

The Crusades and the Welsh Princes

by **Dr. David Harrison**

The wars in the Holy Land attracted Kings, the nobility, and adventurers, but banishment to the Holy Land was a punishment reserved for many a troublesome nobleman, the threat of exile from their ancestral lands by the English King being a way of keeping them as far away from the political theater as possible. One such nobleman, Dafydd ap Gruffydd, the younger brother of the Prince of Wales Llywelyn ap Gruffydd, was requested to go on Crusade in the Holy Land and to never return without the King's permission, as part of an offered peace treaty between the King of England Edward I and Prince Llywelyn in 1282, just before the outbreak of war. The offer was turned down with both Dafydd and Llywelyn preferring to fight and ultimately choosing death over the offer. 1

The Crusades had been an important feature of medieval life for the Welsh nobleman and the Marcher Lords since they began in the late eleventh century, but promotion in Wales by the Archbishop of Canterbury himself for the Third Crusade created passionate interest. The Anglo-Norman cleric known as Gerald of Wales, writing in the later twelfth century, accompanied the Archbishop of Canterbury, Baldwin of Exeter, on his tour of Wales in 1188 to gather recruits for the Third Crusade, and Gerald himself supported the crusading ideal. Baldwin's tour actively promoted the crusade and stirred up interest amongst the Welsh nobility, some leaving their troubled nation behind for promised riches and glory in the Holy Land. It became a way for younger noblemen to gain prestige and honor and to gain first hand military experience. In 1189 the charismatic and newly crowned King Richard I raised funds for the cause before leaving for the Holy Land with Phillip II of France in 1190. His move led the way for many other noblemen who quickly followed suit.

One of these noblemen was the extremely influential Marcher, Lord William Marshal, the March being the name for the fluid borders of Wales and England. Marshal had married into his lands, had become Earl of Pembroke and Chepstow, and was renowned for his jousting, serving Henry II, Richard I, King John, and Henry III. He had participated in the coronation of King Richard I and had fought on Crusade with the Templar Knights, and having made a vow to the Templars, he was finally invested into the order on his deathbed. He had become Regent of England in 1216 for the infant Henry III when he was over 70 years old, becoming one of the most powerful men in Europe, and when he died in 1219, he was buried in the Church of the Templar Knights, his effigy displaying him as a mail-clad knight bearing his shield which is emblazoned with his heraldic arms.

An example of an important Welsh nobleman who went to the Holy Land was Ednyfed Fychan, an ancestor of Tudor monarch Henry VII, who served as "distain" from about 1212 to 1246, a position usually identified as a steward or seneschal to the Welsh Prince Llywelyn ab Iorwerth, a diplomatic role being essential in negotiations which was especially useful in the tense political atmosphere between England and Wales in the

thirteenth century. Ednyfed Fychan embarked on his journey to the Holy Land in 1235, a journey which he would take with his retinue, and while lodging in London before he left, King Henry III ordered his treasurer, Hugh Pateshull, to find out where Ednyfed was lodging and to take him a gift of a silver cup. 2

According to legend, Ednyfed Fychan spent so much time in the Crusades that his family thought he had died there, a fate which was common among many young noblemen who had attempted the dangerous journey. According to Welsh folk tradition, he was said to have composed a farewell song to his love Gwenllian before travelling to the Holy Land, and as she thought him dead, she became betrothed to another man. On the night of the marriage, a beggar arrived at the house and asked to play the harp to entertain the wedding party. The beggar then played Ednyfed Fychan's farewell song to Gwenllian, and on reaching the last verse he removed his hat and cloak and revealed himself to be Ednyfed Fychan.

