

PARRY, Sir THOMAS (1904-1985), scholar, Librarian of the National Library of Wales, University Principal, poet

Name: Thomas Parry
Date of birth: 1904
Date of death: 1985
Parent: Jane Parry (née Williams)
Parent: Richard Edwin Parry
Gender: Male
Occupation: scholar, Librarian of the National Library of Wales, University Principal, poet
Area of activity: Education; History and Culture; Literature and Writing; Poetry; Scholarship and Languages
Author: Derec Llwyd Morgan

He was born on 4 August 1904, the eldest of the three sons of Richard Edwin Parry, quarryman and smallholder, and his wife Jane (née Williams) at Brynawel, Carmel, Caernarfonshire. Richard Parry's father had married three times: a son from the first marriage was **Robert Williams Parry's** father; a son from the second marriage was **T. H. Parry-Williams**'s father. So Thomas Parry was a younger cousin of both **Williams Parry** and **Parry-Williams**: together they formed a notable trinity in twentieth-century Welsh literary history and scholarship. From the Infants' School in Carmel he went to Penforddelen elementary school, which John William Jones (later John Gwilym Jones, the playwright and literary critic) also attended; they became lifelong friends. From there Thomas Parry went to the County School at Pen-y-groes. In 1922 he won an Entrance Scholarship to the University College of North Wales, Bangor, where he enjoyed the company of literary-minded fellow-students. He won the Crown at the Inter-collegiate Eisteddfod in 1923, and both the Chair and the Crown in 1924. 1924 also saw the publication of several of his lyrics in *Barddoniaeth Bangor*. Absent for most of his second year because he contracted scarlet fever and pleurisy, he graduated a year late, in 1926, with First Class honours in Welsh. His supplementary subject was Latin. He was immediately appointed to an assistant lectureship in Welsh and Latin at the University College of South Wales and Monmouthshire, Cardiff. There, as well as lecturing in two departments, in 1929 he finished his MA thesis on "The Life and Work of Siôn Dafydd Rhys". There also he met Enid, the only daughter of Mr and Mrs Picton Davies, whom he married 20 May, 1936.

In 1929, on the death of **Sir John Morris-Jones**, Thomas Parry was appointed lecturer in his old Department at Bangor, now headed by **[Sir] Ifor Williams**. There, the vigorous and versatile young scholar flourished. His early publications include numerous articles on **Siôn Dafydd Rhys** and his Grammar, editions of several medieval Welsh texts, *Peniarth 49* in 1929, *Theater du mond* in 1930 and *Sant Greal* in 1933, a translation (with R. Hughes) of *Hedda Gabler* (1930), and the awdl "Mam" written for the Chair competition in the Aberafan National Eisteddfod, published as 'the best awdl according to **Dr. T. H. Parry-Williams**' in *Cerddi'r lleiafrif*, 1932. It was during these years that he began to publish song-lyrics, translations and adaptations for the most part. He had been musical from boyhood, but it's likely he used that talent in this particular way under his future wife's influence. The most original of his scholarly works in the 1930s was *Baledi'r ddeunawfed ganrif*, 1935, a biased, amusing and caustic study of popular eighteenth-century poetry originally prepared as the Annual Welsh Lectures at UCNW.

But this prolific young scholar during these years had also begun to work on another, vast subject, editing the works of **Dafydd ap Gwilym**. The only book of **Dafydd's** poems then available was a selection, what Parry called **Ifor Williams's** 'handy little edition' of 1921. He began the work in 1929. He also began to study topics germane to **Dafydd's** poems, studies that produced the remarkable articles on medieval poetic development, "Twf y gynghanedd" (1936), "Dosbarthu'r llawysgrifau barddoniaeth" (1937) and "Datblygiad y cywydd" (1939). By the beginning of the Second World War Thomas Parry had seen all the important manuscripts that contained **Dafydd's** work, but, because of the closure of the major libraries and also because of petrol rationing, 'hundreds of copies were still unseen'. After 1945 he carried on his researches, decided on the canon, classified and listed all the variant readings of the poems, and wrote his introduction and notes. When the eight-hundred page *Gwaith Dafydd ap Gwilym* was published in 1952 it was immediately recognized as one of the masterpieces of Welsh scholarship. Thomas Parry was awarded the degree of DLitt by the University of Wales. In 1959 he was elected a Fellow of the British Academy.

