

The Last Initiate

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cover: detail of a tauroctony, British Museum

Chapter One

The Ruin of Britain

When I finish my thesis there will be at most six people in this country who will be interested in my conclusions – and that’s counting me. The history of Roman mystery religions in Britain is not a hugely crowded field. Like David’s work in Welsh oral history, there’s simply not much interest in these things. But at least David and his like have the support of the Cymru-conscious. When he finds something worthwhile he can publish an article in some obscure journal. When I make a discovery my mother is thrilled. It is not, to coin a phrase, a purely academic question. We have a discovery on our hands that concerns both our fields of interest. This is an attempt to make sense of it.

I first met David in the university library, when we fought over the only copy of Winterbottom’s translation of Gildas’ *De Excidio Britanniae*. Well, not physically fought. We had started reading the numbers on the spines of the books on opposite ends of the shelf and backed into each other just as we both spotted it. We jumped apart, hands still reaching for the book.

“Don’t tell me you want it too?” he asked in a low voice, taking it from the shelf.

“Yes, I need it,” I insisted, trying in vain to take it from him.

“What on earth would you need it for?” he asked, keeping a firm grip on the small green volume.

“I could ask you the same,” I countered.

“Will you please be quiet!” a worried-looking girl hissed at us from a nearby table. We looked at each other.

“Well, let’s take it out, at least,” he said in an exaggerated whisper and marched over to the check-out counter. I followed, keeping my eye on the book he clutched protectively to his chest. I couldn’t imagine Gildas was much in demand, certainly no one I knew in the history department was interested in that

period. So who was this person who had taken possession of the *Ruin of Britain*? He looked about my own age, probably another Ph.D. candidate bitten by the research bug and unwilling to let go of even the slightest lead. Once freed from the silence of the library he turned around and introduced himself, letting go of the book with one hand to shake mine. "Hi, I'm David."

"Oh, er, yes. Jonathan," I said, feeling foolish.

He seemed to look at me for the first time. "Really?" he asked, pushing floppy curls off his forehead to reveal raised eyebrows.

"It's what my parents called me," I shrugged.

David and Jonathan. Perhaps it was a good omen. David seemed to think so too, for he suggested we have lunch together in the sandwich place on the corner. Seated on opposite sides of the tiny table, the book lying between us, I asked him what his field of research was. He told me. I told him. We talked. And talked. The sandwich girl came out from behind her counter and pointedly asked if we would like to order anything else. We ordered – tea for me, coffee for David – just to stop her evicting us. When we finally emerged into the street, the afternoon was half gone. We agreed that David could have the book first and that he would bring it around to my place as soon as he had finished with it. I looked forward to talking to him some more.

Everyone who does research has their own pet theory, the great discovery they secretly dream of making. My own dream was to discover that the cult of Mithras endured after the Roman Empire collapsed. Impossible, because the initiates of such mysteries tended to secrecy and would have become even more wary of discovery as Christianity gained ground. The chances of finding evidence – inscriptions, descriptions – firmly dated as sub-Roman are nil. Or so I thought.

I've been fascinated by the cult of Mithras since I was a boy. Mithraism is what took me into this neglected corner of history, and while I can give you the facts of the mysteries of Isis or Jupiter Dolichenus, my imagination always returns to the soldier-god. I remember the first time I came across the name,

reading Mary Stewart. In *The Crystal Cave*, she describes how the boy Merlin is witness to his uncle Uther killing the bull. I can't have been more than twelve at the time, no older than Merlin in the story, and I read it with the same bemused awe as he watched the spectacle. From then on I read everything about Mithras I could find. He's an elusive god. Books about mythology – especially those meant for children – don't mention him much. But I found enough snatches and snippets to add to my hoard. I drank in the articles of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. That august repository of learning displays a fascination with religion of almost prurient intensity, but although the Zoroastrian roots of Mithraism are disentangled there, it was short on information about the later Roman cult. Kipling, with his 'god of the morning' proved more satisfying. His Mithras – 'also a soldier' – emblem of dedication and sacrifice, I adored. I knew the poem by heart. I never wondered at the time why I, the most peaceful of children, should be so gripped by the image of a soldier-god. I still don't know, and I'm still hooked. I suppose I know as much as there is to know about the Roman worship of Mithras. Perhaps that's the reason I'm doing research on the subject, when it comes down to it. The only way to learn more is to find out for myself.

