

## THE EISTEDDFOD

### Gareth Miles

The first Eisteddfod, concerning itself with literary and musical matters of which there is written evidence, was held at Christmas 1176, in Cardigan Castle, at the behest of yr Arglwydd Rhys, the Lord Rhys, last King of Deheubarth/Southern Wales. Although poets and musicians did compete for prizes at Rhys's Eisteddfod, its primary function was, in the words of the University of Wales *Dictionary of the Welsh Language* 'to formulate rules in connection with the crafts of poetry and musicianship and to organise poets and musicians into guilds of craftsmen or graduates'.

There was a similar Eisteddfod in 1450 in Carmarthen, and two more, in 1523 and 1567 both at Caerwys. These last two medieval eisteddfodau were symptomatic of the bards' awareness that their craft and livelihood, both dependent on their relationship with the landed gentry, were being undermined and eroded by the fundamental socio-economic and political changes taking place in Wales and generally throughout the Tudor state at that time. They protested that their dignity and their social role were being threatened by the activities of 'wasters, rhymsters, minstrels and other beggars'. And they reaffirmed a fictitious Statute of Gruffudd ap Cynan in an attempt to buttress the bardic system by defining bardic rights, obligations and qualifications and charging true poets with the observance of a code of conduct in keeping with their high calling — drunkenness, womanizing and gambling being specifically proscribed!

All to no avail. The landed gentry, becoming increasingly anglicised and integrated within the English state, had a correspond-

ingly decreasing need of bards, harpists and eisteddfodau.

The Eisteddfod disappeared in all but name in the seventeenth century, and when it re-emerged in the early eighteenth it did so in public houses and Almanac advertisements, as a weak and tawdry imitation of the great feudal congresses held at Cardigan, Carmarthen and Caerwys. It was for jugs of ale and not finely-wrought silver medallions presented by great magnates that the poets now competed and the verse they produced was correspondingly impoverished. However, this cultural nadir induced a circle of London-Welsh radicals and bohemians who called themselves Y Gwyneddigion/The Gwyneddites to sponsor a series of annual eisteddfodau in different parts of Wales between 1789 and 1795. These were purely competitive events and did not presume upon the 'legislative' functions of their mediaeval forerunners. So were the foundations of the modern Eisteddfod laid.

The last half of the nineteenth century and the first quarter of the twentieth was, *pace* Jimmy Saville OBE, the age of the train. It was also, in Wales, the age of the rising, Nonconformist, rural petty-bourgeoisie. The National Eisteddfodau of the period reflect both factors. As a result of special excursion rates from all parts of the country, effective advertising and more efficient organisation, they became mass spectacles. The modern festival also began to exhibit the permanent crisis of identity which beset the class which had created it and whose interests it was chiefly designed to serve. Was its role to be a national celebration of all that was best in the Welsh cultural heritage,



Above: National Eisteddfod, Machynlleth. Green Ovates arrive by bus for the Crowning Ceremony.

Below: After receiving the Crown, the winning poet is honoured by a floral dance.



or rather a means of disproving the slanders of the 1848 Blue Books and of convincing *The Times* and its readers that the Welsh were trying, really trying, to be as respectable, industrious, dynamic, scientific, practical, civilised and successful as their divinely-endowed Saxon neighbours, and had in fact made some considerable strides towards achieving the most desirable status of honorary Englishmen?

The Top Victorians' paper regarded the Welsh language as 'the curse of Wales' and thundered in typical fashion that 'its prevalence and the ignorance of English have excluded and even now exclude the Welsh from the civilisation of their English neighbours. An Eisteddfod . . . is simply a foolish interference with the natural progress of civilisation and prosperity.'

The nonconformist culture which the nineteenth century Liberal petty-bourgeoisie created, apart from the Gorsedd of Bards and the writings of a few fiercely independent and isolated patriots such as Emrys ap Iwan and Michael D Jones (the founder of the Patagonian colony), was thoroughly British in content, though Welsh in language. By the early 1920s though, that cul-

ture had brought into existence an intelligentsia — preachers, teachers, lecturers and professors — for whom the Welsh language was a means of production and the guarantor of their social prominence. This group required educational, cultural and social arrangements to safeguard the existence of the Welsh language. It was for this specific purpose that Saunders Lewis, GJ Williams and a small number of other academics and sympathisers founded Plaid Genedlaethol Cymru/Welsh Nationalist Party, (later known as Plaid Cymru), at the Pwllheli National Eisteddfod in 1925.

An important cultural achievement on the part of the Nationalists has been to rid the modern National Eisteddfod of the rampant Uncle Tomism and parasitism to which it had been subject from its inception until the reorganisation of its administration in 1937, when a National Eisteddfod Council was established on the principle that 'the Welsh language shall be the official language of the Eisteddfod'. In 1950 the Council enacted that Welsh was to be the only language used by the Eisteddfod in the conduct of its affairs. At the time, this aroused the inevitable howls of outrage from individuals and

organizations dedicated to the preservation of Welsh inferiority in all possible fields, by all means possible, but by now it is generally recognised as having been both necessary and beneficial.

It cannot be denied that the All Welsh Rule does continue to cause irritation and friction in some quarters. For example, Labour-controlled Mid-Glamorgan County Council, regarding it as a home-bred form of apartheid, has declared that it will deny the National Eisteddfod financial support until it becomes bilingual. Unfortunately, this principled stand does not preclude Mid-Glamorgan from investing in South Africa, nor from giving financial support to the Llangollen International Eisteddfod which maintains cultural links with that country and observes an All English Rule.

Removal of the National Eisteddfod's All Welsh Rule would not bring about mass participation by non Welsh speaking workers from the South and North-East but would lead, inevitably, to its infestation by royalty, big business, Oxbridge, the London cultural establishment, and local government 'supremos' and super-hacks.

The Eisteddfod remains a centrepiece of Welsh culture. The Royal National has been held since 1880 on alternate years in north and south Wales, almost without a break. Though often referred to as 'The Eisteddfod' it is by no means the only one. Many hundreds of smaller eisteddfodau take place, every year, in village halls, schools, community centres, chapel vestries, tents and pavilions throughout the country. The following major events are highly recommended: the Urdd (Welsh League of Youth), National Eisteddfod (Whit Week, peripatetic), The Miners' Eisteddfod (first weekend in October, Porthcawl), and the Dai Francis Memorial International Eisteddfod (Mayday weekend, Onllwyn); the Llangollen International Eisteddfod is not. D