

Madoc: The Indian tale still tantalising the Welsh

Did a Celtic prince discover America and influence tribal culture? Byron Rogers examines the 'myth' and its hold on men's imagination down the centuries

It was a bleak April day in an Indian reservation in North Dakota and Professor Gwyn Williams of the Department of History at Cardiff University sat listening to one of the last Mandan Indians describing the origins of his tribe.

Professor Williams was there with a camera crew from BBC Wales but they were not the first Welshmen to come. They have been coming for almost two centuries, in person or in imagination, to this rendezvous beside the Missouri between a dying Indian tribe and a fading British nation.

"And then the man said it, the thing we had half-hoped, half-feared he would say. 'The lone man was the founder of our people. He was a white man who brought our people in his big canoe across a great water and landed them on the Gulf of Mexico'."

In his study in Cardiff, Professor Williams paused. "It was a hell of a shock. Everything stopped. All seven of us were reduced to total silence." He looked up mildly. "Have you ever seen Welsh people reduced to total silence?"

The old Indian, handing on tribal legend about the beginnings of his people, was adding more lore to a powerful and enduring mythology: that the Welsh discovered America nearly 300 years before Christopher Columbus and passed on to the primitive Indians their alien Celtic language, culture and way of life.

A professional historian who knew it was not possible could not keep the awe out of his voice. "There was this Asiatic face looking at me," says Williams. He shook his head. "My brother."

Professor Williams has just published his account of the strangest obsession ever to link two continents, *Madoc: The Making of a Myth* (Eyre Methuen, £8.50). It covers 800 years and has a cast which would have been beyond deMille — Vikings, Elizabethan alchemists, pirates, Indian chiefs, Welsh preachers, American frontiersmen, revolutionaries and some of the greatest con-men of the last four centuries.

The scene moves from small white chapels to the Great Wilderness. There is romance, there is mystery and there is great sadness. Not even the Arthurian legend has this range as the Madoc story tells of what happened when men came to believe in myth.

It begins in the last 20 years of the 16th century. Elizabethan England had its back

to the wall, with Rome and the great Spanish Empire ranged against it. Men needed something to underwrite their perilous isolation, some memory of a great imperial past. They needed Madoc.

The Church of Rome had granted Spain a virtual monopoly in America. It was thus a stroke of propaganda genius that prompted the great Dr John Dee, alchemist, mathematician, geographer, friend to Queen Elizabeth, and a London Welshman, to produce an old tradition of his race that a Welsh prince had landed in America in 1170 and had founded a colony. Beside this — the fact that a British prince had been in residence 400 years before — Papal Bulls withered like old flowers.

There was just a tradition. Icelandic sagas mention a great Welsh sailor of the 12th century who had frightened even the Vikings. But the earliest reference Professor Williams can find to a Prince Madoc, sailor son of the ruler of the last independent Welsh state of North Wales, is in a 15th-century Welsh poem. It is so casual and so brief that it assumes the poet knows his audience will understand: Robin Hood needs no footnotes. So there was a tradition.

There is a well-known Flemish poem of the 13th century about a Prince Madoc of Wales who voyaged through seas of weed to fabulous isles. There are many references to it, but the text is lost. There are many lost texts in the Madoc story.

And he would have sailed on had it not been for a clash of empires. As a Welshman, Dee was fascinated by the tales of Madoc and the Tudor propaganda machine went into action: "The Queen of England's title to all the West Indies is more lawful and right than the Spaniards'." It was emphasised by

that speech of Montezuma to Cortes about the white founding fathers of his race who had come by sea.

As the war threat faded so did Madoc, but not entirely. In the late 17th century, a Welsh clergyman shifted the scene dramatically to the New World. He claimed to have been kidnapped by Indians and to have been released by them when he muttered something in Welsh. So what if they were still there, beyond the maps, the Lost Brothers?

The tale of the Welsh Indians belongs to the later part of the 18th century as men began the slow walk west. Tales came back from the frontier of men whiter than Indians, who had a sacred book they no longer knew how to read. In 1752, the Welsh-American Baptists claimed that Welsh Indians had been discovered west of the Mississippi.

Now the details began to accumulate. Men had come on strange old stone forts running up from Mobile Bay which no Indian could have built. Romantics spoke up from the Frontier. Daniel Boone claimed to have seen the mocassin prints of the Welsh Indians. The renegade James Girty said he had met so many he had compiled a Welsh-Indian dictionary. Thomas Jefferson believed in them.

