

WILLIAMS, GRIFFITH JOHN (1892 - 1963), University professor and Welsh scholar

Name: Griffith John Williams
Date of birth: 1892
Date of death: 1963
Spouse: Elizabeth Elen Williams (née Roberts)
Parent: Ann Williams (née Griffiths)
Parent: John Williams
Gender: Male
Occupation: University professor and Welsh scholar
Area of activity: Education; Scholarship and Languages
Author: Aneirin Lewis

Born at Cellan Court (the Post Office), Cellan, Cardiganshire, 19 July 1892, the eldest son of John and Anne (née Griffiths) Williams. His younger brother was [Dr David Matthew Williams](#). His father was a blacksmith by trade and since there were five acres of land attached to the house, he kept a couple of cows and a pig as well as being the local postman. He was precentor at Erw Independent chapel for over 50 years and also the church secretary. He died in 1931 at the age of 87. John Williams' father was a descendant of the Davieses, a family of blacksmiths in the Aeron valley, G.J. Williams's mother also came from the Aeron valley, the daughter of Elizabeth Griffiths, who was said to have composed much poetry, though it appears that none of her work has been preserved.

He was educated at the council school, Cellan and on 20 September 1905 he enrolled at Tregaron Intermediate School. He missed a year's schooling early in his career there, having to stay at home to allow his health to improve. That was when he began to help his father with postal deliveries and to take an interest in local history, reading all sorts of books concerning local and general history. There were in his home books such as *Y Gwyddoniadur*, *Hanes y Brytaniaid a'r Cymru*, [Cannwyll y Cymry](#), [Difyr-Gampau Twm Shon Cati](#) and volumes that had been bound from issues of *Cennad Hedd* and *Diwygiwr*. His old teacher S.M. Powell maintained that the seed of the scholar that emerged later was planted during that year, when he was free of the burden of formal education. In 1911 he went to the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth as the holder of the Cynddelw Scholarship. He studied Mathematics, Latin and History, graduating with honours in Welsh in 1914. He spent the following two years as a teacher at Dolgellau County School (1914-15) and at Porth County School, in the Rhondda Valley (1915-16). Then he obtained a research scholarship and returned to Aberystwyth to study Middle Welsh texts, where he was awarded an M.A. degree for a dissertation on 'The verbal forms in the Mabinogion and Bruts'. In the meantime, with the encouragement of [J.H. Davies](#) and with the assistance of an additional scholarship he set about studying the Llanover manuscripts, which were donated to the National Library in 1917. That is how he began to take an interest in the life and work of [Iolo Morganwg](#) (Edward Williams), which became the main field of his research from then until the end of his life. At the national eisteddfod held at Neath in 1918, he won the main essay competition on the subject 'The Bards of Glamorgan to the end of the 18th century'. In 1919 he published articles about the work of [Iolo](#) in *Y Beirniad*. As a result he was awarded a fellowship of the University of Wales so that he could continue his studies in this field. He worked under the supervision of [Sir John Morris-Jones](#) at Bangor during the 1919-20 academic year and spent periods studying manuscripts at the British Museum in London, the Bodleian Library, Oxford and the Free Library, Cardiff, as well as parish records of the Vale of Glamorgan. During this period he also had to defend his scholarship in the public press in the face of fierce attacks by prominent people like [W. Llewelyn Williams](#) who did not wish to hear the truth about the forgeries of [Iolo Morganwg](#). The public bickering caused the organisers of the national eisteddfod at Caernarfon in 1921 to set one particular aspect of [Iolo](#)'s Work, namely his connection with the sixteen *cywyddau* that were contained in the Appendix to *Barddoniaeth Dafydd ab Gwilym* (1789), as the main essay subject. These were the poems that [Iolo](#) sent to London to [Owen Jones](#), 'Owain Myfyr' and [William Owen Pughe](#), the editors of the book, claiming that he had copied them from old manuscripts that had been kept safely in Glamorgan. The three adjudicators were [John Morris Jones](#), [T. Gwynn Jones](#) and [W. J. Gruffydd](#). The only competitor was G.J. Williams who produced a lengthy and careful essay that proved conclusively that [Iolo](#) himself was the author of fourteen of the poems. He fully deserved the prize of £40.

