

## BELL, Sir HAROLD IDRIS (1879 - 1967), scholar and translator

**Name:** Harold Idris Bell  
**Date of birth:** 1879  
**Date of death:** 1967  
**Spouse:** Mabel Winifred Bell (née Ayling)  
**Child:** Ernest David Bell  
**Parent:** Rachel Bell (née Hughes)  
**Parent:** Charles Christopher Bell  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** scholar and translator  
**Area of activity:** Literature and Writing; Scholarship and Languages  
**Author:** Thomas Parry

Born 2 October 1879 at Epworth, Lincolnshire, son of Charles Christopher Bell and Rachel (née Hughes). His maternal grandfather, John Hughes of Rhuddlan, was a Welsh speaker. Bell received his early education at Nottingham High School. In 1897 he won a scholarship to Oriel College, Oxford, and graduated in Classics. He spent a year at the Universities of Berlin and Halle studying Hellenistic history. In 1903 he was appointed an Assistant in the Department of Manuscripts at the British Museum. He was promoted Deputy Keeper in 1927, and Keeper in 1929, the post in which he remained until his retirement in 1944. In 1946 he went to live at Aberystwyth, naming his house Bro Gynin, a sign of his respect for the poet **Dafydd ap Gwilym**.

As a scholar Bell's special interest was in papyrology, the subject of two articles as early as 1907. At the same time he was also assisting in the preparation of catalogues of material in the British Museum; the fourth volume of the catalogue (1917) and the fifth (1924) were entirely his own responsibility. He thus acquired an extensive knowledge of the history of Egypt, and articles and bibliographies by him appeared regularly in learned journals, especially the *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*. He also contributed to the *Cambridge Ancient History*. In 1935 he was appointed Honorary Reader in Document Papyrology in Oxford, a position he held till 1950. His standing as a scholar was now very high, and his knowledge of all kinds of documents - legal, social or literary - was unsurpassed. He was president of the International Association of Papyrologists from 1947 to 1955. He was elected corresponding member of several Continental and American learned societies, and was awarded honorary degrees by the Universities of Wales, Liverpool, Michigan and Brussels. In 1932 the British Academy elected him a Fellow, and he was President from 1946 to 1950. He was appointed O.B.E. in 1920 and C.B. in 1936, and knighted in 1946.

It was probably his awareness of his Welsh descent and his father's interest that prompted Bell to take an interest in the Welsh language, which he began to learn when he was twenty-six years of age. The first result was a scholarly work, *Vita Sancti Tatheï and Buched Seint y Katrin*, comprising a Latin text of the life of **Tathan** with an English translation, and a Welsh life of Katherine, with an introduction. The volume appeared in 1909 under the auspices of the Bangor Welsh Manuscripts Society. But it was not as a scholar that he chose to serve Wales. He always maintained that he was not a Welsh scholar, his aim being to provide the means for those who did not understand Welsh to be informed of the contents and quality of Welsh literature, especially Welsh poetry. His first effort in this direction was a volume of translations, *Poems from the Welsh* (1913), a joint production with his father, C.C. Bell. In 1925 father and son collaborated on another volume, *Welsh Poems of the Twentieth Century in English Verse*, with an introductory essay of 57 pages giving a summary of the history of Welsh poetry from the earliest times to the 1920s. Bell expanded this essay into a book of 192 pages and published it under the title *The Development of Welsh Poetry* in 1936.

Almost all the translations in these two volumes were from originals which were in the free metres, and the metrical pattern of the originals had been adhered to. In *The Development of Welsh Poetry* most of the examples cited had been rendered into English prose. The next step was to attempt to translate poems in the strict metres, and the result was *Dafydd ap Gwilym: fifty poems*, which appeared as volume 48 of *Y Cymmrodor* in 1942. Of these 26 are by Bell, and 24 by his son **David**. The metre employed consists of lines of four stressed syllables rhyming in couplets, with variations in the number of unstressed syllables - a much more exacting pattern than that adopted by later translators. The style is 'poetic', often incorporating archaic expressions, which were justified by the occasional archaisms of the originals. The volume contains an introductory essay on the life and work of **Dafydd ap Gwilym**.

Bell's translation of *Hanes Llenyddiaeth Gymraeg hyd 1900* by **Thomas Parry**, was another aspect of his attempt to bring Welsh literature to the notice of people not conversant with the language. He added some explanatory notes and an appendix of 120 pages dealing with twentieth-century literature. It was published in 1955 under the title *A History of Welsh Literature*.

In 1926 Bell had visited Egypt to collect papyri for the British Museum. His account of the journey was translated into Welsh by **D. Tecwyn Lloyd** and published in two volumes entitled *Trwy Diroedd y Dwyrain* (1946). He also wrote two books for children - *Dewi a'r Blodyn Llo Mawr* (1928) and *Calon y Dywysoges* (1929), translated by Olwen Roberts, the wife of **J.E. Jones**. In 1954 he published *The Crisis of our Time and other papers*, consisting of essays on the state of society, Welsh nationalism, the attitude of the Church in Wales towards Welsh culture, and his own religious experience as a convert from agnosticism to the Christian faith.

Bell was a man of great charm and courtesy, who retained his natural modesty in spite of his high status as a scholar and the honours bestowed upon him. His love of Wales was deep and sincere, and nothing gave him more pleasure than to have been awarded the medal of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion in 1946, and to have served as the Society's President, 1947-53. He died 22 January 1967.

He married Mabel Winifred Ayling in 1911. She died a week before him. They had three sons.

### Author

**Sir Thomas Parry**, (1904 - 1985)

### Sources

*Who was who?*

C. H. Roberts, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 53 (1967)

A list of Bell's works appeared in the *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, 1954, 1967

### Further Reading

Wikipedia Article: **Idris Bell**

### Images

National Portrait Gallery: **Sir (Harold) Idris Bell (1879-1967), Scholar**

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