



CONWAY CASTLE.

The Welsh Eisteddfod.

(By Taffy ap Jones, in 'Home Words'.)

What is the Eisteddfod? In a word, it is one of the oldest literary institutions in the world. Year after year Taffy holds his great meeting, where prizes are to be won, and honors, such as every true Welshman loves, to be gained. Eight hundred years ago the first poetical and musical festival brought together all the bards of the kingdom. The King of North Wales, His Majesty Gruffydd ab Cynau, summoned from east and west and north and south the singers and minstrels, and a mighty concert must have been the result. Nearly eight hundred years later the Prince and Princess of Wales were made 'Bards,' without an examination, at Carnarvon. Seven years before, the Eisteddfod had been held in the Albert Hall 'in the chief city of Lud in Britain,' the Prince of Wales having been present on that occasion.

A good deal happens at an Eisteddfod. Every Hannah Jane and John Thomas in the Principality hopes to win, or see a friend win, a silver medal, or a money prize, in open competition. Nearly all are singing (choral and solo) contests, and one must needs have some courage to enter for an event. The tale is told of a most dramatic conflict which happened in the reign of Edward III. Two bards, Rhys Meigen and Davydd ap Gwilym were rivals for the poetic prize. Rhys recited his piece, but Davydd replied with such force that the ancient chronicle declares that Rhys fell to the ground and expired, being overcome by the bardic utterances of his opponent.

Hannah Jane and John Thomas do not risk such terrible encounters nowadays.

But let us begin at the beginning of an Eisteddfod. First comes the grand proclamation of proclamations, given 'in full view and hearing of the country people and aristocracy, in the face of the sun, and in the eye of light, where no weapon shall be bared against them.' It must be 'proclaimed under the expansive freedom of the sky, and under the protection of God and His peace.'

Suddenly a gentleman in a blue silk robe, bare-headed, and with his face to the sun, at the risk of a sun-stroke, ascends the Druidical stone and gives the opening prayers. He is a clergyman, and he is followed by the Crown Bard, who makes a speech.

Then the candidates for degrees come up. There are three grades—druids, orates, and bards. To-day the bards receive many new members. For instance, a young man, pale with fright, and looking as if he were going to be married, appears, supported between

two bards, who handle him very much after the manner of police constables. He is led to the stone, where the Crown Bard receives him, and, holding his hand, asks him a number of questions on poetry or music. If they are answered satisfactorily, the Crown Bard jumps on the stone, uncovers, turns to the sun, and shouts three times, 'Jarrett Roberts—Pencerdd Eifion.'

After this degree-giving is over, we go to the 'Pavilion,' where the Eisteddfod is to be held. There proceedings begin with much speech-making, and are followed by all sorts of competitions, from essays on learned subjects, singing contests for single voices and chorus, to making a patchwork quilt or slate-splitting.

Many are the striking incidents. A pretty peasant woman, in her national costume, knitting in hand, comes forward to play the triple harp in the performance of the harping bards. Then we have the Chair Prize Competition. One year it was given for the best piece of poetry on the Bible. The prize was £21 and a small gold medal.

Let me close this slight sketch with a translated extract from a recent Eisteddfod speech of Llawdden—the bardic name of the Dean of St. David's, who has gained the hearts of all who know him:—

'One of the chief charms of the Eisteddfod is that it brings together the eminent men of the nation. In England they are statesmen; warriors, commercial men,



IN THE LAND OF THE EISTEDDFOD—A WELSH WOMAN IN NATIVE COSTUME.