

Nation and Gender: St David, St David's Day and Masculinity during the Great War

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Masculinity is frequently associated with maturity and martiality.¹ Although by no means the only qualities coupled with masculinity, they are particularly relevant to the history of St David, Wales and the Welsh during the Great War. Many studies that consider the links between military or mature masculinities and the nation have been concerned with subaltern groups and independence or nationalist movements.² In the case of Ireland, the promotion of assertive and mature masculine qualities was part of 'a quasi-postcolonial movement for expressing a deeply felt desire for male power'.³ Nations that were more powerful were concerned with developing similar masculine qualities in their male populations. Sometimes this led to the intermingling of colonist and colonial masculinities.⁴ This constellation of desirable masculine qualities included characteristics that were 'noble, chivalrous, but also powerful and physical'.⁵

There are, however, more varieties of national masculinity than those related to rebellion or anxiety about national decline. A range of masculine characteristics exists at the individual level, and similarly nations have had their own relationship with masculinity. Historical circumstances and national peculiarities mean that not all nations were struggling for independence or against a fear of decline. For Wales,

relationships with the other nations of the British Isles accompanied general British concerns about the state of manhood. Looking at Wales in this way refines the 'masculinist character of nationalism' by uncovering different expressions of 'national masculinity'.⁶ The configuration of nationhood and manhood that played out in Wales offers another perspective on the interplay between the nation and masculinity.

Previous studies of St David's Day have provided a taxonomy of the celebration.⁷ This chapter, however, moves beyond identifying different expressions of patriotism to explore the relationship between the Welsh nation and masculinity. Representations of St David and the celebration of the national day reveal the connections between gender and nationality. In part, the study addresses Paul O'Leary's observation on the need for more studies of the 'role of masculinity in patriotic rhetoric'.⁸ At any given time and place, certain qualities are deemed masculine. A shift in the emphasis placed on these different masculine features have consequences for individuals, groups and institutions.⁹

Two historiographical themes inform this study. In one, Wales went from being a nation associated with peace or pro-Boer sentiment to one that played its part against the Central Powers. Founded on recruitment figures and the role of David Lloyd George, this image of Wales coming to the front resonated with the role of the citizen soldier. Unmartial Wales laid down the ploughshare and picked up the sword.¹⁰ Studies of the martial character of Wales and those concerned with the Welsh contribution to the Great War seek to establish the extent to which Wales was a martial nation or gain a sense of how far the Welsh supported the conflict.¹¹ However, understanding the part played by masculinity in the representation of Wales at this time requires stepping aside from judgements about the degree to which the nation was martial and instead thinking about how gender contributed to the perception and presentation of Wales.

The other historiographical strand suggests that by the late nineteenth century the dominant notion of masculinity in Britain had become more outward looking and assertive.¹² Changes in popular culture, including the popularity of adventure literature, along with the establishment of organisations such as the Boy Scouts and the Territorial

Force, indicate this shift. Responses to the Great War, including the idea of a citizen soldier, capped the trend.¹³ While it is possible to refine such interpretations and note exceptions, they convey a rite of passage or a hero's journey that pervaded the culture and thereby the minds of many. This chapter suggests that, like many individuals at the time, Wales seemed to be experiencing something like a 'flight from domesticity'.

Accounts of the celebration of St David's Day at home and among the military serving abroad demonstrate the relationship between the nation and masculinity. Most of this material originates from newspapers and magazines in English and Welsh. Such sources provide a considerable – if incomplete – account of the celebrations. The press covered many events, but with varying amounts of detail. Verbatim speeches appeared from time to time but summaries predominated, with many speeches merely referred to by their title. Similarly, the activities that marked the day were described in more detail in some reports and less so in others. On the day itself, editorials and letters attempted to sum up the national character. Indeed, contemporaries from many parts of the country thought that more places celebrated the national day during the war than had been the case before the conflict.¹⁴ From 1913, the Welsh Department of the Board of Education called on schools to mark the day and provided instructions.¹⁵ Discussions about disestablishment and disendowment of the Church of England in Wales encouraged Anglicans to emphasise their association with the national saint to counter claims that the Church of England was an 'alien church'. At the same time, the Liberal proponents of a new Wales were embracing St David. A stronger national consciousness needed a saint, and the translation of works published before the war about St David suggest increasing interest in the patron saint.¹⁶ During the war, however, he was portrayed as displaying more aggressive features that were absent in the canonical works about him.