After David came by to drop off Gildas – pronouncing him 'boring to the point of suicide' – we began to see quite a lot of each other. Our meeting in the library took place in late March, and all through a blustery April we shuttled back and forth to borrow each other's books and talk endlessly. David came across his subject much as I did with mine; he read a book of Welsh legends as a child and they wouldn't let him go. And he's just as enthusiastic. I'm often unsure of myself when I talk about my subject, afraid to put people off with my esoteric learning, but David simply goes on regardless and he is so fired by what he's saying that anyone listening wants to know more. In that one month, I learned more about the history of Wales than I had in my entire life before then, just because I loved listening to David. He says that, despite his name and his interests, he has no

Welsh blood, but it wouldn't surprise me to find a number of thoroughly Celtic storytellers among his ancestors.

I was very glad to have found someone my own age who didn't wear a permanent look of bewilderment when talking to me. David always seemed to know what I was talking about and I didn't have to explain myself to him any more than he had to me. On the few occasions when we were together in company I noticed that people couldn't follow us when we were in full flow. It gave me a childish sense of pleasure, like having our own private language. It took me a while to work out that it must be the same for David. He had lots of friends where I had few, but he was no more used to instant mutual comprehension than I was. I would often stay late at his flat, which he shared with a friend who was away so much I never met him. I would lie on the old sofa, sipping tea or wine, while David sat on the floor, plucking books from the shelves to illustrate his arguments and talking, talking, talking. We had other things to discuss beside our research, of course. We're both great readers, but, as we discovered, of different things. Getting stuck in each other's bookshelves we both had a whole new world to explore. He made me read David Mitchell and Alan Hollinghurst, while I fed him Neil Gaiman and Mary Gentle. And then there was music, and movies and science (not my strongest point, but David was interested in biology). We were both, in fact, trying fervently and unfashionably to embrace the entire spectrum of human knowledge. A certain bloody-minded denial of the limits of the human intellect is required to live up to this, and David had it in abundance. Which is why he insisted on going to Anglesey.

I didn't protest too much when he explained the purpose of his trip. After all, he asked me to come with him and I wasn't going to do myself out of a holiday. But privately I thought there wasn't any chance of finding anything useful – no, scrap that, of finding anything *new*. Britain had been fine-combed by students of folktales, ballads, local history, speech patterns, genealogy and migrations until there can't be an old grandmother left who hasn't been interviewed by a scholar of some kind. Okay, I'm exaggerating, but I really thought going to Anglesey in search of

history was an exercise in uselessness. Well, even I get things wrong sometimes. We were going to stay in a small village on the west side of the island. It was called Llanselyf and looked very pretty in the pictures. The prospect of a beautiful environment and a week in David's company pleased me, so having stuffed my backpack with the minimum of clothes and as many books as I thought I could easily carry, I joined him at the railway station on the morning of May 9.

Travelling by train always lulls me into a kind of waking sleep. As waves of green landscape speed by I fall into a trance and the outside world gets partly filtered out. Which is how, although I remember perfectly what David told me on the journey and I knew at the time what he was talking about, I still managed to mishear what he said. He told me the story of Branwen daughter of Llŷr, a story he tentatively connected with Irish settlements in Wales in the fifth century. Branwen, sister of Bran the Blessed, King of Britain, was betrothed to Matholwch, King of Ireland. Her half-brother Efnisien was not told of the engagement, and found out only at the feast. He was so angry that his sister was given in marriage without his approval that he mutilated Matholwch's horses. To make up for that Bran gave the King of Ireland a magical cauldron which could bring dead warriors back to life, and a 'payment of colts', to make good the loss of the horses. Despite this reconciliation gift, Matholwch treated his wife cruelly and she sent to Bran for help. Bran brokered a peace with Matholwch, insisting that his sister's son be named Ireland's heir, but once again the arrangements were ruined by Efnisien. He threw Branwen's son into the fire and caused a long war between Britain and Ireland. Mourning for both her countries, Branwen died of a broken heart at Aber Alaw, close to where we would be staying, and she was buried there.