His other masterpiece of the Bangor period is *Hanes Llenyddiaeth Gymraeg hyd 1900*, 1944. With the nonchalance and bluntness that characterized him, Thomas Parry claimed more than once that he wrote this book, the first comprehensive history of Welsh literature by a professional scholar, in the middle of the war because it was something he could do by the fire at home! It's been an indispensable book for students and other readers till this day. I call it a masterpiece 'of the Bangor period' not only because it was written there, but also because its main themes reiterate the main theories of **Sir John Morris-Jones**, the extremely influential founder of the Bangor Welsh Department, the emphasis on 'the long and marvellous tradition' of praise in Welsh literature, the scholarship that sustained that unified tradition, and the emphasis on what the rhetorician would call adornment, the brilliance of cynganedd and the glorious use of the Welsh language. In 1945 Parry published a brief study of contemporary literature, *Llenyddiaeth Gymraeg, 1900-1945*, and in 1948 another, much briefer, outline history of Welsh literature, *Hanes ein Llên, braslun o hanes llenyddiaeth Gymraeg o'r cyfnodau bore hyd heddiw*. The 1944 volume was translated into English by **Sir Idris Bell** and published in 1955 under the title *A history of Welsh Literature* (which included a chapter on twentieth-century literature by the translator himself). In 1961 Thomas Parry wrote a monograph on **John Morris-Jones**.

He published many other works as well during the Second World War. In 1939 he compiled and published an index of the works of **[Sir] Ifor Williams**, his Head of Department. In the same year, jointly with E. Curig Davies, he published a volume of general knowledge for children, *Gwybod, llyfr y bachgen a'r eneth*. He produced the tenth in a series of Pamphlets for Welsh Pacifists (*Tystiolaeth y Tadau*, 1942), he wrote a booklet on Eisteddfod y Cymry (1943), and co-edited with **Cynan** a compendium mainly for Welsh men and women in the forces, *Cofion Cymru at ei phlant ar wasgar*, 1941-44. For a couple of years during 'that time of affliction', as he called it, in the absence through illness of the College's Registrar he acted as Secretary to the Senate. A few years later, on **Sir Ifor's** retirement, he was appointed to the Chair of Welsh, 'of all my appointments the one that gave me most pleasure'. His reforms of the Welsh course gave him great satisfaction, as did the literary work he undertook partly to meet the cultural demands of his students, in particular the translation of T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the cathedral* as *Lladd wrth yr allor* (1948), and the verse play *Llywelyn Fawr* (1954), 'which' - to quote him - 'is much better as poetry than drama'. These years saw him serve as Dean of Faculty and as Vice-Principal, appointments that gave him 'a foretaste of the prohibited fruits of administrating'.

That ironic prickly comment is a measure of his impatience with some fellow-Welshmen who despised administrating, those who could not understand how a promising young poet could abandon the muse for scholarship, and those some years later who could not understand how such a great scholar could become a head of an institution. For in 1953 he accepted an invitation to become Librarian of the National Library in Aberystwyth. The most important event of his reign there was Queen Elizabeth's opening of the new Book Stack in 1956. Compared to later periods, the Librarianship at that time was not too onerous. Thomas Parry notes that he had enough time there 'to read the publications of Welsh scholars and many other things' (he was Chairman of the National Eisteddfod Council in the early 1950s); and it was there that he did most of the preparatory work for *The Oxford book of Welsh verse* published in 1962.

