Gender, Nation and Conquest in the High Middle Ages: Nest of Deheubarth

Nest of Deheubarth, a 12th-century Welsh princess, has a presence well beyond academic history and interests. She was one of the most famous Welsh princesses and over the centuries has had a significant impact on Welsh history and identity. The main aim of Johns' book is to investigate her life and place in Welsh history and use her and other medieval Welsh noblewomen as a way into a gendered assesment of the Norman Conquest of Wales. Johns argues that gender was of central importance to portrayals of Nest's abduction, the conquest of Wales by Normans, and the Welsh resistance to the conquest. Gendered conquest and politics subsequently influenced the development of Welsh identity in the modern era.

For Nest's biography Johns refers the reader to Kari Maund's book on Nest, but Johns herself provides a more robust narrative from the very few biographical details we have (although a genealogical table would have helped make some of the discussion more readily accessible for historians not working on Wales). Nest of Deheubarth was the daughter of Rhys ap Tewdwr (d. 1093), king of Deheubarth, and Gwladys, daughter of prince Rhiwallon ap Cynfyn of Powys. Nest married Gerald, son of a Norman constable of Windsor castle, c. 1097 and had three sons and one daughter by him. Through her daughter Angharad, Nest was the maternal grandmother of Gerald of Wales. She was also the mistress of Henry I and after Gerald's death she had relationships with Stephen, constable of Cardigan and Hait, a Flemish sheriff of Pembrokeshire, having a son with each.[1] Nest is perhaps best known as the subject of an abduction which occured during a Christmas feast in 1109 when Owain ap Cadwgan, her second cousin, 'moved by passion and love for' Nest, took over the castle where Gerald and Nest were staying.[2] On Nest's advice, Gerald escaped through the privy after which Nest distracted Owain giving Gerald time to escape. Owain and his men seized Nest, her two sons and daughter, as well as one of Gerald's illegitimate sons. The children were returned to Gerald soon after while Nest stayed with Owain. Following her abduction Nest may have had two sons with Owain (pp. 21–2).

Johns' book is based on four main discussions; the abduction itself, contemporary sources on Nest, gendered conquest and medieval Welsh women, and finally modern Nest. Chapter one deals with Nest and medieval narratives of her abduction. Three Welsh manuscript versions of Owain ap Cadwgan's abduction are extant and Johns explores some important differences in them. Violent abduction and rape in one manuscript

tradition contrasts with consensual flight and sexual relations in another, and very soon after the events took place this distinction significantly influenced the development of the Welsh national myth. Johns examines the various narratives within the context of medieval Welsh law and establishes the abduction within a gendered analysis of medieval socio-political world in Wales. The legal context of the abduction and whether or not it was depicted as rape or consensual highlights this gendered nature of high medieval Welsh politics.

In the next two chapters Johns uses Nest as a starting point to contextualise her gendered analysis of the conquest of Wales and Welsh politics by analysing the wider experience of noblewomen: first by focusing on the works of Nest's grandson, Gerald of Wales, and second on charter evidence. As second cousins Owain and Nest's kinship was within the prohibited degrees, and meant that implications of sexual relations after the abduction were highly controversial. Furthermore, the abduction indicated instability in the region. Gerald's account of Nest is notably different from other medieval texts from Wales, specifically by his omission of her abduction. Johns argues that Nest's role as Gerald's grandmother led Gerald to overlook these issues and present Nest through her family and as the embodiment Welsh identity. Johns argues for a reconsideration of Gerald's view of women. He has been seen as dismissive of them, but Johns argues that Gerald's understanding of women and Welsh identity stemmed from his maternal family which included Nest as his grandmother. Consequently Gerald did not include the abduction story and instead portrayed Nest in relation to her family and genealogy.

Chapter three provides an analysis of charter material from Wales. No charters involving Nest are extant but there is enough material from 12th- and 13th-century Wales involving other aristocratic women to illustrate their importance in contemporary politics. The chapter uses the 13th-century English-born Lady of Wales Joan, daughter of King John of England, who was the wife of Llywellyn ap Iorwerth, to contextualise Nest as representative of gendered conquest and female agency in high medieval Wales in general. Johns' conclusions regarding use of women's names in charters and seals – both seals and the matrix – are a valuable contribution to our understanding of women's charters. The reason for the chapter's inclusion in the book is clear, as Johns demonstrates, through charter evidence, that 12th- and 13th-century women were powerful participants in the Welsh political landscape.