St David has a genealogy. This is not the sort of pedigree that would mention his mother Non or his father Sanctus, but rather the history of how the saint has been portrayed over the centuries. Some features permeate the genealogy, but there are also forgotten, rediscovered and invented aspects. All genealogies involve ruptures and disturb any

suggestion of a consistent identity.¹⁷ Looking at wartime renditions of the saint complicates an already complex picture. The Welsh patron saint presented problems and opportunities for those who spoke about the nation during the war. Joseph Staniforth's cartoons in the *Western Mail* portrayed the saint as a ghostly figure sometimes alongside the more solid form of the popular female embodiment of the nation, Dame Wales.¹⁸ Yet this ethereality enabled much to be made of St David. He was a warrior, a man of peace, a patriot and an ascetic. Sometimes he was like St George and sometimes he was a Welsh version of John the Baptist.

Like other saints modelled on the desert fathers, St David embodied the ascetic masculinity of the holy man. Many of the wartime celebrations of his day appear incongruous when compared with the St David portrayed by Rhygyvarch in the eleventh century.¹⁹ The miracles performed by St David, which included cleansing wells and bringing a boy to life, were ones of peace, not war. The Revd W. Harris (*Arthan*) expressed the tension between this version of the saint and the call for men to enlist during a speech at Maesydderwen County School, Ystradgynlais, in March 1915. After briefly acknowledging the nation's 'warrior heroes', Harris stated that 'true instinct had led Wales to choose as her patron, not the blood-stained hero but the cloistered saint. For the soldier, after all, did not represent the highest type of humanity'.²⁰ Speaking less than a week after the start of the Gallipoli campaign, Harris demoted the warrior and suggested that the Welsh were an innately peaceful people. Commentators who anticipated the end of the war invoked this peaceful St David, as did those who envisaged how the nation ought to right itself after the conflict.²¹

Of course, being peaceful could still be manly if it did not indicate passivity or weakness. Activity constituted an important component of masculinity, as seen in a review of the statues of Welsh heroes that were to be located at Cardiff Civic Hall. Unlike Henry VII, who had a 'girlish face', or Owain Glyndŵr, who came across as 'a dreamer rather than a doer', St David's demeanour, with arms raised as if instructing an audience, portrayed him as a man of action.²² The masculine nature of this holy man was emphasised by the Revd D. Thomas at the Denbigh Church Men's Society who, on relating the saint's role in vanquishing the

Pelagian heresy during the synod at Llanddewi Brefi, referred to him as being 'a commanding person, and in stature six feet'.²³ This observation about St David's height and bearing would have carried additional significance during the early stages of the war when the physical and mental qualities of the New Army attracted much attention.²⁴ St David fitted the male archetype of the holy man or magician more readily than that of the warrior. Even so, the holy man was useful in war as his sanction justified bloodshed. During the Great War religious authorities often reiterated patriotic statements that emanated from secular sources.²⁵ Outlining a just cause to fight was especially important for a nation without a warlike reputation.²⁶ A righteous anger became one of St David's qualities, even though this characteristic did not appear in descriptions of his life. In 1915, St David, the protector of small nations, was in armour ('mewn arfogaeth filwrol').²⁷ This stern saint is not present in Rhygyvarch's hagiography, or even in the earlier *Armes Prydain Fawr*, where the Britons carry 'St David's holy banner' into battle.²⁸ For more examples of the warrior saint, it is necessary to look elsewhere.

