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‘SAXON, THINK NOT ALL IS WON’  
Felicia Hemans and the Making of Britons

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*Jane Aaron*

## I

'FEW poetic careers can have been more thoroughly devoted to the construction of national identity than was that of Felicia Hemans's, writes Tricia Lootens, in her contribution to Angela Leighton's *Victorian Women Poets: A Critical Reader* (1996). For the majority of Hemans's twentieth-century readers, there is no question as to which nation was the object of Hemans's constructive patriotism: of course it was that nation eulogised in such poems as 'The Homes of England'. There are few more passionately jingoistic poems in the English language than Hemans's 'The Name of England', for example:

The trumpet of the battle  
Hath a high and thrilling tone;  
And the first deep gun of an ocean-fight  
Dread music all its own.

But a mightier power, my England!  
Is in that name of thine,  
To strike the fire from every heart  
Along the banner'd line.

\* \* \* \* \*

A thousand ancient mountains  
Its pealing note hath stirr'd,—  
Sound on, and on, for evermore,  
O thou victorious word!<sup>1</sup>

And yet, merely a glance at the contents pages of a 'Complete' Hemans shows that the poet was equally capable of empathising with the ancient mountains of her own isle as they 'stirred' to the pealing note of an anti-English patriotic war cry. In poems such as 'Chant of the Bards before Their Massacre by Edward I' and 'Owen Glyndwr's War-Song', the poetic voice takes up arms on behalf of the Welsh nation, in its struggles against its thirteenth-century conquerors and its later rebellions against English rule.

When Hemans's Welsh patriotic verses were published in the 1821 volume *Welsh Melodies*, she was hailed by her contemporary Welsh audience as a 'poet for Wales', and made an honorary member of the Royal Cambrian Institution in acknowledgement of her role as a popularizer of Welsh national identity. By birth of mixed Irish, Italian and German ancestry, Hemans appears to have been gratified by this reception. According to her own testimony she regarded herself as a naturalised Welsh woman, having resided in north Wales since 1800, when her father's failed business necessitated a family retreat from Liverpool to Abergele in Denbighshire: Felicia Browne, as she then was, was seven years old at the time. Cefn yr Ogor Pass, which loomed up immediately behind the Brownes' new home, for centuries was a key battle site between the princes of Gwynedd in their strongholds in Aberffraw and Dolbadarn to the west and the invading armies of the Saxon, Norman and Plantagenet kings of England, coming over Offa's Dyke to the east. According to the nineteenth-century Welsh historian Jane Williams, 'no spot in the Principality has been more thoroughly saturated with blood'.<sup>2</sup> This spot was Hemans's 'scene of writing' from 1800 to 1828, during which years she composed by far the major part of her oeuvre. At the time of the Browne family's arrival in Abergele, a revival of antiquarian interest in Celtic history, led in Wales by the recently established societies of the Cymmrodorion and Gwyneddigion, promoted a local enthusiasm for the old battle sites and their histories, in which Felicia, as a young woman, seems to have participated. As some of her verses in *Welsh Melodies* are translations from Welsh-language originals, it would appear that she could also at least read, if not speak, Welsh.



1 Felicia Hemans, 'The Name of England', *Poems of Felicia Hemans* (Edinburgh and London: Blackwood, 1852), p. 567. All subsequent references to Hemans' poetry are taken from this edition.

2. Jane Williams, *The Literary Women of England* (London: Saunders, Otley, and Co, 1861), p. 393

In 1822, Hemans composed and delivered in person a poetical address for the annual Welsh Eisteddfod in which she publicly presented herself as working within the Welsh bardic tradition. The poem eulogises the Welsh bards of old as inspired by their historic freedom-fighters:

Well might bold freedom's soul pervade the strains  
Which startled eagles from their lone domains,  
And like a breeze in chainless triumph went  
Up through the blue resounding firmament.  
Whence came the echoes to those numbers high?  
'Twas from the battle-fields of days gone by,  
And from the tombs of heroes laid to rest  
With their good swords, upon the mountain's breast.

