

DAVIES, WILLIAM THOMAS (PENNAR) (1911-1996), novelist, poet, theologian and scholar

Name: William Thomas (pennar) Davies

Date of birth: 1911

Date of death: 1996

Spouse: Rosemarie Davies (née Wolff)

Child: Helen Rhiannon Fleming (née Pennar)

Child: Owain L. Pennar

Child: Hywel Martin Pennar

Child: Geraint Pennar

Child: Andreas Meirion Pennar

Parent: Annie Davies (née Moss)

Parent: Joseph Davies

Gender: Male

Occupation: novelist, poet, theologian and scholar

Area of activity: Literature and Writing; Poetry; Religion; Scholarship and Languages

Author: D. Densil Morgan

Pennar Davies was born in Mountain Ash, Glamorgan on 12 November 1911, only son of Joseph and Annie (née Moss) Davies. He had three sisters. His father was a miner from the Rhondda Valley and his mother from the Anglicized part of Pembrokeshire, English was the language of the home. The family were poor, partly due to Joseph's mining injuries as well as to the depressed state of the industrial regions at the time.

William Thomas ('Pennar' was added as an adopted name in the 1940s) was educated in Mountain Ash primary and secondary schools, University College of South Wales and Monmouthshire, in Cardiff, where he graduated with first-class honours degrees in Latin, in 1932 and in English in 1933. Following a year's Teacher Training he went to Balliol College, Oxford, gaining a research degree B.Litt. In 1936, with a Commonwealth Scholarship, he crossed the Atlantic to study for a PhD in Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut. He returned to Wales in 1938 continuing his studies on Elizabethan Literature as an University of Wales Fellow, in Cardiff.

An agnostic, he rediscovered the Christian faith of his upbringing in 1938 and became a candidate for the Nonconformist ministry with the Welsh Independents. He returned to Oxford, this time to Mansfield College, and between 1940 and 1943 immersed himself in theology under the guidance of Nathaniel Micklem, Principal of Mansfield, and the liberal theologian C. J. Cadoux, church historian and New Testament scholar.

He married Rosemarie Wolff in 1943, a nurse at Oxford and member of the Lutheran Church, who had fled Hitler's Germany because of her Jewish ancestry. The same year he was ordained minister of the English Independent Chapel, Windsor Road, Cardiff.

Until his conversion, he was set on an academic career, but subsequently he sought to combine creative writing with a commitment to promote the well-being of Wales, religiously, socially and culturally. In the early years of the Second World War he was a member of 'Cylch Cadwgan' a group of avant garde writers who met at J. Gwyn Griffiths' home in Pentre, Rhondda Valley. Although his early poems, under the name of 'Davies Aberpennar', were published in English, henceforth he wrote in Welsh.

His volumes of poetry *Cinio'r Cythraul* (1945), his contributions to *Cerddi Cadwgan* (1953), *Naw Wfft* (1957) and *Yr Efrydd o Lyn Cynon* (1961) combined vast knowledge, vivid imagination and innovative discussion of spiritual and love themes. He was appointed to the Chair of Church History at Bala-Bangor College, the Independent Theological College in Bangor in 1946, before taking up the same Chair at Brecon Memorial College in 1950, and promoted Principal in 1952. He was Principal of Swansea Memorial College between 1959 until retiring in 1979.

In addition to his contribution to scholarship (for example, in his daring volume on Celtic Christianity *Rhwng Chwedi a Chredo* (1966), in the 1950s and 1960s creative prose took his attention with the appearance of his novels *Anadl o'r Ucheldir* (1961) and *Meibion Darogan* (1968), along with his collection of short stories *Caregl Nwyf* (1966). The nature of his spirituality was best reflected in his spiritual confessional, *Cudd fy Meiau* (1958). His most accomplished book of poetry, *Y Tlws yn y Lotws*, was published in 1971. There was something unique about his spiritual vision, a type of utopian Pelagianism based on the imitation of Jesus of Nazareth, seen most clearly in his theological volume, *Y Brenin Alltud* (1974). He was prominent in the battle for the Welsh language, and was sentenced by Carmarthen assizes in 1979 for turning off the Pencarreg television transmitter in the campaign to establish a Welsh broadcasting service.

Although he continued to be active following his retirement, his last publications did not convey the same creative energy as previous books, and in his final years he suffered from Alzheimer's disease. In assessing his contribution the polymathic nature of his genius and his enigmatic charm are repeatedly mentioned. He left a huge impression on all he met, not least the generations of students he prepared for the Christian ministry in Wales and beyond. He was undoubtedly one of the most intellectual creative writers of the twentieth century and he was unrelenting in his efforts to ensure the continuation of Christian Welsh-speaking Wales. He had five children, one daughter and four sons, among them **Meirion Pennar**, the academic and poet who died in 2010.

Pennar Davies died in Swansea on December 29 1996.

Author

Sources

'Pennar Davies' In Meic Stephens (ed.), *Artists in Wales* (Llandysul 1971), 120-9

Geoffrey F. Nuttall, 'Pennar Davies (12. November 1911-29 December 1996): complexio oppositorum', *The Journal of the United Reformed Church History Society*, 5 (1997), 574-5

R. Tudur Jones, 'Rhagymadrodd' (Introduction) to Pennar Davies, *Cudd fy Meiau*, 2nd ed., 1998

D. Densil Morgan, *Pennar Davies* (Cardiff 2003)

personal information from Owain Pennar and Mrs Rosemarie Davies

Pennar Davies Papers at the National Library of Wales

Further Reading

Wikipedia Article: [Pennar Davies](#)

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