To see the belligerent St David as being entirely the product of the Great War would be a mistake. As a national symbol, invocations of the saint featured in many earlier conflicts. The utilisation of St David the warrior in the Great War, therefore, represented a revival of a tradition outside the texts about the saint. Those who wanted to present the saint as a warrior called on a rich tradition that ran alongside the more conventional image of him. In a summary of texts that evidenced Welsh national feeling published towards the end of the Great War, William Garmon Jones referred to the saint's relationship with the battlefield. These include Dafydd Llwyd's 'Ode to St David', written before Bosworth, that mentions how 'David is angered, with the blade in his hand'.²⁹ Other examples dated from the English Civil War and the wars with France at the end of the eighteenth century. Such traditions often mentioned the saint's advice to Cadwallon and Cadwaladr or King Arthur that the Welsh wear a leek in battle 'for the sake of distinction'.³⁰

If attention only focused on the saint's image at times of peace, it would be easy to overlook these alternative renderings of St David.

During the war, however, there were efforts to revive the warrior saint. Attempts to explain this version of St David suggests that many Welsh people were unaware of the patron saint's martial side. An editorial in a north Wales paper during 1915 described 'The New St David'. With a possible nod to Henry Richard, the nineteenth-century Liberal MP and peace-maker, the paper acknowledged that the 'original Dewi Sant is best known as an apostle of peace', before adding that he was also an 'inspirer of battle courage'. The author expressed their support for the military St David when they stated that 'this second and least known aspect of his character ... appeals most strongly to his present-day countrymen'.³¹ That may have been so, but the contrast between the Davids confused at least one Welshman. A correspondent to *Y Drafod* was puzzled on reading a *cywydd* (a metrical poem) about the saint by the eighteenth-century poet Goronwy Owain that drew St David 'in the character of a victorious warrior', and they felt that it was difficult to reconcile the two Davids.³² It is fair to assume that this letter writer was not the only one to experience cognitive dissonance, and the Gorsedd, with its pledge of peace, prompted similar comments.³³ Confusion about the identity of St David is a reminder that the patron saint divided opinion. Although Glanmor Williams was justified in stating that St David provided a common focal point for the Welsh, it is important not to overlook how differences in how he was seen indicate contrasting versions of Wales.³⁴

National symbols do not exist in a vacuum. Sometimes the symbols of one nation encouraged reflection on those of another nation.³⁵ In Wales, it was felt that an assertive saint was necessary not only as a response to the war but also because St George was a particularly chivalric neighbour. The dragon-slayer's heroism was obvious. There is evidence of an effort to establish the Welsh saint on a similar footing to his English counterpart during the Great War. At the conclusion of a list of sources in support of the leek over the daffodil as the Welsh symbol, Arthur Hughes notes the 'determination of Welshmen to make S. David a fighting patron saint whose achievements are by no means eclipsed by those of S. George'.³⁶ Comparing two at best legendary, if not mythical, figures was not as flippant as it appears. After all, Hughes had already

contributed to an extensive debate about the relative value of leeks and daffodils. Whereas England's greatness required little justification, it was necessary to establish the martial credentials of the Welsh and their saint.

St David provided a foundation for a more assertive national image that emphasised the Welsh contribution to the United Kingdom and its empire. The war presented an opportunity to acquire parity with the other nations of the kingdom. An example of this was the establishment of the Welsh Guards in 1915.³⁷ Another was David Lloyd George's suggestion, made soon after the war, that there should be an Order of St David.³⁸ This order would have brought Wales in line with the other three nations of the kingdom already represented by the Orders of the Garter (1348), the Thistle (1687) and Patrick (1783). According to the press, Lloyd George's proposal failed, but the attempt demonstrates that Wales could enhance its standing via its patron saint. Had this order been realised, it would have opened a medium for the acknowledgement of Welsh chivalric achievements. Like the successful effort to establish the Welsh Guards, an Order of St David held out the promise of bringing Wales alongside its peers.

