

WILLIAMS, Sir GLANMOR (1920-2005), historian

Name: Glanmor Williams
Date of birth: 1920
Date of death: 2005
Spouse: Margaret Fay Williams (née Davies)
Child: Margaret Williams
Child: Huw Williams
Parent: Ceinwen Williams (née Evans)
Parent: Daniel Williams
Gender: Male
Occupation: historian
Area of activity: Education; History and Culture; Literature and Writing
Author: Prys Morgan

Glanmor Williams was born on 5 May 1920 at 3 Cross Francis St, Dowlais, Merthyr Tydfil, Glamorgan, the only child of Daniel Williams (died 1957) and his wife Ceinwen (née Evans) who died in 1970. The paternal family's roots were in Breconshire, the maternal in Rhandir-mwyn, Carmarthenshire. The family were Welsh-speaking Baptists and members of Moriah chapel, Dowlais. His father was first a haulier in a coalmine, then an insurance clerk and later a factory worker. The maternal grandparents, living nearby, and the chapel were powerful early influences.

From 1924 to 1931 he went to the nearby Pant primary school, and from 1931 to 1937 to the grammar school at Cyfarthfa Castle, which occupied one part of the mansion built by the ironmasters, the [Crawshays](#). English was the sole medium of his education, but he had for some years an ambition to enter the Welsh Baptist ministry, and so studied Welsh in the sixth form, in addition to English and History. A brilliant student, he was given a State Scholarship, a Merthyr Scholarship, and a Sir Owen M. Edwards Scholarship to study at the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth in 1937. In Aberystwyth, where he played a prominent part in student life, becoming President of the Students' Representative Council in 1941-2, he studied Welsh and History, though he found the Welsh course too philological for his turn of mind, and came to think of himself as a historian rather than a potential candidate for the Baptist ministry. When the Second World War broke out in 1939, although he was an active member of the Officer Training Corps at Aberystwyth, he was turned down as unfit for military service when he presented himself for a medical at Pontypridd. In June 1941 he was awarded a First Class Honours degree, which gave him confidence to embark on an MA research project on the life of the sixteenth-century bishop [Richard Davies](#).

At Aberystwyth in the summer of 1941 he met his future wife, Fay Davies of Cardiff, a fellow history student slightly his junior, but his plans for MA research were thrown into confusion by the sudden death of his supervisor, [Professor E. A. Lewis](#). He decided to struggle on with his research unsupervised, though with some help from Professor David Williams, while taking a job teaching history and other subjects at Merthyr Intermediate School. In 1945 he was appointed to a temporary lectureship in history at the University College of Swansea, where he remained until retirement in 1982. His colleague [Glyn Roberts](#) went to Bangor as University registrar, and this enabled him to be appointed to a permanent post in Welsh history at Swansea. He married Fay Davies on 6 April 1946, and they settled near the university in Swansea and had two children, Margaret born in 1952 and Huw born in 1953. His MA on [Richard Davies](#) was completed in 1947 and it formed the basis for a book (in Welsh) on [Davies](#) published in 1953. His other early works were also in Welsh, on [Samuel Roberts](#) of Llanbryn-mair (1950) and [David Rees](#) of Llanelli (1950), both leading nineteenth-century nonconformists, and both works show that he was willing to tackle subjects well away from his own favourite period, that of the Tudors.

It is not surprising that he was appointed a senior lecturer in 1952, because of his vigour as a teacher and lecturer and a flow of published articles, and his administrative abilities were observed when he became a member of the Board of Celtic Studies in 1948. He was thus a serious contender for the chair of history at Swansea when Professor D. B. Quinn was appointed to the chair at Liverpool in 1958, but it was in the teeth of some opposition (from the Principal J. S. Fulton, among others) that he was appointed to the chair. Once appointed, he soon showed everyone that he was a most active and energetic head of a department which he rapidly expanded, using it as a power base to raise the importance of history, and especially Welsh history, in the university. This he did by publishing extensively in both languages, by playing an active role in local and national societies, by creating new forums for history, by helping and advising dozens of budding Welsh historians, and in a way that is rare, if not unique, by sitting on so many public bodies in Wales (and England) that he was able to convince the makers and shakers of the need to support his historical schemes and projects.

