

The Maid Of Llanwellyn

When John Shepherd asserted that this song was American (15/01/2016), I doubted him. Doubting, I dug deeper and found a much more tangled and confused history than John had prefaced the song with.

Lyrics

The Maid Of Llanwellyn was a poem by Joanna Baillie (1762-1851) of Lanarkshire, Scotland. Although Scottish, she moved to England, living in Hampstead from 1802.

The Maid Of Llanwellyn appears in print in 'The Songs Of Scotland, Ancient and Modern', compiled by Allan Cunningham in 1825 (Page 319 in the edition held by the Bodleian Library), though this is unlikely to be the first appearance in print.

Melody

The Maid of Llanwellyn was published as a song by George Thomson of Edinburgh (1757-1851). The melody was one of 200 tunes Thomson bought from Franz Joseph Haydn (Austrian, 1732-1809) for 2 ducats each.

Wales

The lyrics speak of a lake. When George Thomson remarked that Wales had no lakes, Joanna Baillie haughtily answered that since lakes would not rise out of the earth for their convenience, and since she was unwilling to alter the line, they would just have to hope that their readers would be as ignorant as she had been when she wrote it.

From this exchange, we may deduce the poem was intended to be about Wales (not America), since Miss Baillie didn't correct George Thomson's assumption.

We may also form the opinion that George Thomson was himself ignorant of the geography of Wales, since we do indeed have many lakes.

The poem was also published in "Poems Of Places: An Anthology in 31 Volumes", edited by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow between 1876 and 1879. Longfellow identified it as a poem of Wales.

Pennsylvania

John Shepherd was correct in stating that Llanwellyn is in Pennsylvania. However, he inadvertently put the cart before the horse.

In late 1886 Henry J. Scott of Pennsylvania (1855-1932) bought 50 acres of land in Glenolden from George G. Knowles.

Scott laid out several streets on his new land and opened two of them: Scott and Llanwellyn Avenues. He called the development "Llanwellyn" which he erroneously claimed was Welsh for "Spring has come". Scott improved the property by planting Lombard poplars on all the streets and in August, 1887, he made the development available for sale.

Supposition

The name Llanwellyn does not appear anywhere prior to Joanna Baillie's poem. Hence, the poem (or song) is the likely source of the name Henry J Scott picked for his land development. Longfellow's anthology was widely available at that time and is just one possible source.

It is not likely that Henry J Scott came up with the name Llanwellyn independently of Joanna

Baillie. His mistranslation ("Spring has come") attests to an ignorance of the Welsh language. Although many Pennsylvanians were Welsh migrants, Scott was not. Welsh place names were commonplace in the locale though, and Scott may have thought a Welsh name was appropriate.

(Within 6 miles of Llanwellyn, the district of Bala Cynwyd boasts Colwyn Lane, Rhyle Lane, St Asaphs Street, Bala Avenue, Clwyd Road, Llandrillo Road and Llanberris Road. It seems clear that the area was not just settled by Welshmen but by Gogs.)

Misinformation

Googling Llanwellyn yields a Facebook page on Things To Do In Llanwellyn. The heading of the page claims Llanwellyn is a city in the United States. Hardly! It's a suburb of Philadelphia. The original land purchase was only 50 acres.

There are also several websites listing The Maid Of Llanwellyn among the traditional songs of Wales. Considering it was penned by a Scottish woman living in London, to a melody composed by an Austrian, about a fictional place, it's hard to see how Wales can lay claim to it.

Oh! And finally...

There is a Welsh version: Y Ferch O'r Llanwellyn, arranged for acoustic guitar by Elfed Hayes in 2007. It's an instrumental, so only the title got translated.

The Maid Of Llanwellyn was written by a Scot, published as a Scottish poem, made into a song by another Scot and inspired a housing estate built by a man named Scott (probably because his ancestors were Scottish).

It's a Scottish Song!

AWR