

HUGHES, ROBERT GWILYM (1910-1997), poet and minister with the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist denomination

Name: Robert Gwilym Hughes
Date of birth: 1910
Date of death: 1997
Gender: Male
Occupation: poet and minister with the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist denomination
Area of activity: Poetry; Religion
Author: D. Ben Rees

Gwilym Hughes was born 17 August 1900 in Bethesda, Caernarfonshire, the second son of Robert John and Elisabeth Hughes. His father hailed from Waen Pentir, and his mother from Trefdraeth in Anglesey. His father worked in the Penrhyn Quarry, after the great strike (1900-1903), and he and his brother, Richard Môn Hughes, experienced at firsthand the poverty that followed the industrial conflict at Bethesda. When he was 4 his family moved to Llonbpty, Bangor where he was surrounded by Welsh-speaking families and the Llonbpty Welsh Calvinistic Methodist Chapel which catered for all ages became his social centre.

Gwilym Hughes was educated at the St Paul Junior School, Bangor where the headmaster T. J. Williams was a well known Welsh children's poet. Following educational reorganisation, he was taught at Cae Top School from 1919 to 1921, where he sat a scholarship for Friars School. This was a school for boys which had a great reputation for its classics-teaching. The headmaster W. St Bodvan Griffith combined expertise in classics as well as in science. R. Gwilym Hughes came under the influence of R. E. Hughes, the Welsh teacher, grandfather of the Welsh author and campaigner, Angharad Tomos. Contemporaries with him at Friars included Dr Carl Witton-Davies, who brought into existence the Council of Christians and Jews; W. R. P. George, poet and solicitor, Huw Wheldon, head of BBC television, and **Professor A. O. H. Jarman**, who was Professor of Welsh at the University College of Wales, Cardiff.

R. Gwilym Hughes was accepted as a student at Bangor university college in October 1928 and he often spoke of his admiration for the scholar **Sir Ifor Williams**, the professor of Welsh, and over the years they became great friends. The scholar wrote him at the end of his life in 1962 a delightful letter from his home in Pontllŷfni where he says: 'I have a longing to see my children of old. Hurry here, and we will have a wonderful conversation.'

Another lecturer from that era who became a loyal friend was **Sir Thomas Parry**. He also admired the scholarship of Professor James Gibson, **Professor T. Hudson-Williams** and the Welsh poet **R. Williams Parry**. He enjoyed the fellowship of a large number of literary-minded students, such as Robert Owen (1908-1972) and **O. M. Lloyd** (1910-1980) and others in the cultural societies and the Inter-College Eisteddfod. Gwilym Hughes graduated in Welsh in 1931 and then began his studies for the degree of BD which he obtained in 1936. He gained an MA for his work on **William Wynn** of Llangynhafal in 1940; part of his dissertation was published in *Llên Cymru* I (1950). He spent a year in pastoral studies at Bala College, under the Reverend Professors **David Phillips** and **G. Arthur Edwards**.

He was ordained at Dolgellau in November 1938, and received a call to two chapels, one at Maentwrog Isaf and the other in Gellilydan. In November 1942 he married Bessie, daughter of Hugh and Margaret Jones, of Gellidywyll farm, Gellilydan after accepting a call to the chapel of Dwyran in the Anglesey Presbytery. The chapel was a successful community centre for the whole parish with meetings held almost every night of the week. He received from there a call to Hyfrydle Welsh Calvinistic Chapel in Holyhead and he moved there in March 1948. This was a delight to him as he could enjoy fellowship with a number of Welsh poets, some from his college days, like Huw Llewellyn Williams and **O. M. Lloyd**, others who had strong links with the denomination, such as the Reverend J. O. Jones (Hyfreithon) and Alun Puleston Jones. He also became a staunch friend of a local solicitor, **Cledwyn Hughes**, who became in the General Election of 1951 the Labour MP for Anglesey. Three of them, all with the surname Hughes - Reverend R. Gwilym Hughes, **Cledwyn Hughes** and his minister Reverend R. Griffith Hughes, of Disgwyllfa Chapel in the town, travelled together in the politician's car, to the Festival of Britain in London in 1951.