Most medieval studies tend to limit their analysis to medieval texts, but in chapters four to six Johns charts depictions of Nest from the early modern era to the present day. The changing landscape of Welsh nationalism and the personal circumstances of Welsh authors have all played an important part in the development of Nest's story. Although conquest remained a gendered subject Johns argues that depictions of it shifted their focus to men. Women, such as Nest, were still intrinsically linked to times of political instability but instead of the actions of women, it is the inability of Welsh noblemen, such as Owain, to control their passions that led to the downfall of the Welsh. Johns points out how the rise of industrialism and appeal of romanticism influenced the development of modern views on Nest and how her supposed beauty and role as symbol of legitimate rule in Deheubarth informed modern depictions of Nest as the 'Helen of Wales'. The same modern authors' narratives of the abduction episode continued to avoid references to rape or violence. Much as with Gerald of Wales, the moral ambiguities of kinship combined with violent rape were difficult topics which did not suit the objectives of the modern authors. The need for the modern era to place Nest within a Welsh landscape which was accessible to local tourism helped popularise her story which consequently further established her romanticised image.

In chapter seven, drawing from depictions of Nest's beauty, Johns discusses gender and beauty and how the two concepts have been treated by medieval and modern authors as sources of legitimate power in the middle ages. However, some of the examples of beauty and the literary treatment of conquest and gender that she draws on are legends, such as that of Culhwch, cousin of Arthur, and Olwen, daughter of the giant Ysbaddaden (p. 222). A detailed comparative study of beauty, conquest, and legitimate power between Arthurian romance tradition and chronicles – which the book understandably does not have scope to cover – could complement Johns' conclusions in the long run. In spite of these limitations, Johns' main argument, that Nest embodied Deheubarth and Wales, is very compellingly made through her analysis of nationalism

and gender. Nest's abduction was the abduction, or repossession, of Wales by the Welsh from a Norman order.

In her introduction Johns asks if a gendered approach to the conquest of Wales reflects the extensive historiography available for England. However, this question is not fully dealt with. Some comparisons are drawn, for example with Vortigern's passion for Rowena's beauty, which led him to lose Kent in the 9th century. The idea of gendered conquest could have been developed further, not least through further historiographical work and for example Kirsten Fenton's *Gender, Nation and Conquest in the Works of William of Malmesbury* is not consulted.(3) Johns' book raises thought-provoking questions about medieval views on gender, politics, and conquest but some are left unanswered. The breadth of the topic, although a strength, is also a weakness, as it does sometimes leave the reader with more questions than answers. Although there are themes in each of the modern chapters, their overall chronological structure within the book sometimes means that Johns' most important conclusions are only to be reached in the concluding chapter. Therefore in order to fully appreciate Johns' argument the second half of the book has to be read as one.

This book is a useful addition to the scholarship and its strengths outweigh its weaknesses. Charting the changing views from medieval to modern Johns provides a stimulating take on Welsh identity, gendered politics, and medieval conquest. Her work on Nest makes it clear that our understanding of Wales needs to reflect her importance in the development of Welsh identity. The significance of the variety and number of narratives of Nest's abduction are an excellent opportunity to explore the development of a national identity through conquest. Johns' inclusion of other noblewomen to highlight gendered conquest and politics gives this book further scholarly value. By suggesting that Nest and other women should be taken as case studies but also contextualised with their contemporaries Johns' study proves that, in spite of limited source material, noblewomen provide valuable information on wider topics. Although Nest is the only named woman in the book's title, this is about noblewomen in Wales, as well as the idea of gendered conquest. On these topics this book is a strong contribution to scholarship and contains approaches that demand to be applied to the wider British Isles.

Notes

1. David Crouch, 'Nest (b. before 1092, d. c.1130)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* < http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/19905 [2]> [accessed 17 April 2014].Back to (1)
2. *Brut y Tywysogion, Peniarth MS. 20 Version*, ed. T. Jones (Cardiff, 1941), p. 41.Back to (2)
3. Kirsten Fenton, *Gender, Nation and Conquest in the Works of William of Malmesbury* (London, 2008). Back to (3)

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