

## RHYS, Sir JOHN (1840 - 1915), Celtic scholar

**Name:** John Rhys  
**Date of birth:** 1840  
**Date of death:** 1915  
**Spouse:** Elspeth Rhys (née Hughes-Davies)  
**Parent:** Hugh Rees  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** Celtic scholar  
**Area of activity:** Scholarship and Languages  
**Author:** Ifor Williams



Born 21 June 1840 at Aberceiro, Cwmrheidol, Cardiganshire, according to the official registrar. He was the son of Hugh Rees, who worked on the farm to which the cottage in which he was born belonged, but the father also cultivated a few plots of his own. He was educated, first of all at the British school, Ponterwyd, and later at a similar school at Pen-llwyn, seven miles away, where he was a pupil-teacher. He then went to the Normal College, Bangor, and, after completing his training there, was appointed master at the British school at Rhos-y-bol, Anglesey. He took a keen interest in languages and antiquities, and this brought him to the notice of [chancellor James Williams](#) of Llanfairynghornwy and [Morris Williams](#) (Nicander) of Amlwch. One of these is said to have introduced him to [Charles Williams](#), principal of Jesus College, Oxford, with the result that he was given a scholarship to that college, which he entered in October 1865. In spite of his lack of opportunity he succeeded in getting a good degree in classics (2nd class in Moderations and 1st in Lit. Hum.), and was elected a Fellow of Merton College. While he was at Oxford he used to spend the summer holidays studying on the Continent, in Paris and Heidelberg, and in 1870-1, in Leipzig and Göttingen. He studied under Curtius and others and was anxious to go in for philological research.

In 1871, however, he left Germany and returned to Wales as inspector of schools for Flint and Denbigh. In this connection his travels gave him the opportunity, which he seized, of studying ancient inscriptions on memorial stones in every part of Wales. By 1874 he was ready to give a series of lectures at University College, Aberystwyth, which was published in 1877 under the title, *Lectures on Welsh Philology* (2nd imp., 1879). Although this was his first book, he had already published a number of important articles in the first three volumes of the *Revue Celtique* on the glosses in the Luxembourg manuscript, on the derivation of words (where he states the philological law, still known as 'Rhys's Law,' that the Celtic consonant *i* becomes *dd* in Welsh), and on the disappearance of the Aryan 'p' in the Celtic languages. He had also started in *Archæologia Cambrensis* that series of discussions on early inscriptions, which was to continue all his life, and he had moreover written a number of articles on Welsh words which had been borrowed from Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. As early as 1865 he had made a notable contribution to Celtic studies by his essay on 'The Passive Verbs of the Latin and Keltic Languages' (*Trans. of the Philological Soc.*, 1865). When, therefore, the chair of Celtic was established at Jesus College in 1877 there was no hesitation in offering him the appointment. At the same time he was made an honorary Fellow of the

college; and in 1881 became official Fellow and bursar. He remained bursar until 1895 when he was elected principal of the college, an appointment which he held until his death, 17 December 1915. He had married, in 1872, Elspeth Hughes-Davies (died 1911) of Llanberis; they had two daughters.

Here is a list of his honours: he was knighted, 1907; made a member of the Privy Council, 1911; LL.D. Edinburgh, 1893; D.Litt. Wales, 1902; Cymmrodorion medal, 1912; Fellow of the British Academy, 1903. He was a member of [Lord Aberdare's](#) departmental committee on education in Wales, 1881; secretary of the commission to enquire into the tithe troubles in Wales, 1887, and of the commission to enquire into Sunday closing in Wales, 1889; a member of the commission on land in Wales, 1893, on University education in Ireland, 1901, on the University of Wales and its constituent colleges, 1907, on a national university for Ireland, 1908, and chairman of the commission on ancient monuments in Wales. He was also president of the Dafydd ab Gwilym Society at Oxford. In all these councils he rendered priceless service to learning, education, and culture, particularly in Wales. The British Academy founded the 'Sir John Rhys Memorial Lecture' to be delivered annually in his memory and, in the first of these, his disciple, [Sir John Morris-Jones](#), gave a full bibliography of his published works. In this note it is only possible to mention the most important items in that rich and many-sided list.

His principal interest was in Celtic philology and, more particularly, in Welsh philology. As a result of the many discoveries he made in this field he was able to make a substantial contribution to the early history of the Celts in Britain. In order to obtain his material he wandered over the whole of western Europe in order to study Celtic inscriptions in museum and field, with special attention to the Ogam inscriptions in Wales and Ireland. In order to interpret these correctly, it was necessary for him to evolve an early Celtic mythology from the names of the gods and goddesses, and to trace its survival in Irish and Welsh sagas and folktales. This led him to collect Celtic folklore wherever it was available. And, as his store increased, new light came constantly flooding in on place-names, the forms of words, and the facts of history. He was a pioneer hacking his way through virgin forests. There was for him no abiding city of a final conclusion: an open mind had to be kept, and he had to push on into a second theory, and then into a third. Flexibility and a readiness to learn - these were his virtues, the indispensable requisites of a pioneer. It was easy for another generation, which profited by his labours, to complain of his changes of mind. The experience of those who have attempted to carry on his research is that the marks of his axe are to be found in every part of the forest. He was ahead of every one in the exploration of all this territory. Then, with the help of [J. Gwenogvryn Evans](#), he began the work of preparing accurate texts of the early manuscripts in order to provide a strong foundation for succeeding scholars.

Here are his principal works from 1877 on: *Celtic Britain*, 1882; 'Notes on the Language of Old Welsh Poetry' (*Revue Celtique*), 1883; *Celtic Heathendom (Hibbert Lectures)*, 1886; *Studies in the Arthurian Legend* , 1891; *Studies in Early Irish History* (Brit. Acad.), 1893; *Outlines of the Phonology of the Manx Gaelic*, 1894; '[Notes on the Hunting of Twrch Trwyth](#) ' (*Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion*), 1894-5; *Celtic Folklore, Welsh and Manx*, 1901; *Celtae and Galli* (Brit. Acad.), 1903; 'The Origin of the Welsh Englyn and Kindred Metres' (*Cymm.*, xviii), 1905; *The Celtic Inscriptions of France and Italy* (Brit. Acad.), 1906; *The Celtic Inscriptions of Cisalpine Gaul* (Brit. Acad.), 1913; *Gleanings in the Italian Field of Celtic Epigraphy* (Brit. Acad.), 1914. As editor, [Pennant's Tours in Wales](#), 1883. As joint-editor, with [Dr. Gwenogvryn Evans](#), *The Text of the Mabinogion* (Red Book of Hergest), 1887; *The Text of the Bruts* (Red Book of Hergest), 1890; *The Text of the Book of Llan Dav* (Gwysaney MS.), 1893; with [Sir J. Morris-Jones](#), *The Elucidarium*, 1894; with [D. Brynmor-Jones](#), *The Welsh People*, 1900.

## Author

Sir Ifor Williams, (1881 - 1965)

## Sources

J. Morris-Jones, *Sir John Rhys* (London 1926)

*Proceedings of the British Academy*

John Fraser, '[Rhys \[formerly Rees\], Sir John \(1840-1915\)](#)' in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 1912-21

## Further Reading

*Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 77 (Summer 2019)

Wikipedia Article: [John Rhys](#)

## Images

Christopher Williams, [Sir John Rhys \(1840-1915\)](#)

## Additional Links

NLW Archives: [Sir John Rhys Papers](#)

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