

TWO ANCIENT NAMES: *BRITANNI* AND *LONDINIUM*

by

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ABSTRACT: *British*, *Britain*, and *London* are terms so familiar that they have distinctive forms in Polish, as *brytyjski*, *Brytania*, and *Londyn*. Yet their origins have been obscure. This paper sets out what has been said on the subject from medieval times to the present, and suggests solutions to the problem through comparison with Welsh and other Celtic languages.

1. *BRITANNI*

The etymology of *Britanni* ‘Britons’ and *Britannia* ‘Britain’ is an old problem. Scholars have asked for twelve hundred years why Britain is so called, and their first recourse was to heroes. The ninth-century *Historia Brittonum* explained that the ancestor of the Britons was Brutus, grandson of Aeneas. A wandering exile (like his grandsire), Brutus came to the island now called after him and filled it with his race. Accounts of his colonizing achievements were thereafter magnified and given further circulation by Geoffrey of Monmouth (d. 1155). They were still taken seriously six centuries later by the Rev. Theophilus EVANS (1693–1767). His (uncritical) pseudo-history of Wales shows him quite certain that a Greek called Brutus ruled in Britain. How else, he asked, could Welsh have borrowed so many words from Greek? He had counted some three hundred, but was sure there were more. He tells how Brutus taught the natives to read, write, build, and plough; duly impressed, they apparently then asked him to be their king (“y cyfrinachwyd rhyngddynt, sef yw hynny, i Frutus gael bod yn frenin i deyrnasu arnynt”). This edifying constitutional event, with Brutus as Iron Age precursor of William III (1688–1702) and George I (1714–1727), who both gained crowns in Britain by the decision of its parliament, allegedly happened in about 110 BC¹.

While EVANS was making a medieval legend do turns for Whig interpretations of history, others had discarded Brutus for sounder methodologies. In his long-unpublished *Sketch of the Ancient British History*, the exiled Philip PERRY (1720–1774) said this. He explained *Britannia* from “the Welch word *Brith* and the

¹ EVANS 1716: 21, 23.