

WILD WALES

ITS PEOPLE, LANGUAGE
AND SCENERY

BY GEORGE BORROW

1862

Arrived at the foot of the hill, I walked along the bank of the canal to the west. Presently I came to a barge lying by the bank; the boatman was in it. I entered into conversation with him. He told me that the canal and its branches extended over a great part of England. That the boats carried slates—that he had frequently gone as far as Paddington by the canal—that he was generally three weeks on the journey—that the boatmen and their families lived in the little cabins aft—that the boatmen were all Welsh—that they could read English, but little or no Welsh—that English was a much more easy language to read than Welsh—that they passed by many towns, among others Northampton, and that he liked no place so much as Llangollen. I proceeded till I came to a place where some people were putting huge slates into a canal boat. It was near a bridge which crossed the Dee, which was on the left. I stopped and entered into conversation with one, who appeared to be the principal man. He told me amongst other things that he was a blacksmith from the neighbourhood of Rhiwabon, and that the flags were intended for the flooring of his premises. In the boat was an old bareheaded, bare-armed fellow, who presently joined in the conversation in very broken English. He told me that his name was Joseph Hughes, and that he was a real Welshman and was proud of being so; he expressed a great dislike for the English, who he said were in the habit of making fun of him and ridiculing his language; he said that all the fools that he had known were Englishmen. I told him that all Englishmen were not fools; “but the greater part are,” said he. “Look how they work,” said I. “Yes,” said he, “some of them are good at breaking stones for the road, but not more than one in a hundred.” “There seems to be something of the old Celtic hatred to the Saxon in this old fellow,” said I to myself, as I walked away.

I proceeded till I came to the head of the canal, where the navigation first commences. It is close to a weir over which the Dee falls. Here there is a little floodgate, through which water rushes from an oblong pond or reservoir, fed by water from a corner of the upper part of the weir. On the left, or south-west side, is a mound of earth fenced with stones which is the commencement of the bank of the canal. The pond or reservoir above the floodgate is separated from the weir by a stone wall on the left, or south-west side. This pond has two floodgates, the one already mentioned, which opens into the canal, and another, on the other side of the stone mound, opening to the lower part of the weir. Whenever, as a man told me who was standing near, it is necessary to lay the bed of the canal dry, in the immediate neighbourhood for the purpose of making repairs, the floodgate to the canal is closed, and the one to the lower part of the weir is opened, and then the water from the pond flows into the Dee, whilst a sluice, near the first lock, lets out the water of the canal into the river. The head of the canal is situated in a very beautiful spot. To the left or south is a lofty hill covered with wood. To the right is a beautiful slope or lawn on the top of which is a pretty villa, to which you can get by a little wooden bridge over the floodgate of the canal, and indeed forming part of it. Few things are so beautiful in their origin as this canal, which, be it known, with its locks and its aqueducts, the grandest

of which last is the stupendous erection near Stockport, which by-the-by filled my mind when a boy with wonder, constitutes the grand work of England, and yields to nothing in the world of the kind, with the exception of the great canal of China.

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After walking about four miles by the side of the canal we left it, and bearing to the right presently came to the aqueduct, which strode over a deep and narrow valley, at the bottom of which ran the Dee. "This is the Pont y Cysswllt, sir," said my guide; "it's the finest bridge in the world, and no wonder, if what the common people say be true, namely that every stone cost a golden sovereign."

We went along it; the height was awful. My guide, though he had been a mountain shepherd, confessed that he was somewhat afraid. "It gives me the pendro, sir," said he, "to look down." I too felt somewhat dizzy, as I looked over the parapet into the glen. The canal which this mighty bridge carries across the gulf is about nine feet wide, and occupies about two-thirds of the width of the bridge and the entire western side. The footway is towards the east. From about the middle of the bridge there is a fine view of the forges on the Cefn Bach and also of a huge hill near it called the Cefn Mawr. We reached the termination, and presently crossing the canal by a little wooden bridge we came to a village. My guide then said, "If you please, sir, we will return by the old bridge, which leads across the Dee in the bottom of the vale." He then led me by a romantic road to a bridge on the west of the aqueduct, and far below. It seemed very ancient. "This is the old bridge, sir," said my guide; "it was built a hundred years before the Pont y Cysswllt was dreamt of." We now walked to the west, in the direction of Llangollen, along the bank of the river. Presently we arrived where the river, after making a bend, formed a pool. It was shaded by lofty trees, and to all appearance was exceedingly deep. I stopped to look at it, for I was struck with its gloomy horror. "That pool, sir," said John Jones, "is called Llyn y Meddwyn, the drunkard's pool. It is called so, sir, because a drunken man once fell into it, and was drowned. There is no deeper pool in the Dee, sir, save one, a little below Llangollen, which is called the pool of Catherine Lingo. A girl of that name fell into it, whilst gathering sticks on the high bank above it. She was drowned, and the pool was named after her. I never look at either without shuddering, thinking how certainly I should be drowned if I fell in, for I cannot swim, sir."

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I struck across the fields and should probably have tumbled half-a-dozen times over pales and the like, but for the light of the Cefn furnaces before me which cast their red glow upon my path. I debauched upon the Llangollen road near to the tramway leading to the collieries. Two enormous sheets of flame shot up high into the air from ovens, illumining two spectral chimneys as high as steeples, also smoky buildings, and grimy figures moving about. There was a clanging of engines, a noise of shovels and a falling of coals truly horrible. The glare was so great that I could distinctly see the minutest lines upon my hand. Advancing along the tramway I obtained a nearer view of the hellish buildings, the chimneys, and the demoniac figures. It was just such a scene as one of those described by Ellis Wynn in his Vision of Hell. Feeling my eyes scorching I turned away.