

WILIEMS, THOMAS ([1545 or 1546]- 1622?), of Trefriw, priest, scribe, lexicographer, and physician

Name: Thomas Wiliems
Date of birth: 1545 or 1546
Date of death: 1622?
Parent: Catherine ferch Meredydd Wynn ap Ifan ap Robert
Parent: William ap Thomas ap Gronwy
Gender: Male
Occupation: priest, scribe, lexicographer, and physician
Area of activity: Literature and Writing; Medicine; Religion; Scholarship and Languages
Author: William David Williams

Referred to by contemporaries as 'Sir' Thomas Williams and 'Sir' Thomas ap William, he generally styles himself 'Thomas Wiliems, physician.' Little is known about him, apart from his work. According to his own testimony, he was born 'at Ardhe'r Meneich, at the foot of Eryri, in the commote of Llechwedd (i.e. Arllechwedd) Isaf, Caernarvonshire,' but he does not mention the year of his birth. His father was William ap Thomas ap Gronwy, who claimed descent from Ednowain Bendew; his mother was Catherine, natural daughter of **Meredyth Wynn ap Evan ap Robert** of Gwydir. It is probable that he received his early education at the Gwydir school (**Sir John Wynn** : *Memoirs*, 1827, 109); he then proceeded to Oxford. Anthony Wood says that he spent several years at Oxford, but is uncertain whether he is the Thomas Williams who graduated M.A. in 1573 from Brasenose College. 'Afterwards,' he adds, 'he entered on the Physick line, but took no degree in that Faculty.' On leaving the University he took holy orders, and a person bearing his name appears as curate at Trefriw in 1573. Later he practised as a physician and was medical adviser to his kinsman and patron, **Sir John Wynn** of Gwydir. It is, however, unlikely that he studied medicine at Oxford as Wood seems to imply. His letters of advice to **Sir John Wynn** suggests that he was an unorthodox practitioner, in the old folk-medicine tradition, rather than a product of the Oxford faculty of Medicine. Nevertheless, he seems to have been held in high esteem as a physician, for **Dr. John Davies** of Mallwyd refers to him as a 'doctor of note among his own countrymen.' But **Roger Mostyn**, **Sir John Wynn**'s son-in-law, writes in disparaging terms of his medical knowledge and ridicules his presumption in posing as a physician. Dr. Alexander Read, a contemporary orthodox practitioner of great repute in North Wales, and the author of several medical books, also pours scorn on his 'ineffectual old simples.'

According to **Humphrey Humphreys**, bishop of Bangor, Thomas Wiliems was reputed to be a papist, and was arraigned as a recusant before a bishop's court at Bangor in 1606 and before the archbishop's court in 1607. He adds that **lady Bodvel** affirmed that Thomas Wiliems, having some knowledge of the Gunpowder Plot, persuaded her father, **Sir John Wynn**, not to attend that assembly of Parliament.

Throughout his life, Thomas Wiliems was an ardent student of Welsh literature, and a diligent collector and copyist of old manuscripts. Among the manuscripts written by him are: 'Prif Achau Holl Gymru Benbaladr' (N.L.W. Llangibby MSS. 1 and 2), a copy of the Welsh Laws (**Peniarth MS 225**), and a collection of Welsh proverbs (**NLW MS 3064B**). But his outstanding achievement was the compilation of a Latin-Welsh dictionary, *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae et Cambrobrytannicae*, and it is on this that his fame chiefly rests. The work, which is in three closely-written quarto volumes, is based, in the main, on the *Dictionary of Latin and English* of Thomas Thomas, first printer to the University of Cambridge. It is a monument of industry and scholarship, and a veritable treasury of both literary and spoken Welsh. For each Latin word Thomas Wiliems gives several Welsh equivalents, and with a view to the study of the Welsh no less than the Latin language, illustrates their use by copious quotations from the manuscripts which he had perused. Writing in 1620, he says that it took him fifty years to amass the material for the dictionary and four years to write it. It appears that **Sir John Wynn** undertook to see the work published, but Thomas Wiliems died (probably in 1622), before any arrangements were made to do so. The manuscripts then came into **Sir John**'s possession and, at his request, **Dr. John Davies** of Mallwyd undertook to edit the dictionary. The work, however, was never published, but was used by **Dr. Davies** as the basis for the Latin - Welsh part of his *Antiquae Linguae Britannicae Dictionarium Duplex*, 1632. The correspondence between **Sir John Wynn** and **Dr. Davies** relating to the dictionary, and preserved among the Wynn Papers, reflects very unfavourably on **Dr. Davies**'s treatment of Thomas Wiliems's work.

Author

William David Williams

Sources

Anthony Wood, *Athenae Oxonienses* (1813–20) (1691) i, 266
Cambrian Register (1795–1818), i (1795), 157
Calendar of Wynn (of Gwydir) Papers, 1515–1690, in the National Library of Wales and elsewhere
Reports on Manuscripts in the Welsh Language (Historical Manuscripts Commission 1898–1910)
Sir John Wynn, *The History of the Gwydir Family* (1927) (1827 ed.), 109
Llenyddiaeth Cymru o 1450 hyd 1600 (Lerpwl 1922), ii, 259
on Thomas Thomas (a Londoner), see *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*

Further Reading

M. T. Burdett-Jones, 'Catalogus auctorum Britannicorum' Thomas Wiliems, *The National Library of Wales Journal*, Vol. 27, no. 1 (Summer 1991), pp. 109-110

Wikipedia Article: [Thomas Wiliems](#)

Works

Peniarth MS 228 i: [Dictionarium Latino-Cambricum Thomas Wiliems](#)

Peniarth MS 228 ii: [Dictionarium Latino-Cambricum Thomas Wiliems](#)

Peniarth MS 228 iii: [Dictionarium Latino-Cambricum Thomas Wiliems](#)

NLW MS 8497B: [Gwaith Thomas Wiliems](#)

Peniarth MS 188: [Llyfr Syr Thomas Wiliems](#)

Wynnstay MS 1 i: [A collection of Welsh poetry, with some prose, made, in his earlier hand, by Thomas ab William of Trefriw](#)

Wynnstay MS 1 ii: [A collection of Welsh poetry, with some prose, made, in his earlier hand, by Thomas ab William of Trefriw](#)

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