David told the tale from the beginning, with all the necessary flourishes, and I listened dozily, like a child to a bedtime story. "...and colts were given to him to make his tally complete," David

said towards the end of the story, "And that's why the place was given the name Talebolion."

"Taurobolium?" I asked, hearing a familiar word, "What has that got to do with anything?"

David in his turn was surprised. "I said 'Talebolion', it's explained as meaning 'payment of colts' in the text, but it probably just means 'end of ridges'."

"Oh, I see," I said, not really seeing. "I must have misheard."

David nodded, "But what did you think I said? Taurobolion? What's that?"

"-bolium," I corrected, "It's the slaying of the bull. An important rite in several ancient religions. The followers of Cybele were actually baptised in bull's blood. And of course Mithras is usually depicted killing a bull."

"Of course, I remember now."

I had in fact shown David my collection of pictures of Mithras and the bull. I had a number of photographs of reliefs and sculptures on file and David had looked at them all.

"He's rather sexy, isn't he?" he'd said, "Though I doubt climbing on its back before cutting its throat is the most effective way of killing a bull. Especially if one chooses to look the other way."

"It's a stylised representation," I said, choosing not to answer the first part of his remark. He was right, though. There was something powerfully erotic about Mithras, depicted as a handsome youth, and the bull, which always seemed to submit willingly to its fate. I was thinking of this conversation as the train carried us into Wales, and I jumped when David laid his hand on my knee and leaned forward to retrieve his bag. He laughed. "You're nearly asleep aren't you? Fancy a sandwich before you go under entirely?"

I accepted his offer, and we both munched quietly for a while. Then I suddenly remembered that he hadn't finished his story. He told me the rest quickly, concluding with Branwen's death in, indeed, Talebolion. "It's where we're going," David explained, "Llanselyf lies within what was once the commot of Talebolion. There's even a place called Branwen's tomb nearby."

"But even if the story tells of things that really happened," I said sceptically – feeling free to voice my doubts now we were safely under way – it's fifteen centuries ago. And human memory is only reasonably accurate to about a hundred years in the past. Two grandfathers, that's it."

"Well, I don't exactly expect a witness to stand up and announce that his 30 times great-granddaddy was cruelly slain by Irish invaders. I know that's not going to happen. But perhaps... a similarity of local folktales and those of Southern Scotland would be telling, for example."

"Supporting your hypothesis that it was Cunedda's Scots and not the Irish who disrupted the peace of Gwynedd." I said, understanding, "That's how you read the story, isn't it? That the Irish in Wales were doing just fine until Scotland fucked things up? You think that's what the evil half-brother stands for."

"It's a way of explaining the story," David said with proper academic caution, "But one must remember Branwen's tale was first written down in the eleventh century. Much too late for accuracy, as you say. Still, there's evidence that Irish settlement in Wales began earlier than we used to think. In your period rather than mine, in fact."

"Which means that some kind of equilibrium had formed by the time Cunedda came charging in. Which was– when?"

"That's the bugger," David nodded, "Dating Cunedda."

I laughed. He made it sound like a difficult love-affair instead of a dry historical problem.

