

I.

NOTICE OF ST GOVANE'S HERMITAGE, NEAR PEMBROKE, SOUTH WALES. By COSMO INNES, Esq., F.S.A. Scot.

In the course of a week spent recently in Pembrokeshire, beyond Milford Haven, I enjoyed one day a pleasant walk along the sea cliffs which run out into Stackpole Head. It is a fine bold coast of limestone rocks, broken here and there into little bays, or what we in Scotland should call *coves*. One of these, a mere indenture in the lofty cliff strewn with huge blocks of its debris, is so steep and rugged that we should have had much difficulty in descending from the downs, but for the assistance of a long flight of steps, which ends half way down in a little chapel of rude masonry, and evidently ancient, though patched and altered so frequently, and possessing so few architectural features, that I cannot venture to fix its era. It is known as St Govan's Chapel. A few yards farther down the ravine, is a well still covered with a roof of rude architecture, and which the natives still hold in great respect, and visit for the cure of various diseases. There is also a sonorous stone known as the Saint's Bell.

But the curious part of St Govan's abode is his bed, or rather his coffin, for it is a vertical interstice between two immense slabs of rock, into which a body of common size can be forced with some difficulty, the

prisoner still remaining upright. The rock is polished by the number of visitors fitting themselves into the Saint's bed of penance, and the natives make you feel in the inner surface the indentures caused by the ribs of the Saint! I should wish to call attention to this and similar places used of old for purposes of penance by hermits, partly, no doubt, for their spiritual benefit, and partly perhaps to create an interest in the neighbouring population by a rather ostentatious asceticism. But the examples are chiefly to be drawn from Ireland, and I am not at present able to collect them. I am not without hope, however, that Mr Joseph Robertson may be able to cite some of the cases which are found within the territories of our own Celtic Church. What I wish to point out at present is a circumstance of another kind—a curious mixing up of mythical or romance personages with holy hermits of early Christianity. I do not think there can be any doubt that the popular name is here the correct one. The little chapel—the bed of rock for penance—the Saint's well—the well, sanctified perhaps by being used for baptism in early times, still sacred in the estimation of the people, and turned a little to superstitious uses—all these agree with numerous examples in our country and in Ireland, and point to the place as the dwelling of an early solitary or hermit, or a primitive missionary, winning the admiration of the rude natives by self-inflicted rigours, instilling the first lessons of Christian faith, and securing his converts by the sacrament of baptism. Of such a personage of prehistoric antiquity we can not expect to know much. His name affixed to the scene of his labours, and such enduring monuments as the well and his penance-bed, are the only memorials to be looked for, of one who may have done the work of conversion extensively. But here the name—attached not only to the little chapel, but to the marked headland of the Pembroke coast which it adjoins—bears a resemblance to that of a famous personage in romantic history, who has oddly enough robbed the humble Saint of his identity.

Sir Gawayne, the most famous of the knights of the Round Table slain by Sir Lancelot, was buried at Kamalot, say one set of romances, and the Laureate after them; or at Dover, as Caxton and Leland affirm; or at "Wybre in Wales," if we believe Langtoft; or, finally, in his native country of Scotland, according to the book of the "Brut—," for I need

not tell you that, according to the best authorities, the good knight Sir Gawayne was a Scotsman—one of the princes of Galloway. But, in short, history not being precise upon the points, as it befell the heroes and poets of old, many countries contended for the honour of his birth and his burial; and the occurrence of a name so similar as that of St Govan, attached to a remarkable site, was, I presume, sufficient warrant to put forward such a claim. In this instance the assertion that Sir Gawayne is buried at St Govan's chapel is not modern. William of Malmesbury¹ tells us that, in the reign of William the Conqueror, the sepulchre of Gawayne was discovered on the seashore of a province of Wales named Ross (no doubt the coast of Pembrokeshire), 14 feet in length, where it is reported the previously wounded knight was shipwrecked, and then slain by the natives. Leland rejects the story, but preserves the fact that the remains of a *castle*, called by Gawayne's name, were still extant in his time near the shore; and Sir Frederick Madden,² who adopts Malmesbury's story of the place, asserts that the traditionary voice of the neighbourhood assigns St Govan's Head as the burial-place of Arthur's nephew; while he admits that the local historian (Fenton)³ knows nothing of the legend. *Pace tanti viri*—I have learned to distrust "the voice of the neighbourhood" when speaking of things better known than Arthur's nephew. But in this case, on the spot I could find no trace of such tradition, except, to be sure, in the library of the owner of the land, who was quite at home in it, and turned up as his authority a fine tall copy of William of Malmesbury. It has occurred to all of us, in hunting up a popular tradition to run it to ground at last in "the printed book."

¹ Script. post Bedam, lib. ii. p. 64. Lond. 1596, fol.

² Introduction to the volume from which all these quotations are taken: "Sir Gawayne, a Collection of Romance Poems, by Scottish and English Authors," &c., edited by Sir F. Madden for the Bannatyne Club. 1839. 4to.

³ Fenton's Pembrokeshire, p. 414.