

## WILLIAMS, Sir IFOR (1881 - 1965), Welsh scholar

**Name:** Ifor Williams  
**Date of birth:** 1881  
**Date of death:** 1965  
**Spouse:** Myfanwy Williams (née Jones)  
**Parent:** Jane Williams (née Hughes)  
**Parent:** John Williams  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** Welsh scholar  
**Area of activity:** Education; Scholarship and Languages  
**Author:** Thomas Parry

Born at Pendinas, Tre-garth, Caernarfonshire, 16 April 1881, the son of John Williams, slate-quarryman, and Jane, his wife. His maternal grandfather was [Hugh Derfel Hughes](#), and [H. Brython Hughes](#) was an uncle of his. After receiving his elementary education at Gelli and Llandygái schools, he entered Friars School, Bangor, in 1894, but stayed only for a year and a term owing to an accident which caused him severe back injuries and left him bedridden for some years. On regaining health he went in 1901 to the preparatory school maintained at Clynnog by the Calvinistic Methodist Connexion for candidates for the ministry, where J.H. Lloyd Williams was the master. From there in 1902 he gained a scholarship to the University College of North Wales, Bangor. He graduated with honours in Greek in 1905, and took honours in Welsh in 1906. Session 1906-07 he spent as Assistant to [John Morris Jones](#) in the Welsh Department and working for his M.A. degree. He was appointed Assistant Lecturer in 1907. In 1920 he was given a personal chair, with the title of Professor of Welsh Literature. On the death of [John Morris-Jones](#) in 1929 the personal chair was discontinued, and Ifor Williams became Professor of Welsh Language and Literature. He retired in 1947.

He became interested early in life in the study of spoken Welsh. He won the prize for an essay on the subject at the national eisteddfod held at Caernarfon in 1906, and lectured frequently on the topic to Welsh societies for many years. He was also interested in place names. In 1907 he contributed notes on local place names to *Y Gwyliwr*, which circulated in his native locality of Tre-garth and Bethesda. He collected material for a Welsh onomasticon, which however was never produced. But he kept up his interest for many years, and produced a very useful little book entitled *Enwau Lleoedd* in 1945. In 1949 at the request of I.A. Richards and O.G.S. Crawford he wrote on 118 of the names which occur in the 'Ravenna Cosmography' (*Archaeologia*, 1949).

Sir Ifor's aim in publishing his early books - *Breuddwyd Maxen* (1908) and *Cyfranc Lludd a Llevelys* (1909) - was a purely practical one, namely the provision of texts for the use of schools and colleges and similarly at a later date *Chwedlau Odo* (1926) and *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi* (1930). *Casgliad o waith Ieuan Deulwyn* (1909), which he edited for the Bangor Welsh MSS Society and which appeared in a limited edition of 200 copies, did not have the same aim. But he returned to his original purpose with *Cywyddau Dafydd ap Gwilym a'i Gyfoeswyr* (1914), produced in collaboration with [Thomas Roberts](#).

He had long been interested in [Dafydd ap Gwilym](#), having discussed his floruit in two articles in *Y Drysorfa* in 1909. This selection of [Dafydd](#)'s poems was the first attempt to restore the text along scholarly lines. From this he proceeded, in a lengthy article in the *Transactions of the Cymmrodorion* 1913-14, to demonstrate how continental literature, through the *clerici vagantes*, had influenced [Dafydd](#). Research into the activities of [Dafydd](#)'s kinsman and friend, [Sir Rhys ap Gruffudd](#), led to the poet who sang [Sir Rhys](#)'s praise, [Einion Offeiriad](#), author of the first treatise on grammar and prosody in the Welsh language (*Cymmrodor*, xxvi). Sir Ifor's studies in this field were new and original and made a valuable contribution to our knowledge of the background of [Dafydd ap Gwilym](#)'s life and work.

It was the same desire to produce texts for the use of students that prompted the publication of *Cywyddau Iolo Goch ac Eraill* in 1925, jointly with [Thomas Roberts](#) and [Henry Lewis](#). Sir Ifor also edited the works of two poets which had been collected by two other scholars - [Dafydd Nanmor](#) (1923) by Thomas Roberts (of Borth-y-gest, not to be confused with the [Thomas Roberts](#) mentioned above), and [Guto'r Glyn](#) (1939) by J. Llywelyn Williams. He published many texts, both prose and verse, in the *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies*. His linguistic pursuits led him to take a passing glimpse at sixteenth century scholars. [William Salesbury](#)'s orthography and vocabulary were the subjects of two articles (*Y Drysorfa*, 1946, 1949). In another article he maintained that the date of publication of the first Welsh printed book was 1547, not 1546 as stated on the title page. (But in this he was mistaken, see *BBCS*, xxiii).

All these studies however were peripheral. The central topic of Ifor Williams's research was the *Hengerdd*, the poetry associated with the names of [Aneirin](#), [Taliesin](#) and [Llywarch Hen](#). It was this poetry, or subjects which shed some light on it, that engaged his attention from the age of 25 until a few years before his death. After graduating in 1906 he took 'Y Gododdin', the poem attributed to [Aneirin](#), the sixth century poet, as the subject of his M.A. dissertation, and published notes on the meanings of some obscure words as early as 1908 (*Y Geninen*, xxvi). There were also articles on the substance of the poem which contained a great deal of information that was new at the time (*Y Beirniad*, 1911, 1912).