The Eisteddfod successes of G.J. Williams demonstrated the important place of the National Eisteddfod in the life of Wales and its noteworthy contribution to the promotion of Welsh scholarship before the University became established. The Eisteddfod served as a catalyst for G. J. Williams, not only as a scholar but also as a poet. He spoke enthusiastically throughout his life about his first visit to the Eisteddfod, when his father took him to Carmarthen in 1911, immediately before going as a student to Aberystwyth. He enjoyed competing during the following ten years and he won in the Corwen eisteddfod of 1919 on the three lyric poems, the sonnet, the poetic composition for recitation and for the composition of verses for the harp. In Barry in 1920 he won for his lyric poem 'Gwladys Ddu' and his sonnet 'Llanilltud Fawr'. Indeed, during this period he was quickly becoming an important poet and among his papers there was a sizeable volume of poems in his

wife's handwriting. But he gave up writing poetry to concentrate on his research on [Iolo](#) and his work following his appointment in 1921 as a lecturer in the Department of Welsh at the University College, Cardiff. His later tendency was to look back on his poems as a boyhood amusement.

He threw himself into his work as a lecturer and in 1946 he succeeded [W. J. Gruffydd](#) in the Chair of Welsh, because by this time he had developed into one of the foremost Welsh scholars of his day. In order to separate the chaff from the wheat in the vast learning and abundant imagination of [Iolo Morganwg](#), he set about mastering every aspect of knowledge about the Welsh language and its literary tradition. Consequently, he made a brilliant contribution in many fields. *Gramadegau'r Penceirddiaid* (1933) is a standard work on the grammar of poets in the middle ages with an authoritative preface on the manuscripts and the education of the bards. He undertook a thorough study of the work of the Welsh scholars of the Renaissance producing in 1930 editions of [William Middleton's](#) *Barddoniaeth neu Brydyddiaeth* (1593) and [Henri Perri's](#) *Egluryn Phraethineb* (1595). But his masterpiece in this field was his expert editing of [Gruffydd Robert's](#) *Welsh grammar of 1567* (1939), a work that entailed research at the Biblioteca Ambrosiana in Milan and other libraries in Italy. He also made original contributions to the literature and learning of the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. His publications include standard studies of the work of [Stephen Hughes](#), [Charles Edwards](#), [Edward Lhuyd](#), [William Owen Pughe](#) and others. He drew attention to the important key role of London Welsh societies, especially the Cymmrodorion and the Gwyneddigion, in the development of the Welsh literature of the modern period. He showed how they were following the critical principles of [Goronwy Owen](#) and the classical movement of the 18th century and how they founded the modern eisteddfod as a means of producing literature and promoting scholarship.

He also maintained that Gorsedd Beirdd Ynys Prydain was [Iolo's](#) creation and that the antiquity that he claimed for it was fictional. Nevertheless, the *gorsedd* romanticised the *eisteddfod* and made it a popular movement among the common people in the second half of the 19th century, which had a profound influence on the growth of national consciousness and the development of literature and culture in Wales. Without doubt, G.J. Williams's work on the literary tradition of Glamorgan was his most substantial. In 1926 he published his winning essay of 1921 under the title *Iolo Morganwg a chywyddau'r Ychwanegiad. Traddodiad llenyddol Morgannwg* that appeared in 1948 was at first intended to be the preface to the biography of [Iolo](#), but it grew into a volume in excess of three hundred pages. When he was on the point of making a serious attempt to construct a final version of his revised biography, between 1953 and 1955, one of [Iolo's](#) descendants, [Iolo Aneurin Williams](#) donated to the National Library boxes of letters and pamphlets written by [Iolo Morgannwg](#). These had been in the possession of the family in Middlesborough and north-east England and in Kensington, but had been missing until a sister of [Iolo Aneurin Williams](#) inherited the house in which the family had lived before its sale to another family. She came across the manuscripts in a chest, which had been left in a shed in the garden before the sale of the property. After mastering this additional material, *Iolo Morganwg: y gyfrol gyntaf* appeared in 1956. Alas, this was the only volume of the planned biography that he wrote.

