

HUGHES, ELLEN (1862 - 1927), poet, essayist, lecturer, preacher, temperance campaigner

Name: Ellen Hughes
Date of birth: 1862
Date of death: 1927
Parent: Catherine Hughes (née Benjamin)
Parent: William Hughes
Gender: Female
Occupation: poet, essayist, lecturer, preacher, temperance campaigner
Area of activity: Literature and Writing; Religion; Activism
Author: Jane Aaron

Ellen Hughes was born on 18 May 1862, in Llanengan, Caernarfonshire, the daughter of the Reverend William Hughes (1820-1867), a Calvinistic Methodist minister, and his wife Catherine (née Benjamin, 1833-1877). Their home, Tan-y-fynwent, had long been in the possession of her mother's family, and it was there that Ellen Hughes lived for most of her life. She was the first daughter in the family, with two older brothers, William Benjamin and Griffith, and a younger sister and brother, Lydia Ann and Richard. But their childhood was darkened by the death of their father when Ellen was four years old, after which Catherine Hughes struggled to maintain her children through keeping a grocer's shop. Ellen received very little formal education, just a few years in the village school. Then in 1877, when Ellen was fifteen, her mother also died. William Benjamin returned home from his studies at the theological college in Bala to support his younger brothers and sisters, but by September 1880 he too was in his grave. On Ellen then fell the responsibility of keeping house for her brother Griffith, a miner, and her younger siblings.

During this difficult period she was much cheered by the appearance in print of her first publication, a poem in memory of her mother, published in August 1879 in a new Welsh-language periodical for women, *Y Frythones*. 'Is the satisfaction of receiving a university degree comparable to the satisfaction felt by young women forty years ago when they saw their compositions and names on the pages of *Y Frythones*?' she asked in 1923, remembering the event. Ellen would not have dared send her early poems to *Y Frythones* had she not known that the main aim of its editor, *Cranogwen*, was to publish writing by women, particularly those who had not previously had the opportunity to see their work in print. But once Ellen Hughes started publishing there was no stopping her. From 1879 onwards her poems appeared regularly in *Y Frythones*, and in 1887 she published a collection of them, *Sibrwd yr Awel: sef cyfansoddiadau barddonol Ellen Hughes, Llanengan* ('The Whisper of the Breeze: The Poetical Compositions of Ellen Hughes, Llanengan').

Before that volume appeared, she had also started to publish prose as well as poetry. Her first published essay, which appeared in *Y Frythones* in August 1885, was entitled '*Excelsior*'; in it she encourages her readers to aspire towards greater mental cultivation. 'Let us all become ambitious women,' she writes, 'and let us be too ambitious to be satisfied with promotion in terms of social class, or with anything other than our own substantial progression.' She encouraged her readers to educate themselves; she herself was an autodidact, who had taught herself Greek as well as a thorough-going knowledge of both Welsh and English literature and history. Her early essays, written under such titles as 'Myself Alone' and 'Myself and Others', were ruminations on human nature, and in 1888 she won a prize at a literary festival for an essay on 'The influence of one epoch in the life of man on the next' ('Dylanwad y Naill Gyfnod o Oes Dyn ar y Llall'). By this time her essays and poems were starting to appear in other periodicals, as well as the *Frythones*, such as *Trysorfa y Plant*, *Y Drysorfa*, and the *Dyngarwr*.

In 1889, she started giving public lectures; 'Moral Courage' was the title of her first lecture. In it she insisted that virtues were not gendered, that courage was an attribute as much to be praised in woman as in man, and that though 'we had learnt from childhood that humility was a female virtue', it was in fact an indispensable part of the formation of every good character. 'A man without humility - well, he is not admirable, and a woman without courage is lamentably defenceless', she maintains. During her career as a public speaker nurturing her own courage was an imperative for Ellen Hughes. Hers was apparently an introverted, reclusive nature, according to her own testimony and that of others. In her poem '*Unigrwydd*' ('Solitude'), first published in the *Frythones* in 1890, she confesses that 'Though my heart is cheered by meeting many a one / Yet the sweetest hour of all is spent in my own company' ('Er llonni'm bron i gwrrd â llawer un, / Mae'r awr felysaf oll yn nghwmni f'hun'), and closes the poem imagining herself in heaven, longing 'even there for some hours in my own company' ('Gael yno ambell awr yn nghwmni f'hun').