From the 1950s right up to 2005 there was an incessant flow of articles and reviews from his pen, some of which he garnered into collections of essays. His most original work was also one of his earliest, *The Welsh Church from Conquest to Reformation* (1962), which was meant as an introduction to what he foresaw as his magnum opus on the Reformation in

Wales, but which turned out to be a massive tome illuminating all aspects of that most stormy and enigmatic epoch of Welsh history between 1282 and the early sixteenth century. He edited a collection of essays on his native heath in 1966, *Merthyr Politics: the Making of a Working-class Tradition*. A short study of [Owain Glyndwr](#) and his *Welsh Reformation Essays* followed in 1967. Another collection of his essays, *Religion, Language and Nationality in Wales* appeared in 1979, and a collection of his Welsh essays on religious leaders in Wales, *Grym Tafodau Tân* in 1985, together with a short bilingual study of [Henry Tudor](#). He himself had persuaded Oxford University Press to launch a series of standard general histories of Wales, the first of which appeared in 1981, and in 1987 he produced for this series a second magnum opus entitled *Recovery, Reorientation and Reformation: Wales, c. 1415 to 1642*, covering the period from the late middle ages to the outbreak of the Civil Wars. Yet another collection of his essays, *The Welsh and their Religion* appeared in 1991, and eventually in 1997 his third magnum opus *Wales and the Reformation* appeared, the fruit of a lifetime's research and analysis. He was eighty when his last collection of essays was published, *Cymru a'r Gorffennol: Côt o Leisiau*, and here he talks of politics and society as well as religion.

As a young lecturer in Swansea he was a keen member of the Gower Society founded in 1948, and was for some years joint editor of its journal *Gower* and the official 'historian' of the society, and he helped to co-found (with the historian [Sir Frederick Rees](#)) the Glamorgan Historical Society in 1951, becoming joint editor of its journal *Morgannwg* for some years. He persuaded the Board of Celtic Studies in 1957 that Wales needed its own national historical journal, and found himself in the role of its first editor when the *Welsh History Review/Cylchgrawn Hanes Cymru* was launched in 1960. As one of the founders of the Glamorgan Historical Society he saw the potential of reviving the defunct *Glamorgan County History* series, which had produced one volume back in 1931. His enthusiasm for the project meant that he found himself the general editor of the five remaining volumes of the series, and the editor of two massive volumes on Glamorgan from the late fifteenth to the late eighteenth century.

The tone of his writing was always carefully balanced and judicious, with a strong emphasis on readability and elegance, and his collections of essays were meant to make his publications in scholarly or local history journals available to the general reader, the kind of people to whom all his life he enjoyed giving talks in societies or extra-mural classes. He sometimes claimed that he wrote Welsh with some effort and strain, but the finished works seem to flow just as naturally and elegantly as his English, and his talks in Welsh were sometimes more revealing and 'unbuttoned' than those in English. It is clear from what has been said of his publications that many of them are on the theme of religion, the Reformation in particular and Welsh religion in general, and this reflects his firmly-held belief all his life in the importance of religion. But it was a matter of deep concern to him that much of his work would become irrelevant and meaningless to future generations, since he saw clearly the signs of the decline of religious observance all around him. This torrent of publications, of which only a small proportion has been mentioned, was just one part of his personal campaign to show Wales that its history was important, and that historical memory should be central to the life of the nation.

He had a strong belief in the importance of national institutions. Nimble-witted and eloquent, he was an ideal committee-man. He had an instinctive sense of orderliness, reliability, neatness, and a judicious sense of balance, and so administrative jobs attracted him, while his proverbial good nature and sense of public duty tended to make him accept jobs which his contemporaries offered him, because they appreciated these qualities in him. As a student in Aberystwyth he had been President of the SRC, and as a young lecturer in Swansea as staff treasurer he kept an eye on the Swansea Students' Representative Council, and for a short time in 1961 he became a warden of one of the new halls of residence on the newly-expanded campus. As a young professor he became in 1964 for some years the dean of the new Faculty of Economic and Social Studies. From 1975 to 1978 he was Vice-Principal of his college, though he later refused the offer of the principalship. He strongly believed in the close cooperation of town and gown, and was not only a keen member of the Gower Society for much of his life, but also a member of the Swansea Festival Committee from 1967 onwards for several years, was for many years a Vice-President of the Royal Institution of South Wales, a Justice of the Peace on the Swansea Bench of Magistrates, and for many years a director of the Dillwyn Building Society in Swansea. He was until the end of his life a keen member and deacon of Capel Gomer Baptist chapel, acting as its precentor even in his last days.

