

CARADOG FRAICHFRAS - ANCESTOR OF THE BLAYNEYS KNIGHT OF THE ROUND TABLE?

One of the most striking of the coats of arms carved above the fireplace in the Blayney Room at Gregynog is that depicting the three spear-heads of Caradog Fraichfras (Caradog Strong-Arm). Like many ancient Welsh families the Blayneys claimed descent from the earliest Welsh princes and their legendary forbears, rather like eccentric English aristocrats claiming direct descent from Adam, but, needless to say, when probing into these early mists the boundary between genealogy and mythology tends to become somewhat blurred.

The case of the Blayneys and Caradog Fraichfras is a case in point, as is indicated by the fact that to find out who he was we must consult not *Dictionary of Welsh Biography* but the *Oxford Companion to the Literature of Wales*, edited by Meic Stephens. According to Stephens, Caradog Fraichfras is a hero of the Arthurian cycle who also appears in French legends and romances of the Middle Ages such as *Lai du Cor*, *Le Manteau Mautailié* and *Livre de Caradoc*. He is certainly of Welsh origin, often mentioned in early Welsh manuscripts; for example in *Breuddwydd Rhonabwy* (The Dream of Rhonabwy) he is described as King Arthur's cousin and chief counsellor, 'a virtuous, proud man, an eloquent and bold speaker.' In one of the Triads (the lists of legendary characters, arranged in groups of three, which were a feature of the early Welsh oral modes of imparting information) he is called the son of Llyr Merini and is said to have cast a wonderful spell of love on Tegau Eurfron, the daughter of Nudd Llwhaugh, King of North Britain. (A coat of arms associated with her and a later connection of the Blayneys can also be seen in the Blayney Room.) According to another Triad, Caradog was one of the Three Battle-Horsemen of the Isle of Britain. Gwyn A. Williams, in *Excalibur: The Search for Arthur*, suggests that Caradog 'may have appeared from the decurions, the social leaders of Roman Caerwent in the south east of Wales, and his very name may commemorate an ancient hero of the Silures' struggle against Rome, Caractacus/Caradog.'

Caradog's horse Lluagor (the name is said to mean 'host-splitter' which implies some hard and uncomfortable riding) has its own claim to fame, being listed in *Trioedd y Meirch*, The Triads of the Horses, as one of the Three Jaunty Steeds of the Island of Britain. In her article *The Triads of the Horses* in *The Horse in Celtic Culture: Medieval Welsh Perspectives* edited by Sioned Davies and Nerys Ann Jones, Cardiff, UWP, 1997, Rachel Bromwich says that the horse's name occurs in early French poems and it even found its way into the work of Chretien de Troyes (who is responsible for the first Grail stories).

According to Philip Yorke in *The Royal Tribes of Wales*, Caradog was known as the Earl of Hereford and was a powerful ruler in that part of the Welsh border once known as 'Rhwyng Gwy a Hafren' or 'Twixt Wye and Severn' - not so very far from here.

It's good to think that Arthur Blayney, the genial old bachelor who was the last Blayney to live at Gregynog, might have believed himself to be descended from a Knight of the Round Table, but I wonder if the Misses Davies were aware that the carving in their parlour had such a story behind it?

People wishing to find out more might like to browse in the Arthurian collection in the Gregynog library. May we also refer you to the booklet by Michael Siddons, Wales Herald Extraordinary, *The Heraldic Carving at Gregynog*, reprinted from the Montgomeryshire Collections No 88 (2000).

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