

## The Miracle Stone and Welsh Legend Formation

By the time of her death in 1964, Marguerite Barclay Evans (nee Jervis) had produced over 100 successful romance novels, mostly under the pseudonyms, Oliver Sandys or Countess Barcynska. One of her novels became a successful musical, and Alfred Hitchcock filmed another. Born in 1886, the daughter of an officer in the Indian Medical Core, she was educated in Britain and trained as an actress. She retained a lifelong interest in theatre and managed a regional theatre company. Her first marriage to Armiger Barczinsky/Barclay, a Polish writer considerably older than herself, produced one son, Nicholas Barczinsky/Sandys, who became an actor. About 1930 she met the Welsh writer, Caradoc Evans, then a journalist in London. Three years later, the two married and their, often stormy, relationship continued until his death in 1945. Marguerite spent most of her married life with Caradoc in Wales. She described Wales as her Shangri-la, 'a land of enchantment and faery' that provided an escape from 'the undiluted materialism that has descended on so much of English and American life'.<sup>1</sup>

In 1957, she wrote a small book under the penname Oliver Sandys entitled *The Miracle Stone of Wales*. The publisher, Rider & Son, was the foremost publisher of matters occult. According to Marguerite Evans, she had been given the stone by a local *dyn hysbys*, called 'Old Griff' living on Pumlumon (Plynlimmon) in Mid-Wales. From 1933-37, she and Caradoc were in Aberystwyth. During that time she suffered writer's block. She hints that ill-wishing (witchcraft in effect) caused this, something the *dyn hysbys* was traditionally assumed to counter. In addition, Caradoc had problems with a lease on their house. They visited the *dyn hysbys*, Evan Griffeths of Llangurig, in his house on Plynlimmon and became friends. Griffeths, who is buried in the cemetery of Llangurig Church, was one of a family of healers who had provided several generations of local farmers with protection for their animals. However, for Marguerite, he became the source of a miraculous stone that had great personal meaning for her. She recalled a blue stone near the hearth on which 'Old Griff' often rested his hand. She describes in some detail the circumstances in which shortly before his death, he insisted she take the stone with her. By contrast, descendents of Griffeths who were interviewed much later by researchers from St Fagans recall the stone as a doorstep. Marguerite says she remained unaware of the stone's 'true' powers for many years. It was not until the 1950s that she met Captain Gordon Hewitt, a former Kenyan soldier and unsuccessful coffee planter, who told her a story which connected her stone with a mysterious African talisman.<sup>2</sup>

Caradoc Evans kept a rather intermittent diary of the war years he spent with Marguerite after they returned to Wales in 1939. The diary itself is lost. All that remains is an edited typescript, and there is no way of knowing what Marguerite may have omitted. It contains accounts of various Welsh folk beliefs, such as a phantom funeral, a witch transformation, a local curing well, apparitions and a *celwydd golau* tale, but no mention of the stone. However the diary does provide interesting background. In 1940, the family moved into a house in New Cross about five miles from Aberystwyth. The house, called Brynawelon, lived up to its name and had spectacular views of Pumlumon (Plynlimmon). Marguerite, Caradoc and Marguerite's son, Nick, remained there until 1945. One frequent student visitor remembers a house

furnished in a rather exotic mixture of Marguerite's antiques and her eclectic collection of religious objects. Marguerite's account says that the stone was kept on the shelf of a cabinet in her room in front a statue and picture of the Madonna.<sup>3</sup> Caradoc portrayed his wife as romantically inclined, especially where the Welsh were concerned and with an abiding interest in the spiritual dimension of life. His diary records an incident after the death of Marguerite's mother. Caradoc had attended a series of séances in the 1920s at which he received messages in Welsh allegedly from his long-deceased father, but in retrospect he was strongly inclined to disregard these experiences.<sup>4</sup> Marguerite gives a more elaborate account of the séance in *The Miracle Stone*, but she acknowledges her husband's sceptical attitude.<sup>5</sup>

After Caradoc's death, she moved back to London briefly, then to Penrhyncoch, then to Panteidal Lodge with Captain Hewitt whom she describes in her book on the Miracle Stone as 'the mystical experience which is the background of my life today.'<sup>6</sup> Her deepening interest in spiritualism is reflected in the second of her autobiographical works, *Unbroken Thread*, also published by Rider in 1946, and this is what informs *The Miracle Stone*. Captain Gordon 'Kenya' Hewitt recalled an African native scout, the son of a local tribal chief, who showed him a similar stone in a grotto near his tribal home on Mt Elgon. It was, according to Hewitt's informant, a source of peace and happiness to the tribe who claimed descent from the ancient Egyptians.<sup>7</sup> The original owner, Evan Griffiths, had vaguely remembered that an ancestor of his had brought the stone from Palestine, but in the light of Hewitt's story Marguerite concluded that hers was the other half of the African talisman.