He was a member of the University of Wales Board of Celtic Studies for decades and for some years its chairman, and he was Vice-President of the University College of Wales Aberystwyth from 1987 to 1996. He was chairman of the Glamorgan History Society from 1968 to 1975 and thereafter its President until 2005. He was also President of the Glamorgan County History Trust, which administered funds for research projects. He was a member of the council of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion for years and also the recipient of the Cymmrodorion Medal in 1991 for services to Welsh history. He was a Vice-President of the Royal Historical Society from 1979 to 1983, and the President of the Cambrian Archaeological Association for the year 1980, a member from 1962 to 1990 of the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historic Monuments in Wales, and its chairman from 1986 to 1990, chairman of the Ancient Monuments Board for Wales from 1983 to 1995, a member of the Historic Buildings Council for Wales from 1962 to 1989 (a task which always gave him immense pleasure), a member of the council of the National Museum of Wales from 1983 to 1990, and from 1987 to 1990 the chairman of the committee for the Welsh Folk Museum. He resigned from his work at the Museum and the Folk Museum in protest at some aspects of the institution's policy. He was from 1978 to 1981 a member of the Welsh Arts Council, and was briefly from 1969

to 1970 a member of the Countryside Commission for Wales. Having been a history master at a school, he was always keenly alive to the problems of presenting history at school level, and was delighted to become President of the new Association of History Teachers in Wales in 1988, and thus to play a part in forming a new history curriculum for Welsh schools.

What was unusual about him was his readiness to carry out public duties not directly connected with academic interests. The Welsh public in general first heard of him as a member of the Committee on the Legal Status of the Welsh Language from 1963 to 1965 (often called the 'Hughes Parry Committee' after its chairman [Sir David Hughes Parry](#)), from the work of which came the Welsh Language Act of 1967 with its principle of equal validity for the use of English and Welsh in Wales. He was also a member for some years of the Welsh Forms Panel, which stemmed from the passing of the act. He greatly admired '[Dafydd Hughes Parry](#)' and agreed to follow him as chairman of the Pantyfedwen Trust in Aberystwyth (from 1973 to 1979). The government in London saw him as a 'safe pair of hands' and from 1965 to 1971 he was appointed as National Governor for Wales on the BBC's Board of Governors, and chairman of the Broadcasting Council for Wales, an exceptionally difficult job at a time of great tension between the two languages, made even more tense by the events surrounding the Investiture of the Prince of Wales in 1969. The chapters on his work for the BBC form some of the liveliest and sharpest parts of his genial and entertaining autobiography, *Glanmor Williams: a Life* (2002). It is likely that it was for the sake of the BBC's coverage of the event that he became a member of the Prince of Wales Investiture Committee from 1967 to 1969.

Soon after he had completed his work for the BBC he was appointed from 1973 to 1980 a member of the British Library Board which was to organize the transfer of the library of the British Museum to a new site, and then from 1980 to 1985 he became the chairman of the British Library Advisory Committee and concurrently, from 1974 to 1982 was a member of the Advisory Committee on Public Records. Very few Welshmen of his generation held quite so many public offices, and it may be that in future he will be seen as a key figure in Welsh 'civil society', a formative and characteristic participant of the growing network of boards and committees in Wales in the latter half of the twentieth century, out of which came 'the age of devolution' from 1997 onwards. It is hardly surprising that his academic and public service should earn many accolades, and he was made a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society in 1954, a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries in 1970, a Fellow of the British Academy in 1986, he was made a CBE in 1981 and was given a knighthood in 1995. He was given a D.Litt. of the University of Wales in 1963, and was given an honorary LL.D. by the University in 1998. One of the honours which gave him most pleasure was to be made an honorary freeman of the Borough of Merthyr in 2002.

In many ways he looked like a typical southwalian, short, tough, dark-haired, fine-featured with a high forehead and exceptionally piercing eyes. He had a clear high tenor voice which he could modulate with an actor's sensitivity when lecturing, and which he used to great effect when mimicking or telling funny stories. His accent in English could be described as 'educated southwalian' and in Welsh as 'standard southwalian' rather than the Gwentian dialect of his native Dowlais, which he only used when quoting some old characters of his youth. A person of neat and regular habits, and of exceptional energy and productivity, he not only worked and wrote on his researches every day, but also kept lengthy diaries which he filled almost every day, and which form part of his manuscripts preserved in the National Library of Wales. He was always in great demand as a lecturer, and it should be noted that his lecturing manner was not at all histrionic; his lectures would be well-rehearsed and timed, and he would face his audience while keeping an eye every few seconds on the text, turning the pages at a measured pace, occasionally making impromptu asides.

He retained his good health and vigour to the end of his life: on 7 February 2005 he lectured in Oxford as part of a series to honour the coming retirement of Professor Sir Rees Davies, but was stricken with a cold on his way home by train in the bitter winter weather, which led him to be admitted to Morriston Hospital, Swansea, within a few days, and there he died on 24 February, of heart failure. He was cremated on 8 March at Swansea Crematorium in a service attended by his widow, Fay, and his two children and their families, and by many hundreds of admirers and mourners, and his ashes were scattered in Gower.

Author

Prys Morgan

Sources

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Images

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