After five years in the Library he was appointed Principal of the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth. He was bitterly disappointed that someone else had been appointed to succeed **Sir Emrys Evans** as Principal of Bangor, a man with whom he'd worked 'closely and most amicably' for many years, and one who had shown him much sympathy and help when 'he was a conscientious objector during the war'. No doubt the governors at Bangor didn't want to show him that sympathy. In Aberystwyth he had to reshape the ship after **Goronwy Rees**'s unorthodox captaincy; he had to preside over the enlargement of the university college as part of the extraordinary expansion of the British university sector in the 1960s; and, during his first Vice-Chancellorship of the University of Wales, 1961-1963, he had to deal with the University's federality. Academically, Aberystwyth thrived under his leadership; socially and corporately, although the Arvonian Puritan now and again found it very difficult to put up with the mores and the customs of the liberal youth of that period, he was a fair, upright principal to staff and students. He was a successful university administrator, almost universally respected. But there was something of an uproar because of his independent stand on the question of the University. The Commission that met between 1961 and 1964 to consider the University of Wales's federality produced two final reports, the one, by people who were mostly incomers to Wales, recommending its disbandment and the establishment of four unitary universities in its stead, the other, by native Welshmen, recommending its retention and reform. Thomas Parry would have been expected to cast his lot with the second group. What he produced was a Statement to the effect that the Commission's 'terms of reference' asked for a report, not for recommendations. During his last term as Principal, Aberystwyth was always in the limelight because Charles, then designate Prince of Wales, was there as a student. The most important role he fulfilled outside Aberystwyth was his chairmanship of a committee on the future of university libraries established in 1963 by the University Grants Committee. Considering the value of its analysis and recommendations, it's good to note that the UGC's Report of the Committees on Libraries, 1967, is known as the Parry Report.

When he retired from the Principalship in 1969, he was elected to the Presidency of the National Library, an office he held for ten years. In 1970 he was made LLD honoris causa by the University of Wales. He had already been made an honorary DLittCelt by the National University of Ireland in 1968. Further honours followed: in 1976 he was

awarded the Medal of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion (and made President of the Society from 1978 to 1982), and in 1978 he was knighted.

But this formidably industrious man did not retire merely to enjoy honours. He was Chairman of Cwmni Theatr Cymru at a difficult juncture. He regularly wrote articles and reviews, he continued to adjudicate at the National Eisteddfod (as he had done throughout his career), and he was called upon to act as a leading consultant to several significant projects. He co-edited *Llyfryddiaeth Llenyddiaeth Gymraeg*, 1976, with Merfyn Morgan. Until his death he was the Chairman of the Literature Committee of the New Welsh Bible that was published in 1988. And for many years he was one of the chief consultants for the major *Companion to the literatures of Wales* (ed. Meic Stephens), until he completely lost patience with it because it contained 'much stuff that has nothing at all to do with the literature of Wales, Welsh or English.'

He was unflinchingly plainspeaking: his tongue like his fountain-pen could be very sharp. His bearing alone was enough to frighten some people, and his criticism was scathing. But he also enjoyed leg-pulling and witty repartee. If he had not become a scholar, he could have earned his living as a carpenter or a book-binder: in the few chapters of autobiography he wrote (see the opening chapters of *Amryw Bethau*, 1996), he writes admiringly of the craftsmen he knew in his native Arfon and his mother's home-land of Llŷn. To those chapters, add Ty a thyddyn, the Penygroes Library Annual Lecture for 1971-72, in which he exalts the people and the land that gave him his singlemindedness, his diligence and his standards, his wit also. *Amryw Bethau* contains a great body of tributes and memorials to those, writers and scholars mostly, who included him in their collegium. He was a scholar prince who never forgot his people, his peers or their essential institutions.

He died 22 April 1985 at Bangor; his funeral was on 24 April. His wife, Enid Parry, died 21 January 1998. Their remains are in the cemetery of Bangor Crematorium.

Author

Derec Llwyd Morgan

Sources

Thomas Parry's papers and most of his correspondence are at the National Library of Wales

J. E. Caerwyn Williams's introduction to *Amryw Bethau* (1996), and the chapters of autobiography there

J. E. Caerwyn Williams, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 73 (1987), 567-89

Bedwyr Lewis Jones, "Syr Thomas Parry 1904-1985," *Transactions of the Caernarfonshire Historical Society*, 1985

The Times 24 April 1985

information from Gruffudd Parry's family and from Meic Stephens and J. Gwynn Williams

Further Reading

Wikipedia Article: [Thomas Parry](#)

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