But it was a dark and difficult field of study, and before it could be elucidated, the history of Wales and of northern Britain and the state of the Welsh language in the period between the sixth and the tenth centuries had to be examined in great detail. It was this that determined the pattern of Sir Ifor's scholarship throughout his life, a pattern that was both orderly and logical. As a result of a thorough study of [Nennius's](#) *Historia Brittonum*, in which is found the earliest reference to the 'Hengerdd' poets, he made certain important suggestions as to the interpretation of the work (*BBCS*, vi, vii, ix, xi). In a lecture to the Cymmrodorion (*Transactions*, 1946-47), he showed that some of [Nennius's](#) material is derived from folk tales.

It was of supreme importance to know the characteristics of the Welsh language in the early centuries, and this necessitated a very close study of all the contemporary linguistic evidence, such as the glosses found in some old Latin MSS. In following this trail Sir Ifor greatly extended our knowledge of Old Welsh. The best example of his highly perceptive approach to the language in its early period is his discussion of the 'Computus Fragment', a short treatise on the use of two astronomical tables (*B.B.C.S.*, iii). To interpret this piece of prose it was necessary to have not only wide linguistic knowledge but also astute understanding in order to grasp the significance of the background. The inscribed stones of the seventh and the eighth centuries also proved valuable evidence on the state of the language. As a result of these and other studies Sir Ifor gained an incomparable knowledge of the meaning of scores of Welsh words hitherto unexplained. Lexicographical notes by him appeared in various periodicals, especially in the *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies* for thirty five years after the inception of that journal in 1921.

All this immense labour gave Ifor Williams the right to speak with authority on the 'Hengerdd'; he started with the easiest to interpret, namely the *englynion* once thought to be the work of [Llywarch Hen](#). In 1933 he delivered the John Rhys Memorial Lecture to the British Academy, in which he set out his theory about the origin of the *englynion*. The theory was developed in 1935 in the volume *Canu Llywarch Hen*, which contained the text of the poetry with an introduction and copious notes. In view of Sir Ifor's interpretation of the poetry it was unfortunate that the book was called *Canu Llywarch Hen*, which implies that [Llywarch](#) was the author, whereas he was really one of the characters in the story. Furthermore, there is a large number of stanzas which have nothing to do with [Llywarch](#), but rather with Cynddylan ap Cyndrwyn and his sister Heledd. Sir Ifor's theory is that the *englynion* are the remnants of sagas which were partly in verse and partly in prose, and preserved orally. They are nostalgic and elegiac, and tell the story of [Llywarch](#), who is old and has lost all his sons, and of Heledd, who grieves over the devastated court of her brother Cynddylan. Both stories are dated around 850. (It should be said that some modern scholars do not accept this theory).

Ifor Williams's major achievement was the volume entitled *Canu Aneirin* (1938), in which he interprets the 'Gododdin' as a sequence of short elegies on the members of a small band of 300 men sent by Mynyddawg, lord of Edinburgh, to recapture Catraeth (Catterick today), which was in the hands of the men of Deira, but had formerly been an important civic and military centre. The expedition was a failure. The editor showed that the language of parts of the poem proved that it had been written down in the 9th or 10th century, and had been circulating orally long before that. He also showed that the facts which emerge in the poem are in accordance with what is known of northern England and southern Scotland in the 6th century. It is therefore fair to assume that the battle of Catraeth was fought about 600, and that the gist of the 'Gododdin' commemorates it.

As regards [Taliesin](#), Ifor Williams showed that a poet of that name sang the praises of the kings of Powys and of the North in the sixth century, and that about a dozen of his poems have survived. He also showed that a folk tale about [Taliesin](#) had developed early, and that it was current in Wales until the 16th century at least.

In addition to this valuable work on the early poetry, Sir Ifor interpreted some poems which fall in the 'gap' between the sixth century and the poets of the Princes, such as the elegy on Cynddylan, a poem in praise of [Cadwallon](#), another in praise of the lord of Tenby, 'Armes Prydain', and the *englynion* in the Juvencus MS at Cambridge.

Radio gave Ifor Williams the opportunity to develop his special gift for writing short essays, presenting a scholarly topic in popular terms or philosophising in a light vein. Three collections were published - *Meddwn i* (1946), *I Ddifyrru'r Amser* (1959) and *Meddai Syr Ifor* (1968).

As a devoted scholar he very rarely undertook any public duties apart from serving on learned bodies - as Chairman of the Board of Celtic Studies, 1941-58, President of the Anglesey Historical Society, 1939-54 and of the Cambrian Archaeological Association, 1949. He received the medal of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion in 1938 and was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in the same year. He was knighted in 1947. In 1949 the University of Wales awarded him the degree of LL.D. honoris causa. He was a typical product of Welsh Nonconformity; he took preaching engagements on Sundays regularly for many years. He delivered lectures to Welsh societies in all parts of Wales, and as a lecturer, in public as well as in class, he was adept at keeping his audience interested. As a university teacher his great learning and his skill in presentation impressed and inspired his students.

He married Myfanwy Jones of Cae-glas, Pontllyfni, Arfon, in 1913, and there were two children, a daughter and a son. He died 4 November 1965, and was buried at Brynaerau.

## Author

Sir Thomas Parry, (1904 - 1985)

## Sources

Alun Eirug Davies, 'Bibliography', *Studia Celtica*, 4 (1969)

I. Ll. Foster, *Proceedings of the British Academy* 53 (1969)

Thomas Jones in A. T. Davies, (ed.), *Gwyr Llên ysgrifau beirniadol ar weithiau deuddeg gwr llên cyfoes* (London 1948)

*Y Traethodydd*, 136 (1981)

personal knowledge

## Further Reading

Wikipedia Article: [Ifor Williams](#)

## Additional Links

VIAF: [7517201](#)

Wikidata: [Q1974074](#)

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](#).