In the late 1950s, Glyn Daniels interviewed Marguerite, ostensibly on her knowledge of Evan Griffiths, for a BBC Wales television programme on 'The Secret Arts'. She brought the stone with her, and this publicity raised the profile and the number of visitors. The little chalet, which Hewitt had refurbished, was rather remote, so he provided both a grotto for the stone and a sign to help visitors find it. The chalet was situated in an area that is now Panteidal Holiday Park near Aberdyfi. There is a photograph of Marguerite standing by the sign that reads 'Approaching Happiness Stone'.<sup>8</sup> Marguerite's reminiscences are interesting. She reports numerous cures, most without very detailed authentication, from visitors to this 'little Welsh Lourdes' at Panteidal. The incidents relating to Evan Griffiths are typical of *dyn hysbys* activity, such as curing cattle allegedly made sick by a blacksmith with whom the owner was in dispute or providing a charm for a woman unable to churn butter after she was 'cursed' by a gypsy. These are the kind of local and personal legends associated with the healers of Llangurig. Only one incident reported by Marguerite actually involved the stone. Other recollections are quite frankly strained. She remembered that Dylan Thomas and the Welsh artist, Evan Walters, touched the stone and believed that their posthumous successes were due to its power.<sup>9</sup> After she herself had suffered an accident, she became convinced that the stone had the power to 'cure' as well as comfort. One cure was reported in *Y Cymro*, while others she admits were known only because people who visited the stone wrote to her. Corroborating details and correspondence, which she mentions with great confidence, are not among the few letters from her in the archives of the National Library at Aberystwyth. After her death the stone was supposed to go the Welsh Folk Museum at St Fagans (now the National History Museum), and the museum has received about two-dozen recorded enquiries as to its whereabouts over the years.

What happened to the stone? This is the point at which the story takes on the characteristic of legend. Both Captain Hewitt and Marguerite's son were alive in the 1970s when one of the correspondents seeking the stone at St Fagans wrote that someone in Aberdovey had stated categorically that the son had taken the stone with him to America. Nicholas Sandys/Barcynska, Marguerite's rather bohemian son, was described as something of a 'hipi' with a drink problem by one Welsh researcher. The rumours became positively conspiratorial, suggesting that the stone was in the hands of the F.B.I. It was the subject of a BBC Cymru radio broadcast in the 1980s, and by then contrasting opinions about 'cures' and 'con' tricks were expressed.<sup>10</sup> Marguerite set the stone in the context of the Welsh *dyn hysbys* tradition, although the way in which the stone was used is not typical of Welsh curing traditions. Curing stones are common enough, but are more typically referred to as 'maen', for example, 'maen magl' or glain nadrodd (adder beads). Oddly, the Welsh term applied to the object may be an attempt to translate 'the happiness stone' into Welsh, rather than vice versa. A literal interpretation of 'Y Garreg Ddedwydd' implies that the stone is happy. Something like 'carreg uwrthiol' would convey the meaning of a miracle stone. Certainly one cannot dismiss Marguerite's belief in the power of the stone, or even the cures and psychological benefits which her visitors report. However, it is well to remember the author's background as a literary writer and her interest in Spiritualism. The imaginative mixture of literature and folklore was a popular genre at the time. The Anglo-Welsh writer Arthur Machen produced several short stories that incorporated folk motifs and adopted a journalistic style which made them immediate and real-sounding. Machen was a friend of both Marguerite and Caradoc and an early champion of the latter's work. That Marguerite believed in the power of the stone is not in doubt. She had a lifelong interest in Spiritualism and used the vocabulary of healing radiations, messages from beyond and belief in the power of mental healing so characteristic of that mode of thought. It is just this account of the power of the stone, and in particular, subsequent speculation as to its whereabouts after she died, that illustrates how legends are created and continue to function.

Irrespective of whether the rumours about the stone are true, they parallel the narrative structure of pre-existing legends and lore. What is most striking about them is that they provide either a believable or a doubtful context for particular traditions. For example Marguerite's memory of the stone near the hearth in a place of importance lends credence to her account of a miraculous object. On the other hand comments from Griffeths' family suggest it was used as a doorstep, and this undermines it. Neither can be proved one way or the other. The cures too have this ambiguous quality, they may be true or they may not. Marguerite's book mentions several famous people who, according to her, touched the stone and she makes much of a well-known local figure who wrote to her about a cure. The varying accounts of the fate of the stone also add to its glamour. One possibility is that her bohemian son took it to America or that it fell into the hands of a government agency. In the absence of concrete evidence, there is also the possibility that it is still out there, waiting for its truth to be re-discovered. Or maybe it is still being used as a doorstep.