St David during the Great War was a holy man with a martial streak. While some placed emphasis on a man who was, as the *Aberdare Leader* put it in 1917, undoubtedly a son of peace ('ddiamheu yn fab tangnefedd'), others opted for the warrior saint of Goronwy Owain's poem.³⁹ When needed, unquestionably warlike figures from King Arthur to General Thomas Picton accompanied St David. The St David's Day booklet provided by the Welsh Department of the Board of Education in 1915 was praised for shining a light on 'two of the most chivalrous personages in the history of Wales', Owain Glyndŵr and Picton.⁴⁰ Saint and nation resembled one another. Both required reconfiguration during the war because of their reputation for being peaceful and inward-looking.

St David's Day was not only about the saint. Many found the more fantastic elements of the patron saint's life an embarrassment and preferred to use the day to reflect on the nation. Before the conflict, the mayor of Ruthin, T. J. Roberts, dismissed the legends and suggested that St David's 'personality serves as a lens to focus the attention of

Welshmen upon their nation and upon the spirit of nationality'.⁴¹ By 1914, nations had masculine roles as rivals who also occasionally engaged in friendly competition.⁴² An interior 'spirit of nationality' was an important part of a nation that jostled with others for prominence or acknowledgement. Imperial rivalry and commercial competition meant that an important part of any nation's character was that of its men. They provided the active, overt aspect of the national character that transformed thought into action. During wartime, men were under an even greater obligation to protect and assert the national spirit. Even before the war, many described the Welsh nation as having matured and broadened its horizons.⁴³ Liberal politicians in parliament asserted Welsh educational and religious concerns throughout the Edwardian period. As passionate as these causes were, it was possible to frame these issues as being tantamount to domestic disputes that hardly embodied a martial people loyally playing their part on the imperial stage. Moreover, actions that asserted Welsh individuality could be considered disloyal, a decidedly unmanly characteristic.

At the same time, visual media often personified Wales in female form dressed in a national costume. There was no male equivalent of the national costume. This fact would have been of less note if the other nations of the United Kingdom also took on a feminine form. Ériu and Britannia were not embodiments of the people as such. An Edwardian postcard that portrays the four nations walking arm in arm captures the exceptional nature of Wales in this respect.⁴⁴ The femininity of the slight Welsh figure is highlighted by its companions, who wear a kilt, carry a shillelagh and embody English meat and might in the form of John Bull. To some extent, the heftier frame of Dame Wales, as drawn by Staniforth, counterbalance the more fragile depiction of Wales. Nonetheless, at a subconscious level at least, many Edwardian images reinforced the idea that Wales was the least masculine or military nation in the British Isles.⁴⁵ Indeed, the 'ladies daintily dressed in the national costume' who took to the streets on the flag days that were held on St David's Day during the war rendered this version of Wales all the more visible.⁴⁶

Masculine identity depended on a contrast with boyish or feminine attributes. Where available, statistics facilitated comparisons based on presumed masculine characteristics. Up to and beyond the centenary of the outbreak of the Great War, recruitment figures have generated pride or been questioned by those who place less value on the martial reputation of Wales.⁴⁷ In this study, the accuracy of these figures is of less importance than the investment of value in them. Recruitment figures supported or undermined claims that Welshmen were brave and enthusiastic citizen soldiers. Throughout Britain, the number of recruits provided a barometer of manly patriotism. In a Welsh context, these figures represented a national contribution to the war effort. The virtue of dedicating the self to something greater than itself featured in demands that individuals enlist in the army or navy. Similarly, Wales had to demonstrate a 'comprehensive' instead of a narrow patriotism.⁴⁸ In a St David's Day speech delivered in 1916, the bishop of St Asaph, Alfred George Edwards, who lost a son a year earlier, suggested that the bulk of Welsh recruits were churchmen rather than Nonconformists. This statement from an opponent of Church disestablishment illustrates how the national day was an opportunity to proclaim the superiority of one group over another.⁴⁹ Furthermore, it raises the question of whether some considered churchmen more 'masculine' than male Nonconformists.

