

DAVIES, BRYAN MARTIN (1933-2015), teacher and poet

Name: Bryan Martin Davies
Date of birth: 1933
Date of death: 2015
Spouse: Gwenda Davies
Child: Siân Davies
Child: Nia Davies
Parent: Evelyn Davies (née Martin)
Parent: Horace Davies
Gender: Male
Occupation: teacher and poet
Area of activity: Education; Poetry
Author: Grahame Davies

Bryan Martin Davies was born in Brynaman, Carmarthenshire, on 8 April 1933, the son of Horace Davies (1900-1950), coalminer, and his wife Evelyn (née Martin, 1909-1997). He was raised in the close community of this Welsh-speaking coalmining area, and participated in its lively poetic culture which had produced luminaries such as the author of englynion, Gwydderig ([Richard Williams](#)), and the poet and hymnwriter [Walcyn Wyn](#). Although, like so many of his generation, he took the path of education and made his home in other parts of Wales in due course, his heart never wandered far from Brynaman, whose values and roots were to him a lifelong and inexhaustible source of inspiration and imagery.

The foundations of his poetic craft were also laid down at an early age, as he became friendly, due to his membership of the Urdd, with the sons of the poet J. M. Edwards. While visiting the family's home in Barry, he came under the influence of the older poet's modernism and his readiness to engage with the industrial world. After leaving the Aman Valley Grammar School, he went to study Welsh at the University College of Wales Aberystwyth, becoming an admirer of the work of two of his lecturers in particular: [T.H. Parry-Williams](#) and [Gwenallt](#). The work of [Gwenallt](#) appealed to him especially, possibly because of their shared background in the industrial communities of south-west Wales, and he chose [Gwenallt](#)'s work as the subject of his M.A. dissertation. While in Aberystwyth, he began to write poetry seriously, winning the Inter-Collegiate Eisteddfod crown in his final year, 1955.

This was followed by two years of compulsory military service, in the North Staffordshire Regiment, after which he began his career as a Welsh teacher in Ruabon School near Wrexham, moving later to be lecturer in Welsh at Yale Sixth Form College in the town itself, where he worked until his early retirement.

He married Gwenda on 12 August 1958, and the couple made their home in Ruabon, where their two daughters, Nia and Siân were born. This area, on the border with England, was his home until his last few years, when he moved to Ystradowen

in the Vale of Glamorgan to be closer to his family. In the Wrexham area, over the years, he enjoyed the company of cultured local Welsh speakers such as the poet Euros Bowen, and his neighbour in Ruabon, the former coal-mine manager and politician Tom Ellis. He was also one of the founders of the local literary society, Cymdeithas Owain Cyfeiliog. Nonetheless, it was the Brynaman area which was the location and subject of the series of poems which brought him to national prominence as a poet in 1970, when he won the Crown of the National Eisteddfod in his native valley, in Ammanford; Brynaman was also the setting of his first volume, *Darluniau ar Gynfas* ('Paintings on Canvas') which contained a series of portraits of the area's scenes and characters. This exceptionally mature first volume was no apprentice work: its imagery was daring, its references extensive, and its mastery of alliterative *vers libre* consummate. In it, the poet presented one of the first extended Welsh-language depictions of the depressed post-industrial Valleys. In later years, Bryan Martin Davies's advice to young writers was that they should not publish before the age of thirty, a statement no doubt based on personal experience.

He won the National Eisteddfod Crown again the following year in Bangor, and his second volume, *Y Golau Caeth*, ('The Captive Light') appeared in 1972. The volume opens with the title sequence, 'Y Golau Caeth' which had won the Bangor Crown. The sequence displays one of the main sources of the poet's imagery: the early literature of Wales, and the *Mabinogi* in particular, a resource which provides a series of symbols and stories to illuminate the understanding of contemporary situations, and to show the age-old persistence of human instincts and motives. The volume also makes extensive use of a stock of imagery which is characteristic of all the poet's work, namely the vocabulary of poetry itself, with 'the poem' standing as a symbol of creativity and of virtue against philistinism and despair.

