One of my favourite books is *Madoc: The Making of a Myth* by the eminent Welsh historian, Gwyn A. Williams. This traces the extraordinary career of the belief that the twelfth-century Welsh prince Madoc sailed to North America and established a colony there which survived into modern times as a tribe of Welsh-speaking Indians. The story of Madoc was widely believed in Britain and America for nearly four hundred years from the 1570s to the end of nineteenth century, when it was finally discredited by the work of textual critics such as Thomas Stephens, who showed that there was no contemporary evidence that Madoc sailed across the Atlantic, and explorers such as John Evans, who searched the American interior for the descendants of Madoc’s settlers and reluctantly came to the conclusion that ‘there is no such people as the Welsh Indians’. However, Gwyn Williams’ brilliant narrative shows that the question of whether Madoc ever travelled to North America or indeed whether he ever actually existed is beside the point. The legend of Prince Madoc became ‘what the Indians called an-idea-that-walks, an idea that became material force’. This ‘idea-that-walks’ is of far greater historical interest and significance than whether or not a nobleman from North Wales was able to cross the Atlantic in the twelfth century.

The enormous literature affirming the truth of the Madoc legend and seeking to locate the Welsh Indians, ranging from George Peckham’s *True Reporte* of 1583, which declared that the word “Pengwyn” was clearly Welsh in origin, to John Williams’ compendious *Enquiry* of 1791, the result of more than thirty years archival research, testifies not to the likely truth or otherwise of the Madoc story, but rather to the enormous historical and social impact of the legend. The legend of Prince Madoc was used to justify attacks

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1 Williams, *Madoc*.
2 Ibid., iv.
3 ‘Pen (head) plus gwyn (white) equals penguin (white head). QED. The only snag here is that (pace Sir George and David) penguins have black heads. Later writers translated it as ‘white rock’; in any case no speculative linguist worth the name is to be deterred by such little local difficulties. By the twentieth century, at least fifteen Indian languages have been identified as Welsh, often by linguists of such uncommon capacity as to be able to recognise the Welsh language without knowing it’: ibid., 43.
on Spanish dominion of America, inspired crazed expeditions across uncharted territory in search of the Welsh Indians, and became a significant force in rivalry between Britain, France, Spain and the fledgling United States for control of the American interior. The story of the Madoc myth was, in the words of Bernard de Voto cited by Williams, ‘by far the most widespread legend of pre-Columbian discovery. In the United States, it became our most elaborate historical myth and exercised a direct influence on our history’. But none of this meant that the legend was true, a fact which was to prove unpallatable when the evidence for the story was more rigorously examined. When Thomas Stephens, a pharmacist of Merthyr Tydfil, submitted to the Llangollen eisteddfod in 1858 what Williams describes as ‘one of the finest essays in historical criticism to be written in any language’, showing beyond any doubt that the Madoc legend was not supported by any evidence, the eisteddfod committee disqualified the essay so that it was not printed, provoking a near riot.

Part of the fascination of Williams’ book is the way in which it vividly shows how British history consists of many different narratives of different nations and people, jostling together. Welsh history has its own distinctive narrative (or indeed narratives), as do the histories of Scotland, Ireland and England. Welsh history cannot be represented by token references to Welsh people who figure in the histories of other countries. But the most important message of Williams’ book is that myths and legends are as important in shaping history as real events. The first duty of the historian is to establish what is legend and what is supported by reliable evidence, but beyond this the historian should also examine the way in which myth and legend can shape history. In Williams’ words: ‘Now that professional Welsh history has come of age and fulfilled its first duty, to clear the ground of legend, it is moving into a more sophisticated enterprise—the relocation of these legends in history, the analysis of legend and its function in history, for the history of all peoples has largely been a matter of motor-myths’.

Within masonic history, the legend that the Stuart kings actively participated in pre-Grand Lodge freemasonry, actively promoted in both Britain and Europe by legions of masonic writers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, was clearly another motor myth, an ‘idea-that-walks’. There is as yet no convincing evidence to support the idea that James VI and I, Charles I or Charles II were themselves freemasons, but the dissemination of the legend that they were tells us a great deal about the history of freemasonry in

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