

WILLIAMS, MARGARETTA (Rita) (1933 - 2018), lecturer and Celtic linguist

Name: Margaretta (Rita) Williams
Date of birth: 1933
Date of death: 2018
Spouse: Carl Williams
Parent: Gwennie Morgan (née Williams)
Parent: William Morgan
Gender: Female
Occupation: lecturer and Celtic linguist
Area of activity: Scholarship and Languages
Author: Heather Williams

Margretta Williams, or Rita as she was known, was born in 1933 in Cwmgors, Glamorganshire, but spent most of her childhood in the neighbouring village of Gwaun-Cae-Gurwen. She was the third daughter of William Morgan (1898-1961), a miner, and Gwennie Morgan (née Williams, 1903-1976), a housewife, and had two older sisters: Eulonwy (1925-2010) and Mary (1931-2011). As well as being erudite, Rita had a quicksilver mind and was an extremely friendly and sociable person. She was also a rather determined character, perhaps in part because all her life she fought bronchiectasis and coeliac disease.

She was educated at the local school in Gwaun-Cae-Gurwen, and then at Pontardawe Grammar School when Isaac 'Eic' Davies (1909-1993) was a Welsh teacher there. She graduated with a first class honours degree in Welsh at University College of Wales, Aberystwyth in 1955. Before embarking on her academic career she was a full-time Youth Organizer for Urdd Gobaith Cymru in Carmarthenshire in 1956/7, and she continued to volunteer with the movement in the Llandovery area when she worked as a teacher in Pantycelyn School, and was also a 'swyddog' at Urdd summer camps many times.

Then she began researching Middle Breton syntax, and gained the degree of MA in 1958 for her dissertation 'Dadansoddiad cystrawenol o rai testunau Llydaweg Canol' [A syntactic analysis of some medieval Breton texts]. A University of Wales senior research fellowship enabled her to study Modern Breton at the University of Rennes (Brittany) and in Aberystwyth, and to complete her doctoral thesis 'Yr arddodiad mewn Llydaweg Diweddar' [The Preposition in Modern Breton].

Following a period teaching in Ystalyfera Grammar School and Pantycelyn County High School in Llandovery, she began lecturing at St David's College, Lampeter in 1966. Her duties were wide-ranging, encompassing Breton, Cornish and Irish as well as Welsh literature of various periods. In 1972, following the untimely death of J. R. F. Piette (Arzel Even), she was appointed lecturer in Breton and Cornish at University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, responsible for Breton studies, modern and middle Breton and middle Cornish. Rita developed and enlarged the Breton provision whilst also helping out at St David's College, Lampeter, until her retirement in 1987.

She met her husband, the Reverend Carl Williams (1938-2017), a Baptist minister, while they were both engaged in voluntary work for Urdd Gobaith Cymru. They were married in 1969, and Rita followed Carl to his various Baptist chapels in Pontarddulais, Penygroes and Fishguard. They were both stalwarts of the Welsh-language community in Fishguard in particular, and in addition to their chapel duties, were responsible for publishing the local 'papur bro' *Y Lliên Gwyn*, teaching Welsh to adults and organizing exchange visits between twin towns and villages in Wales and Brittany. Rita was also a longstanding contributor to the editorial page of *Seren Cymru*, the periodical of the Baptist Union of Wales.

As a lecturer Rita prioritized the preparation of resources for the study of Breton language and literature, as no such materials existed in Welsh or English. She therefore published dictionaries: *Geiriadur Bach Llydaweg-Cymraeg* (1984), *Geiriadur Brezhonek-Kembraek* (1984); and a textbook *Cyflwyno'r Llydaweg* [Presenting Breton], an adaptation of Pêr Denez's influential coursebook, *Brezhoneg... buan hag aes*, with additions (1981), along with several other translations of literary works including fiction and poetry by Roparz Hemon, Ronan Huon, Abeozen, Pêr Denez and Naïg Rozmor. Her **Breton-Welsh dictionary** was published online in 2023.

Rita Williams was in contact with many prominent members of the Breton movement over a long period, notably Pêr Denez (1921-2011). The correspondence between her and Pêr Denez is testament to the cooperation and joint planning between Wales and Brittany in the domain of publishing. She was also an active member of several twinning committees, and would often welcome groups of visitors, sometimes acting as interpreter. She would facilitate trips to Wales by school pupils from Brittany. She and her husband would enjoy a month in Brittany every summer in a caravan, and they had many friends there. Rita was also extremely active in Brittany, teaching Welsh to Bretons in summer schools for years; she gave a speech on Wales at the Lorient Inter-Celtic Festival in August 1975, and delivered two series of lectures in Breton at the University of Rennes in 1983, sponsored by the British Council. She corresponded with the poet Naïg Rozmor and Ivona Martin.

She worked tirelessly to promote friendship between Wales and Brittany, and was admitted to Gorsedd Beirdd Ynys Prydain in Wales in 1994, and received the Urzh an Erminig (Order of the Ermine) prize in Brittany in 1996.

Rita Williams died on 3 September 2018 in Llanelli Hospital, and she was cremated at Llanelli Crematorium.

Author

Heather Williams

Sources

Meirion Evans, 'Teyrnged Meirion Evans i Rita Williams', *Y Ffôn Newydd* 86 (2018), pp. 42-43
Personal information from Gareth Walters (nephew)

Further reading

Breizh-Cymru

Archives

Rita Williams papers, Centre de recherche bretonne et celtique, University of Brest, Brittany, France

Additional Links

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