

WILLIAMS, DAVID JOHN (1885 - 1970), writer

Name: David John Williams
Date of birth: 1885
Date of death: 1970
Spouse: Sian Williams (née Evans)
Parent: Sarah Williams (née Morgans)
Parent: John Williams
Gender: Male
Occupation: writer
Area of activity: Literature and Writing; Patriots; Politics, Government and Political Movements
Author: Hywel Teifi Edwards

Born at Pen-rhiw, a farmhouse in the parish of Llansawel, Carmarthenshire, 26 June 1885, the elder child of John and Sarah (née Morgans) Williams. The family moved to Aber-nant in 1891 and he went to Rhydcymerau school, 1891-98. Between 1902 and 1906 he was a coalminer at Ferndale, Rhondda; Betws, Ammanford and Blaendulais. He resumed his education in 1906 at Stephens' School, Llanybydder. After being a pupil-teacher at Llandrillo school, Edeyrnion, Meirionnydd, 1908-10 he entered the Old College School, Carmarthen, 1910-11. In 1911 he went to the University College at Aberystwyth and after graduating and winning a Meyrick Scholarship in 1916 he proceeded to Jesus College, Oxford, where he graduated in 1918. After a term as temporary Welsh teacher at Lewis' Grammar School, Pengam, he became English and physical education teacher at Fishguard Grammar School, 1919-36, and then Welsh master there from 1937 until his retirement in 1945. In 1925 he married Siân Evans, daughter of Dan Evans, minister of Hawen (Congl.) church, and Mary his wife, and sister of the poet **William Evans**, 'Wil Ifan'. They made their home in the Bristol Trader, Fishguard, which became a meeting place for hosts of friends. D.J. Williams was elected an elder of Pentowr (Presb.) church in 1954. They had no children. His wife died in 1965 and he died with dramatic appropriateness on Sunday evening, 4 January 1970, after delivering a patriotic address at a sacred concert held in Rhydcymerau chapel. He was buried with his wife in the graveyard of that chapel. A memorial tablet outside Aber-nant house was unveiled on 17 September 1977.

Years before his death D.J. had become a legend among lovers of Welsh literature and among nationalists. He was one of the founders of Plaid Cymru in 1925, and with **John Saunders Lewis** and the **Rev. Lewis Valentine** he spent nine months in Wormwood Scrubs gaol during 1936-37 for setting fire to some of the huts of the Bombing School at Penyborth, near Pwllheli. That symbolic protest takes a central place in the mythos of the nationalist movement. He endeavoured all his life to campaign for a Free Christian Wales. He wrote hundreds of letters to the press and brought two of his heroes, the Irishman, 'A.E.' (George William Russell) and the Italian, Mazzini, to the notice of his fellow-Welshmen through his books: *A.E. a Chymru* (1929); *Y Bod Cenhedlig*, a translation with introduction of *The National Being* by A.E. (1963); and *Mazzini: cenedlaetholwr, gweledydd, gwleidydd* (1954). He also put on record some of the early history of Plaid Cymru in a pamphlet, *Codi'r Faner* (1968). Through all of these publications one feels the passionate single-mindedness that made him such a convincing advocate.

The same passion gives his creative literature its distinctiveness. With **Kate Roberts** he brought distinction to the Welsh short story and most of his published stories were collected together in *Detholiad o Storiâu'r Tir* (1966). Some of his earliest stories, with a number of portraits and essays which are an index to his most important themes, are in *Y Gaseg Ddu* (1970). He sought to shame some of the most prominent writers of Wales who wanted no part in the battle to 'save the soul' of the nation, those who could 'stand aside limply without making any move to assist in the battle in any way - as though some moral paralysis has struck them'. How deficient they were, in contrast to the ancient prophets of Israel, unrepentant propagandists who gave being to a great literature. Wales needed 'writers under the passion of conscience' and it was as a propagandist and Christian nationalist that D.J. took to writing.

Basically he was a pastoral writer, the recorder of visual memories. He was in his middle age and early old-age when he produced the works which will be of lasting value. Like his hero, **William Llewelyn Williams**, he held a deep love for the rural life of Carmarthenshire, but he did not rest content with sentimentality. He saw the Wales that he found worth living and dying for mirrored in his native 'square mile'. Certainly he idealised it, but it is equally true that he showed the civilised, multi-talented, hardworking society which he had idealised in *Hen Wynebau* (1934) and *Storiâu'r Tir Glas* (1936) gradually disintegrating in *Storiâu'r Tir Coch* (1941) and *Storiâu'r Tir Du* (1949) as 'the wretched new world' closed in on it. The same vision gave rise to his two autobiographical volumes, *Hen dy ffarm* (1953) and *Yn chwech ar hugain oed* (1959). *Hen dy ffarm* [transl. **Waldo Williams**, *The old farmhouse* (1961)] is his masterpiece, the story of cultivating the land of Pen-rhiw, creating a garden and orchard and then leaving because the hard work of winning the land brought ill-health and tensions within the family, preventing its continuation. Like every classical pastoral paradise, D.J.'s paradise, too, was destroyed, from within as well as from outside.

No man-made paradise can last, but man always needs a paradise to cherish. It is a fundamental need that is as old as existence, and his reaction to it makes D.J. Williams, at his best, one of the finest of Welsh storytellers. His achievement was acknowledged in 1957 when the University of Wales conferred on him an hon. D.Litt. degree. In 1963 he was elected President of the Welsh Academy.

Author

Professor Hywel Teifi Edwards

Sources

John Gwyn Griffiths (ed.), *D. J. Williams, Abergwaun Cyfrol deyrnged* (Llandysul 1965)

John Gwyn Griffiths (ed.), *Y Gaseg Ddu a gweithiau eraill* (Llandysul 1970)

John Gwyn Griffiths, *D. J. Williams 1885-1970* (Cardiff 1983)

Dafydd Jenkins, *D. J. Williams* (Cardiff 1973)

Further Reading

People's Collection Wales: [Fire in Llŷn](#)

Wikipedia Article: [David John Williams](#)

Additional Links

NLW Archives: [Papurau D. J. Williams, Abergwaun](#)

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