Most hilarious of all, a Welshman said he had found it very difficult to talk to the Comanches. But then he was a South Walian himself, and the Comanches spoke North Wales Welsh.

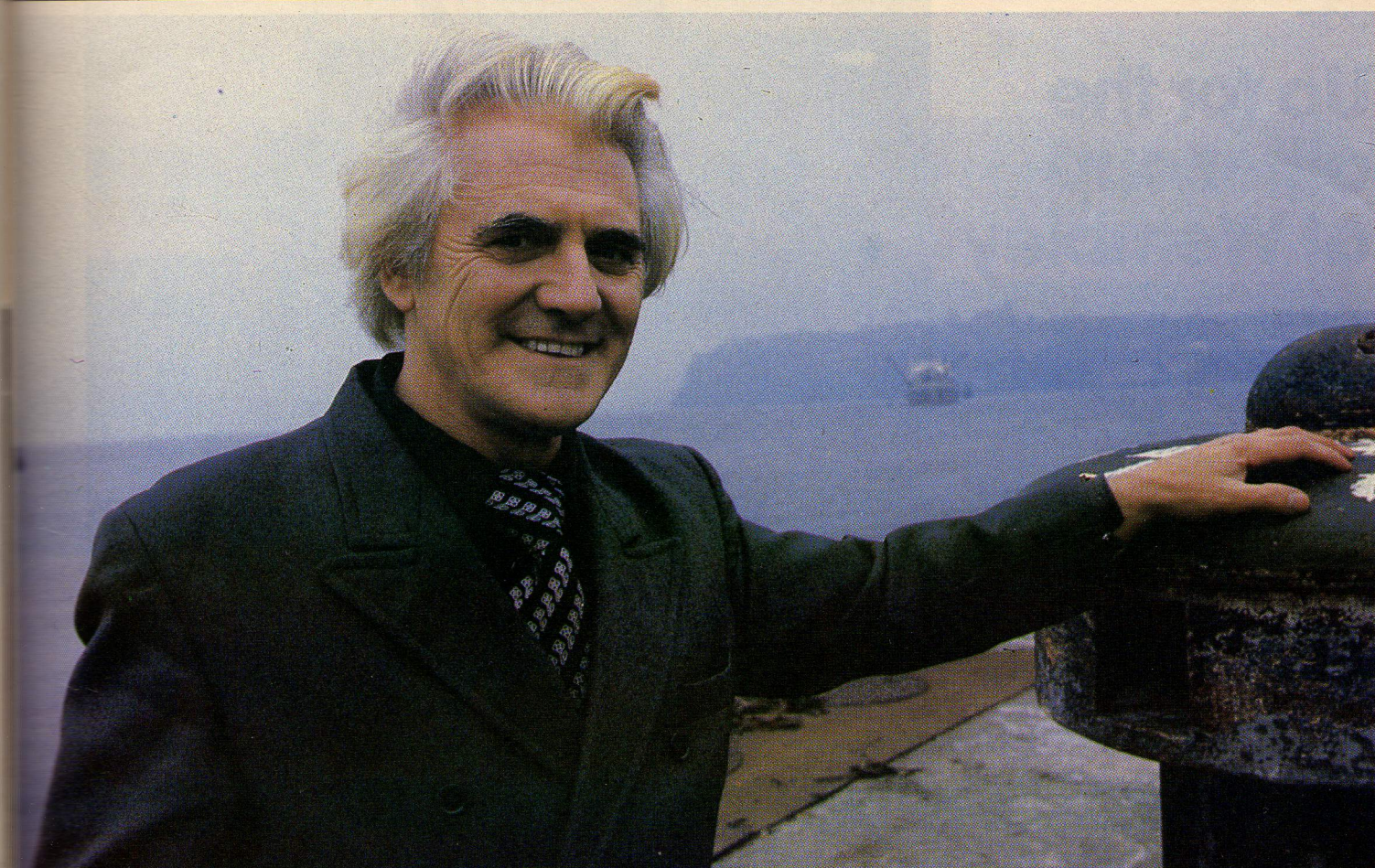
But there were others. In 1782, a very old Cherokee chief said his people had a tradition that, in ancient times, they had fought against white people.

