



The Union and the tale of the two dragons *by Robin Millar MP*

Vortigern, High King of the Britons, had rotten luck.

Even by the chaotic standards of the fifth century, nothing seemed to go his way. To the north, fierce blue-skinned men – the Picts – had hopped over the old Roman wall and were carrying off or burning whatever they could lay their hands on. Spurred by tales of plunder, ships brimming with pirates and settlers – including the dreaded Scots – had crossed the Irish Sea and swept over the beleaguered Britons. When Vortigern, in his desperation, invited in the Saxon brothers Hengist and Horsa to defend his lands, the pair duly betrayed him, killed his son and set about conquering swathes of Britain.

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Now, with the barbarians pressing in on all sides, King Vortigern couldn't even build a castle. Every day, his masons worked to erect walls on a hill in what is now Gwynedd, North Wales. But every morning they found their stones toppled.

Despairing, the King was driven to the verge of sacrificing a local boy to appease whatever spirit had cursed the hillside. The boy in question, Myrddin (better known these days as Merlin), was understandably displeased with the idea and persuaded the King of a counter-proposal: excavate the hill. This proved a fateful choice, for when Vortigern's workmen drove their spades into the hillside, part of its exterior crumbled, and two ferocious dragons sprang forth – one Red and one White. Taking to the skies above the terrified retinue, the Red Dragon duly slew the White Dragon, casting its body down into the valley.



The message of all who would go on to repeat the tale was clear: the Britons (the Red Dragon) would one day defeat the Saxons (the White Dragon) and unite all of Britain under one banner.

This is not whimsy. Folk traditions are a serious thing. Innocuous as they may seem, contained within them is something potent: competing claims to a people's story. They can make nations or break them apart; it may be the soldiers who fight, but it is the storytellers who inspire bravery or fear, who define a sense of who is 'us' and who is 'them' and who give weight and passion to a cause.

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One thousand years on from Vortigern, Henry VII (of the upstart Welsh Tudor dynasty) was well aware of the potency of folk tales when he adopted the Red Dragon as his battle banner during his march through Wales against Richard III. His message was clear: 'I am "Y Mab Darogan" ["the Prophesied Son"], liberator of the Britons, here to re-establish our dominion over our ancient lands.'

When the victorious Henry presented the Red Dragon alongside the flag of Saint George at Saint Paul's Cathedral in 1485, he was consciously combining the tales, and fates, of the descendants of Vortigern and the tricky Saxon brothers. From this footing, his son, Henry VIII, went further – abolishing the legal distinctions between the two peoples.

And yet, in the minds of some, the two peoples remained forever separate. However enthusiastically the English adopted Welsh tales of Arthur, Merlin and dragons, however integrated their cultures and economies grew, some were never convinced by Wales's 15th-century 'liberation'. This anxiety grew during the industrial period, when English and Irish migration doubled Wales's population, contributing to a rapid decline of the Welsh language.



Yet most Welsh people proved willing to combine their concerns with those from different backgrounds. So long as the folk tradition had no competing claims of sovereignty to latch onto, enclaves of the Welsh language could join themselves to the wider British non-conformist, liberal tradition; even returning, among others, Britain's only Prime Minister to speak English as a second language – David Lloyd George. Welshmen and women fought bravely alongside their English cousins in defence of their island, married into English families and migrated across the UK (and, later, its colonies). As embodied by the likes of Aneurin Bevan, the Welsh played a crucial part in forging the modern British state.

The 21st century has been witness to a curious twist in the Tale of Two Dragons. When Tony Blair created the Welsh Assembly (now the Welsh Parliament, or 'Senedd'), he unwittingly created a vessel for a competing claim to sovereignty. In law, of course, the Westminster Parliament remains sovereign, but this claim must also convince those it binds.

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Take, as an example, my own constituency – Aberconwy. Like most of North Wales, Aberconwy now votes Conservative in both general and Senedd elections, and I'm blessed with a good relationship with my Senedd colleague Janet Finch-Saunders. Imagine, however, that the constituency's Member of the Senedd (MS) was not from my party. Imagine, too, that the Conservative majority in the British Parliament voted for a project – say, a new railway station – that was opposed by Aberconwy's MS and a majority of her Senedd colleagues. Which one of us can rightly claim to speak for Aberconwy? And which of the two elected bodies can claim the right to make the ultimate decision over the project?

To answer these questions, we must look deeper than the legal literature – for a population must believe in the legitimacy of the law-making process for its laws to



hold them captive. Nor can an appeal to democracy aid us, for both sides vest their claims in democracy – the British Parliament in the notion of ‘one Briton, one vote’, and the Senedd in ‘one Welsh person, one vote’ (or, in the latter case, ‘an equal number of votes’). An appeal to localism can’t help us either – for both parliaments assert primacy over councils.

None of these methods are wholly satisfactory because at its heart, the answer to the question of sovereignty is by no means wholly objective. The answer also lies in whether you identify with the British story – that of the coming together of the descendants of Vortigern and his Saxon, Scots and Pictish rivals – or not. This does not preclude an identification with any one tradition (I consider myself Welsh and British), but it does require a belief in a covenant between the people of these islands – in the existence of a ‘British people’.

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Successive British administrations have failed to recognise this truth – or, indeed, grasp that there is a web of memories and relationships that bind our Union. Faced with conflict between the Welsh and British executives, successive UK governments have deferred to the Welsh Assembly. Every time a UK minister has been pushed around by a devolved administration, they have unwittingly sent a message to voters that ‘one briton, one vote’ does not prevail in Wales. Welsh Government ministers, meanwhile, have explicitly founded their recent attacks on British authority in the tale that the Welsh are the ultimate source of authority in Wales – that there is no such national people as ‘the British’. This may be wrong in fact and in law, but it is a tale to tickle many listening ears.

While the claims of all sides are vested in ancient stories, it is the nationalists who have proved willing and adept at telling theirs. Herein lies the danger – an untold story becomes an unheard story and, over time, will be forgotten. The advocates of Britain, seemingly unaware of (or embarrassed to tell) a rich and contemporary story of British



sovereignty, have instead thrashed about for alternative arguments, such as the scale of fiscal transfers from England to Wales or the economic benefits of the Union.

Of course, these rational economic arguments are quite persuasive at one level. It is possible to be a Welsh nationalist – to believe in the sovereignty of Wales – and still want to remain part of the UK as a matter of Welsh self-interest. Indeed, this seems to be the philosophy of the Welsh Government, which furiously denounces any UK Government initiative in Wales – while simultaneously relying on its subsidy to remain solvent as an administration.

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However, dry economic arguments are unsatisfying to souls needing nourishment. They leave the Union in a precarious position – for ceding the narrative to nationalists will eventually undermine the very fiscal transfers upon which the new federal-style Unionism rests its case.

Democracies work by the willingness of a person to have their property confiscated (taxes) and their liberty constricted (laws) at the behest of a group of people they do not know (the electorate). But that also requires some sense that those people share with them the same interests and destiny. This starts to break down if a person sees the interests of the ruling group as separate from, or pitted against, their own. In assessing whether this is the case, such a person will often refer to a tale that reaches beyond the personal and identifies a collective ‘we’.

If those of us who love Britain want to secure the future of our country, we are going to have to tell such a story. This is a tall task, but we should take heart that we have much to say. The UK’s story is a compelling one, complex and complete with heroism, tragedy, love, friendship, forgiveness and ingenuity.

And if that isn’t enough, we can always throw in a couple of dragons.