

## GRUFFYDD, WILLIAM JOHN (1881 - 1954), scholar, poet, critic and editor

**Name:** William John Gruffydd  
**Date of birth:** 1881  
**Date of death:** 1954  
**Spouse:** Gwenda Gruffydd (née Evans)  
**Child:** Dafydd Gruffydd  
**Parent:** Jane Elisabeth Griffith  
**Parent:** John Griffith  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** scholar, poet, critic and editor  
**Area of activity:** Eisteddfod; Literature and Writing; Poetry; Printing and Publishing; Scholarship and Languages  
**Author:** Thomas Parry

Born at Gorffwysfa, Bethel, Caernarfonshire, 14 February 1881, son of John and Jane Elisabeth Griffith. He was educated at Bethel elementary school and Caernarfon County School, where he was one of the first entrants when the school was opened in 1894. He entered Jesus College, Oxford, in 1899, and read English Literature. In 1904 he was appointed Assistant Master at Beaumaris Grammar School, and in 1906 Lecturer in Celtic under [Thomas Powel](#) at University College, Cardiff. The years 1915-18 he spent as an officer in the navy, and on being demobilised he was appointed Professor to succeed [Powel](#), who had retired in 1918. He remained in the chair until his retirement in 1946. In 1943 he successfully contested the University of Wales seat in Parliament as a Liberal, in spite of having been a prominent member of the Welsh Nationalist Party (as it was then called), defeating [Saunders Lewis](#), the Nationalist Party candidate. He retained the seat until 1950, when university seats were abolished.

Gruffydd's main field of interest as a scholar was the Four Branches of the Mabinogi. As early as 1914 he published a substantial article in the *Transactions of the Cymmrodorion* under the title 'The Mabinogion'. His major contribution, *Math vab Mathonwy*, a discussion of the fourth branch, appeared in 1928, to be followed after a long interval by *Rhiannon* in 1953, in which the first and the third branches were investigated. The aim was to unravel the various strands that had formed the tales and discover how they were linked together.

Another aspect of Gruffydd's scholarship was his study of the history of Welsh literature. His first book was *Llenyddiaeth Cymru o 1450 hyd 1600* (1922), which, in spite of its title, dealt with the strict metre poetry only. Next came *Llenyddiaeth Cymru, Rhyddiaith o 1540 hyd 1660* (1926). Though 'a series of volumes on Welsh Literature' was promised, only these two appeared. They were very useful in schools and colleges. In 1929 Gruffydd edited a reprint of *Perl mewn Adfyd* by [Huw Lewys](#) (1595), and a bilingual booklet on [Dafydd ap Gwilym](#) appeared in 1935. He published four anthologies of poetry. The first was *Cywyddau Goronwy Owen* (1907). *Y Flodeugerdd Newydd* (1909) was a selection of *cywyddau* of the poets of the gentry, meant as a textbook for students rather than a meticulous work of scholarship. *Blodeuglwm o Englynion* (1920) included, in addition to the *englynion*, an introduction explaining a theory of [John Rhys](#) that the *englyn* was an adaptation in Welsh of the Latin elegiac couplet (a theory refuted by [J. Morris-Jones](#) in his *Cerdd Dafod*). In 1931 *Y Flodeugerdd Gymraeg* appeared, an anthology of poetry in the free metres of the period between the seventeenth and the twentieth centuries, with an introduction which is interesting for the light it throws on the principles of literary criticism adopted by the editor. Two lectures were published in pamphlet form - *Ceiriog* (1939) and *Islwyn* (1942).

