

POWEL, DAVID (c.1540-1598), cleric and historian

Name: David Powel
Date of birth: c.1540
Date of death: 1598
Spouse: Elisabeth ferch Cynwrig
Child: Samuel Powel
Child: Gabriel Powel
Child: Daniel Powel
Parent: Hywel ap Dafydd ap Gruffudd
Gender: Male
Occupation: cleric and historian
Area of activity: History and Culture; Religion
Author: Robert Thomas Jenkins

[Prof. Melville Richards](#), on the basis of a deed of transfer of land dated 26 October 1558 at N.L.W., ([Eriviat Estate Records, File 35](#)), concludes that the year of birth of Dr. Powel should be at least as early as 1540. He was the son of Hywel ap Dafydd ap Gruffudd of Llantysilio and Bryneglwys, Denbighshire - the pedigree, stretching back to [Edwin ap Gronw](#) (died 1073), is printed in *Powys Fadog*, ii, 340. He went up 'at 16' to an unascertained college at Oxford, but on the foundation of Jesus College (1571) migrated thither, and is believed (Hardy, *Jesus College*, 41) to have been the first to graduate (3 March 1572/3) from that college - he proceeded D.D. in 1583. Even before graduating he was (1570) vicar of Ruabon ([Thomas, A History of the Diocese of St. Asaph](#), iii, 286) and (1571) of Llanfyllin (op. cit., ii, 234); he exchanged Llanfyllin for Meifod in 1579 (op. cit., ii, 502 - he would seem to have resigned this in 1597); he received two successive prebends in St Asaph (op. cit., i, 350, 347); and in 1588/9 was given the sinecure rectory of Llansantffraid-ym-Mechain. In February 1587/8 he is named as one of the only three 'preachers' in his diocese. Powel was one of the most important representatives of the Revival of Learning in Wales. [Bishop William Morgan](#) acknowledges his help in translating the Bible into Welsh, and [Dr. John Davies of Mallwyd](#) (and, for that matter, Powel's own son Daniel) says that he intended producing a Welsh dictionary.

But it is as a historian that Powel is remembered. In September 1583 [Sir Henry Sidney](#) - Powel was his chaplain, asked him to prepare for press the translation by [Humphrey Llwyd](#) of 'Brut y Tywysogion,' which [Llwyd](#) had translated from a manuscript ending in 1270, to which he had added an appendix coming down to 1295. But Powel's *Historie of Cambria, now called Wales*, which he published in 1584, was much fuller than this; in the words of its title-page, it was 'corrected, augmented, and continued, out of records and best approved authors,' and its preface gives a list of authorities used and of persons who aided Powel, such as [William Cecil, lord Burghley](#), who gave him access to official records. As an introduction to the book, Powel printed [Llwyd](#)'s translation of the account of the territorial divisions of Wales, by [Sir John Price](#) of Brecon. He inserted into the text of the 'Brut' additions, by himself and others, such as the tractate by [Sir Edward Stradling](#) (see the article on that family) on the Norman conquest of Glamorgan, which had been given to Powel by [Blanche Parry](#). Lastly, he added a very inadequate continuation down to 1584. Using different founts and other devices, he carefully differentiated between [Llwyd](#)'s text and the added matter. The book was somewhat comically illustrated by 'portraits' of 'the old Welsh princes' - but [Sir J. E. Lloyd](#) and Victor Scholderer ('[Powel's Historie \(1584\)](#)', *N.L.W. Jnl.*, 1943, 15-8) have shown that these were quite irrelevant, being blocks borrowed from the 1577 edition of Holinshed's *Chronicles*.

Powel's *Historie* is of the greatest importance in the history of Welsh historiography. Either in its original form (reprinted in 1811) or (more commonly) in the adaptation by [William Wynne](#) - and see *B.B.C.S.*, 1932, 153-9, it was the 'authority' on which practically all writers depended when writing on the period down to 1282, until [Sir John Edward Lloyd](#)'s *A History of Wales* appeared in 1911. Powel's style (but not [Wynne](#)'s) was lively, at times colourful. He rejoiced in the union with England, and averred that under it Wales was well ordered - lacking only a *Bible* in its own tongue. Yet he has no great love for the English people. If the Welsh fought with the English, 'is it not natural to defend your purse against robbers?' - and he expatiates upon the wrongs done by March lords and royal officials in Wales. He has little to say on behalf of [Owain Glyn Dwr](#), 'who lived in a fool's paradise,' and whose claim to the princely title was 'altogether frivolous' - indeed, he can spare [Owain](#) only a page; but he speaks with great severity of the English penal legislation which ensued after his rising. Writing as he did in the age of Elizabeth, he goes out of his way to show that [Owain Tudur](#) was no plebeian adventurer but a man of ancient and noble lineage. Yet, interestingly enough, it is not upon the [Tudor](#) family of Penmynydd ancestry that he bases his queen's and her father's right to the principality of Wales. To him, [Llywelyn ap Iorwerth](#)'s heir was [Dafydd ap Llywelyn](#) - [Gruffydd ap Llywelyn](#) and his sons, [Llywelyn](#) and [Dafydd](#), to Powel, were not in the legitimate succession; accordingly, on the death of [Dafydd ap Llywelyn ap Iorwerth](#), his heir was his sister, [Gwladus Ddu](#), whose rights descended to the [Mortimer](#) family. In other words, the claim of Henry VIII (and of Elizabeth) to the principality arose not from [Henry VII](#), but from his queen, Elizabeth (Mortimer) of the house of York.

In 1585 Powel published three books in a single volume: (1) the *Historia Britannica* of Ponticus Virunnius, a summary of [Geoffrey of Monmouth](#); (2) the *Itinerarium Cambriae* and the *Descriptio Cambriae* of [Giraldus Cambrensis](#) - this is the first printed text of [Giraldus](#), but Powel's patriotism prevailed over his historical conscience, and he left out [Giraldus](#)'s unfavourable judgements upon the Welsh; (3) a letter, *De Britannica Historia recte intelligenda*. He died 'early in 1598,' according to [J. E. Lloyd](#) (in *D.N.B.*), and was buried at Ruabon - there is, by the way, no foundation for the belief that he founded Ruabon grammar school.

From his marriage with Elizabeth, daughter of Cynwrig of Marchwiall, Powel had three sons:

DANIEL POWEL, layman

Alive in 1620, he was the founder of the Powel of Rhuddallt family (*Powys Fadog*, loc. cit.). It was he who published *Llyfr Plygain* in 1612 (reprinted 1931); in his preface he speaks lovingly of his father - of his care for the Church of God, and of his 'costly travail' on his country's behalf - and makes a half promise to publish 'a Welsh Dictionary, my father's Thesaurus'.

SAMUEL POWEL (1570 - 1600)

A graduate of Jesus College, Oxford, who succeeded his father as vicar (1598-1600) of Ruabon ([Thomas](#), *A History of the Diocese of St. Asaph*, iii, 286)

GABRIEL POWEL (1576 - 1611)

There is a *D.N.B.* article on him by Alexander Gordon. Apart from the fact that (like his father before him) he held the sinecure rectory of Llansantffraid-ym-Mechain (1601-11; [Thomas](#), op. cit., ii, 252), there was nothing Welsh about his career. According to Anthony Wood, he was 'a Prodigie of learning,' and published nine books against Popery and Puritanism.

Author

Emeritus Professor Robert Thomas Jenkins, (1881 - 1969)

Sources

Sources named in the article

Further reading

Melville Richards, '[Dr David Powel, Rhiwabon](#),' *The National Library of Wales Journal*, XIII, 398

Wikipedia Article: [David Powel](#)

Additional Links

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