Many of the details of this story parallel another well-known Welsh miracle object, the Nanteos Cup.<sup>11</sup> The Nanteos estate is a few miles outside Aberystwyth, and during the 1930s and 1940s, the owner, Mrs Powell encouraged the belief that her object was the Holy Grail. Those seeking cures visited the Nanteos mansion, although the number of attested visitors is never as large as the reported number of visitors. The

Anglo-Welsh social circle in and around Aberystwyth was a small one, especially during the Second World War. Marguerite Evans noted that all Mrs Powell's servants (at Nanteos) were co-opted to the war effort, while she thankfully kept the services of her housekeeper.<sup>12</sup> Other parallels between these rumours motifs, which give an aura of authenticity to both the Miracle Stone and the Nanteos legends, are quite striking. It has been claimed that the Nanteos cup is 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestinian olive wood, when it is in fact 14<sup>th</sup> century wych elm, a bowl unearthed during repairs to Strata Florida rather than a sacred relic brought back from the Crusades. Marguerite's stone was associated with traditions about the survival of Ancient Egyptian knowledge among African tribes. Both objects are linked to large numbers of visitors and cures, relatively few of which can be fully validated. Persistent rumours suggest that the Nanteos cup was sold to a wealthy American. In fact it was only lent to an exhibition and remains in the possession of the last family to live at Nanteos. The tale of its intended future also parallels the fate of the Miracle Stone since the National Library of Wales has been offered the Cup (unofficially) on condition that it continue to be made available to those seeking its curative power. Although rumour suggested that her son, who died in 1992, took the stone to America, it is not clear whether Marguerite ever put her wish into a formal document like a will. She spent her last years in Shropshire living on a small pension after the market for her romantic fiction dried up and she died in hospital in Shrewsbury.<sup>13</sup>

The Miracle Stone is a curious story<sup>14</sup> and one which, except for the somewhat tangential connection with the *dyn hysbys* tradition and the intended destination for the stone, has more to do with Spiritualism than Welsh folklore. Nevertheless, the tone of the Marguerite's book reflects a particular view of Welsh tradition, one of natural psychic powers in ancient peoples. This was a view much influenced by the likes of Andrew Lang, Lewis Spence and E. Evans Wentz<sup>15</sup> and the fact that Rider, the noted occult press, published the book reinforces this idea. Comparatively little has been written about the influence of popular 19<sup>th</sup> century spirituality as expressed in Spiritualism or Theosophy in Wales. E Evans Wentz did some research anew his theosophical training is very clear in the conclusions he draws, and the Welsh nationalist politician and biographer of Lloyd George, Beriah Gwynfre Evans contributed several articles to *The Occult Review* about the Egryn Chapel lights and the preacher Mary Jones.

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<sup>1</sup> Oliver Sandys, *The Miracle Stone of Wales* (Rider, 1957) 2, 16, 40

<sup>2</sup> I wish to express my thanks to Dave Taylor for reminding me of this curious bit of mid-Wales history, to my colleagues Dr Wyn James and Dr Diana Luft for their help with many background details and discussions about the sources for Welsh medical and healing lore. I would also like to thank the staff at St Fagans, Amgueddfa Cymru for access to archive material. This initial discussion is the basis for a chapter in a forthcoming book on *The Supernatural Narratives of Wales* to be published by University of Wales Press.

<sup>3</sup> A photograph of the stone and the pictures as they were a Panteidal Lodge is included in the book

<sup>4</sup> *Caradoc Evans, Morgan Bible and Journal 1939-44* edited with an afterword by John Harris (Planet 2006), 136-138.

<sup>5</sup> *Miracle Stone*, 23-38.

<sup>6</sup> *Miracle Stone*, 59

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<sup>7</sup> The details of this African stone are contained in a letter from Captain Hewitt to Marguerite, pp.76-80. She also describes a photograph of Nandi scouts and officers from 1917, one of whom is presumably Captain Hewitt. This photograph is quite likely one which is listed among The Royal Commonwealth Society Collections in Cambridge University Library. See Africa Miscellanea, RCMS 113/48.

<sup>8</sup> *Miracle Stone* 98-100.

<sup>9</sup> *Miracle Stone* 54.

<sup>10</sup> Article *Radio Times* 27 July 2 August 1985 by Parch Harri Parri.

<sup>11</sup> Juliette Wood, 'Nibbling Pilgrims and the Nanteos Cup: A Cardiganshire Legend' in *Nanteos A Welsh House and its Families* edited by Gerald Morgan, Gomer Press Llandysul, Ceredigion 2001

<sup>12</sup> *Caradoc Evans* ed John Harris, 195.

<sup>13</sup> Evans [nee Jervis], Marguerite Florence Laura, by John Harris, *Dictionary of National Biography* on-line version (Oxford University Press 2003).

<sup>14</sup> Patrick Harpur, 'The Happiness Stone' *Fortean Times* 145, May 2001, 47.

<sup>15</sup> Juliette Wood, 'Lewis Spence: Remembering the Celts: 196-211 in *Fantastical Imaginations The Supernatural in Scottish history and culture* edited by Lizanne Henderson (Birlinn, Edinburgh 2009).