Medieval Masterpiece: Edward I's Counterinsurgency in Wales

By
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Edward I, King of England from 1272 to 1307, can be ranked as one of the greatest military commanders of the Middle Ages. His war against Wales in the second half of the 13th century was more than just a conquest; it was a triumph of military planning, logistics and counterinsurgency. In each of three Welsh crises (1277, 1282, and 1294), he acted with deliberate speed, dispatching reinforcements to the border marches while patiently gathering an army at Chester, his forward staging area. From Chester, Edward could march along the coast, thereby drawing naval support. A supporting force of woodsmen, smiths, and carpenters built a road behind the main army. Once a strategic location was taken, Edward paused and consolidated. Troops whose terms of service had expired were rotated out and replaced with fresh contingents. Domestic taxes, duties on exports, loans from English and Gascon cities, and Italian bankers financed the campaign.

At the time of Edward's first invasion in 1277, Wales was ruled by Llywelyn ap Gruffydd, who, by a 1267 treaty with the English, was Prince of Wales. Wales was a mountainous and remote country with few towns and little, if any, economy. English nobles ruled on the border and had some holdings along the coast but had made few inroads to the interior. These were the marcher lordships, militarized border districts; the most important were Chester in the north, Montgomery in the center, and the port of Carmarthon on the southwest coast. Several rivers crisscross the country, including the Dee, the Severn, the Wye, and the Usk. On the all-important north coast were the rivers Clwyd and Conway. Snowdonia, in the northwest, was a mountain stronghold and Gruffydd's base of support, a redoubt to which he could withdraw. Off of Gwynedd was the isle of Anglesey, which the 13th century monk, Gerald of Wales says produced 'far more grain than any other part of Wales…When crops have failed in all other regions, this island, from the richness of its soil and its abundant produce has been able to supply all Wales.'[1] Important towns on the north coast included Flint, Rhuddlan, and Degannwy.

In his travel memoirs, Gerald portrays his mother's people as ruthless and savage habitual thieves. They fought in small groups, relying on 'agility', ambush, and hit-and-run, but they did not like open battle in 'the Gallic style,' as they called it, after the Normans. Should their foe withstand the initial onslaught, the Welsh would simply melt back into the woods from which they sprang. But Gerald cautions, 'Although beaten today and shamefully put to flight with much slaughter, tomorrow they march out again, no whit dejected by their defeat or their losses.'[2] He believed that the north Welsh were good spearmen, while those in the south were potent archers. Gerald goes on to offer advice to the king who wished to conquer Wales. No single battlefield victory will bring them to heel. 'He can beat them only by patient and unremitting pressure applied over a long period.' Feuding lords must be divided, dissention must be sewn in the ranks, the coast must be blockaded, and castles built at strategic choke points. An army of knights and heavy infantry must be accompanied by lightly armed scouts and outriders to protect the flanks and harry the Welshmen's own hunting and foraging parties.[3] It was this strategy that Edward pursued.

Edward I had at his disposal a formidable military machine. The main source of manpower came from his tenants, men who owed the king military service in exchange for land. The oath could be fulfilled either by providing fighting men or by paying a fine. Based on his land holdings, each lord had a quota to meet. Edward could raise upwards of 7,000 mounted knights. County sheriffs raised infantry in standard units of 100 men led by a constable paid like a knight. Laws mandated they be equipped with light armor and a spear or bow. In all, the whole of England could produce tens of thousands of infantry. Large numbers were most sensibly

recruited from the shires nearest to the border. Many thousands were also recruited form Wales proper.[4]

In 1277 trouble arose due to skirmishing in the marches, Llewellyn's tardy payment of tribute, and his refusal to swear fealty as required by the 1267 treaty.[5] Edward resolved to enforce the treaty through military means. He gathered a force of 800 knights and 2500 infantry and marched to Chester where a fleet of 26 ships waited.[6] Edward's target was Llewellyn's Gwynedd stronghold on the northwest coast. Employing a leapfrogging strategy whose ultimate goal was Anglesey, Edward began the march in July and quickly took the coastal town of Flint, which he fortified. A road connecting Flint to the marches was quickly built. Rhuddlan was taken in August, and Degannwy fell soon afterward. The road construction followed Edward west, as did reinforcements-- over 15,000 of them, at least 9,000 of whom were Welshman recruited from the marches.[7] From Degannwy, Edward sent a strong force to Anglesey, which took the island and harvested the crops. With Anglesey denied to the Welsh, Edward pulled back to Rhuddlan and waited for the food shortage to take its course. Having been completely unable to stop the English advance or even protect the breadbasket of Wales, Llewellyn was forced to sue for peace. In the ensuing treaty, Llewellyn had to pay an indemnity of 50,000 pounds, cede the north coast, and agree to Edward's possession of the lands he had conquered, excluding Anglesey.[8]