His third volume, *Deuoliaethau*, ('Dualities') appeared in 1976, the culmination of the work of the previous five years; it showed how the poet's experience of geographical fragmentation had now stabilised into an internal symbolic landscape. The volume is divided between poems based on recollections about his native community 'down in the South of my memory' ('Llwch'), and the remainder which deal with the contemporary experience of the Wrexham area, including the sequence 'Y Clawdd', ('The Dyke'), in which Offa's Dyke is a pervasive physical and symbolic presence. Neither location holds much comfort for the poet: the South is close-knit, Welsh and full of characters - but is also constricted, closed, claustrophobic, and, of course, irretrievable. On the other hand the contemporary area of the Dyke is an agoraphobic, disconnected, disassociated wasteland, perpetually open, as Dafydd Johnston has noted, to the cold winds of the English east which scour the fragile growth of Welshness off the face of the land. If the poet is living between two worlds, then it is the worst of two worlds, and it must be acknowledged, in the case of the portrayal of the area of the Dyke, that this vision is a very selective one, which excludes the experience of the large industrial villages such as Rhosllannerchrugog where the Welsh language was strong and which are no more than a stone's throw from the town of Wrexham itself. This is a landscape depicting an interior condition of estrangement, not an objective portrayal, a fact the poet freely admits in the opening poem of the sequence, 'Ynom Mae y Clawdd' ('The Dyke is within us').

In 1984, his fourth volume, *Lleoedd*, ('Places') appeared, with the border area once more the background to many of the poems, and with the pessimism which had been an undercurrent in many of the earlier pieces now finding increasingly painful echoes in the author's everyday experience. His foreword mentions ill-health which had made the task of writing poems very difficult for him, a reference to the major surgery he underwent at the beginning of the eighties as the result of cancer, a condition which led to his early retirement from Yale College. His experience was further darkened when his wife Gwenda developed the multiple sclerosis which led to her death in 1996. The volume ends with the poem 'Lasarus', which presents the Biblical character as depicted by the sculptor Jacob Epstein, arising from the dead by pushing his way out of his stony bindings. In fact, this poem represents something of a milestone in the development of the poet's vision, as Christian imagery increasingly displaces the former terminology of art and 'the poem' as the main method by which the poet withstands materialism and despair.

This travail with the mystery of suffering and the crisis of absence of meaning came to a head in 1988 in the poet's last substantial volume, *Pan Oedd y Nos yn Wenfflam* ('When the Night was Ablaze'). Here can be seen some of the familiar elements of his previous work, such as poems about the border, and poems of greeting to fellow poets. But the heart of the book is the long poem, 'Ymson Trisco' ('Trisco's Soliloquy'), which appears to combine the main currents of the author's imagery and ideas: religion and the conflict of communal and artistic values with suffering, evil and nihilism. It is a kind of allegory, set in the Brynaman coalfield, in which an idealistic pit pony called Trisco suffers a Passion like that of Christ, but overcomes death with his defiant assertion: 'Darkness has no meaning', a statement which marked the end of the poem, and, to all intents and purposes, - with the exception of a small handful of late poems - also marked the end of the poet's career.

Bryan Martin Davies was a charismatic character, naturally saturnine, though with flashes of dry humour, a man whose pessimism about the future of Wales's culture only seemed to intensify his love for it. He transferred his passion to the two poets to whom he was a mentor, Elin ap Hywel and the present author, who were both pupils of his at different times at Yale College. His literary reticence and social reclusiveness in his last thirty years were regretted by his many friends. Looking back at his life in his final years, he said, with characteristic pitiless realism, that his literary career really only comprised fifteen years of intense creativity. He was very ready to admit that writing was hard work for him, and it is true

that he engaged only seldom with ancillary literary activities such as readings, reviews, articles, conferences, committees and the like, apart from his work as a judge for the Eisteddfod Crown competition, where he was one of the stalwarts, adjudicating in 1973, 1977, 1979, 1980, 1988 and 1991. In addition to his five volumes of poetry, he published two other books: his skilful translation of Chaucer's *Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* in 1983, and the short children's novel, *Gardag*, in 1988, which tells the story of a cunning fox.

Despite his long retirement from the literary scene, the literary and educational community did not forget about him: his work was included for years on the GCSE curriculum; he was represented in anthologies and critical works, a collected edition of his poems was produced when he turned 70 in 2003, and prominent public tributes were paid when he marked his eightieth birthday. This was a measure of his significance as a poet, one who needed no tireless self-promotion in order to keep his work before the public. From his first appearance on the national stage until his untimely silence, and beyond, it was clear to readers and critics that he was one of the most substantial and influential poets of his generation.

Bryan Martin Davies died on August 19, 2015, aged 82.

Author

Grahame Davies

Sources

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