

LEWIS, TIMOTHY (1877 - 1958), Welsh and Celtic scholar

Name: Timothy Lewis
Date of birth: 1877
Date of death: 1958
Spouse: Nellie Myfanwy Lewis (née Evans)
Parent: Mary Lewis
Parent: Job Lewis
Gender: Male
Occupation: Welsh and Celtic scholar
Area of activity: Scholarship and Languages
Author: William Beynon Davies

Born 17 February 1877, in a house called Noble Court near Nebo chapel in the village of Efail-wen, Cilymaenllwyd parish, on the border between Pembrokeshire and Carmarthenshire. He was the eldest son and third of seven children of Job and Mary Lewis. The father worked locally in Llwyn'rebol quarry but after the quarry owners failed to pay the workers for six weeks' work in 1880 he decided to go to the coalfield and he found work in a pit in Cwmaman, Aberdare. The family moved there a few years later and became members of Moriah Aman chapel (Congl.). The family was gifted: one son, Edward, became a school teacher in Cwmaman, an organist and conductor of the local ' Cŵr Mawr ' [Cwmaman United Choir]; Daniel, another son, graduated at University College, Cardiff, and became minister of churches in the Clunderwen area, but died aged 34; another son was Thomas John who graduated at University College, Bangor. He was a schoolteacher in Aberdare, and rose to be director of education for Aberdare. The poet, [Alun Lewis](#), was his son.

Most probably Timothy Lewis left school at the age of 13 and worked in the mines until he was 22. It is also likely that he had began preaching by then and set his mind on entering the ministry. In 1899 he was accepted as a probationary student at the Memorial College, Brecon, under whose sponsorship he had two years' preparatory education in an academy at Pontypridd until he entered University College, Cardiff, during autumn 1901. He graduated with honours in Welsh in 1904, and won the chief prize awarded to a student of Celtic during his second and third years. During the year 1904-05 he took a course for intending ministers at the Memorial College but he did not return to complete the course, presumably because neither the opportunity nor the encouragement was offered to him there to continue his study of Welsh.

In 1905 he won a scholarship worth £120 a year at Victoria University, Manchester, where he spent two years as a research student under Prof. John Strachan. He then obtained a scholarship to spend periods with Prof. Heinrich Zimmer at Berlin University and further periods in 1908-09 with Rudolf Thurneysen in Freiburg. Since Strachan had died in September 1907 Timothy Lewis was recalled from Berlin to prepare Strachan's book - *An introduction to early Welsh* - for publication by Manchester University Press. In the dispute and litigation between Strachan's trustees and [J. Gwenogvryn Evans](#) concerning the use, in the book, of Middle Welsh texts for which [Gwenogvryn](#) had the copyright, Timothy Lewis presented evidence on the facts of the case in favour of [Gwenogvryn](#), and in consequence a warm and very close friendship developed between the young student and the latter. By August 1908 the prospects for the future were dark, with his scholarship and savings depleted, but [Evans](#) and two 'anonymous' friends succeeded in raising sufficient funds to enable him to spend another semester with Thurneysen in Freiburg. No longer, he said, did he desire to return and prepare for the ministry, although he had been preaching in churches that had no minister during the intervals when he was not out of Wales, a practice he maintained till his last years. He was also a deacon of the Independent church in Baker Street, Aberystwyth, from 1914 till he retired in 1929.

Although he would have liked to have had a post in the newly established National Library at Aberystwyth, another opening came his way when he was appointed assistant lecturer in Welsh at the University College, Aberystwyth, under [Sir Edward Anwyl](#) in January 1910. After [Sir Edward](#) died in 1914, he collaborated with [T. Gwynn Jones](#) and [T.H. Parry-Williams](#). He had obtained an M.A. degree of Victoria University, Manchester, in 1909 for his work on the Welsh of the laws of [Hywel Dda](#); and in September 1911 he married Nellie Myfanwy (1885 - 1968), youngest daughter of [Beriah Gwynfe Evans](#) and they had two children, a son and a daughter.