Nor are their latter-day counterparts, in whose ranks Hemans—through her use of the first-person plural pronoun—here firmly includes herself, wanting in Welsh 'patriot-feeling':

Land of the bard! our spirit flies to thee!  
To thee our thoughts, our hopes, our hearts belong,  
Our dreams are haunted by thy voice of song!  
Nor yield our souls one patriot-feeling less  
To the green memory of thy loveliness  
Than theirs, whose harp-notes peal'd from every height,  
*In the sun's face, beneath the eye of light.*<sup>3</sup>

But it is not the Welsh, or even the British, dead who are eulogized in the poem—also published in 1822—which immediately precedes 'The Meeting of the Bards' in nineteenth-century editions of Hemans's poetry. In 'England's Dead', while ostensibly mourning those who fell in Britain's eighteenth-century imperial wars and its more recent engagements with Napoleon, Hemans also by implication glories in the world-wide expansion of English dominion:

Go stranger! track the deep—  
Free, free the white sail spread!  
Wave may not foam, nor wild wind sweep,  
Where rest not England's dead. (p. 246)

Poems like 'England's Dead' established Hemans's reputation, and accounted for both her immediate and subsequent extensive popularity during the nineteenth century, not only in Britain but in its most far-flung colonial settlements. But the fact that Hemans's Welsh patriotic poems by no means gained the same degree of international prominence in later Victorian culture as did her English nationalist verse is, of course, in part the consequence of the vast difference in terms of influence and power between the two nations at that time, and should not blind her late twentieth-century readers to the paradoxes in her position. Is it possible to be the national poet of two nations at once, particularly given a scenario in which the existence of one of the nations in question can only be constructed at the cost of deconstructing the 'greatness' of the other? Not insubstantial numbers of England's military dead, albeit of an earlier date, rested beneath Hemans's own back doorstep in Abergele, but, in the poems in which she evokes the battles in which they died, it is to their opponents that she accords her moral appropriation and patriotic fealty. In this paper, I intend to explore this apparent contradiction further, not only in relation to Hemans's own writings, but also in terms of its significance for the construction of early nineteenth-century British—as opposed to either Welsh or English—identity.

Hemans's Welsh patriotic poems belong to one very specific period in her history and that of Britain: they were composed during the years immediately following the final defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo. Although she wrote a few scattered incidental poems with Welsh settings both before and after the years 1815 to 1822, they are local rather than national poems, expressive of the warmth of her feelings only for her immediate home environment and community rather than for Wales as a nation or for the Welsh as a race. According to Linda Colley, in her seminal study *Britons: Forging a Nation*

3. Hemans, 'The Meeting of the Bards', *Poems*, pp. 246–7; the italicised last line is a translated quotation from the Welsh Eisteddfod prayer—'*Yng ngwynneb haul ac yn llygaid goleuni*'.

1707–1837, the years which immediately succeeded Waterloo constituted something of a crisis point in terms of British identity. 'There was,' Colley says, 'a profound loss of direction involved ... How was Britishness to be defined now that it could no longer rely so absolutely on a sense of beleaguered Protestantism and on regular conflict with the Other in the shape of Catholic France?'<sup>4</sup> Colley sees Britain as an invented nation, superimposed—during the century which followed the Act of Union with Scotland—onto much older English, Scottish and Welsh alignments and loyalties, and one which was forged above all by war with France; Britons, she says, defined themselves as Protestants struggling for survival against the world's foremost Catholic power. During the 1790s and early 1800s, British militarism could convincingly be represented as pre-eminently defensive, as intent on resisting aggressive French imperialist encroachments on both its own national liberty and that of its weaker European neighbours: it was not, after all, until 1805 that Napoleon was finally forced to abandon his plans to invade Britain. Felicia Browne, at the age of fourteen, had made her poetic debut with a paean in praise of Britain as a pre-eminent world freedom-fighter. In her 'England and Spain, or Valour and Patriotism', published in 1808, Freedom is personified as the local deity of the British Isles (or rather 'Isle'):

Immortal Freedom! daughter of the skies!  
 To thee shall Britain's grateful incense rise.  
 Ne'er, goddess, ne'er forsake thy favourite isle,  
 Still be thy Albion brighten'd with thy smile!

The desecrator of the goddess Freedom is of course the 'Despot of France! destroyer of mankind!' who in 1808 continued to challenge the forces of Liberty through his attempts to annex Spain. 'Wouldst thou yet by added crimes provoke / The bolt of heaven to launch the fatal stroke?' the young Felicia asks of Bonaparte?

Bereave a nation of its rights revered,  
 Of all to mortals sacred and endear'd?  
 And shall they tamely liberty resign,  
 The soul of life, the source of bliss divine?

\* \* \* \* \*

No, tyrant! no! Thy utmost force is vain  
 The patriot-arm of freedom to restrain.

