

PARRY-WILLIAMS, Sir THOMAS HERBERT (1887-1975), author and scholar

Name: Thomas Herbert Parry-williams

Date of birth: 1887

Date of death: 1975

Spouse: Emiah Jane Parry-Williams (née Thomas)

Parent: Ann Parry-Williams (née Morris)

Parent: Henry Parry-Williams

Gender: Male

Occupation: author and scholar

Area of activity: Literature and Writing; Scholarship and Languages

Author: Angharad Price

T. H. Parry-Williams was born on 21 September 1887 to [Henry Parry-Williams](#) (1858-1925) and Ann, née Morris (1859-1926), at Rhyd-ddu, Arfon. Christened 'Tom' (not 'Thomas'), he was the second of six children, the siblings being Blodwen, Willie, Oscar, Wynne and Eurwen. Literary tendencies can be seen on both maternal and paternal sides of the family. The brother of Ann, [R. R. Morris](#), was a talented strict-metre poet, and [Henry Parry-Williams](#) himself enjoyed some literary success in local eisteddfodau. The poet [R. Williams Parry](#) was Parry-Williams' cousin on his father's side.

[Henry Parry-Williams](#) was headmaster at Rhyd-ddu village school and pioneered the teaching of Welsh literature to elementary school pupils. He also taught Welsh to some dozen continental Celtic scholars who came to stay at the family home in order to practise the modern living language. Parry-Williams's childhood in Snowdonia profoundly influenced him. Rhyd-ddu itself, and the surrounding landscape, feature in some of his most famous works, such as the poems 'Bro', 'Hon', 'Llyn y Gadair', 'Ty'r Ysgol' and 'Moelni', and the essays 'Dieithruch', 'Y Lôn Ucha' and 'Drws-y-Coed'.

In 1899, Parry-Williams won a county scholarship to Porthmadog Intermediate School, located fifteen miles from Rhyd-ddu. The eleven year old schoolboy was compelled to lodge in Porthmadog during school term, returning home during the vacation. Exile from his beloved Rhyd-ddu gave rise to 'poetical stirrings' within him, and caused a sense of alienation from his native area. The busy quayside at Porthmadog was not without its attractions, however, and the teenage Parry-Williams also made the acquaintance of the town's poets, [Iolo Caernarfon](#), [Tryfanwy](#) and [Eifion Wyn](#), a friend of his father's. During this period he began to keep his matter-of-fact diary, a habit he maintained for the rest of his life.

Parry-Williams matriculated at the University College of Wales Aberystwyth in 1905 and graduated with first class honours in Welsh in 1908, the first to achieve such a result. He graduated in Latin (second class) a year later. At Aberystwyth he also won the main literary prizes at the college eisteddfod. These early works - written in both Welsh and English - show the influence of the neo-romantic lyricism of [W. J. Gruffydd](#) and [R. Silyn Roberts'](#) *Telynegion* (1900).

Spurred on by his mentor and Professor of Welsh at Aberystwyth, [Edward Anwyl](#), Parry-Williams commenced his

postgraduate career at Jesus College, Oxford in 1909, completing a BLitt thesis under [John Rhys](#) on English loan-words in Welsh by summer 1911. (He submitted a closely related MA thesis to the University of Wales at the same time.) His research was later published as the pioneering volume *The English Element in Welsh* (1923). At Oxford, Parry-Williams also attended lectures by Joseph Wright and Henry Sweet, scholars whose emphasis on spoken language and dialectology later came to influence Parry-Williams's literary style. At meetings of Cymdeithas Dafydd ap Gwilym, the Oxford Welsh Society, he began to air his opinions on Welsh literary and cultural issues of the day, venturing into print on the pages of *Y Brython* in a series of provocative articles published under the pseudonym 'Oxoniensis'.

In November 1911 a scholarship from the University of Wales enabled him to travel to Freiburg University in Germany to undertake doctoral research under Rudolf Thurneysen, a former pupil of Parry-Williams's father. (The PhD thesis, entitled *Some Points of Similarity in the Phonology of Welsh and Breton*, was published in 1913.) Whilst at Freiburg, Parry-Williams attended lectures on other subjects, including psychology, a discipline pioneered by the university, the influence of which can be traced in his subsequent poems and essays. Easter 1912 was spent travelling in Switzerland and it was here, in part, that he composed the *awdl* ('Y Mynydd') and the *prydeust* ('Gerallt Gymro') that won him both Chair and Crown at the Wrexham National Eisteddfod that year, gaining him national recognition for the first time. The theme of exile is central to both works.

From Freiburg Parry-Williams progressed to Paris in the spring of 1913, attending classes in philology and phonetics at the Sorbonne, although without matriculating. His experience of the urban culture of Paris inspired the *prydeust*, 'Y Ddinas', which he completed on his return to Aberystwyth in 1914 when he was appointed university lecturer in Welsh. Despite [Eifion Wyn](#)'s eloquent condemnation of its amorality and sordidness, 'Y Ddinas' won Parry-Williams the Crown at the Bangor National Eisteddfod in 1915 and is today considered the first properly Modernist poem in Welsh. Parry-Williams won the Chair at the same Eisteddfod (for a 'chromatic' *awdl* on the subject of Snowdonia); this made him the first poet to win the 'double-double', that is to say, to win both Chair and Crown at the National Eisteddfod on two separate occasions.

The First World War was a turbulent period for Parry-Williams. Like his fellow lecturer in Welsh, [T. Gwynn Jones](#), he stood as conscientious objector, publishing anguished poems on the pages of the pacifist journal, *Y Deyrnas*, as well as in *Y Wawr*, the provocative magazine produced by students at Aberystwyth from 1913 until closed down by the college authorities in 1918. He also composed a series of fascinating semi-autobiographical essays, beginning with 'Eiconoclastes', that dealt with disturbed mental states or obsessive psychological conditions. As the war progressed, Parry-Williams became increasingly reclusive, withdrawing from society and spending his vacations at Oerddwr, high above the Aberglaslyn pass in Snowdonia, at the home of his cousin, the poet, William Francis Hughes ('Wil Oerddwr', 1879-1966).

