

## WILLIAMS, EDWARD (Iolo Morganwg, 1747 - 1826), poet and antiquary

**Name:** Edward Williams  
**Pseudonym:** Iolo Morganwg  
**Date of birth:** 1747  
**Date of death:** 1826  
**Child:** Taliesin Williams  
**Parent:** Edward Williams  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** poet and antiquary  
**Area of activity:** History and Culture; Poetry; Scholarship and Languages  
**Author:** Griffith John Williams

Son of Edward Williams of the village of Pennon in the parish of Llanarfarn, Glamorganshire. He was born (according to his own account) on 10 March 1747. His parents moved afterwards to the neighbouring village of Trefflemin (Flimston) and that was his home, apart from short intervals, until his death. He says himself that he did not attend any school but that he learnt to read whilst watching his father cutting the inscriptions on gravestones. His mother was an able woman and it may be gathered that it was she who taught him in his early youth. He relates that it was a bard named Edward Williams of Llanarfarn who taught him the elements of the bardic craft, but he also came, when quite young, into touch with the bards of upper Glamorgan, such as [Lewis Hopkin](#), [Siôn Bradford](#), and [Rhys Morgan](#). He also had the opportunity to read Welsh manuscripts. [Thomas Richards](#), Coychurch, and [John Walters](#), Llandough, must be listed among his teachers - and this accounts for the great interest which he took in the vocabulary of the Welsh language. Thus it was that he began to grow into a Welsh scholar. He learnt his father's craft, that of a stonemason. He journeyed in North Wales c. 1771-2 and, in 1773, he and his brothers went to London. There he met [Owain Myfyrr](#) and other members of the Society of Gwyneddigion, and had an opportunity of attending meetings of that society and also of reading the manuscripts of the [Morrises](#) of Anglesey. He worked at his craft not only in London but also in Kent. Then, in 1777, he returned to Bristol, and afterwards to Glamorgan. He married in 1781, and, in 1783, settled at Llandaff. He met with a difficult time and is later found farming some land given him by his father-in-law in the parish of Tredelerch (the 'Rumney' of today) near Cardiff. It is not easy to follow his movements during this period, but he was in Cardiff prison in 1787. Afterwards he returned to Trefflemin. He went to London in 1791 and stayed there (but for one short period) until 1795. It was now that he began to explain the doctrines of bardism and to hold druidical gorseddau on Primrose Hill. He came in contact with men who sympathised with the French Revolution and also with Unitarian leaders. He returned to Trefflemin in 1795, and, in 1796, he was given work under the Board of Agriculture - to describe the condition of the land and of farms in Glamorgan and Carmarthenshire. He assisted [Walter Davies](#) (Gwallter Mechain) at a later period when the latter was preparing his report on the state of agriculture in Wales. He was appointed as one of the editors of *The Myvyrian Archaeology of Wales*, and, in 1799, he journeyed through North Wales to collect the materials. By this time he had become a Unitarian and he was the leading spirit when a Unitarian Association was formed in South Wales in 1802; he it was who drew up the *Rheolau a Threfniadau* of that body published in 1803. He was very little in touch with his London friends after about 1805. A little later on, another generation arose which was interested in the history and literature of Wales - the men of the 'Cymdeithasau Taleithiol' (Provincial Societies) who regarded Iolo as one of the principal authorities on those subjects. When the Dyfed society held an eisteddfod at Carmarthen in 1819, he succeeded in making the Gorsedd an essential part of its proceedings. He was urged to publish the manuscripts which he maintained he had discovered in Glamorgan and in his old age he was busy arranging to publish *Cyfrinach Beirdd Ynys Prydain*. He died at Trefflemin on 18 December 1826. He had four children, his son, [Taliesin Williams](#), became a prominent figure in the literary life of the succeeding period.

Iolo published but little of his work although he did include many of his forgeries (or inventions) in *Barddoniaeth Dafydd ab Gwilym*, 1789, *The Myvyrian Archaeology of Wales*, 1801, 1807, and in *Y Greal*, 1805-7. He published an elegy, 1772, upon his poetic teacher, [Lewis Hopkin](#), under the title of *Dagrau yr Awen*, and two volumes of English poems, *Poems Lyric and Pastoral*, 1794. He wrote many hymns which were published in 1812, 1827, and 1834 under the title of *Salmau yr Eglwys yn yr Anialwch*. He also published some minor works.

One of Iolo's perennial concerns from the 1790s onwards was the abolition of chattel slavery. His first abolitionist poem is dated c.1789 - coinciding with a major upsurge in abolitionist activism throughout Britain - and his poetry and correspondence contain several denunciations of the British slave trade and its supporters. His activism included forceful refusals to allow enslavers in Bristol to subscribe to his books, selling East Indian sugar at his short-lived grocer's shop in Cowbridge (as an alternative to West Indian sugar, produced by enslaved labour), and rejecting at least some of the money he could have received from his brothers, all of whom became enslavers in Jamaica. However, Iolo did receive money directly from his brothers during periods of financial difficulty, and eventually accepted an inheritance for himself and his family in 1815 from his brothers' Jamaican holdings (when enslaved workers were no longer part of the estate). Iolo therefore has a prominent place in both the history of Welsh opposition to slavery, and the history of Welsh economic profit from slavery.

Iolo was a versatile man. He took an intelligent interest not only in the literature of Wales but also in such subjects as agriculture, gardening, architecture, geology, botany, politics, the history of religion, theology, etc. He was an excellent poet and he has a special place in the history of romantic verse in Wales. The most strange thing about him was his complex mind - but it would be out of place to treat that subject here.

After the death of Iolo his son, [Taliesin](#), bound his papers into volumes; those volumes are now in the National Library.

### Authors

**Emeritus Professor Griffith John Williams**, (1892 - 1963)

Revised by the editorial team, 2024

## Sources

Elijah Waring, *Recollections and Anecdotes of Edward Williams, the bard of Glamorgan, or, Iolo Morganwg* (London 1850)

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G. J. Williams, *Iolo Morganwg a Chywyddau'r Ychwanegiad* (1926)

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G. J. Williams, *Iolo Morganwg* (Caerdydd 1956)

Andrew Davies, "'Uncontaminated with Human Gore"?: Iolo Morganwg, Slavery, and the Jamaican Inheritance', in Geraint H. Jenkins, *A rattleskull genius: the many faces of Iolo Morganwg* (Cardiff 2009)

## Further Reading

Geraint H. Jenkins, *Bard of liberty: the political radicalism of Iolo Morganwg* (Cardiff 2012)

Ffion Mair Jones, *"The bard is a very singular character": Iolo Morganwg, marginalia and print culture* (Cardiff 2010)

Geraint H. Jenkins, *A rattleskull genius: the many faces of Iolo Morganwg* (Cardiff 2009)

Marion Loffler, *The literary and historical legacy of Iolo Morganwg 1826-1926* (Cardiff 2007)

Wikipedia Article: [Iolo Morganwg](#)

## Works

NLW Archives: [NLW MS 13107B: History of the British Bards](#)

## Additional Links

NLW Archives: [Iolo Morganwg and Taliesin ab Iolo manuscripts and papers](#)

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### APA Citation



Williams, G. J., (1959). WILLIAMS, EDWARD (Iolo Morganwg, 1747 - 1826), poet and antiquary. *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*. Retrieved 9 Nov 2024, from <https://biography.wales/article/s-WILL-EDW-1747>

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