

REES, THOMAS (1815 - 1885), Independent minister, and historian

Name: Thomas Rees
Date of birth: 1815
Date of death: 1885
Parent: Hannah Rees (née Williams)
Parent: Thomas Rees
Gender: Male
Occupation: Independent minister, and historian
Area of activity: History and Culture; Religion
Author: Robert Thomas Jenkins

Born 13 December 1815 at Penpontbren, Llanfynydd, Carmarthenshire, son of Thomas Rees and his wife Hannah (Williams), but reared by his mother and her family, on the holding of Banc-y-fer, Llangathen. He had only three months' schooling, and was of little use on the farm - 'slow, clumsy, and lazy,' so it was said; yet he was good at basket-making. He became a member of Capel Isaac church, and in 1832 began preaching. In 1835 he became a collier at Llwyclgoed (Aberdare), but the work proved too much for his health, and he opened a school, which in the same year (1835) he removed to Merthyr Tydfil, becoming also pastor of the Independent church which met in the old General Baptist chapel there (for which see under **Evans, Henry**). He married in 1838 (his wife died in 1876), and opened a shop at Pont-aberbargoed, but did not prosper, and had to spend a week or so in a debtor's prison pending his rescue. In August 1840 he became pastor of Ebenezer at Aberdare, moving in 1842 to Siloah at Llanelly, thence in 1849 to Beaufort (Brecknock), and finally, in 1861, to Ebenezer at Swansea. He died at Swansea 29 April 1885. He had been twice (1873, 1875) chairman of the Union of Welsh Independents, and at the time of his death was chairman-elect of the Congregational Union of England

Thomas Rees was an eminent preacher, a hymn-writer, a Biblical commentator (he translated Barnes's *New Testament* commentary in 1860, and himself published commentaries), and one of the founders of *Yr Adolygydd*, 1850, the first Welsh Independent quarterly. But he is remembered rather as the historian of Nonconformity and Independency in Wales; from an early age he had a passion for history. His *History of Protestant Nonconformity in Wales* (1861 - enlarged edition in 1883) is very well known; the original intention that Rees should co-operate with **David Morgan** (1779 - 1858) was abandoned, as Rees had no very high opinion of **Morgan's** work. In 1852, Rees had suggested to **John Thomas** (1821 - 1892) that they should jointly undertake a history of Welsh Independency. They came to agreement in 1862; publication began in 1870; and the work was completed in 1875, in four volumes (**Thomas** added a fifth in 1891). The work had been planned in such a way as to leave the older and more historic congregations to Rees, and the more modern to **Thomas**; but Rees's eyesight began to suffer, and in the event **Thomas** had to write more than half the work - including, e.g., the churches of Carmarthenshire, despite their long history and their great importance. It would seem that **Thomas**, rather than Rees, was chiefly responsible for the sententiousness which so frequently irritates the reader.

Rees has been severely criticized as a historian. In especial, he has been charged with denominational prejudice. And to be sure, he was an extremely zealous Independent; and although (by common testimony) he was a most kindly man and a willing co-operator with men of other churches, yet it would be untrue to credit him with the urbanity which marks the old Baptist historian **Joshua Thomas**. But Rees's prejudices do not outweigh his major virtue (in an historian), his unusual command of sources. He scented these from afar, diligently burrowed in libraries and record-offices, tramped miles from one place to another to garner local information. In particular, he differed from his compeers in that he perceived the value of the 'church books' of the older Dissenting churches - books which had been greatly neglected, and indeed have in several instances disappeared since Rees used them, so that he is our only evidence for their contents.

His real weakness was not his prejudices, which are easily discounted. It was rather his almost comical inability to reproduce documents exactly. With no ill intent, but unfortunately with not a word of warning, he abridges, paraphrases, 'sums up'; and as not everybody agrees with his interpretation of them, the sources have continually to be consulted afresh. Yet we must remember that he had had no training. And his work is even today indispensable. More: when we take into account the length of its chronological span, the breadth of its geographical ambit, its orderly arrangement, and (speaking generally) the accuracy of its details, *Hanes Eglwysi Annibynol Cymru* is still the best of our 'standard' Welsh denominational histories.

There is a *Life (Cofiant)* of Rees by his collaborator **John Thomas**, 1888.

Author

Emeritus Professor Robert Thomas Jenkins, (1881 - 1969)

Sources

John Thomas, *Cofiant y Parch. T. Rees, D.D. Abertawy* (Dolgellau 1888)

Images

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VIAF: 26747502

Wikidata: Q7793448

Published date: 1959

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APA Citation



Jenkins, R. T., (1959). REES, THOMAS (1815 - 1885), Independent minister, and historian. *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*. Retrieved 6 Oct 2024, from <https://biography.wales/article/s-REES-THO-1815>

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