Although he retired from the Chair of Welsh at Cardiff in 1957, he did not wish to confine himself to concentrating on the completion of the biography of [Iolo](#). He continued to edit *Llên Cymru*, the half-yearly journal that he was primarily responsible for founding in 1950 as a vehicle for publishing the product of research into the history of Welsh literature. In 1959 he delivered the O'Donnell lecture in the colleges of the University of Wales. His subject was 'Edward Lhuyd', a work that entailed much research at Oxford. He adjudicated at the national eisteddfod and lectured to local societies and in 1960 he was elected the first president of the Welsh Academy. He also gave much time to research into the history of individual works, by virtue of his membership of the editorial board of the *Dictionary* of the University of Wales. He took great pride in the fact that R.J. Thomas (1908 - 1976), one of the most brilliant of his former students, had dedicated the whole of his career to serving the *Dictionary* as Editor and he was generous in giving him help and support. Also, between 1959 and 1961, he was chairman of the St Fagan's Folk Museum Committee taking great interest in the development of the Department of Oral Tradition and Dialects. However, during 1962 he had arranged all his transcripts, notes and indexes on [Iolo](#) and his works and was ready to commence work on the second volume. [Iolo Morgannwg](#) was his chosen subject when he was invited to deliver the annual lecture of the B.B.C. Welsh Home Service before an audience in Cowbridge, Glamorgan, in the spring of 1963. Alas, he delivered it only to his wife in the quietness of his study, because as he was amending the wording of the final paragraph, he was taken ill at his desk and he died within a few days on 10 January 1963.

In 1922 G.J. Williams married Elizabeth Elen Roberts of Blaenau Ffestiniog, a fellow student in the college at Aberystwyth (1910-14) who taught Welsh at the girls' county school, Treforest, Pontypridd (1914-18) and at Ebbw Vale county school, Monmouthshire (1918-22). They had no children and she died in St. David's Hospital, Cardiff on 31 January 1979 after only a few days illness. She provided great support and practical help to her husband throughout his career, possessing a great concern for the Welsh language and the whole of the life of Wales. They both had a passionate desire to serve their country and their nation. They made their home from 1922 to 1933 at 9 Bedwas Place, Penarth, and it was there on 7 January 1924, that [Saunders Lewis](#) and [W. Ambrose Bebb](#) came together to found a 'new Welsh movement', to decide on fundamental principles and to choose [W. Ambrose Bebb](#) as President of the movement, [Saunders Lewis](#) as Secretary and G.J. Williams as Treasurer. This was the south Wales strand that joined with the strand from north Wales to establish the Welsh National Party (Plaid Cymru) at the national eisteddfod at Pwllheli in August 1925.

In 1933, they moved to Bryntaf, Gwaelod-y-garth, and in her will Mrs Williams left this house to Plaid Cymru. Additionally, in 1968 she presented a substantial sum of money to the National Union of Teachers of Wales in order to establish a trust to help disadvantaged children who were Welsh-speaking. The Charity Commission approved the objectives and over the years the ' Bryn Taf Trust ' has assisted a number of children from different parts of Wales.

G.J. Williams was a lifelong avid collector of old Welsh books and he possessed a magnificent library that included treasures like his two copies of parts of [William Salesbury's](#) *New Testament, Y Drych Cristianogawl* (1585), [Thomas Evans](#) Hendre Forfudd's copy of the *Grammar* of [Siôn Dafydd Rhys](#) (1592) that had belonged to [William Maurice](#) of Llansilin, together with many other rare books from the 17th and 18th centuries. G.J. Williams's library and papers, together with his shelves, cupboards and desk are now in the National Library.

A list of his publications can be found in *Agweddau ar hanes dysg Gymraeg*, ed. Aneirin Lewis, Cardiff, 1969, 279-86.

Author

Aneirin Lewis, (1924 - 1989)

Sources

Personal research

Aneirin Lewis in *Dysg a dawn cyfrol goffa Aneirin Lewis* (Cardiff 1992), ed. W. Alun Mathias and E. Wyn James, 30-37, 67-81
Ceri W. Lewis, *Griffith John Williams (1892-1963) y dyn a'i waith*

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