

## STEPHENS, THOMAS (Casnodyn, Gwrnerth, Caradawg; 1821-1875), historian and social reformer

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**Name:** Thomas Stephens

**Pseudonym:** Casnodyn, Gwrnerth, Caradawg

**Date of birth:** 1821

**Date of death:** 1875

**Spouse:** Margaret Elizabeth Stephens (née Davies)

**Parent:** Rachel Stephens (née Williams)

**Parent:** Evan Stephens

**Gender:** Male

**Occupation:** historian and social reformer

**Area of activity:** History and Culture; Literature and Writing; Public and Social Service, Civil Administration

**Author:** Marion Löffler

Thomas Stephens was born on 21 April 1821 at Tan-y-gyrchen (also known as T -to-cam, i.e. the house with the crooked roof), in Pontneddfechan, Glamorganshire, the son of Evan Stephens, a well-known boot-maker, and his wife Rachel, the daughter of William Williams (Wil y Gweydd, 1778-1834), a weaver and the Unitarian minister of Blaen-gwrach chapel. Among those who influenced Stephens in his youth were [Maria Jane Williams](#) and the Quaker Thomas Redwood (author of *The Vale of Glamorgan. Scenes and Tales among the Welsh*). Having first attended an elementary school 'located in a barn' near Cefn Rhigos, Stephens spent about three years at the Unitarian school founded by [David Davis](#) (1745-1827), which during his time there was under the care of John Davies, the former minister of Capelygroes in Ceredigion. In October 1835, Stephens was apprenticed to David Morgan, a Merthyr Tydfil pharmacist, on whose death in 1841 he took over the business at 113 High Street, which remained his main source of income throughout his life. In 1866, Stephens married Margaret Elizabeth Davies, a descendant of a well-known family of Unitarians from Penrheolgerrig (see [Morgan Williams](#), 1808-1883) in Llangollen Parish Church. Her brother Richard conducted most of the business after Stephens suffered a first stroke in 1868.

Thomas Stephens's main contributions to the shaping of modern Wales are his efforts as a member of Merthyr Tydfil's middle class to transform it from an industrial village to an urban community endowed with modern civic institutions; his tireless work on modernizing all aspects of Welsh culture, particularly the eisteddfod, education and Welsh orthography; and his pioneering works of scholarship, especially in history.

As a Unitarian, Thomas Stephens believed in the ability of individuals and society to improve their condition through education and by pursuing rational pastimes. All his work is to be viewed against this religious background. He first put his beliefs into practice by co-founding a public library in Merthyr Tydfil in 1846, for which he acted as secretary until his health failed in 1870, organizing and delivering educational lectures. In this, as in other undertakings, he received the support of [Lady Charlotte Guest](#) and [Sir John Josiah Guest](#). Stephens was one of the campaigners for the desperately needed Board of Health in Merthyr Tydfil in the 1850s, took a leading role in the planning of its Temperance Hall, which would provide rational pastimes for the working classes, and campaigned tirelessly for the Incorporation of the town. He acted as an intermediary between iron masters and workers on more than one occasion. In 1853 it was he who chaired a mass meeting of over 3,000 people, called to achieve an end to long strike action. For the widows and children of the men killed at an explosion at the Crawshay Gethin Pit No. 2 in 1862, he instigated a relief fund, and collected and distributed money until the day before he died. He was a close friend of and political campaigner for [H. A. Bruce](#), Lord Aberdare, Liberal MP for Merthyr Tydfil between 1852 and 1868, and served as High Constable of Merthyr in 1858.

Thomas Stephens's talent and style as a social critic and reformer with a penchant for acerbic prose first showed itself in a series of letters to [The Cambrian](#) in 1842-3, in which he harshly criticized the romantic nature of the eisteddfod. In 1847, and reacting to the publication of the [Blue Books](#), he took a leading part in the controversy over voluntaryism versus the acceptance of governmental grants for educational purposes which was acted out in the [Monmouthshire Merlin](#). He was one of the very few who gave voice to the unpopular view that 'voluntary exertions would be insufficient to provide education for the very large number of children who now remain uneducated'. For this, he was denounced by representatives of Church and Chapel alike as 'a maniac and a liar'.

