

OUT OF THE PAST

THE PHYSICIANS OF MYDDFAI

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The sudden mountains of Carmarthen rising green and black upon the valley pastures and leading to flat mysterious summits with wild, rocky lakes are still as inhabited by fairies as they were when Rhys Grug (Rees the Hoarse) was given Cantref Mawr and Cantref Bychan by Llywelyn the Great in the thirteenth century. A good place to start to look for them is at the little lake of Llyn y fan fach in the Black Mountains and the vigil can begin on the shore away from the precipitous side of the lake where once upon a time one of the most beautiful creatures ever seen appeared on the surface of the water. The farmer's son who saw her fell in love at first sight and to her amusement tried to win her by offering the barley bread and cheese that he carried for his lunch. She disappeared crying, "Hard baked is thy bread! 'Tis not easy to catch me." She was lovelier far than the fair maids of Myddfai and for two days he wooed her, first with uncooked and then with delicately cooked bread before he won her. Her father put the young man to the magic test of identification from another identical daughter and the young lady, who was by this time apparently as keen as the young man, helped by delicately putting one foot forward.

The correct choice made, she arrived with a dowry of cattle and the admonition that should he ever strike her three causeless blows she would return at once beneath the waves with all her fortunes. And of course, unwittingly, in the course of a long, happy, married life three blows (and they were very technical blows) were struck and she vanished from the farm at Esgair Llaethdy, across the Myddfai Mountain and with all her cattle, even the recently killed calf which got down from its hook, to her watery birthplace leaving her husband and three sons disconsolate and impoverished.

Having taken the livestock she did not, however, leave her family for ever "without means of support" and returned to give her first-born, Rhiwallon, a bag full of medical prescriptions and aphorisms and later to continue a series of personal lessons in herb-lore. This medical education enabled Cadwgan, Gruffydd, and Einion, the three sons of Rhiwallon to become appointed physicians to Rhys Grug, Lord of Llandovery and Dynefor, who gave them "rank,

lands and privileges at Myddfai for their maintenance in the practice of their art and science, and the healing and benefit of those who would seek their help." It was in effect a Royal Health Service for the surrounding countryside and the foundation of the fortunes of the Physicians of Myddfai, who continued in direct lineal descent to the eighteenth century physician, John Jones.

A main source of our present knowledge of the Physicians is *The Red Book of Hergest* in Jesus College, Oxford supported by a MS said to have been compiled by one of the earlier Physicians called Hywel and copied by Iolo Morganwg in 1801, from which sources the Welsh MSS Society in 1861 published a translation. Not all the contents of the book¹ are the direct work of the Physicians themselves. Some had formed part of the materia medica of Wales for generations before. The profession was firmly established even in the reign of the tenth century king, Hywel Dda, for the mediciner of the royal court was well organized enough to have in his rules; "The mediciner is to take an indemnification from the kindred of the wounded person, in case he die from the remedy he may use. And if he do not take it let him answer for the deed."

Some of the influences in the book were obviously Hippocratic, but in the main it consisted of herbal remedies. Although instructions were given for the surgical treatment of haemorrhoids the treatment of a growth was medical: "For a small tumour. Take a cock or hen (as the patient may be a man or woman) and apply the rump, feathered, to the part until the bird dies. This will extract the venom." Giraldus Cambrensis had noted in the twelfth century the dazzling white teeth of the Welsh, and the Physicians of Myddfai gave the sound dental advice to clean the teeth with the dry bark of hazel "and they will become fairer in consequence." They were general practitioners in every sense of the word and foreshadowed the plans of a Gwent layman for a national health service by 700 years.

REFERENCE

¹Ab Ithel, Rev. John Williams (ed.) & Pughe, John (tr.): *The Physicians of Myddfai*. Llandoverly. 1861.