A less frequently examined point of comparison in academic literature is that made between the Welsh and the martial races that formed a conspicuous part of imperial culture. The rhetoric of the time about the Welsh channelling their more warlike ancestors, also implied in the historiography, ignores the comparative context.⁵⁰ Martial races were not restricted to Asian peoples like the Sikhs and Gurkhas. Military and civilian sources refer to the Irish and Scots, but not the Welsh, possessing similar martial qualities. Discussions about 'surgical fortitude' in the army during the nineteenth century, for instance, appear to have passed over the Welsh.⁵¹ No matter how well Wales responded to the call to war, the Welsh would always be at the rear of the pre-existing martial races. In a way, the establishment of the Welsh Guards gave Wales a belated equal standing with the other nations of Great Britain. With relief, one newspaper announced that 'for the first time since the Act of

Union with England, the Principality has been recognized by Royalty in its military character as on a par, and entitled to equal honour, with the other three sister nationalities of the United Kingdom'.⁵² As this example shows, the absence of a martial reputation need not have prevented the acknowledgement of Welsh nationhood or loyalty, but when it came to military qualities the Welsh were at best last among equals.

Many proclamations of masculine achievement were compensatory or the result of challenges to status, often from a figure in authority. The following pair of commentators on the military character of Wales spoke from a position of authority based on an assumed knowledge of Welshmen. Although exaggerated and partial, their opinions circulated widely and carried weight. Their views help explain why more martially inclined Welshmen, such as Owen Rhoscomyl, attempted to establish a 'masculine Wales'.⁵³ In response to an unsatisfactory response to the colours a month and half after the outbreak of war, 'P. G. L' explained that 'the Welsh are not a bellicose people' and equated being 'a non-combative people' with being 'non-patriotic'. The impression conveyed was of unadventurous men protected by 'the more belligerent English'.⁵⁴ Sir Owen Thomas adopted a less critical tone. Even so, as a veteran of the Second Boer War, during which he established and led the Prince of Wales Light Horse Regiment, Thomas was all too aware of the reputation of the Welsh. His comments a year after the war before the Birmingham Welsh Society indicate how the war had not transformed the image of the Welsh man. Thomas's proclamation that the 'Welsh are not a war-like nation' contradicted the patriotic rhetoric that featured in so many St David's Day speeches. The *Cambria Daily Leader* described his assessment as a 'surprising statement'. These comments about Welshmen only coming forward when they had their own 'army' identified the Welsh as being anything but a martial race.⁵⁵

Volunteering to fight in the Great War presented an opportunity for men to demonstrate their maturity. Comments made during St David's Day celebrations present the Welsh involvement in the war as a rite of passage, something akin to the transition from boy to man. The Welsh man was no longer 'too home-loving, too much the child of his mountains and valleys' to be a good soldier, as Major General Luke O'Connor

suggested eight years before the war.⁵⁶ An editorial in a Swansea paper published on 1 March 1916 hoped that the 'old St David's Day style of regarding Welshmen as the salt of the earth has passed away, never, we hope, to return'. The author felt that this tendency towards self-congratulation was a symptom of an 'exclusive' Welshness. As a result of the 'strange comingling' of war and the performance of the Welsh soldier '[o]ur patriotism has become infinitely broader and deeper ... Is it not true to say that the patriotic Welshman has learned to think in terms of Empire?' Ironic as they appear, statements about being less Welsh on St David's Day were common and were an attempt to show that the nation had emerged from its chrysalis.⁵⁷

Loyalty was an important component of mature masculinity, and the combination of maturity and faithfulness is evident in speeches about Wales. While it is true that the past provided a foundation for a more martial Welsh identity, both as an independent people and as soldiers in English armies, it is important not to overlook the contribution of more recent events.⁵⁸ A St David's Day speech by Sir Owen Thomas, in which he argued that the 'war had dispelled the idea that the Welsh people were not loyal', revealed the opinions about the Welsh prevalent in the late Victorian and Edwardian era.⁵⁹ For him and many others an awakening of the old military spirit ('adfywiodd hen ysbryd milwrol') had joined a heightened sense of imperial identity befitting the first decades of the twentieth century.⁶⁰ In 1916, another speaker declared that 'these days our eyes were being opened to the uniting of the nations within the Empire'.⁶¹ It was as if Wales had suddenly awoken to its responsibilities.

