

## WILLIAMS, JOHN ELLIS CAERWYN (1912-1999), Welsh and Celtic scholar

**Name:** John Ellis Caerwyn Williams  
**Date of birth:** 1912  
**Date of death:** 1999  
**Parent:** Maria Williams (née Price)  
**Parent:** John R. Williams  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** Welsh and Celtic scholar  
**Area of activity:** Scholarship and Languages  
**Author:** Robert Geraint Gruffydd

He was born 17 January 1912, in Gwauncaegurwen, Glamorganshire. His father's name was John R. Williams, his mother's maiden name was Maria Price; they had a son, Keri, and a daughter, Morfudd, as well as Caerwyn. His father was a coal-miner who had migrated south from Y Groeslon, Caernarvonshire in search of work, his mother came from Ammanford, Carmarthenshire; Caerwyn was glad that he had connexions with both North and South Wales. In 1946 he married Gwen Watkins of Abertridwr, Glamorganshire, a school-teacher, and their marriage sustained them both throughout their lives; they had no children. Caerwyn had excellent secondary schooling at Ystalyfera County School, where he concentrated on Welsh and Latin, gaining the highest marks in the whole of Wales in his Welsh examination for his Higher School Certificate in 1930. He proceeded to the University College of North Wales, Bangor, where he graduated with Upper Second Class Honours in Latin in 1933 and First Class Honours in Welsh in 1934; he gained his MA degree for a thesis on two Middle Welsh religious prose texts, both of which were translated from Latin, in 1936. After three years as a Teaching and Research Assistant in the Department of Welsh, he was awarded a University of Wales Fellowship which enabled him to spend two years in Dublin, where he laid the foundations of his profound Irish learning. He returned to Wales in 1941, embarking on a course of study for the ministry of the Presbyterian Church of Wales at the denomination's Theological College at Aberystwyth, from which he graduated BD with Distinction in Church History and *New Testament* Greek in 1944; this was followed by a year's course of pastoral studies at Bala Theological College. Rather than entering the pastoral ministry in 1945, however, - although he preached occasionally, with deep conviction, for the rest of his life - he was persuaded to join Bangor's Department of Welsh as a Lecturer, advancing to a Senior Lectureship in 1951 and to a Professorship and Headship of Department in 1953. In 1965 he was invited to become the first incumbent of the newly-established Chair of Irish at the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, where he remained until his retirement in 1979. Before retiring he had undertaken the Directorship of the newly-founded Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies in Aberystwyth, and his oversight of that Centre, first as Director (until 1985) and then as Consulting Editor, was fundamental to its success. He was awarded the Honorary Degrees of D.Litt.Celt. by the National University of Ireland in 1967 and D.Litt. by the University of Wales in 1983. He was Chairman of Yr Academi Gymreig (the Welsh Academy) between 1966 and 1975 and was elected Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries in 1975 and Fellow of the British Academy in 1978 (gaining the Academy's Derek Allen Prize in 1985); in 1990 he was made an Honorary Member of the Royal Irish Academy. Two Festschriften were presented to him (the latter of the two posthumously): *Bardos* (ed. [R. Geraint Gruffydd](#), 1982) and *Cyfoeth y Testun* (ed. I. Daniel et al., 2003).

Caerwyn Williams was undoubtedly one of the world's foremost Celtic scholars during the second half of the twentieth century. He mastered all the Celtic languages and their literatures and published extensively on many of them. The bibliography of his works prepared by Mr Gareth O. Watts (in *Bardos*, 1982) and by Dr Huw Walters (in *Y Traethodydd*, CLIV, 1999) lists well over five hundred items. Here it must suffice merely to note the following titles: *Traddodiad llenyddol Iwerddon* [*The literary tradition of Ireland*], 1958 (versions in Irish, 1978, and in English, 1992); *Edward Jones Maes-y-plwm*, 1963; *Poems of Taliesin*, 1968; *Y Storiwr Gwyddeleg a'i Chwedlau* [*The Irish Story-teller and his Tales*], 1972; *The Poets of the Welsh Princes*, 1978, 1994 (revised edition entitled *The Court Poet in Medieval Wales*, 1997); *Geiriadurwyr y Gymraeg yng Nghyfnod y Dadeni* [*Welsh lexicographers during the Renaissance period*], 1983; *Diwylliant a Dysg* [*Culture and Scholarship*] ed. Brynley F. Roberts, 1996. He was also an outstanding editor of periodicals and of monograph series: he edited *Y Traethodydd* 1965-99; *Ysgrifau Beirniadol* 1965-99; *Studia Celtica* 1966-99; the 'Llên y Llenor' Series, 35 volumes, 1983-2000. But perhaps his most enduring editorial feats were as Consulting Editor of *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru* [*The University of Wales Dictionary of the Welsh Language*], 1970-99, and the Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies *Poets of the Princes* Series, 8 volumes, 1991-6: Caerwyn, together with Professor Peredur Lynch, was responsible for the whole of Volume I of this series, *Gwaith Meilyr Brydydd a'i Ddisgynyddion* [*The Work of Meilyr Brydydd and his Descendants*], 1994. He was also able to oversee the launch of the *Poets of the Nobility* Series of the Centre, 15 volumes, 1994-2000.

Caerwyn and Gwen were a handsome pair, always impeccably dressed, and their outer seemliness somehow reflected their inner harmony. They were extremely hospitable, and always deeply interested in other people, particularly Caerwyn's

colleagues and students and their families. Caerwyn died of cancer in Bronglais Hospital, Aberystwyth, 8 June 1999, and was cremated 12 June 1999 at Aberystwyth Crematorium where his ashes were interred. Gwen died on 19 November 1999, a little more than five months after her husband. There is a photograph of J.E. Caerwyn Williams in *Bardos* and a portrait by Ifor Davies in the Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies in Aberystwyth.

## Author

Professor Robert Geraint Gruffydd

## Sources

*Who was who?*X 1996-2000, 619-20, London, 2001

D. Ellis Evans, 'J.E.C.Williams 1912-1999', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, CXI, 696-716, London, 2001

P. Mac Cana, 'Nécrologie: J.E.C.Williams, 1912-1999', *Studia Celtica*, XXXIII, 354-7, Cardiff, 1999

*Y Traethodydd*, CLIV, Caernarfon, 1999

Personal knowledge

## Further Reading

Huw Walters, 'Yr Athro Emeritws John Ellis Caerwyn Williams, 1912-1999: Llyfryddiaeth 1980-1999', *Y Traethodydd*, 154 (Hydref 1999), pp.257-76

Wikipedia Article: [J. E. Caerwyn Williams](#)

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