

## SALESBURY, WILLIAM (1520? - 1584?), scholar and chief translator of the first Welsh New Testament

**Name:** William Salesbury  
**Date of birth:** 1520?  
**Date of death:** 1584?  
**Spouse:** Catrin Salesbury (née Llwyd)  
**Parent:** Annes ferch Wiliam ap Gruffydd ap Robin  
**Parent:** Ffwg ap Robert ap Tomas Salbri Hen  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** scholar and chief translator of the first Welsh New Testament  
**Area of activity:** Literature and Writing; Religion; Scholarship and Languages  
**Author:** William Alun Mathias

He was a gentleman by birth, the second son of Ffwg ap Robert ap Thomas Salbri Hen, and Annes, daughter of **Wiliam ap Gruffydd ap Robin** of Cochwillan. He was born at Llansannan but spent the greater part of his life at Plas Isa, Llanrwst. He was educated at Oxford and, in all probability, it was while he was there that he left the Roman Catholic Church and became a Protestant. He married Catrin Llwyd, sister of **Dr. Elis Prys** of Plas Iolyn. Although **Sir John Wynn** of Gwydir and others suggest that he lived to about the end of the century, it is practically certain that he died about 1584 or shortly before that. William Salesbury's industry was actuated mainly by two motives: a desire to make the Holy Scriptures available to the Welsh, and a desire to impart knowledge and learning to them in their own language. His first attempt to render the Scriptures into Welsh was a translation of the lessons used in the Church Communion service, printed in 1551 under the title *Kynniver Iliith a ban*. His plans were upset for a time when the Roman Catholic faith was revived under queen Mary (1553-8), but in 1563, early in the reign of queen Elizabeth, a law was passed directing the translation of the *Bible* and the *Book of Common Prayer* into Welsh, and he was invited to assist **Richard Davies**, bishop of S. Davids, in this work. The *Prayer Book* and the *New Testament* were finished by 1567 when both texts were published. Salesbury was responsible for the greater part of the work: as far as can be ascertained, he translated the Prayer Book and all the books of the *New Testament* except the Book of Revelations, translated by **Thomas Huet**, precentor of S. Davids, and the following epistles translated by **Richard Davies** - 1 Timothy, Hebrews, James, and 1 and 2 Peter. It is probable that Salesbury and **bishop Davies** began to translate the *Old Testament* into Welsh, but for some reason - according to **Sir John Wynn** because they disagreed about the meaning and derivation of a word - the work was discontinued and there was no Welsh version of the *Old Testament* until (**bishop**) **William Morgan** published his translation of the *Bible* in 1588. Salesbury's translations were severely criticized and, indeed, were barely welcomed, owing to the fact that they were so full of Latinisms and other orthographical peculiarities as to be unintelligible to a great many of his contemporaries. For all that, they were fine translations, both as regards language and style, and **Morgan's** debt to them is great.

Salesbury did not confine his activities to the translation of the Scriptures. In 1547 he published a dictionary for the instruction of his fellow-countrymen in English; this was possibly the first book to be printed in Welsh. Three years later he published a book intended to help the English to learn Welsh. One of his bestknown books is *Oll Synnwyr pen Kembero ygyd*, a collection of Welsh proverbs, published about 1547 with the object of making his fellow-countrymen acquainted with the traditional wisdom of their nation. There were other books which he translated into Welsh, e.g. in 1552, a Latin treatise on rhetoric which, however, he did not publish, and, some time between 1568 and 1574, a herbal which he translated from the original Latin and English sources and which also remained unpublished (the latter - *Llysulyfr* - was published in 1916). In addition to the works already mentioned, Salesbury published a number of books in English and Welsh on various subjects.

William Salesbury was the most learned Welshman of his day: he was proficient in Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and a number of modern languages, and was a master of many different subjects. But, above all, he was a Welsh scholar and man of letters, and was one of the most brilliant representatives of Renaissance humanism in Wales. It would be hard to find anybody who has rendered greater service to the Welsh nation than William Salesbury. His great contribution was his translation of the Scriptures into Welsh, thus laying the foundations of modern Welsh prose.

### Author

**William Alun Mathias**

### Sources

W. Alun Mathias, *Journal of the Welsh Bibliographical Society*, vii, (July 1952), 125-43, which includes a list of Salesbury's writings and of the old and modern editions of such of them as have been printed

*Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*

D. R. Thomas, *The Life and Work of Bishop Davies and William Salesbury* (1902)

### Further Reading

Testament Newydd ein Arglwydd Iesu Christ gwedy ei dynnu, yd y gadei yr ancyfaiith, 'air yn ei gylydd or Groec a'r Llatin

W. Alun Mathias, "William Salesbury a'r Testament Newydd", *Llŷan Cymru*, Cyfrol 16 (1989), tt.40-68

Isaac Thomas, *Y Testament Newydd Cymraeg, 1551-1620* (Caerdydd 1976)

Coflein: **PLAS ISAF, NR LLANRWST**

Wikipedia Article: **William Salesbury**

### Works

William Salesbury, *A dictionary in Englyshe and Welshe*(1547)

William Salesbury, *Lliver gweddi Gyffredin a gwenidogaeth y sacrametae, ac eraill gynneddfe u' ceremoniae yn Eccles Loecr*(London 1567)

William Salesbury, *Testament Newydd ein Arglwydd Iesu Christ gwedy ei dynnu, yd y gadei yr ancyfaiith, 'air yn ei gylydd or Groec a'r Llatin, gan newidio ffurf llythyreu y gairiae-do*(1567)

William Salesbury, *Kynniver Iliith a ban or yscrythur lan ac a Æ'arlleir yr Eccles pryd Commun, y Sulieu a'r Gwilleu trwy'r vlyddy*(London 1551)

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