Although statements about loyalty and national maturity suggest an effort to distance Wales from a less than heroic recent past, there were parallels between a nation with little or no military reputation and the ideal of the citizen soldier. According to this interpretation, the Welsh were taking up arms in a way that differed from the Prussians or for that matter the jingoist of any other nation. At Abertillery's St David's Day banquet in 1916, John Phillips assured his audience that in 'peace times he was absolutely opposed to militarism'.⁶² Across the United Kingdom, recruiters appealed for responsible, but not overly aggressive, men to join the army. Yet, as a country with a reputation for being

reluctant to support imperial endeavours, Wales was more of a national equivalent of the ideal citizen soldier than the other nations of the United Kingdom. Sir Vincent Evans, who chaired the executive committee of the London Welsh battalions, described how the Welshman expressed an ‘unobtrusive patriotism’. Unlike the other nations, Wales was ‘never eager to advertise itself’.⁶³ The home-lovers had retained their humility.

Given the number of speeches summarised in the press during the war, it is easy to overlook the other activities that took place on St David’s Day. Yet action, as well as words, expressed a more robust Welsh identity. Many of the more elaborate pre-war St David’s Day celebrations featured lavish meals that drew criticism from less ostentatious patriots. However, the demise of the St David’s Day meal during wartime was not the result of an ascetic impulse; rather it displayed patriotic restraint and sobriety instead of frivolity. It was important to mark the day in a ‘practical way’.⁶⁴ Schools commemorated former pupils who had died at the front and celebrated those awarded medals.⁶⁵ Processions of the Boy Scouts, Boys Brigade and some schools took to the streets on the national day.⁶⁶ While some Welsh women wore the national costume on the day to collect money for the war effort, Welsh masculinity was on parade.

Like the patron saint, Welsh manhood took on a more combative and protective role during the war. St David’s Day celebrations attempted to reconcile the existing idea of Wales as a peaceful nation with the demands of war. There was an effort to amend the reputation of the Welsh with its men represented as dynamic patriots, although their reputation as warriors still fell short of those of other nations. Despite the influence of such representations, it is important not to overlook the expressions of masculinity at the scale of individuals and groups. St David’s Day was not just about the nation’s identity. Patriotic celebrations in the Great War were composed of individuals and groups who had their own interests and objectives. Identities not necessarily based on nationality influenced the experience of national days. Indeed, such days highlighted or legitimised other aspects of the celebrant’s identity. In the case of St David’s Day during the Great War, an individual’s actions, appearance and location demonstrated their masculinity. The same was true for Welsh women. Although masculinity is the focus of this chapter,

there is by necessity an interplay between the performances of both genders because “[m]asculinity” does not exist except in contrast with “femininity”.⁶⁷

The struggle between the leek and the daffodil to become the chief Welsh symbol of organic origin owed much to ideas about gender. Lloyd George suggested that the daffodil might appeal more to women. By March 1917, critics of the flower had lumped it with ‘flapperdom’. The press also feminised the daffodil by calling it fashionable.⁶⁸ On the final St David’s Day of the war, the National Fund benefitted from a ‘great effort by London Welshmen’. Among the items for sale were 50,000 ‘white metal leeks’ and the same number of daffodil brooches. Violet Douglas-Pennant, a commandant in the Women’s Royal Air Force, ‘drove in a motor-car gaily decorated with daffodils’.⁶⁹ There did not appear to be an equivalent vehicle adorned with leeks and the report did not indicate whether men preferred leek brooches and women opted for daffodils. Still, other sources point out the gendered nature of these Welsh symbols, how there was an ‘interplay between military and civilian worlds’ and that, for men, the leek was manly as well as patriotic.⁷⁰