By the time the taxi dropped us on the village green of Llanselyf it was getting dark. David had booked us into the Llanselyf Guesthouse – Mrs Jones, proprietress – the local B&B. We had some trouble finding it, and when we had found it, ringing the doorbell had no discernable effect. The house itself looked tall and forbidding and even uninhabited, though that might have been a product of my by then very sleepy state of mind. When it was clear that there really wasn't going to be a warm welcome at the front door, David shrugged and said, "Let's go and have a

look round the back." We retraced our steps and found the little lane that ran behind the row of houses. The kitchen side at least looked more inviting and there were lights on in what we thought was the guesthouse. Boldly we entered the garden and knocked on the kitchen door. It was open. "Excuse me," I said, to the woman we found inhabiting it, "Could you tell us—"

"What gives you the right to come barging in here?" she interrupted indignantly.

"We're sorry to disturb you," David tried, "We hoped you could give us directions."

"That's no reason to walk into other people's houses unasked," she snapped. She was so angry that she could snap whole sentences. "We're looking for the Llanselyf Guesthouse," I blurted out.

"That's next-door."

"Yes. Thank you so much," David said as we jostled each other in our haste to get out of the woman's house. It wasn't a very encouraging welcome. Granted that a woman on her own had some cause for alarm when two strange men walk in, her reaction was still uncalled for. We were after all mostly harmless, evidently tourists and at our most deferentially polite. I hoped Llanselyf wasn't going to be one of those villages where they view every stranger with the mistrust usually reserved for aliens from the planet Zog. After the encounter with the neighbour we hardly dared walk into Mrs Jones's kitchen, but we had to sleep somewhere that night. We needn't have worried. Mrs Jones, expecting us, apologised profusely for the bell being out of order and laughed heartily when we told her of our meeting with her neighbour. "You have to watch your step with Anna," she said, "But her bark's worse than her bite."

After Mrs Jones had shown us our room – assuring us again that we should call on her if there was anything we needed – we decided against exploring Llanselyf that night and went straight to bed.

By daylight Llanselyf proved to be charmingly unremarkable. The village green boasted an architecturally undistinguished church, a library, a primary school and a couple of stores and patrician houses. The streets surrounding it varied from anciently picturesque cottages to uninspired sixties terraces. We looked it all over that morning and got some curious looks in the process. I had the impression that the tourists Llanselyf usually attracted were of the retired variety. People were clearly wondering what we were doing there. That was exactly how David wanted it. "We have to get people to talk to us. Hear the things tourists don't usually hear."

"So where do we start?" I asked over lunch in the Head and Kettle.

"The vicarage," David replied, "Vicars have to know a lot about their parish."

"You were planning to visit unannounced?" I said, remembering last night's unfortunate encounter.

"Don't worry," David laughed, "Vicars have to be professionally welcoming."

I think we were both expecting the vicar to be kindly, absentminded and knowledgeable, with a firm practical wife hovering in the background. We both read too much fiction. Our expectations couldn't have been more wrong. To start with, the firm practical woman who opened the door to us *was* the vicar. The Reverend Elizabeth Young – 'call me Liz' – was a formidable woman in her forties, with a haircut that made her look like Louis XIV. She knew nothing whatever about local history.

"I've only been here a year or two," she told us, pouring tea, "And I haven't had time to read up on the place. I don't think there's anything special really. Except for Branwen's tomb, of course."

"We were planning to go there tomorrow," David replied, "But it's not just the special things we're interested in."

I noticed that 'we'. Apparently I was suddenly a student of Welsh history as well. I didn't mind. Rev. Young – Liz – advised us to try the local library first. "Though that's mostly fiction and

newspapers. And of course you should talk to the old men on the green."

"The old men on the green?" I echoed. It sounded like the title of a folksong.

"They are there every day except Sunday," Liz said, "Sitting on the bench, watching the world go by. They probably could tell you a lot if they chose, but they are not the most approachable of people. Grandfather Dale-Evans is the man to talk to. Eighty-seven and all his faculties."

Having thanked the Reverend for her tea and her advice, we found ourselves back on the green. There were indeed a couple of old men sitting on the bench at the far end. "So what next?" I asked, "The library?"