The poem describes how, as the handmaiden of the goddess Liberty, the British army under Arthur Wellesley issued forth to join forces with the guerrilla fighters of Spain and Portugal and wage the Peninsular Wars against France. It hails the heroism of Spain's valiant British rescuers with a patriotic fervour which was no doubt heightened by the fact that two of Felicia's brothers served in the Royal Welsh Fusiliers, and at least one of them was fighting in Spain at the time the poem was composed:

Ye sons of Albion! first in danger's field,  
 The sword of Britain and of truth to wield! ...  
 The reign of Freedom let your arms restore,  
 And bid oppression fall—to rise no more!

But 'England and Spain' is not a poem which glorifies war as such, as opposed to necessary wars in defence of Liberty: it closes with an eulogy to the 'sweet Peace' which will return once 'mad ambition has ceased to rage', and Napoleon has finally been taught his lesson. The 'demon-breath' of war will be assuaged when 'the despot's dread career is closed, / And might restrain'd and tyranny deposed!' (pp. 6 and 9). After 1815, however, the problem for both Hemans on a personal and familial level, and for Britain's image on an international level, was that although Napoleon's 'mad ambition' duly ended with his final surrender, neither Britain, nor the Browne brothers, nor the infantry captain Felicia had married in 1812, did in fact lay down their arms. On the contrary, the Waterloo period, and the years immediately following Napoleon's downfall, saw Britain annexing territories and conquering kingdoms with as much avid imperialist greed as the French 'tyrant' had shown at his most despotic. The Ascension Island, British Guiana, the Ionian Islands, Malta, Mauritius, the Seychelles, Trinidad,

4. Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging a Nation 1707–1837* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 322

Tristan da Cunha, Tobago, and other territories ostensibly 'freed' from Dutch or French rule during the Napoleonic wars were annexed to the British Empire in the settlements of 1814 and 1815. The Cape of Good Hope became a British colony in 1814; the King of Kandy was deposed and Ceylon taken in 1815; the Himalayan kingdom of Nepal conquered in 1816; Singapore taken in 1819; Gambia and the Gold Coast placed under the British Crown in 1821; the Burmese kings conquered in a series of engagements which began in 1824; and Western Australia, Queensland and Tasmania established as British territories in 1824–6. These military engagements, bloody and long-lasting as many of them were, were not easily construable as fought in the name of Britain's, or any other nation's, freedom. And yet Felicia, as much as her brothers and husband, had founded a public career on her role as upholder and popularizer of Britain's image as the heroic defender of smaller nations' liberties against the greed and aggression of more powerful states.

Apart from the references in the poem 'England's Dead' to far-flung English corpses, Felicia Hemans wrote few verses either in praise or disapprobation of these aggressively imperial British engagements. And yet during the years 1815 to 1821 she continued to compose poems with a markedly militaristic theme. But her concern now was with the history of a very different epoch in which Britons, albeit of a more Ancient variety, could still plausibly enough be presented as fighting for freedom. In 1819 she won a Scottish prize poem competition on the subject of William Wallace's invocation to Bruce to take up arms against the English, and two years later published her volume *Welsh Melodies*. That these works not only operated to preserve the concept of British heroes as freedom fighters but also, ironically enough at one level, aided in the construction of a British, as opposed to an English, Scottish or Welsh, identity, is suggested by one of the reviewers of her 'Wallace's Invocation to Bruce':

That a Scottish prize, for a poem on a subject purely, proudly Scottish, has been adjudged to an English candidate ... demonstrates the disappearance of those jealousies which, not a hundred years ago, would have denied such a candidate any thing like a fair chance with a native ... We delight in every gleam of high feeling which warms the two nations alike, and ripens yet more that confidence and sympathy which bind them together in one great family.<sup>5</sup>

Binding together the English, Welsh and Scots in one great fighting family would appear to be part of the purpose of Hemans's Scottish and Welsh verses. They frequently work to suggest that the Welsh and Scots should not forget their historical fighting prowess, but should resurrect and exercise it in the interests of present-day Britannia. In 'The Fair Isle' from *Welsh Melodies*, for example, the native Britons are rallied in defeat after the coming of the Anglo-Saxons by a bardic voice which prophesies their final triumph:

Sons of the Fair Isle! forget not the time  
Ere spoilers had breathed the free air of your clime ...  
Ages may roll ere your children regain  
The land for which heroes have perish'd in vain;  
Yet, in the sound of your names shall be power,  
Around her still gathering in glory's full hour.  
Strong in the fame of the mighty that sleep,  
Your Britain shall sit on the throne of the deep. (p. 152)

In so far as the last line quoted above means anything at all, it presumably refers to that British naval supremacy which was the primary cause of Napoleon's downfall. The poet, then, speaking as a prophet, appears to be exhorting Britain's aboriginal tribes to take an active pride in its future nineteenth-century imperial triumphs, and to see them as redeeming their lost honour and liberties. Both the Scots and the Welsh are pre-eminently interpolated as heroic freedom-fighters in Hemans's verse of this period.