Being patriotic implied being masculine. Men defended the land, represented the nation in sport and provided most national heroes in the fields of war, religion and art, as demonstrated by the statues in Cardiff Civic Hall. Active female patriotism, however, was more evident in the Great War than in any previous conflict. Drawing a distinction between male and female varieties of patriotism emphasised female engagement in the war effort while maintaining a clear sense of manly patriotism.⁷¹ As a result, donning the leek became even more of a manly gesture because it distinguished one as not only a Welsh but also a male patriot. Clothing is an important part of gender identification and decoration on garments often reinforced a gender identity.⁷² Wearing an actual leek, or a representation of one, carried many connotations, some of which were the result of the vegetable’s appearance and other physical characteristics. Of the plants and flowers used to represent the four nations, the leek is the most phallic, although the thistle could lay claim to being as masculine. Its phallic shape was likely to be among the reasons it struck some as being an unladylike national symbol.⁷³ There

was also the matter of the leek's pungent aroma. Women did occasionally wear leeks, but they were more likely to be ornamental than real, and the decorative version was more practical for many men too.⁷⁴

The leek's phallic appearance accompanied historic examples of military masculinity. Even non-combatants who wore the leek could, albeit vicariously, be part of a masculine tradition thus dispelling those accusations of not being appropriately patriotic that were occasionally levelled at male civilians.⁷⁵ Some of these traditions were ancient and emerged from the history of the militant St David. The most familiar tale involved St David instructing the Britons to wear a leek to distinguish themselves from the Anglo-Saxons. Another tale related how St David revived himself after combat by eating a leek and encouraged his fellows do so as well before he died. These traditions contain messages of wiliness, comradeship and sacrifice. While it is not necessarily the case that celebrants were aware of the older stories, less ancient military associations were common knowledge.

Shakespeare and the Royal Welch Fusiliers had planted the leek in British culture long before the outbreak of war. The act of consuming a raw leek was part of the literary canon. Many would have been familiar with the leek-eating scene in *Henry V* where Fluellen tells Pistol: 'If you can mock a leek, you can eat a leek'. Pistol represents a counterfeit military masculinity, of talk above action and cowardice beneath bravado. His reluctance to eat the leek betrays an inability to withstand discomfort or meet a challenge. Along with its goat mascot, the tradition of eating the leek among the Royal Welch Fusiliers was a defining feature of the regiment. Accompanied by a drum roll, the task of eating a leek faced guests and newly promoted fusiliers at St David's Day dinners.⁷⁶ Humorous leek-eating initiations bonded both participant and observer. 'Bulging cheeks, tear-filled eyes, and perspiring brows, besides testifying to the universal heroism, provided a hilarious spectacle.'⁷⁷ The military meaning of the leek extended to other, more recently formed units and another established regiment, the South Wales Borderers (figure 4).⁷⁸ On St David's Day, the leek brought Welshmen into the same symbolic community as the warriors of long ago, fictional and those at the front.



Figure 4: Welsh soldiers with leeks on their hats

Homosocial or male-led activities were a feature of St David's Day. Under the auspices of the national day, men met to discuss personal and business matters. Welsh societies contributed towards the cultural capital of their largely middle-class members. Membership demonstrated a degree of interest, if not aptitude, in the arts and humanities. Moreover, these gatherings maintained the bond between manhood and the nation. The outbreak of war gave celebrations a weightier reputation and meant that Welsh societies could demonstrate their usefulness. In Chester, the Flag Day 'showed what the Welsh Society could do in the way of organisation'.⁷⁹ These gatherings were no longer purely social events but played a part in the war effort. They served as venues where men could repeat and amplify points about the war.⁸⁰ Lloyd George embodied a bolder Wales, and speakers at national society meetings celebrated his success and appeared to channel him – described as 'a real man' by the journalist Charles Parker.⁸¹ A man who attended St David's Day meetings in the war was a protector and a custodian, a little Lloyd George.