Llywelyn ab Iorwerth, or Llywelyn Fawr (the Great) as he became known, dominated the area of Gwynedd and called himself "Prince of North Wales" and "Lord of Snowdon." He had married King John's illegitimate daughter Joan and established himself as the most powerful native ruler of Wales in the early thirteenth century. He had never been on Crusade, and having stayed in his native lands, he had established close ties with other powerful local noblemen such as Earl Ranulf of Chester who Llywelyn confirmed his friendship

Marcher Lord William Marshal became one of the most powerful Anglo-Norman statesmen, serving four monarchs he went to the Holy Land, fighting with the Templar Knights, finally being invested into the order on his deathbed in 1219. He was buried in the Church of the Templar Knights in London. William Marshal was celebrated for his jousting, and this medieval picture reveals Marshal unhorsing Baldwin Guisnes, taken from the *Historia Major* of Matthew Paris, Cambridge, Corpus Christi College Library, vol 2, p. 85. with by personally meeting the Earl on his return from Crusade in 1220. 3

Ranulf had made a crusading vow in 1215, and in 1218 he left for the Holy Land to honour the vow and to take a prominent role in the Fifth Crusade. With the Earls of Arundel and Winchester, they sailed toward Egypt and took part in the attack on Damietta which was a strategic port that would give control of the Nile. Fearing the fall of Damietta, the ruler of Egypt, Sultan Al-Kamil, offered the Crusaders a deal; leave Egypt and they could have Jerusalem, but the Bishop Pelagio who was leading the Crusade on behalf of the Pope turned the offer down. Francis of Assisi was also present during the Crusade and had even attempted to convert Al-Kamil to Christianity. The rejection of Al-Kamil's offer went against the advice of Ranulf, and despite capturing Damietta, Ranulf returned home in 1220 as the crusading force became demoralised. The crusader forces under Pelagio decided to take Cairo in 1221, but ultimately lost out to a combination of nature and an attack by the Sultan's forces.

Edward I finally conquered Wales in 1283 after the death of the last Welsh Prince Llywelyn ap Gruffydd, the grandson of Llywelyn Fawr. Edward had also supported the

ideal of the Crusades, having accompanied the French King Louis IX to the Holy Land, and Edward had attempted an expedition against the Baibars during what was known as the Eighth and Ninth Crusades. On conquering Wales, Edward took inspiration from the fortifications he had seen on his visit to the Holy Land and had a string of castles constructed around the native Welsh stronghold of Gwynedd in the north. Perhaps his greatest castle was that of Caernarfon which was inspired by the walls of Constantinople, a city which many a Crusading knight would have seen. This castle became Edward's administrative center, Caernarfon being located on the site of the ancient Roman Segontium. To display these imperial links, the castle would express the architectural splendour of Rome's successor state of Constantinople. The mighty polygonal towers of the castle walls strongly resemble the Theodosian Wall of Constantinople, and as a piece of medieval military architecture, Caernarfon conveys the influence of the Crusades in Wales.⁴ These post conquest Welsh castles were designed by the architect Master, James of St. George, who Edward had met in Savoy on his way back from the Crusades. Caernarfon Castle is the most impressive of Edward's castles in Wales and symbolises his dominance over the conquered Welsh people, the influence of the Crusades having a far reaching affect on this much troubled nation.

End Notes

1 See R.R. Davies, *The Age of Conquest: Wales 1063-1415*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

2 David Walker, *Medieval Wales*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p.108.

3 See R.R. Davies, *The Age of Conquest: Wales 1063-1415*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p.248.

4 See Ifor Rowlands, 'The Edwardian Conquest and its Military Consolidation', in Trevor

Herbert and Gareth Elwyn Jones (ed.), *Edward I and Wales*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1988), pp.52-55

Dr. David Harrison is a history lecturer, having completed his Ph.D. on the history of Freemasonry in 2008 at the University of Liverpool. His thesis was published by Lewis Masonic titled *The Genesis of Freemasonry* and is available at all good book outlets. His second book *The Transformation of Freemasonry* is published by Arima and is available through Amazon, Barnes and Noble, and all good book outlets. The author can be contacted via the Lewis Masonic website: www.lewismasonic.co.uk

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