

## BEBB, WILLIAM AMBROSE (1894 - 1955), historian, prose writer and politician

**Name:** William Ambrose Bebb

**Date of birth:** 1894

**Date of death:** 1955

**Spouse:** Eluned Pierce Bebb (née Roberts)

**Parent:** Ann Bebb

**Parent:** Edward Bebb

**Gender:** Male

**Occupation:** historian, prose writer and politician

**Area of activity:** History and Culture; Literature and Writing; Poetry; Politics, Government and Political Movements; Scholarship and Languages

**Author:** Thomas Parry

Born 4 July 1894 at Blaendyffryn, Goginan, Cardiganshire, son of Edward and Ann Bebb. The family moved to Camer Fawr, near Tregaron, and Bebb attended Tregaron grammar school. He graduated in Welsh and History from U.C.W., Aberystwyth in 1918, and spent two years working for his M.A. In 1920 he went to Rennes University, but not finding there the facilities he had expected, he left after a few weeks for Paris, where he attended the lectures of Prof. Joseph Loth at the Collège de France and acted as Assistant in Welsh to Joseph Vendryes. He worked in Paris until 1925, when he was appointed tutor at the Normal College, Bangor, where he remained for the rest of his life, teaching Welsh, History and Scripture Knowledge at various times.

Ambrose Bebb published six books on the history of Wales from the earliest period till the sixteenth century. One of them, *Hil a hwyl y castell* (1946) was a course of lessons delivered on the radio in 1936. The other five form a sequence, though the dates of publication do not follow in chronological order. The first was *Ein hen hen hanes* (1932), the story of Wales from the earliest times till the fall of [Llywelyn ap Gruffudd](#) told in simple language for young children. The second was *Llywodraeth y cestyll* (1934), bringing the story down to the end of the fifteenth century. Then came *Machlud yr Oesoedd Canol* (1950), *Cyfnod y Tuduriaid* (1939) and *Machlud y mynachlogydd* (1937). These historical works are noteworthy for two reasons. First of all, the author made use of Welsh literary sources, as well as the more usual historical sources such as state papers, to understand and to elucidate the history of Wales, quoting extensively from published and unpublished collections of the works of the poets of the gentry. Secondly, these books are imbued with a patriotic fervour which ensures that a historical work by Bebb is not only a factual account of a period or of the men of note at the time, but also an attempt to arouse in the reader the enthusiasm felt by the author.

In three books which deal with the Welsh countryside when emigration to America was common the historian gave rein to his imagination. *Y Baradwys Bell* (1941) is an imaginary diary for the year 1841 kept by one of the author's ancestors, and *Gadael tir* (1948) is the story of the same man, again in diary form, until his departure for America in 1847. In both books use is made of letters sent from America and kept in the family; *Dial y tir* (1945) is a novel which tells how a number of men

and women from Montgomeryshire, again including members of the author's family, emigrated to America at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries and how they fared there. In these three books there is a large element of historical fact.

Bebb had for many years kept a personal diary, and he was consequently well placed to comment on current events. Such comments are found in *1940, Lloffion o ddyddiadur* (1941) and *Dyddlyfr 1941* (1942). Similarly in *Calendr coch* (1946) he gives an account of his campaign as a Plaid Cymru candidate in the parliamentary election in 1945. These books are interesting because they present the author's immediate reaction to the events recorded without any of the distortions which lapse of time might cause.

Ever since his brief visit to Rennes in 1920 and his stay in Paris Bebb had been deeply interested in Brittany. He visited the country regularly and travelled extensively within it, so that he knew its topography thoroughly. He learnt the language, and he had some very good friends among the Bretons. He contributed extensively to *Breiz Atao*, the journal of the Breton nationalists. Through all this he not only gained a thorough knowledge of Brittany, its history, its customs and its religion, but also came to admire the Breton way of life and to sympathise with the aims of those who strove to preserve the country's culture. This led to the publication of three books: *Llydaw* (1929), *Pererindodau* (1941) and *Dydd-lyfr pythefnos, neu y ddawns angau* (1939), an account of his travels in Brittany during the last fortnight before the outbreak of World War II.

Though he thoroughly disapproved of the hostile attitude of France towards Brittany and its language, Bebb was a great admirer of France and its notable contribution to world culture. He had a wide knowledge of the country's history and its literature. This is evident in *Crwydro'r cyfandir* (1936), an account of a journey through France, Italy and Switzerland. During his stay in Paris he came to know Leon Daudet and Charles Maurras and other leaders of the reactionary and royalist movement known as L'Action Française, and they had a profound influence on his thinking. He read the movement's journal regularly on his visits to France.