Like many of her other verses, 'Solitude' strikes a memorable and distinctive note. But Ellen Hughes is at her best, perhaps, in her prose, particularly in her many essays on gender and women's place in society. She vividly evokes what it felt like to experience at first hand those decades in the closing years of the nineteenth century when women's lives changed radically. 'It's strange by now to remember the mystifications surrounding women and their social position during our mothers' time' she says in 1892, in *Cyfaill yr Aelwyd a'r Frythones*, the periodical which followed the *Frythones* after *Cranogwen* had retired from her editorial post: 'Was it not easy to see - impossible not to, one would have thought - that woman was of the human race, and that consequently all the rights of man were hers also? How could our ancestors have fallen into such dire error as to think that gender was more important than species?'

By this time her siblings had left the family home in Llanengan, and between 1898 and 1903 Ellen went to live with her sister in Bedford, where Lydia Ann had found work as a clerk in a draper's shop. From there she continued to send essays and poems back to Wales, to be published now in a new periodical, *Y Gymraes*, the journal of the Welsh Women's Temperance Movement. For thirty years, from its commencement in 1896, a contribution by Ellen Hughes appeared in every number of that monthly periodical, often in the form of a series of articles under the same title, e.g. 'Hours with Books' (1898), 'Famous Women' (1913-16). Towards the close of the 1890s she also published a few short stories in O. M. Edwards's periodical, *Cymru*.

Then, in 1901, *Cranogwen* founded the South Wales Women's Temperance Movement, and Ellen moved to Ton Pentre in the Rhondda to help with establishing and developing that movement. There she also started to preach as well as lecture, but only as an unofficial preacher - her denomination, the Calvinistic Methodists, did not accept women as registered preachers during her lifetime. And throughout the last decades of her life, up to a few weeks before her death, she continued to publish in the

Welsh journals. In 1907 some of her essays, along with more recent poems, were collected in her second volume, *Murmur y Gragen: sef detholiad o gyfansoddiadau barddonol a rhyddiaethol* ('Murmurings of the Shell: a Collection of Poetry and Prose Compositions'), but they form only a slender representation of the five hundred and more pieces she published.

Before she died, on 11 May 1927, she had moved back to Llanengan. There she was buried in the graveyard of her father's chapel, Capel y Bwlch, Abersoch, and on her gravestone were enscribed the words 'The text of her last sermon in Bwlch chapel was "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God" ('Testun ei phregeth olaf yng nghapel y Bwlch oedd "Ac ni a wyddom fod pob peth yn cydweithio er daioni i'r rhai sy'n caru Duw".') It was said of her in one of the obituaries which appeared in the press after her death, 'She loved her sisters intensely, and consecrated every talent she had, and every opportunity in her reach, to work towards their promotion, and their moral and spiritual benefit.' The social and political progress of women were also important to her. In her 1910 essay 'Merched a Chynrychiolaeth' ('Women and Representation') she pleads the suffragist cause with intensity, arguing that 'If woman is a rational and moral creature, with the waves of eternity beating in her nature, surely she cannot be incapable of participating in the governance of her country?' She sought to awaken in her female readers an awareness of their independent identity and its innate strengths: 'You can do it, you can!' ('Gelli, ti eili!') was her message to women.

Author

Jane Aaron

Sources

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Further reading

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Published date: 2024-07-19

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APA Citation



Aaron, J., (2024). HUGHES, ELLEN (1862 - 1927), poet, essayist, lecturer, preacher, temperance campaigner. *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*. Retrieved 13 Aug 2024, from <https://biography.wales/article/s15-HUGH-ELL-1862>

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