The post of Professor of Welsh at Aberystwyth had been vacant since the untimely death of [Edward Anwyl](#) in 1914, and when steps were taken to fill the chair after the war a vociferous campaign was mounted opposing the appointment of Parry-Williams on account of his pacifism, favouring [Timothy Lewis](#) instead. In indignation, Parry-Williams withdrew from Welsh scholarship and in the autumn of 1919 enrolled on a first-year science course at Aberystwyth, with a view to a career in medicine. As can be gleaned from the essay, 'Y Flwyddyn Honno', this was one of the happiest years of his life: he gained the best results of his year and won a scholarship to study medicine at Barts, London. In July 1920, however, Parry-Williams was finally awarded the Chair in Welsh, a position he held until his retirement in 1952, though the controversy, along with the abuse suffered during the war, took their toll: a more private and evasive Parry-Williams - both as man and as writer - emerges thereafter.

A 1922 essay on the subject of his motorbike, 'KC 16', published in the first issue of *Y Llenor*, set the pattern for all of Parry-Williams's mature essays in which the central subject becomes a means to make keen observations on life and the universe. Deceptively conversational in tone, they are characterised by highly detailed descriptions and a superb mastery of Welsh literary registers, including the coining of new words soon adopted into everyday speech. The essays, over one hundred in total, were published in a series of volumes beginning with *Ysgrifau* in 1928. His first volume of poetry, *Cerddi*, was published in 1931, though only one poem belonging to the period before 1920 features in it. A volume of English sonnets, composed in 1919-20, nevertheless appeared in 1932.

A further six volumes of poems and essays make up the main body of his creative work, namely *Olion* (1935), *Lloffion* (1942), *O'r Pedwar Gwynt* (1944), *Ugain o Gerddi* (1949), *Myfyrdodau* (1957) and *Pensynnu* (1966). The essays were collected in *Casgliad o Ysgrifau* in 1984, and the poems in *Casgliad o Gerddi* three years later.

In his canonical poetry Parry-Williams employed two poetic forms to which he adhered for most of his writing career. The *rhigwm*, or rhyming couplet, is used to make concise, often ironic, observations on life, employing colloquial forms of language. Prime examples are the *rhigymau* which feature in the two series of poems inspired by his travels to South and North America in 1925 and 1935. By contrast, the sonnet form allows him to explore paradoxes of feeling, to make full use of the rhythmic and sonorous aspects of language, and to pay tribute to his neo-Romantic literary heritage. Central to his

work, in both prose and poetry, is a tension between reason and feeling, or between a positivist and a transcendental view of life, especially in relation to the landscape of Snowdonia. An emphasis on fear and nihilism, and key words such as 'ias' (chill), 'bwrn' (burden) and 'dieithrwch' (alienation), place him firmly in the Modernist camp.

As early as 1955, [Saunders Lewis](#) rightly concluded that Parry-Williams was the 'most influential Welsh writer of the inter-war period' ('Braslun Radio'). Indeed, his work, in terms of style and subject-matter, continued to inspire: his influence can be traced in the work of some of the most significant Welsh writers of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Parry-Williams also made a significant contribution as scholar, the 1930s being a particularly fruitful decade. In 1933, together with [John Morris-Jones](#), he published an edition of the medieval manuscript, *Llawysgrif Hendregadredd*, and four years later his modern adaptation of the Four Branches of the Mabinogi (*Pedair Cainc y Mabinogi*, 1937). The same decade saw the publication of four works that made a substantial contribution to our understanding of the tradition of Welsh free-metre poetry, namely *Carolau Richard White* (1931), *Llawysgrif Richard Morris o Gerddi...* (1931), *Canu Rhydd Cynnar* (1932) and *Hen Benillion* (1940).

Parry-Williams edited several further volumes of modern poetry and prose. His analysis of the craft of poetry, *Elfennau Barddoniaeth* (1935), does not always reflect his own subtler practice. He was a frequent adjudicator in the literary competitions of the National Eisteddfod, an institution for which he also, over a period of forty years, acted as a translator of songs, hymns, arias and lieder. He also translated from German an anthology of 'Bohemian Tales' (*Ystoriau Bohemia*, 1921). His contribution as scholar was formally recognised with two DLitt degrees: the first from the University of Wales in 1934 and the second from Oxford University in 1937.

He married [Emiah Jane Thomas](#), or 'Amy' (1910-1988), a former student of his, in August 1942. After his retirement he became a popular broadcaster on radio and television, and a prominent figure in Welsh national life. He held the Presidencies of the National Library of Wales, the Court of the National Eisteddfod and the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion, and was also made Chairman of the BBC's Welsh Council and Warden of the University of Wales Guild of Graduates. Knighted in 1958, he was given an honorary doctorate by the University of Wales in 1960 and was made honorary fellow of Jesus College, Oxford in 1968.

He died of a heart attack at his home, Wern, North Road, Aberystwyth, on 3 March 1975. A memorial service was held at Bangor Crematorium and his ashes were buried in the parish cemetery at Beddgelert.

Author

Angharad Price

Sources

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R. Gerallt Jones, *T. H. Parry-Williams* (1978)

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Further Reading

Bleddyn Owen Huws, *Pris cydwybod: T. H. Parry-Williams a Chysgod y Rhyfel Mawr* (Talybont 2018)

Wikipedia Article: [T. H. Parry-Williams](#)

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