Gruffydd was better known to his fellow-countrymen as a poet than as a scholar. He competed unsuccessfully for the crown at the national eisteddfod at Bangor in 1902 with a poem on the subject 'Trystan ac Esyllt', but was awarded the prize at the London eisteddfod of 1909 for his poem on 'Yr Arglwydd Rhys'. Love lyrics by him appeared in the periodical *Cymru* in 1900, and in the same year he and his friend [R. Silyn Roberts](#) published a collection of their poems under the title *Telynegion: Caneuon a Cherddi*, Gruffydd's own poems, followed in 1906. In 1923 *Ynys yr Hud a chaneuon eraill* appeared, containing poems written between 1900 and 1922. A selection of the poems which the author wished to preserve entitled *Caniadau* was published by the Gregynog Press in 1932. Gruffydd's poetry varies greatly in style and quality. The early works are often luscious, with echoes of Heine (and some translations) and of the English Romantic poets. There are also early examples, as in 'Cerdd yr Hen Chwarelwr', of his unaffected style. There are instances of stereotyped social comment, as in 'Y Pharisead' and 'Sionyn'. Later Gruffydd developed a more direct idiom and a more truly critical attitude, as in 'Gwladys Rhys' and 'Thomas Morgan'. It is somewhat surprising that in his final selection for the Gregynog volume in 1932 he included examples both of cloying nostalgia and bitter onslaughts. His best poems are a valuable contribution to Welsh poetry, and the long poem 'Ynys yr Hud' is one of the outstanding products of the twentieth-century revival.

Gruffydd's prose is of a very high order. His style shows none of the striving after effect and the pedantic expressions found in the works of some writers of his period. His best work is *Hen Atgofion*, first published as articles in *Y Llenor*

between 1930 and 1935, and in book form in 1936. Four additional chapters, but unfortunately no more, appeared in *Y Llenor* between 1936 and 1941. These reminiscences reflect the author's own personality, the men and women of his native parish and the Welsh people at a crucial time in their history, all conveyed with humour and keen discernment. In *Owen Morgan Edwards: Cofiant* (1937) Gruffydd found a subject and a time and place with which he was in full sympathy, and the work equals *Hen Atgofion* as an achievement.

*Y Llenor* was first published in 1922 as a quarterly with Gruffydd as editor, a role which he performed with distinction until 1945 when T.J. Morgan became co-editor until the periodical ceased publication in 1951. All the chief writers of Wales in a rich and productive period in the history of Welsh literature contributed. The editor himself was a frequent contributor of articles on literary criticism and of satirical commentaries on aspects of Welsh life. In 1926 he started his 'Editor's Notes', in which he expressed his views on all those topics which worried him and justified his description of himself as Wales's *enfant terrible*. Among the subjects discussed were the preservation of the Welsh language, religion, the Anglicisation of some classes in Welsh society, corruption in public life, political protest, broadcasting, education at all levels, and in particular the National Eisteddfod. He continually accused the local committees of the Eisteddfod of mismanagement, and criticised the prominence given to people who were out of sympathy with Welsh aspirations, and the growing use of English from the platform. When the reform of the Eisteddfod was taken in hand in 1935 and the Court and the Council established, Gruffydd played a prominent part in the discussions, and henceforth he was closely associated with the Eisteddfod, not only as adjudicator (of the crown poem usually) but also as a member of the Council and as President of the Court from 1945 until his death.

Gruffydd wrote three plays- *Beddau'r Proffwydi*, first performed by members of University College, Cardiff, in 1913, *Dyrchafiad arall i Gymro* (1914) and *Dros y D r* (1928). His translation of Sophocles's *Antigone* was published in 1950. A full bibliography appears in the *Journal of the Welsh Bibliographical Society*, viii, 208-219, ix, 53-4.

He was awarded doctorates honoris causa by the University of Rennes (1946) and the University of Wales (1947), and the medal of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion (1946). His influence on several aspects of Welsh life was great, although his opinions were often the subject of controversy and disagreement, because they were sometimes forcibly expressed and were always the product of an independent mind, which was at times inconsistent. But he was remarkably consistent in his opposition to injustice and dishonesty, which accounts to some extent for the deep respect and affection in which he was held by his friends, and indeed by all who knew him.

He married Gwenda, daughter of John Evans, minister, of Abercarn, in 1909. They had separated several years before his death. They had one son. Gruffydd died 29 September 1954.

## Author

Sir Thomas Parry, (1904 - 1985)

## Sources

*Y Llenor: cylchgrawn chwarterol dan nawdd cymdeithasau Cymraeg y colegau cenedlaethol*, the Editor's memorial number, 1955

T. Robin Chapman, *W.J. Gruffydd* (Cardiff 1992)

Geraint Bowen, *W.J. Gruffydd* (Swansea 1994)

## Further Reading

NLW Archives: [To the Electors of the University of Wales](#)

Wikipedia Article: [William John Gruffydd](#)

## Additional Links

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