R. Gwilym Hughes supported the Labour Party and devolution over the years. He had close links with the Labour Party stalwarts in North Wales, **Goronwy O. Roberts, MP**, **Cledwyn Hughes, MP**, Frank Price Jones, Bangor and **Huw T. Edwards**. There are a number of letters from R. Gwilym Hughes in the Lord Cledwyn Hughes of Penrhos papers at the National Library of Wales. In 1979 his son, R. Meirion Hughes stood as the Labour Parliamentary candidate for West Flint.

The family moved from Anglesey in 1954 to Bethesda, Mold in the Flint Presbytery. There he became a member of the local team in the *Pawb yn ei Dro* in the Radio Wales programme, with the Wesleyan Methodist minister, Ronald Griffith and the Welsh Independent minister and poet, Dafydd Owen. He also was involved in the staunch work done by the Directors of Education in providing Welsh-language education based in those early years on the town of Mold.

Gwilym Hughes received a call in 1961 to Penmount Chapel in Pwllheli, as the successor to the well known minister Reverend Morgan Griffith, and he stayed there until his retirement in 1981. At Pwllheli he became an ecumenical leader and had great satisfaction in pastoring to the children of Penrallt School, to the patients at Bryn Beryl Hospital and the Old People's Hospital in Ala Road. In these two decades he became an outstanding leader of his denomination, representing the Presbyterian Church of Wales with distinction. He published more than one Sunday school text books. He was invited to deliver the Davies Lecture at the General Assembly held at Newtown in 1965, and this was published under the title *Y Weinidogaeth Hon* ('This Ministry'), (Caernarfon, 1967).

From 1942 he had been heavily involved in discussions on the education of ministerial students and on the Presbyterian Ministry. He edited the Poet's Column in the *Goleuad* for 15 years, as well as acting for a period as editor of the weekly denominational newspaper. He was the Moderator of the North Wales Association in 1977-78 and Moderator of the General Assembly in 1978-9.

Retiring to Caernarfon in 1981, he was very much involved in the 1980s in the North Wales Association and in the life of the denomination more generally. From 1982 to 1985 he served on the panel that prepared an Appendix to the 1929 hymnbook of the Welsh Wesleyan and Calvinistic Methodist churches. This 'Appendix' contained 7 of his hymns when it appeared in 1985.

From his college days he had been writing poetry. Six sonnets and one englyn from that period appeared in the volume *Barddoniaeth Bangor 1927-1937* (edited by **J. E. Caerwyn Williams**, Aberystwyth, 1938). He competed more than once for the Crown at the National Eisteddfod of Wales. **Sir Thomas Parry** wrote to him after his poem at the National Eisteddfod of Wales Bangor in 1971 almost gained him the highest accolade: 'It is a great shame that you came so near to the Crown but did not get it', and especially in the city which meant so much to him. His sequence of poems, *'Canaf i'm bro'*, was published in 1971. He came close to winning the crown in 1972 with his poem 'Dadeni' He gained many awards for his poetry in other eisteddfodau, in particular the Anglesey Eisteddfod. A selection of his poems appeared in *Cerddi* (Caernarfon, 1994), but he was a better hymnwriter than poet, and three of his hymns (9, 155, 800) appeared in *Caneuon Ffydd* (2001).

As a pupil of **Sir Ifor Williams** he was himself an excellent editor, and succeeded the Reverend William Morris, as Editor in Chief of the Pantycelyn Press. As a preacher he was always very competent and biblically-based but he was not often invited to the special anniversary preaching festivals of the churches. He loved music (he was a skilled pianist), and his daughter, Carys Hughes (1949-2004), who died prematurely, was a professional organist. Gwilym Hughes died 20 July 1997. After a service at Engedi chapel Caernarfon and he was laid to rest in the new Bangor City Cemetery. He left a wife and three sons and a daughter to mourn.

Author

D. Ben Rees

Sources

R. Gwilym Hughes, *Dwr dan y Bont* (Caernarfon 1994), a volume of reminiscences

Delyth G. Morgans, *Cydymaith Caneuon Ffydd* (Aberystwyth 2006), p.556

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Published date: 2012-05-17

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APA Citation



Rees, D. B., (2012). HUGHES, ROBERT GWILYM (1910-1997), poet and minister with the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist denomination. *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*. Retrieved 9 Nov 2024, from <https://biography.wales/article/s8-HUGH-GWI-1910>

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