David nodded. "The librarian, the headmaster of the school, the landlord of the Head and Kettle and anyone we meet in between. We'll keep the old men on the green for last. When they know we've been talking to everyone else, they'll tell us everything they know."

"Why didn't you ask the Reverend for introductions? It won't do our reputation any good if we turn up unexpected on everyone's doorstep, especially not if her next-door has been talking."

"I'd rather have someone local as a guide," David answered, "Liz said she'd been here for no more than two years. That's not long enough to get under the skin of a village like this."

"So who do you suggest for our 'local guide'? You make it sound like we're going into terra incognita."

"Here be dragons," David grinned.

"A white one and a red one," I replied, "But for God's sake don't mention that story, or we'll walk into spurious Arthuriana at every turn."

In fact, David had already spotted a potential guide into the wilderness that was Llanselyf. A young woman with spiky black hair was crossing the green, carrying a grocery bag. Before I knew what was happening David had set out to intercept her and by the time I caught up with him they were already talking. It sounds odd, that he could just start talking to strangers, but David has such an engaging manner that people answer despite

themselves. It works especially well with women. As David talked with the girl – who introduced herself as Katie Dale-Evans – I stood by feeling awkward and shy. “I’m David and this is Jonathan,” he introduced us.

Katie looked from one to the other. “You’re taking the piss, right?”

“No, really. David Marsh and Jonathan Langtry. So tell me, is grandfather Dale-Evans *your* grandfather? Or your great-grandfather?”

“My great-uncle actually,” she said, “Though I don’t see what business it is of yours.”

“Sheer curiosity,” David said blithely, as he tried and failed to take over Katie’s bag of groceries – “I’m not quite decrepit, thanks”. “We were wondering if you could help us,” he continued, quickly explaining our interest in the history of Llanselyf. “We spoke to the Reverend Young this afternoon, but she’s not local. We need someone to show us around and make introductions, someone who knows what’s what.”

“And what makes you think that’s me?” Katie asked, her perfect black eyebrows drawn into mocking arches. She was right to ask. From her perfectly cut hair to her shiny high-heeled boots, she didn’t look like someone whose days were spent in a place where everyone knew each other. Her voice betrayed little, being much closer to the generic southern English we spoke ourselves than to the – to our ears – strangely intonated accent of Anglesey. I thought she must be a local girl who’d escaped and was only back visiting. I was nearly right. As David bumbled something about her walking as if she owned the place, Katie explained that she had just finished her teacher’s training in London and would be starting a job in September at a secondary school in Shrewsbury. Meanwhile she was back in the old place, helping to take care of her ailing grandmother. “Grandfather Dale-Evans’s sister in law,” she added, before David could ask. It seemed a curiously dutiful thing to do for a modern young woman, but Katie disagreed. “It’s a kind of holiday, before my working life begins in earnest. Besides, I love being in Llanselyf and I love my gran.”

"But it's hardly 24/7 occupation," David said.

"Hardly," she agreed, "By which I suppose you mean I have all the time in the world to go history hunting with you." She appeared to come to a decision. "Let me just drop off the groceries and I'll join you in the Head and Kettle in about half an hour. Then you can tell me *exactly* what you expect of me."

"There's your local guide," David told me smugly, as Katie moved off along one of the more picturesque streets.

"Why did you pick her?" I asked, being less confident in his choice.

"She looks like a girl who'd know her way around anywhere," David said, "But she definitely has the same nose and eyes as a lot of people around here."

"I see," I said. The truth was that I wouldn't have noticed her if David hadn't spoken to her, any more than I noticed the other women bringing home their shopping. Now David had mentioned it I began to see a common element in the faces of the people coming out of the store and the women waiting to pick up their children from school. There were huge differences as well, of course, but something about the nose and eyes I saw again and again. The eyes were deep-brown and wide-set, the nose short but straight. I wondered how long that nose and those eyes had been in Llanselyf. I knew enough about recent DNA research to have learned that people stay put to a remarkable degree. If one analysed the human remains found in Branwen's tomb, would the DNA be similar to Katie's? I mentioned the thought to David, who was at first excited by the idea, and then glum when he realised there was never going to be enough funding to put it into practice.

