

STEPHENS, MICHAEL (Meic) (1938 - 2018), writer and literature administrator

Name: Michael Stephens
Date of birth: 1938
Date of death: 2018
Gender: Male
Occupation: writer and literature administrator
Area of activity: Literature and Writing

Meic Stephens was born on 23 July 1938 at 50 Meadow Street, Treforest, the eldest child of Arthur Stephens, a power station worker, and his wife Alma (née Symes). He had a younger brother from whom he became estranged.

Treforest then was a world of coal, industry and rail tracks, English-speaking but intensely Welsh in character. Stephens attended Pontypridd Boys Grammar School and then studied French at the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth where, like many before and since, he became a nationalist. He adopted the Welsh spelling 'Meic' but was proud to be an English-speaking nationalist, writing in his memoir, 'I believed Wales should govern itself as a matter of principle, and my belief wasn't based on language or territory which, in my opinion, belong to the right wing.' He admitted to looking down somewhat on Welsh-speaking students from rural backgrounds whom he regarded as culturally insular, a bias he never entirely surrendered. His Wales was the industrial south east where he lived practically his entire life.

As part of his degree course he spent a year in Brittany, stirring an interest which resulted in his 1976 book, *Linguistic Minorities in Western Europe*. He began learning Welsh, and was taught by Islwyn Ffowc Elis while undertaking teacher training at Bangor University. He taught at Ebbw Vale 1962-66.

One night at the Old Arcade pub in Cardiff he met [Harri Webb](#); Stephens's jacket caught fire from a cigarette lighter and Webb doused him with a pint of Guinness. The two had much in common - poetry, European literature, nationalism, a Valleys sensibility - and struck up a life-long friendship. In 1962 at Webb's invitation Stephens moved into Garth Newydd in Merthyr Tydfil, a large house which seemingly had no owner and evolved into a sort of commune for idealists, writers, radicals and nationalists. He later edited Webb's *Collected Poems* (1995).

Stephens was politically active and took part in the first protest of Cymdeithas yr Iaith at Pont Trefechan in Aberystwyth in 1963. He was a serial graffiti warrior and painted the original 'Cofiwch Tryweryn' slogan near Llanrhystud, an image now viewed as iconic. He is pictured carrying [Gwynfor Evans](#) aloft at his famous Carmarthen by-election victory in 1966. Stephens was himself Plaid's candidate for Merthyr at the general election that year, though this marked the close of his direct political career.

He married Ruth Meredith from Llanuwchllyn in 1965 and they raised four children, Lowri, Heledd, Brengain and Huw, in their Welsh-speaking home in the Cardiff suburb of Whitchurch. His son Huw Stephens is a radio and television presenter, in English and Welsh, focusing on music and the arts.

After a short stint as a journalist on *The Western Mail* Stephens began his life's major work as literature director at the Welsh Arts Council from 1967-1990. He had already made a mark launching Triskel, a publishing imprint, and the magazine *Poetry Wales* (1965) which published, among others, Harri Webb, Roland Mathias, Herbert Williams, Dannie Abse, Gillian Clarke and Anthony Conran.

Stephens's time with the Arts Council coincided with years of expanding administrative devolution and public funding for the arts. Wales's English-language literature was a poor relation, lacking coherent identity, advocacy and a natural community of interest such as that provided by the Eisteddfod for the Welsh language. Stephens proved an able administrator and his commitment to Wales's English writing was a powerful driving force. That he became fluent in Welsh only added to his credentials and gave him a keen comparative sense of the two literatures.

In collaboration with figures such as [T.J. Morgan](#), Roland Mathias, Glyn Tegai Hughes and M. Wynn Thomas a stable publishing environment was established, literary magazines were born (some stillborn), writers were supported and a lively exchange programme placed Welsh writing in an international context. The future Nobel Prize winner Derek Walcott was recipient of a Wales Arts Council international award and toured Wales's universities, as did a young Margaret Atwood.

After leaving the Arts Council in 1990 Stephens became a freelance writer, and from 1994 he taught journalism and creative writing at the University of Glamorgan, now the largest employer in the town of his birth. He was appointed Professor of Welsh Writing in English there in 2000, a post which he held until his retirement in 2005. He was awarded an honorary MA by the University of Wales in 2000, and was made a Fellow of Aberystwyth University in May 2018.

Stephens was prolific writer and editor. He edited *The Oxford Companion to the Literature of Wales* (1986) and with Dorothy Eagle *The Oxford Illustrated Literary Guide to Great Britain and Ireland* (1992), as well as numerous guides and collections about Welsh literature and culture. As an obituarist he recorded the lives of his notable contemporaries in *The Independent*; these were collected in three volumes, *Necrologies: A Book of Welsh Obituaries* (2008), *Welsh Lives* (2012) and *More Welsh Lives* (2018). His biography *Rhys Davies: A Writer's Life* (2014) won a Wales Book of the Year award. He was founder and secretary of the Rhys Davies Trust which promotes the writing of short fiction in Wales. *The Old Red Tongue* (2017), a massive anthology of Welsh-language literature in translation which he co-edited with Gwyn Griffiths, was a crowning achievement.

In 2012 he published his entertaining autobiography, *Cofnodion*; an English version appeared later, *My Shoulder to the Wheel* (2015). He describes how, for his seventeenth birthday, his grandfather bought him a copy of [Idris Davies's](#) *Selected Poems*. This ignited a passion which he describes as, 'not unlike falling in love for the first time' - a passion which was never extinguished. He recalled his Arts Council period, paid tribute to friends, described grudges and settled some scores. Meic Stephens was a man of strong opinions and shared them generously.

In later life he wrote poetry in Welsh and became a serial competitor at the National Eisteddfod. In a lengthy chapter in his autobiography he quotes extensively from his own poems and explains how he was robbed, he believed, of the Crown because of his use of Gwenhwyseg, the historic dialect of south east Wales, against which Wales's literary establishment was biased. A collection of his Welsh poems, *Wilia - Cerddi 2003-2013*, was published in 2014.

Meic Stephens was a vital figure in the development of Welsh writing in English during the latter part of the twentieth century. He wrote prolifically in many genres - poetry, fiction, criticism, journalism, obituaries, autobiography - but was most influential as an editor, publisher, advocate and administrator. While he never achieved the front rank as a poet or creative writer, any serious student of Welsh literature and culture will find themselves consulting his works. His contribution to the nation's literature was immense.

Meic Stephens died in Cardiff on 2 July 2018. His funeral service was held at Crwys Chapel and Thornhill Crematorium, Cardiff, on 20 July.

Author

Desmond Clifford

Sources

Meic Stephens, *Cofnodion: hunangofiant Meic Stephens* (Talybont 2012)

Sam Adams, [Meic Stephens obituary](#), *The Guardian*, 5 July 2018

M. Wynn Thomas, [Meic Stephens: Doyen of advocacy for the Welsh language and its literature](#), *The Independent*, 4 August 2018

Further reading

Wikipedia Article: [Meic Stephens](#)

Images

Geoff Charles, [Protest gyntaf Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg ar Bont Trefechan, Aberystwyth](#)

Additional Links

VIAF: [61611576](#)

Wikidata: [Q6809953](#)

Published date: 2023-05-17

Article Copyright: <http://rightsstatements.org/page/InC/1.0/> 

The Dictionary of Welsh Biography is provided by The National Library of Wales and the University of Wales Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies. It is free to use and does not receive grant support. A donation would help us maintain and improve the site so that we can continue to acknowledge Welsh men and women who have made notable contributions to life in Wales and beyond.

Find out more on our [sponsorship page](#).