"You can't explain that away," said Professor Williams. "All those stories. I am



ABOVE: Mandan coracles and Celtic style huts depicted in an early painting. LEFT: Commemorating Madoc

In memory of Prince Madoc, a Welsh explorer, who landed on the shores of Mobile Bay in 1170 and left behind, with the Indians, the Welsh language.
Authority is: Encyclopedia Americana copyright 1918 - Webster's Encyclopedia and Geographer 1252 to 1616 - a Welsh Historian - ancient Roman Kidpath's History of the World - These Forts resemble the Forts of Wales of the 9th and 10th centuries and of the white Indians of the Tennessee and Missouri rivers.



Professor Gwyn Williams: A sceptic who came face-to-face with the final irony of the Madoc myth

sceptical, highly sceptical, yet there are 93 documented instances of people claiming to have directly spoken in Welsh to Red Indians. For God's sake, they can't all be liars or maniacs." It is a historian's nightmare: all those references, all that well-documented lunacy. "Perhaps they *were* all liars and maniacs," muttered Professor Williams gloomily.

Now the tempo speeded up as tales came back of a tribe living on the headwaters of the Missouri, the Mandans. They lived in fortified camps, not in tents but in beehive houses, and they used round boats very like the coracles of Wales.

Wales went off like a Roman candle at the news. By the end of the 18th century the country was struggling out of its colonial night and had yet to lapse into its Methodist night. This left just one decade, the 1790s. Men had gone into a ferment because of the American and French Revolutions. They remembered the old glories of their independence, old traditions. And now this. Across the Atlantic were their Lost Brothers, unconquered, free, with their own language and their liberty. This historical dimension was staggering and the first impulse was to find these Lost Brothers.

The great Iolo Morgannwg had done much for the Welsh Revival, even discovering a lost literature (which he had thoughtfully written himself) and, in his middle 50s, slept out in the rain and lived off berries in order to get into training for the journey.

The Lost Brothers were too far into the Wilderness for most, but they prompted visions of a Welsh National Home in the New

World, and, in the late 1790s, fleeing inflation and war taxes, came waves of Welsh immigrants.

But there was one man who did not fear the Wilderness. In 1792 perhaps the strangest figure in the whole canon crossed the Atlantic — a 20-year-old wildly romantic North Walian who had vowed to lay down his life in the quest for his Lost Brothers. John Evans landed at Baltimore and, in the spring of 1793, with one dollar and 25 cents, began to walk towards the Wilderness.

'No such people as the Welsh Indians'

In 1794 Evans reached St Louis, where, at Christmas, he was thrown into jail by the Spaniards. He had walked into what was a potential war zone.

Three trading empires met on the Missouri — those of the British, the new American states and the fading Spanish Empire. It had become a matter of urgency for all three to break through the Indian tribes to the Pacific.

Evans was released, and by the strangest irony he now became the last conquistador, as Professor Williams calls him, being hired by the Spaniards to break through to the Mandans.

In September 1796, Evans reached the Mandans. He survived a terrible North Dakota winter and in May 1797 began his journey. In St Louis, he sat down to write what must have been the saddest letter of his young life. "There is no such people as

the Welsh Indians . . ." He was dead two years later of alcoholism, burnt out at 27. But the Madoc myth did not die. Welsh scholars sniffily disowned it, but not the Americans. In 1953, the Daughters of the American Revolution raised a plaque to Madoc at Mobile.

When Professor Williams padded in the footsteps of John Evans, he realised he had left the certainty of libraries. "It was very eerie. The stone forts with their dry stone walling are just like the Gaer above Brecon. And then you see these reconstructions of the Mandan villages which look just like the old Celtic beehive huts. And then the coracles . . ."

He came to the Madoc myth first because it amused him. He stayed with it because of the effect he found it had had on history. "Historians should examine myths. They are the warp and woof of history. Men believed in them and all a historian can do is look back through the filters of other men's minds."

He is not so shaken now as he was when he heard the Mandan speak of his origins. As with modern folk tales so a tradition can enter a community and be passed down until all accept it as true. It was, said Professor Williams, a sort of osmosis.

But there was something else that day in North Dakota. "The Mandan went on to speak about the disappearance of his tribe and of the need to keep the language going. And there was this sudden familiarity about it all. I had heard it before."

That is the final irony in the Madoc myth. Beside the Missouri, a Welshman felt he had come home.