Military celebrations of St David's Day occurred in an exclusively male environment. These gatherings facilitated patriotic performances and the reiteration of military masculinity. With the expansion of the army, the military celebration of St David's Day went from being something primarily associated with the three Welsh regiments, and the Royal Welch

Fusiliers in particular, to a widespread event that included men from many different units.⁸² Indeed, given that a considerable number of men who served in Welsh regiments did not hail from the country, many celebrants were unlikely to have considered themselves Welsh.⁸³ Letters and reports sent to the press reveal a little about the sentiments evoked by the occasion. A letter from 'Llewelyn' to his father in 1916 demonstrates the way in which the day served as a milestone in a soldier's life. After mentioning that all the men wore leeks on the day, he reflected on a red-letter day that had taken place a year previously when Lloyd George visited the 'Welsh army' at Llandudno.⁸⁴ The letter refers to Welsh soldiers earning the respect of others through their ferocity in battle. His recollection of St David's Day in Llandudno was of an earlier time before the literal bleeding of war and traced a national as much as a personal journey.

In an imperial age, travel and adventure were motifs of masculine experience and aspiration. Accounts of how celebrants marked the day in distant locations, such as 'somewhere in the desert', combined the exotic with the familiar and in doing so emphasised the novelty of their situation.⁸⁵ These letters gave the impression that the correspondent represented Wales and informed others, whether they be fellow soldiers or inhabitants, about the nation. One soldier stationed in Salonika noted how public notices advertising a St David's Day gathering 'greatly amused our friends from the other side of Offa's Dyke, and laughable in the extreme were their efforts to interpret them'.⁸⁶ An individual's pride in Wales appeared more salient in distant lands.

Wounded soldiers represented ambiguous symbols of masculinity. Although physically limited in varying degrees, they all conveyed bravery, fortitude and had experienced war. On occasion, Welsh casualties attended St David's Day events that acknowledged and celebrated military masculine virtues. Yet the injured men who attended events like the musical social held by the Sheffield and District Cambrian Society in 1916 were more than symbols of sacrifice.⁸⁷ Relating their personal experience to a specific nation instead of to more abstract ideals or concepts like freedom, the United Kingdom or an empire accentuated their role as defender of hearth and home. Most of these events included women and sometimes children, as was the case at

Cardiff , where ‘hundreds’ of schoolboys gingerly carried newly laid eggs to wounded soldiers on the national day.⁸⁸ The presence of the most vulnerable civilians served as a reminder of what the soldiers had been ostensibly protecting.

Even before the war, St David’s Day celebrations reinforced and transmitted messages about Welsh masculinity. The war heightened the martial significance of the leek and Welsh nationality itself. Wearing a leek brought attention from others and provided a symbolic link to a history of heroism. Gatherings, whether exclusively male or mixed, enabled men to assume the role of patriot, Welshman, adventurer and hero. Being a man entailed protecting the homeland and that role was made all the clearer on a day dedicated to a specific homeland rather than the empire or a collection of nations in the form of the United Kingdom. It is not possible to disentangle a national day, especially one that takes place in wartime, from gender.

The image of the Welsh saint and notions of Welsh masculinity point to the negation of the tension between aggression and peacefulness that existed during the conflict. Just as St David was an unlikely figure to rouse martial ardour on the eve of the Great War, the Welsh lacked a martial reputation. Nonetheless, certain traditions about the saint provided a masculine embodiment of the nation and speeches on his day often presented a more assertive Wales. The day also provided opportunities for individuals to articulate their own masculinity. It would be going too far to argue that St David’s Day reinvented the Welsh in a way that complied with British and imperial ideals about martial races, but it did provide an opportunity for the announcement of a Wales that owed more to its distant ancestors than to its Victorian forebears. This chapter has touched on only one aspect of masculinity and a brief period in which notions of masculinity on a personal scale found a counterpoint in that of the Welsh nation. An important theme that is only briefly mentioned here is the comparative and long-term factors that rendered Wales less ‘masculine’ than the other nations of the United Kingdom. In this context, it is worth thinking more about how gender has played a part in the interpretation of Wales not only as female but also in terms of different varieties of masculinity.

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