The second war began with a widespread revolt instigated by Llewellyn's brother, Dafydd. In late March of 1282, several key English strongholds were attacked, including Flint and Rhuddlan. After quickly reinforcing the marches, Edward patiently assembled 600 knights, 7,000 infantrymen, 430 woodsmen, 340 carpenters, 40 masons and a supporting fleet at Chester.[9] When all was ready, Edward once more advanced up the coast. This time he also detached a covering force, which advanced along the River Dee, protecting his left flank. Edward retook Rhuddlan, where he paused and waited for the arrival of supplies and reinforcements. Once sufficient force had been gathered, Edward launched an amphibious assault on Anglesey, taking the island and building a bridge of boats to the mainland. With the main army, Edward pushed west, annihilating Welsh forces in a two-pronged assault across the Clwyd. All was going well until an English raiding force from Anglesey was destroyed. In the south, Llewellyn took this opportunity to counterattack, but he was killed and his army destroyed by the English at the battle of Orewin Bridge. Edward then renewed his attack, crossing the Conway, pivoting south and isolating Snowdonia. Meanwhile, English forces were busy in the south subduing rebel provinces there. With Llewellyn dead and Snowdonia cut off, in April 1283, Dafydd capitulated.[10]

In October 1294, Edward was confronted with another war when Llewellyn's son, Madoc, sparked a nationwide revolt. Several towns and castles fell to the Welsh, including Carmarthen, Howarden, and Denbigh. But importantly, Edward's fortified castles at Flint, Rhuddlan, and Conway held out. As Edward was making ready for a campaign in Gascony, the English war machine was already running. Again, Edward dispatched reinforcements to the marches while his army gathered at Chester. In December, Edward began the re-conquest. The Welsh once more retreated before the advancing English army who, by the end of the month, had relieved all three besieged northern castles and rested at Conway. In the south, however, the marcher lords were fighting battles. One of Edward's lords routed a Welsh army in the environs of Conway (late January 1295), while another lord defeated Madoc himself at the battle of Maes Moydog (5 March 1295). Edward soon resumed the offensive, taking Anglesey (of course) and pivoting down the western coast. With the north in English hands and their leader dead, Welsh resistance collapsed. Edward's invasion was now a grand tour, a virtual victory march, as he made his way along the west coast, pivoting inland at Cardigan and then Carmarthen, swinging north at Brecon and completing the circle at Conway in May. Madoc's was the last major Welsh uprising.[11]

In conquering Wales, Edward did not just plunder; he brought his genius for organizing an army to the job statecraft. Most famously, castles were constructed at strategic points, on the coast or along the rivers, so they could be easily reinforced by sea. These were powerful symbols

of English dominance and also important administrative centers. Wales was to be ruled through the Statue of Rhuddlan, a kind of constitutional and legal framework. Says Welsh historian David Walker, 'No working lawyer or administrator in Wales could afford to be without it, or could fail to benefit from [the Statute of Rhuddlan's] guidance.'[12] The basic local unit of Welsh political organization was retained, the cantred, but these were reorganized along the lines of English shires. Edward installed a bureaucracy of English sheriffs, judges, and bailiffs, which enforced English law and ran English courts. Much land was, of course, granted to important nobles.[13] Thus, Edward established his military and political dominance in Wales.

       The image of medieval commanders peddled by historians like Charles Oman and Theodore Dodge is one of incompetent, petty kings blundering into battle. But Edward I's experience in Wales belies that image. Edward gathered his strength before pushing ahead. Once engaged, he used the English fleet to keep his army supplied and deployed troops behind Welsh positions. Once those positions had been taken, Edward brought work parties in the wake of the main army to build roads and bridges to establish a supply line back to England. Edward imposed an English peace on the Welsh. This peace was not enforced merely by the weight of English arms but that of the English state as well. It has been there ever since.

[1] Gerald of Wales. *The Journey Through and Description of Wales.* London: Penguin, 1978, 187.

[2] Gerald, 260.

[3] Gerald, 268.

[4] Morris, J.E. *The Welsh Wars of Edward I.* Gloucestershire, UK: Alan Sutton Publishing, 1996, 36. A triumph of scholarship and research and an invaluable reference. The book, however, is almost impossible to read.

[5] Prestwich, Michael. *Edward I*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997, 173.

[6] Ibid, 179.

[7] Ibid, 180.

[8] For accounts of the first war, see Prestwich, 173-182, and Morris, 110-148.

[9] Morris, 161.

[10] Prestwich, 182-196; Morris, 149-197.

[11] Prestwich, 218-224; Morris, 240-260.

[12] Walker, David. *Medieval Wales*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 139.

[13] For the occupation of Wales, see Prestwich, 220-217, also David Walker, *Medieval Wales*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 139-164.