Another unifying device, used by Hemans in both 'Wallace's Invocation to Bruce' and *Welsh Melodies*, is her frequent reference to those battles in which Britain's early freedom fighters successfully—according to Hemans—vanquished an earlier southern European imperial invading army, the Romans this time rather than the French. That the Romans left Britain because Rome was threatened by the Goths rather than because they had not entirely subjugated Britain's Northern and

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5. *Edinburgh Monthly Review* 2 (1819), on Felicia Hemans' prize-winning poem 'Wallace's Invocation to Bruce'.

Western fringes is ignored in these poems, and Ancient British valour stressed. Wallace after his defeat mourns that,

Shrouded in Scotland's blood-stain'd plaid,  
Low are her mountain-warriors laid;  
They fell, on that proud soil whose mould  
Was blent with heroes' dust of old,  
And, guarded by the free and brave,  
Yielded the Roman—but a grave! (p. 64)

And in *Welsh Melodies* Caswallon, a king of the Ancient Britons jeers after the departing Romans, 'Lords of earth! to Rome returning, / Tell how Britain combat wages!' ('Caswallon's Triumph', p. 150)

The Romans, like the French, constituted an unproblematic 'Other' against which 'Britain' could readily be represented as united. But the entry of the Anglo-Saxon into this happy British fighting family required more delicate negotiation. In the Welsh poems this negotiation is accomplished through a very particular use of racial terminology: a splitting of the sign 'Anglo-Saxon', in which Hemans is aided by the fact that the Welsh and Gaelic terms for the English as a race—'Saeson' and 'Sassenach'—derive from the name of the Saxon—rather than the Anglo-Germanic tribe. For Hemans in these poems it is not a matter of the Welsh versus the English but of 'Cambrians' or 'Britons' versus 'Saxons' only. In 'The Dying Bard's Prophecy' for example, a Welsh bard, after Edward I's final defeat of the last native Welsh prince in 1282, interpolates the enemy as Saxon, rather than as Anglo-Norman or English. With his last breath the bard proclaims:

'Saxon, think not all is won. ...  
Dreamer! that numberest with the dead  
The burning spirit of the mountain-land! ...  
Think'st thou, because the song hath ceased,  
The soul of song is fled?' (p. 152)

Here the 'Saxon' features as a brute materialist, unmindful of the power of poetry and the resistant spirit of the freedom fighter mystically united with his land, but the 'Angles' are not necessarily implicated in his disgrace. Even as late as 1400 to 1415, during the period of Owain Glyndwr's ill-fated rebellion, the Cambrians are still only fighting the Saxons in Hemans's poetry, although by then it would appear a gross historical inaccuracy to designate their enemy as anything other than English. 'A sound is on the breeze,' says the doomed but still resistant Owain, 'A murmur as of swelling seas! / The Saxon on his way!' (p. 149). In the interest of constructing the image of the Britons as a united family of liberty-lovers, Hemans appears ready to sacrifice that lower-ranking, and not even Christian, churl, the Saxon, but 'the name of England' must not be defiled.

Nor did the historical heroes of Catholic Ireland find inclusion in Hemans's Great British fighting family. Irish freedom fighters are not registered in her roll-call of the great, which with hindsight was just as well, given that, after she finally left Wales in 1828, Hemans was to spend her last years in the Dublin residence of her brother Lieutenant-Colonel George Browne, the then British Commissioner of Police in Ireland. As her brother was tasked with the repression and policing of any incipient contemporary uprisings against the British Crown in Ireland, it would have been curious, to say the least, had family loyalties compelled him to welcome to his home one who had espoused in her verse the cause of those rebels' predecessors. But Hemans's 'Fair Isle' is always singular, a Britannia without Ireland, and a Britannia which, moreover, after 1821, with British unity and its global supremacy apparently secularly established, she reverts to calling simply 'England'.

## II

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