One reason for Bebb's devotion to Brittany was that since his youth he had been an ardent nationalist. As a student at Aberystwyth he had edited *Y Wawr*, a student publication which had dared, during World War I, to champion the cause of conscientious objectors and to express approval of the 1916 Easter Week rising in Ireland, with the result that the College authorities had banned it. When he worked in Paris, Bebb used to send articles for publication in Welsh periodicals such as *Y Geninen*, *Y Llenor*, *Y Faner*, *Cymru* and *Y Tyst*. In these he discussed the future of the Welsh language, and as early as 1923 he argued the case for Welsh self-government. These articles played a significant part in creating an atmosphere conducive to the establishment of an independent Welsh political party. In January 1924 he and [G.J. Williams](#) (1892 - 1963) and [Saunders Lewis](#) met at Penarth, and decided to start a Welsh political movement. In August 1925 a small group of ardent Welshmen met at Pwllheli, and established the Welsh Nationalist Party. The two movements were fused, and in June 1926 *Y Ddraig Goch* (the Party's monthly newspaper) was launched, the first page of the first number carrying an article by Bebb. He was the editor of the first few numbers, and remained a member of the editorial board till the outbreak of war.

During these fifteen years Bebb applied himself unsparingly to many kinds of activity on behalf of the Nationalist Party (as it was then called). He was president of the University College, Bangor, branch and of the Caernarfonshire Committee. As the party's candidate he won a seat on the Bangor Borough Council in 1939. He addressed innumerable meetings, and contributed to the press regularly on the principles of nationalism. He soon came to be regarded as one of the leaders of the movement.

But with the outbreak of war in 1939 he severed his connection with the other leaders. They maintained that Wales, lacking self-government, had had no opportunity to define its attitude to war, and that therefore a neutral position was indicated. It was Bebb's view, however, that the fate of France, which had so generously contributed to the culture of mankind and which he so dearly loved, was too important to be left to the mercy of German materialism and militarism. For some years he took no part in Welsh politics. In 1945, however, after considerable persuasion, he agreed to stand as the Nationalist Party's candidate in the general election held in July of that year.

Bebb had always been deeply religious. He thought very highly of the Welsh Sunday school, and published *Yr Ysgol Sul* in 1944. In his later years his concern for Wales had shifted from considerations of language and culture to anxiety about its spiritual condition. Hope lay for men and for nations not in political parties, but in the ideals advocated by the Christian Church. He expressed this standpoint in a series of articles in *Yr Herald Cymraeg* in 1953. (They were posthumously republished in book form, *Yr Argyfwng*, 1955). The same belief is forcibly expressed in the volume which he wrote to celebrate the centenary of his chapel in Bangor, *Canrifo hanes y Twr Gwyn* (1954). But this change of standpoint brought no change in the enthusiasm, conviction and sincerity which had always been a prominent feature of his character. As a prose writer Bebb had some marked characteristics. He liberally used words from his own dialect, and was fond of collocations and alliteration, thus creating an impression of energy and exuberance, all springing from the pleasure of writing or from a desire to convey a message, whether that be a description of a rural scene or the expression of some important principle which he wished to impress upon the reader's mind.

Bebb translated two works from French : *Geiriau credadun* (1923), Lamennais's *Paroles d'un croyant*, and *Mudandod y môr* (1944), *Le Silence de la mer*, by ' Vercors ', a story of occupied France during World War II.

He married Eluned Pierce Roberts of Llangadfan, Montgomeryshire, in 1931, and they had seven children. He died suddenly 27 April 1955, and was buried in Glanadda cemetery, Bangor.

## Author

Sir Thomas Parry, (1904 - 1985)

## Sources

Leonard Clark, *The Anglo-Welsh Review*, 17/40, 25

Saunders Lewis, *Gallica essays presented to J. Heywood Thomas by colleagues, pupils and friends* (Cardiff 1969)

A. O. H. Jarman, *Y Genhinen*, 6, 87

T. H. Lewis, *Y Genhinen*, 21, 65-9

information given by his widow

Gareth Miles in Derec Llwyd Morgan, *Adnabod deg. Portreadau o ddeg o arweinwyr cynnar y Blaid Genedlaethol* (Denbigh 1977)

Rhidian Griffiths, *Llyfryddiaeth William Ambrose Bebb* (Aberystwyth 1982)

T. Robin Chapman, *W. Ambrose Bebb* (Cardiff 1997)

## Further Reading

NLW Archives: [Mr Ambrose Bebb. Atoch chwi, Etholwyr Sir Gaernarfon](#)

Wikipedia Article: [Ambrose Bebb](#)

## Additional Links

NLW Archives: [Papurau Ambrose Bebb](#)

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