

WATKIN, MORGAN (1878 - 1970), scholar, university professor

Name: Morgan Watkin
Date of birth: 1878
Date of death: 1970
Spouse: Lucy Watkin (née Jenkins)
Parent: Barbara Watkin (née Rhys)
Parent: William Watkin
Gender: Male
Occupation: scholar, university professor
Area of activity: Education; Scholarship and Languages
Author: Edouard Bachellery

Born 23 June 1878 at Pen-rhewllas farm, Mynydd Gelliwastad, Clydach, Glamorganshire, one of the 6 children of William and Barbara (née Rhys) Watkin. One of his brothers was [William Rhys Watkin](#). He attended Pen-clun elementary school, near Rhydypany, and then began work, aged 11, as a door-boy in a colliery. In 1893 he was apprenticed for 3 years to a builder, John Griffiths, in Pontardawe, where he made such an impression that he was paid at the 3rd-year rate at the end of the first year. He worked as a builder in Swansea and the Swansea valley, on the Elan and Clee reservoirs and in Birmingham. He learned French, German and Italian at evening classes. He spent a year in Crookley and used to walk the 4 miles to evening classes in Kidderminster. He gained the first prize in French under F.E. Von Dembski and was placed first of 600 students in the Midland Counties Union of Educational Institutions. He mastered German and taught his teacher Welsh. He moved to Chatham where he was a stonemason in the naval dockyards and learned Latin in his leisure hours. In 1903 he became French teacher at the Birkenhead Institute and then moved to Lime School, Croydon. In 1905 he became French teacher at Howard Gardens School, Cardiff. He followed classes at the University College, Cardiff, and in 1910 graduated with *hons.* in French and Welsh. A university fellowship and the Gilchrist Scholarship enabled him to go to France as 'reader in English' in the Lycée Louis-Le-Grand and reader in English language and literature in the University of Paris. Joseph Vendryes, at the time professor of comparative philology at the university, employed him as a reader in Welsh. He studied Medieval Welsh with Joseph Loth, professor of Celtic at the Collège de France, and phonetics with Abbé Rousselot. He gained his M.A. (Wales) in 1913 for his dissertation on *Ystorya Bown o Hamtwn*, his Licence ès Lettres (Rennes) in 1914 and his Ph.D. *summa cum laude* (Zürich) in 1916. He was appointed to a lectureship in Welsh at Cardiff by [Thomas Powell](#) and (non-stipendary) special lecturer in French by Paul Barbier. From 1917 to 1920 he was professor of French and Italian at Johannesburg School of Mines and Technology, and was appointed in 1920 professor of French and Romance Philology at University College Cardiff. He held the chair of French at University College Swansea from 1948 to 1950. He was dean of the faculty of arts, Cardiff, 1923-25, vice-principal, 1931-33, and chief examiner in French and Italian for the Central Welsh Board for many years. He fought strenuously for the equality of Welsh and English in the University of Wales matriculation examinations and for bilingualism in the Welsh education system. He took particular interest in the Baptist College, Cardiff, and in Tabernacl Baptist church where he was elected an elder in 1926. He was an active member of the Gorsedd of Bards for over 70 years, serving as Administrative Druid from 1959 to 1964. Among the honours awarded him were Officier de l'Instruction Publique, Rennes, 1911; Cavaliere della Corona d'Italia, 1920; Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur, 1932; Commandeur des Palmes Académique, 1965; Docteur ès Lettres, Rennes, 1962, D.Litt. (Wales), 1961.

He was a scholar of the foremost rank in two fields normally studied quite separately in his day, viz. Old French and Medieval Welsh literatures. He was one of the first to realise that the close relationship between the Norman lords and their French-language courts on the Marches and in south Wales and the Welsh lords and their courts had had important effects in both directions: not only did 'Celtic' tales (including *Welsh Arthurian legends*) have great influence on Old French Literature and consequently on all western European literatures, but French culture and language penetrated the Welsh aristocracy and literary circles. The majority of Old French words in Medieval Welsh were borrowed directly, rather than through the medium of English. This is particularly true in the case of Welsh texts (like *Ystorya Bown o Hamtwn*) translated from Old French where the same French word appears in both versions. Morgan Watkin believed he could trace Old French idioms in the syntax of some Medieval Welsh texts. His mastery of palaeography also enabled him to see in the script of the main Welsh MSS., copied in Cistercian houses, the influence of the Old French script of the mother-abbey. It must be acknowledged that Morgan Watkins's thorough knowledge of the Anglo-Norman background sometimes enticed him to go to extremes and to overstate the French influences on native Welsh texts such as *Culhwch ac Olwen*. The French origin of a Welsh word must also be rejected (however plausible the phonetics) if its Celtic cognates reveal its native origin. But, nevertheless, it is probably true that the great mass of French words borrowed into Welsh down to the mid-14th century came directly from French. Watkins's great achievement was to open wide a new window on an important aspect of Welsh literature which had long lain hidden. His successors can re-evaluate the evidence and assess his arguments, but they cannot be ignored.

His main publications are: ' The French linguistic influence in Mediaeval Wales ', *The Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion*, 1920; ' The French literary influence in Mediaeval Wales ', *The Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion*, 1921; with [V.E. Nash-Williams](#), ' A pre-reformation inscribed chalice and paten ', *B.B.C.S.*, 3 (1925); ' Albert Stimmings Welsche Fassung in the Anglonormanische Boeve de Hamtone, an examination of a critique ' in *Studies in French language and mediaeval literature presented to M.K. Pope*; ' Sangnarwy ac oed Kulhwch ac Olwen yn y Llyfr Gwyn ', *B.B.C.S.* 13 (1949); ' Testun Kulhwch a'i gefndir Ffrengig eto ', *ibid* 14 (1950); *Ystoria Bown de Hamtwn, cyfieithiad canol y 13 ganrifo La geste de Bown de Hamtone* (1958); ' The chronology of the Annales Cambriae and the Liber Landavensis on the basis of their Old French graphical phenomena ', *NLW Jnl.* (1960); *La civilisation française dan les Mabinogion* (1962); ' The chronology of the White Book of Rhydderch on the basis of its Old French graphical phenomena ', *NLW Jnl.*, (1964); ' The Book of Aneurin, its Old French remanients, their chronology on the basis of the Old French language ', *ibid.* (1965); ' The chronology of the Black Book of Carmarthen on the basis of its Old French phenomena ', *ibid.* (1965); ' The Black Book of Chirk and the orthographia gallica anglicana, the chronology of the Black Book of Chirk on the basis of its Old French graphical phenomena ', *ibid.* (1966).

He married Lucy Jenkins, Hendy, Pontarddulais (a sister to [John \(Gwili\) Jenkins](#) at Tabernacl chapel, Cardiff in 1911. He died 7 September 1970.

Author

Edouard Bachellery, (1907 - 1988)

Sources

Information from his son, Dr Iestyn Watkin

personal knowledge

Additional Links

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