

## ROBERTS, GWILYM OWEN (1909-1987), author, lecturer, minister and psychologist

**Name:** Gwilym Owen Roberts  
**Date of birth:** 1909  
**Date of death:** 1987  
**Spouse:** Mary Roberts  
**Child:** Marilee Roberts  
**Parent:** Mary Elisabeth Roberts  
**Parent:** William Owen Roberts  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** author, lecturer, minister and psychologist  
**Area of activity:** Education; Literature and Writing; Medicine; Religion  
**Author:** Llion Wigley

Gwilym O. Roberts (in error, a full middle name was not registered on his birth certificate though his university records have Owen), was born 22 July 1909 in Cerniog, Pistyll, son to William Owen Roberts, a farmer and well known lay preacher, and his wife Mary Elisabeth Roberts, a seamstress. He received his education at Pwllheli County School and then went on to Aberystwyth University in 1929 to study Philosophy and Theology. After graduating BA at Aberystwyth, he followed BD courses at the United Theological College and trained as a Calvinistic Methodist minister at Bala College where he came under the influence of [Professor David Phillips](#), an early admirer of Freudian ideas who made practical use of psychoanalysis on Roberts amongst others (See his article on [Phillips 'Yr Athro Phillips fel Meddyg Meddwl'](#) in [Y Traethodydd](#), 1952).

He was ordained at the Association meeting in Bethesda in September 1938 and was a Methodist minister in Stoke-on-Trent and Manchester in the 1940s. His interest in psychology increased during these years, and he decided to study the subject in more detail. He trained as a clinical psychologist at Leeds University School of Medicine through completing a detailed study of the relationship between three hundred married couples. Some of the results of his research appeared in 1950 in *The Road to Love Avoiding the Neurotic Pattern*, the only volume of his work which was published in English. The book was praised by leading contemporary American psychologists, such as Gordon Allport. Roberts came into personal contact with some of these psychologists after he took a post as a lecturer in clinical psychology at Lewis and Clark College in Portland, Oregon in 1947. He was made a professor during his period in the United States.

He returned to Wales due to family reasons in 1953, with his wife Mary. Their only child, Marilee (the actress Mari Gwilym), was born soon after. He settled in Pontllyfni and lived there for the rest of his life. He taught adults on behalf of the Workers' Educational Association and Bangor University from 1953 until his retirement in the early seventies. He held classes on psychology and religion across North Wales, and he was a popular and charismatic teacher.

But he came to national fame, or notoriety even, in Wales mainly through his weekly column in *Y Cymro*, which was published between 1958 and 1967. He combined his two main interests in the column, namely psychology and religion, in a particularly challenging and modern way. His column angered readers of traditional and orthodox viewpoints. His frank treatment of questions regarding sex and sexuality further enraged his critics.

However, his writings appealed to young people in the sixties in particular, who were increasingly questioning religious doctrines and traditions. This is reflected in the fact that the Lofa, a comparatively new and experimental press, were the only publisher in Wales to print his work. Prominent older figures also supported his ideas, and his most loyal defender was undoubtedly his friend [Professor J. R. Jones. Jones](#) acknowledged his debt to his friend in terms of the development of his theological philosophy regularly in the early sixties. Roberts's column was certainly a key influence on his important pamphlet *Yr Argyfwng Gwacter Ystyr*. The pamphlet shares the same central argument as articles by Roberts from the period which preceded it, namely that the language of religion in Wales, above all else, was now meaningless and irrelevant to the vast majority.

Roberts believed that meaning could be restored to modern life through emphasising that Christianity's essential message agreed with the message which modern psychology preached. The core of this message was the importance of empathy, love and acceptance in the process of maintaining mental health. The main task of both the minister and the psychotherapist was to show individuals that they were accepted and loved, in the same way Jesus showed that God accepted and loved each individual. He believed furthermore that organised religion in Wales had ignored the insights of psychology and psychiatry to a large extent. He discussed a wide range of these revelations in his column in *Y Cymro*, and

he made an invaluable contribution to the study of psychology in the Welsh language. He coined his own terms for some of the key concepts in the field, such as repression and regression. He published many articles in *Y Traethodydd*, *Lleufer* and *Efrydiau Athronyddol*.

Although Freud's work sparked his interest in psychology, and his conviction was that sex was an all-important part of life which should be discussed fearlessly, he was not a blind admirer of his ideas. He used, in contrast, an eclectic range of texts to develop his own unique philosophy, from the work of Neo-Freudians such as Karen Horney and Erich Fromm to the key works in eastern religion. His period in the United States influenced him particularly strongly, when the ideas of pioneering figures in humanistic psychology and client centred therapy, such as Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow, were gaining in popularity. Empathy was the key attribute for the psychotherapist to display in the relationship with his client according to Rogers in particular.

Roberts tried to show in his writings how the latest psychotherapeutic techniques could be married with Christianity. This would not only lift individuals from the hopelessness and lack of meaning which had overcome them, but also transform the hopes of Christianity in Wales through making the churches more responsive to the genuine needs of their audiences. He learnt the techniques of hypnotherapy under the guidance of his colleague at Lewis and Clark College, Professor Volney Faw, a friend and follower of Carl Rogers. He used these techniques successfully in his classes after returning to Wales, and to treat the psychological difficulties of individuals who visited him.

His arguments for an empathetic, realistic, down-to-earth religion and against respectable, superstitious and supernatural religion continued to arouse a strong reaction throughout the sixties. According to his editor, John Roberts Williams, his column 'created the greatest excitement in the Welsh press for a hundred years'. His columns for *Y Cymro* are not only a valuable historical source, which reveal important aspects of the debate in Wales in the fifties and sixties around religion, but also a clear and coherent expression of an original and unique vision about the significance of modern psychology and the future of Christianity.

He suffered a stroke in 1972 which curtailed his work as an author and preacher. He died in Walton hospital Liverpool 12 January 1987 and the funeral service was held in Bryn Aerau chapel followed by interment at Pentre Uchaf cemetery Pwllheli 17 January 1987.

## Author

Llion Wigley

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information from the family

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