At the end of 1915 he joined the army; he was called to the Royal Artillery in 1916, and fought near the Somme and Ypres in 1917 and 1918. He broke a bone in his arm on a raid and found himself by chance in the vicinity of the famous centre of learning in Peronne; he was discharged early in 1919. The following year was a difficult one for him. He had hoped to be appointed to the chair of Welsh at Aberystwyth, but during summer 1920 [T.H. Parry-Williams](#) was selected, which was a great disappointment to a man recently returned from the battlefield. However, he too was promoted in his turn to a new post as reader in Celtic Palaeography, a position he held thereafter till he retired aged 65 in 1943. In 1924 he had hoped to be appointed to the Celtic Chair at Oxford but John Fraser (1882 - 1945) was chosen; after Fraser died he desired to be

appointed so as to secure a 'platform' for about five years from which to publish his theories since the University of Wales was not prepared to acknowledge them, but he was past the age of retirement by then. After retiring he continued to work on early Welsh literature - his favourite field - reading and collecting widely from out-of-the-way books and texts, especially from the works of scholars on the Continent. He planned a series ' *Cyfes Hywel Dda* ' in ten volumes but only two were published (by the author himself) namely *Beirdd a bardd-rin Cymru Fu* (1929) and *Mabinogi Cymru* (1931).

His early work on the vocabulary of the laws was highly commendable, but after gaining a foothold in the university he began to go his own way, particularly after the disappointment of not being appointed to the chair of Welsh. What made his perspective in much of his work unacceptable to scholars of Welsh of the University of Wales was that he was not satisfied with trying to explain the hypothetical philological derivation of words in the tradition of [John Rhys](#) and [J. Morris-Jones](#); but chose instead to search in the language itself, or in cognate or neighbouring languages for words which could have been borrowed into Welsh. Two of his central themes were that the characters of tales of the *Mabinogion* were not the old gods of the Celts but rather that the tales were stories about the plundering which had occurred along the coast of Wales in the ninth and tenth centuries by the Scandinavians; also that it was the stories of the Normans settling in Gwent and Glamorgan that constituted many of the tales of [Arthur](#) and the ' Coraniaid '. In his volume *Beirdd a bardd-rin Cymru Fu* he tried to show that the analysis of [J. Morris-Jones](#) of the bardic system in his book *Cerdd dafod* was totally misleading since patterns for many of the Welsh metres and poetical terms are to be found in English and Medieval Latin. Some of his theses were mocked by some scholars and were totally ignored by others. However, many people wrote to him expressing their pleasure that he had defended ' [Iolo Morganwg](#) ' (Edward Williams, 1747 - 1826) and the Gorsedd and that he was neither ashamed nor afraid of disagreeing with [J. Morris-Jones](#) and [W. J. Gruffydd](#). He corresponded regularly with many friends in the world of scholarship and particularly with [Gwenogvryn Evans](#). The two families became close friends and in the 1920s Timothy Lewis took his family on many occasions to [Gwenogvryn](#) and his wife for a holiday.

He himself was an exceptionally charming man, as can be seen from the fact that he wrote to his father's aged sister at home in Cwmaman at least once a week for years. He could write interestingly on many topics and his mother-in-law wrote in a letter to him that he could have made an excellent newspaper correspondent. He died 30 December 1958 and was buried in Nebo graveyard in his home area of Efail-wen.

He published: *A glossary of mediaeval Welsh Law* (1913); *A Welsh leech book* (1914); *Beirdd a bardd-rin Cymru Fu* (1929); *Mabinogi Cymru* (1931), as well as a number of articles in *Aberystwyth Studies* and in periodicals such as *Wales*, *Y Wawr*, *Y Tyst*, *Y Ford Gron* and others. He also distributed studies under the title ' Aberystwyth Revisions ' in duplicated typescripts.

Author

William Beynon Davies, (1908 - 1987)

Sources

Personal acquaintance

letters in the Timothy Lewis collection at N.L.W.

information from the family and from Principal Pennar Davies

W. Beynon Davies in *The National Library of Wales Journal*, 21 (1979), 145-58

Additional Links

NLW Archives: [Timothy Lewis Papers](#)

NLW Archives: [NLW MS 6435E: Timothy Lewis: Beirdd a Bardd-rin Cymru Fu..., gyda nodiadau ac ychwanegiadau](#)

VIAF: [66839363](#)

Wikidata: [Q20567576](#)

Published date: 2001

Article Copyright: <http://rightsstatements.org/page/InC/1.0/>

The Dictionary of Welsh Biography is provided by The National Library of Wales and the University of Wales Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies. It is free to use and does not receive grant support. A donation would help us maintain and improve the site so that we can continue to acknowledge Welsh men and women who have made notable contributions to life in Wales and beyond.

Find out more on our [sponsorship page](#).

