

# WILLIAMS, JOHN (Ab Ithel; 1811 - 1862), cleric and antiquary

**Name:** John Williams  
**Pseudonym:** ab Ithel  
**Date of birth:** 1811  
**Date of death:** 1862  
**Spouse:** Elizabeth Lloyd Williams (née Williams)  
**Parent:** Elizabeth Williams  
**Parent:** Roger Williams  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** cleric and antiquary  
**Area of activity:** History and Culture; Religion  
**Author:** Robert Thomas Jenkins

Born 7 April 1811 at Ty-nant, Llangynhafal, the son of Roger and Elizabeth Williams; his grandfather's name was William Bethell, and in his later years he adopted this surname in the form ' Ab Ithel ' instead of his earlier pseudonym ' Cynhaval .' He was educated at Ruthin school and Jesus College, Oxford (1832); he graduated in 1835, and took his M.A. in 1838. His first curacy was at Llanfor, where he married Elizabeth Lloyd Williams (his vicar's niece) and where, in 1836, he published his first book, *Eglwys Loegr yn Anymddibynol ar Eglwys Rhufain*. In 1843 he became perpetual curate of Nerquis where, in 1844, he published his *Ecclesiastical Antiquities of the Cymry*. In 1849 he was appointed rector of Llan-ym-Mawddwy. In the course of the campaign against the proposal to amalgamate the dioceses of Bangor and S. Asaph, he had become friendly with another opponent of this measure, [H. Longueville Jones](#), and in 1846 these two started the publication of the *Archaeologia Cambrensis*. He was co-editor of *Archaeologia Cambrensis* with [H. Longueville Jones](#) until 1851, and then sole editor until he resigned in 1853. This laid the foundation-stone of the Cambrian Archaeological Association. In 1852 Ab Ithel published an edition of the *Gododdin*, together with a translation of that work. The two friends quarrelled in 1853 - a clash of temperaments between a 'dry,' methodical antiquary and a fiery nationalist whose zeal outran his knowledge.

Ab Ithel had but little scholarship; moreover, such critical faculties as he had were wrecked when he became involved in the romantic inventions of [lolo Morganwg](#) and his school - more particularly [Myfyr Morganwg](#) (Evan Davies, 1801 - 1888). Unfortunately, he was by this time generally regarded, except by a few people of more balanced judgement, as the principal Welsh scholar of his day, and his name was considered in all seriousness for the proposed chair of Celtic in the University of Oxford. He started the Cambrian Institute and its periodical, the *Cambrian Journal*, which he edited from 1854 until his death. He became the leading light in the Welsh Manuscripts Society, and edited four of its publications; worse still, on the death of [Aneurin Owen](#) he was appointed by the government (1858) to complete the plan of publishing the old Welsh chronicles - *Annales Cambriae* and *Brut y Tywysogion* appeared in 1860. His editorial work was shot to pieces by later critics - not only because he was quite incapable of editing old manuscripts diplomatically but because he plagiarised the ideas of men like [Aneurin Owen](#) and [Thomas Rowland](#) without acknowledgement. But the high-water mark of his folly was the ' Great Llangollen Eisteddfod ' (1858), organised by himself and his friends such as [Môr Meirion](#) (R. W. Morgan) and [Carn Ingli](#) (Joseph Hughes), which aroused derision and shame among his fellow-countrymen - his own family 'won' several of the prizes, and [Thomas Stephens](#) was the subject of an iniquitous decision because he had the audacity to suggest that the story of Madoc was not true. For all that, the 1858 eisteddfod was an important milestone in the history of the national eisteddfod - no thanks to the promoters.

On the other hand, we cannot for one moment deny Ab Ithel's industry, both within the Church and outside it, nor his wholehearted patriotism. He was an exceedingly devoted parish priest, and in addition supervised 'Madam Bevan's' schools in North Wales, as well as the church schools in the diocese of St Asaph. He was the first priest to serve the new parish of Rhosygwaliau. He was a High-churchman (but not a ritualist), and in 1850 he did his best to organize a protest against the decision of the Privy Council in the notorious Gorham case. He worked so hard that he had two nervous breakdowns - in 1849, when he was temporarily transferred to the lighter parish of Llangorwen, Cardiganshire; and in 1855 when he was forced to take sick leave for nearly two years. In March 1862, he was transferred from Llan-ym-Mawddwy (where his successor was [Daniel Silvan Evans](#)) to Llanenddwyn and Llanddwye in Arduydwy. But, by this time, his health had broken down completely, and he died 27 August 1862; he was buried in Llanddwye churchyard. His widow, Elizabeth, received a civil pension, 18 June 1873.

## Author

Emeritus Professor Robert Thomas Jenkins, (1881 - 1969)

## Sources

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G. J. Williams 'Ab Ithel,' in *Y Llenor: cylchgrawn chwarterol dan nawdd cymdeithasau Cymraeg y colegau cenedlaethol*, 1933 (216-30), 1934 (88-100)

J. E. Lloyd in *A Hundred Years of Welsh Archaeology*, 11-15

Owen Williams, *Llyfryddiaeth Sir Ddinbych* (1935-7, 1951), part 3, 179

## Further Reading

Wikipedia Article: [John Williams](#)

## Works

John Williams, [\*The Physicians of Myddfai: Meddygon Myddfai\* \(Llandovery 1841\)](#)

## Additional Links

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