"I'd love to know," he said, "To think Branwen might have looked something like that."

'That' was a tall woman with the requisite nose and eyes, her hair twisted in an old-fashioned bun, wearing an expression of marked ill-temper. She looked familiar at once, but it took her sharply bitten-off 'afternoon' for me to realise it was the neighbour who had afforded us such a warm welcome the night

before. I couldn't for the world imagine her as Branwen daughter of Llŷr.

"She would have been shorter," I told David, "She wouldn't have worn crumbly pink lipstick. Anyway, I thought you didn't accept Branwen as a historical person?"

David blushed, he actually blushed. I had caught him out in his dream, his unattainable historian's urge to know what it was really like. Never mind that intellectually he knew Branwen was never a real British princess, he thought of her as a person.

"You're as bad as I am," I told him, "If our tutors could hear us they'd be horrified. 'Too much fiction, too little argument,'" I imitated Professor Underwood's dry voice, "'If you want to make a career as a novelist, young man, I suggest you seek help elsewhere.'"

"They always make it sound as if speculation is a dangerous, contagious disease," David said, "One knows what they mean, though. It's easy to get carried away."

I suggested we go and see where our spiky-haired psychopomp would carry us, and we repaired to the Head and Kettle. It was an old-fashioned village pub – I was glad to see that some clichés still stood the test of reality – and didn't have much local trade in the afternoon. I imagined the men of the village would drop by in the evening for a pint. When we entered the only other customers were an elderly husband and wife I thought I had seen at Mrs Jones's guesthouse. The landlord of the Kettle recognised us and welcomed us heartily. He had the eyes but not the nose. His wife got us our soft drinks. She had the nose but not the eyes. We had a half-hearted game of darts until Katie turned up. She had said she wanted David to tell her everything, but when it came down to it she did most of the talking herself. "You were right thinking the vicar wouldn't be much use," she told David, sipping her coke, "But it's not because she's new in Llanselyf. It's because she's a woman." She clearly expected us to be surprised by this statement, and we were.

"I know villages tend to be more conservative," I said cautiously, "And I can see how people would have to get used to the idea of

a female minister. But how would that affect her knowledge of local history?"

Katie sighed, a little theatrically. "There are some things... There are things that only the men of Llanselyf are allowed to know. Some local traditions the women know nothing about."

I must admit that at first I thought Katie Dale-Evans was a rampant latter-day feminist seeing spectres. I couldn't believe that something like that – whatever it was – was still going on in real life, here in Llanselyf. But as Katie explained, and David and I listened, it sounded all too convincing.

"There have been Dale-Evanses in Llanselyf for a long time," she began, "My uncle still farms the land of our ancestors. I suppose you can say we're important people in Llanselyf. When I was a girl I thought it no more than our due, it seemed natural that Dale-Evanses should be well-respected. But actually, I'm not at all sure why this is so. We're farming stock, and not rich. There must be some other reason why we are so high in the pecking order. I suspect it's got something to do with what I'm about to tell you. I'm the youngest of five children. I have three brothers and a sister, she lives with her husband over in Llanfigael."

Katie, who had lived in London for the last three years, made 'Llanfigael' sound as if it was slightly further away than the Australian outback.

"My eldest brother was eighteen when I first noticed that something strange was going on. I was six years old at the time, always curious, always asking questions. One evening my father and my brother went out late together and when I asked where they had been they wouldn't tell me. I was miffed, but at that age you still accept that there are things grown-ups know and you aren't allowed to. I would have forgotten all about it, but three years later the same thing happened with my second-oldest brother. Away half the night, and not a word about where they'd been or what they'd done. My mother took it maddeningly calmly, saying it was none of my business. When it was my youngest brother's turn, I thought I would learn what it was all about. He's only a year older than me, and we'd always been close. But when the time came, he was as close-lipped as the