During the 1850s Stephens became one of the two main instigators of a Welsh orthography reform, a subject debated since the misguided efforts of [William Owen Pughe](#). Following a meeting at the 1858 Llangollen Eisteddfod Stephens and [Robert John Pryse](#) (Gweirydd ap Rhys) circulated questionnaires that led to the publication of *Orgraph yr Iaith Gymraeg* in

1859, a valuable forerunner of articles on the same subject published by [Sir John Morris-Jones](#) in *Y Geninen* in the 1890s. These efforts ultimately led to the standard work on Welsh orthographic principles published in 1929.

Competing at eisteddfodau was a major incentive and stage for the learning and creativity of many amateur scholars in Victorian Wales and Stephens was no exception. At most eisteddfodau in which he competed between 1840 and 1858 he won, sometimes up to three prizes. His first success was in the Liverpool Eisteddfod of 1840, where he won a prize for his essay on the 'History of the life and times of Iestyn ab Gwrgant, the last native lord of Glamorgan'. He made his name with a winning essay on 'The Literature of Wales during the twelfth and succeeding centuries' at the Abergavenny Cymreigyddion Society Eisteddfod of 1848, which appeared a year later as *The Literature of the Kymry*. This first study of medieval Welsh literature conducted on the basis of modern scholarly principles was extremely well-received by international scholars, such as Matthew Arnold, Theodore Hersart de La Villemarqué, Henri Martin, Max Müller and Albert Schulz, and an acclaimed German translation appeared in 1864. Nevertheless, and although he continued to produce scholarly essays for eisteddfodau, *The Literature of the Kymry* remained the only book-length study of his to be published during his life time. His five-hundred page essay on a 'Summary of the History of Wales from the earliest period to the present time' gained first prize at the Rhuddlan Eisteddfod, but remained unpublished due to a lack of patronage. His winning essay at the last Cymreigyddion y Fenni eisteddfod of 1853, on the 'Remains of the Welsh Poets from the sixth century to the twelfth', which was to be part one of 'a complete history of Welsh literature', remained unpublished for the same reason. His 'English prose translation of the "Gododdin" with explanatory notes', also submitted in 1853, was published in 1888 as *The Gododdin of Aneurin Gwawdrydd: An English Translation with Copious Explanatory Notes; A Life of Aneurin; and Several Lengthy Dissertations Illustrative of the 'Gododdin', and the Battle of Cattraeth*, edited by [Thomas Powel](#) (1845-1922). Stephens's last major work, 'Madoc: an essay on the discovery of America by Madoc ap Owen Gwynedd in the twelfth century', failed to win the competition at the 1858 Grand Eisteddfod of Llangollen, because it disproved the tale that Madoc and his followers had discovered America. The result made Stephens a martyr to truth, and the main judge and druid [John Williams](#) (ab Ithel) even more notorious than he had been. This essay was published in 1893, edited by Stephens's neighbour and pupil [Llywarch Reynolds](#).

Stephens turned to the periodical press as a medium of critically reviewing Welsh history in order to replace Welsh romanticism with a more scientific approach. Among his major series of critical essays are those on the romantic forger [Edward Williams](#) (Iolo Morganwg) in *Yr Ymofynnydd* (1852-1853), on the fictional 'Dyfnwal Moelmu' and early Welsh law in the *Cambrian Journal* and *Archaeologia Cambrensis* (from 1854), on 'The Book of Aberpergwm' in *Archaeologia Cambrensis* (1858), and on 'The Bardic Alphabet called "Coelbren y Beirdd"' in *Archaeologia Cambrensis* (1872). Numerous shorter contributions by him appeared in newspapers like *The Cambrian*, *The Merthyr Guardian*, *The Monmouthshire Merlin*, *The Silurian* and in periodicals, such as *Seren Gomer*, *Yr Ymofynnydd*, *Y Traethodydd* and *Y Beirniad*.

Weakened by a succession of strokes, Thomas Stephens died on 4 January 1875 and was buried in the Nonconformist part of Cefncoedycymer cemetery. The funeral sermon held in his honour at Twynyrodin Unitarian Chapel, Merthyr Tydfil, was published by request of the members, along with a list of the over 180 books in a number of languages he had bequeathed to Merthyr Tydfil Library. His archive was donated to the National Library of Wales by his widow's family in 1916 and is to be found at [NLW MSS 904-66](#). Transcripts of the main collection of his letters were made available to the public in 2017 and may be viewed at: <https://archives.library.wales/index.php/letters-534> and <https://archives.library.wales/index.php/letters-889>.

## Author

Marion Löffler

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Wikipedia Article: [Thomas Stephens](#)

## Additional Links

NLW Archives: [Thomas Stephens Manuscripts](#)

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