

EDWARDS, Sir OWEN MORGAN (1858 - 1920), man of letters

Name: Owen Morgan Edwards
Date of birth: 1858
Date of death: 1920
Spouse: Ellen Elizabeth Edwards (née Davies)
Child: Haf Parry (née Edwards)
Child: Ifan ab Owen Edwards
Child: Owen ab Owen Edwards
Parent: Elizabeth Edwards
Parent: Owen Edwards
Gender: Male
Occupation: man of letters
Area of activity: Literature and Writing; Scholarship and Languages
Author: Robert Thomas Jenkins

Born at Coed-y-pry, Llanuwchllyn, Meirionnydd, on 26 December 1858, eldest son of Owen and Elizabeth Edwards; their third son, EDWARD EDWARDS (1865 - 1933), was professor of history at Aberystwyth from 1896 to 1930. The story of Owen Edwards's early education has been charmingly (but not with meticulous accuracy) related by himself in his *Clych Adgof*, 1906. Intended for the ministry, he went to Bala College and then (1880-3) to Aberystwyth, where he did very well in English and history in the London University examinations (graduating in 1883), but not so well in philosophy despite his great attachment to [Henry Jones](#) (1852 - 1922), an attachment which led him to spend a session (1883-4) at Glasgow at the feet of Edward Caird. At Balliol College, Oxford (October 1884), he reverted to history, and had a brilliant career, winning the three chief university prizes in history and a first class in honours (1887). Two important influences upon him in his early Oxford days should be noted. The first was the aestheticism of Ruskin (with whom he afterwards corresponded) and of William Morris. The second was the 'Dafydd ap Gwilym Society,' on which see [T. Rowland Hughes](#) ('*Cymdeithas Dafydd ap Gwilym, Rhydychen*'²) in *Y Llenor*, 1931; the 'Dafydd' enhanced that love of Wales which already characterized him.

After spending a year on the Continent (described in his first two books, 1888), he returned to Oxford to teach, and was in 1889 elected Fellow of Lincoln, and history tutor there and in other colleges. There he remained till 1907. He might have been expected to become a specialist on the history of the Renaissance and the Reformation - his three prize essays had been concerned with these. But this expectation was not to be fulfilled. For one thing, he took his routine duties very seriously, preparing his (very popular) lectures most laboriously and spending a disproportionate share of his time on tutorial work, to the great detriment of his health. But further, it became increasingly apparent that he was a man of letters rather than a 'pure' historian - that he viewed the past with an artist's eye rather than through a researcher's microscope. In the event, he published nothing in English on his 'special subject,' nor indeed much at all in English besides his popular history of Wales, 1901, in the 'Story of the Nations' series; it is in Welsh, in periodical articles - some of them reprinted in book form in *Er Mwyn Iesu*, 1898, and *Llynnoedd Llonydd*, 1922 - that we today can find evidence of this early enthusiasm. Indeed, our danger at present is that of underestimating Owen Edwards's very considerable knowledge of history.

What prevailed with him was love of Wales - the love which drove him to incessant writing and proof-correcting, often at the end of a hard day of official work, and often in the small hours of the morning. In 1890 he was co-editor of *Cymru Fydd*, but in 1891 started publishing *Cymru* on his own account, following this with *Cymru'r Plant*, 1892, *Wales*, 1894, *Y Llenor*, 1895, and *Heddyw*, 1897. He also published small books in Welsh, such as *Cartrefi Cymru*², 1896, and set to work to reprint considerable selections of the Welsh classics, notably in his series 'Cyfres y Fil.' His service to Wales in these respects cannot be over-estimated; it was a service rendered at a critical time in the history of Welsh culture, and in virtue of it he became something far greater than a university teacher of history. Nor was it merely knowledge of their past history and literature that he thus placed within reach of his fellow-countrymen, nor even his own charming Welsh prose. He nourished a school of young writers, and it would be easy to give a long list of prominent Welsh literati who began their careers under his aegis. Notable, too, was the opportunity afforded by *Cymru* to 'rustic' men of letters who without it would have had little chance of recognition outside their own parishes.

In 1907, Edwards was appointed the first chief inspector of schools under the new Welsh Education Department. Here he was very successful, not so much because he made any very considerable 'reforms' in the system of education as because of his pervasive inspiration. Naturally, he stimulated the teaching of Welsh; but he also improved the atmosphere of the schools and mitigated the formalism and pedantry of the older regime. He was less fortunate in his dealings with the autonomous Central Welsh Board for Intermediate Education. Impelled as he was by his deep-seated feeling that the new intermediate schools were anglicizing institutions, he chose to join issue with the Board on minor matters which would

have been better avoided, and thus obscured the main issue. He was indeed a man whose mind it was never easy to read - a man of a complex mind, whose manifestations seemed at times inconsistent, to the great perplexity of even his warmest admirers. And not everybody understood the impish humour which lurked under a demeanour of great solemnity.

For a short period (1899-1900) he was M.P. for Merioneth, but politics were to him a secondary interest at the most; his nationalism was cultural, not political. He was knighted in 1916, and in 1918 received the honorary degree of D.Litt. from the University of Wales. He died (still in harness) at Llanuwchllyn, 15 May 1920. His wife, Ellen Davies of Prys Mawr, Llanuwchllyn, had died a year before him. They had two sons, Owen ab Owen (1892-1897) and [Ifan ab Owen Edwards](#) (1895-1970), and one daughter, Haf (1898-1965) who married [David Hughes Parry](#).

Author

Emeritus Professor Robert Thomas Jenkins, (1881 - 1969)

Sources

Cymru (O.M.E.), memorial number, January 1921

W. J. Gruffydd, *Owen Morgan Edwards Cofiant Cyfrol 1, 1858-1883* (Aberystwyth 1937)

G. Prys Williams, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 1912-21

personal knowledge

Further Reading

Hazel Walford Davies, *O.M. - cofiant Owen Morgan Edwards* (Llandysul 2019)

Wikipedia Article: [Owen Morgan Edwards](#)

Works

O. M. Edwards, [Cartrefi Cymru \(Gwreccsam 1896\)](#)

Islwyn, O. M. Edwards (ed.), [Gwaith barddonol Islwyn, 1832-1878 \(Gwreccsam 1897\)](#)

O. M. Edwards, [Llyfr Del \(Gwreccsam 1906\)](#)

O. M. Edwards and Winifred Hartley, [Hwian gerddi Cymru \(Llanuwchllyn 1900-1909?\)](#)

O. M. Edwards and Winifred Hartley, [Yr hwiangerddi \(Llanuwchllyn 1911\)](#)

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