

WILLIAMS, GWYN ALFRED (1925-1995), historian and television presenter

Name: Gwyn Alfred Williams
Date of birth: 1925
Date of death: 1995
Spouse: Maria Williams (née Fernandez)
Partner: Gillian Siân Howell Lloyd
Parent: Thomas John Williams
Parent: Gwladys Williams (née Morgan)
Gender: Male
Occupation: historian and television presenter
Area of activity: History and Culture
Author: Geraint H. Jenkins

He was born at 11 Lower Row, Pen-y-wern, Dowlais, Glamorgan, on 30 September 1925. He was one of three children born to Thomas John Williams (1892-1971) and Gwladys Williams née Morgan (1896-1983), both of whom were schoolteachers. His roots were deep in the iron-making town and he took pride in being the archetypal 'bachgen bach o Ddowlais' (little boy from Dowlais). The house where he was raised had been built by the powerful [Guest](#) family and he was educated at Cyfarthfa Castle Grammar School, formerly the palatial home of the mighty [Crawshay](#) family.

His left-wing parents plied him with books and magazines, and nurtured him in the radical working-class tradition of a community that was now riddled with poverty and unemployment. He attended Gwernllwyn Independent Chapel where members worshipped in Welsh and prided themselves on being the descendants of radical puritans who had been brave enough to chop off the head of a king in Stuart times. Although his relatively well-to-do parents cushioned him from the worst aspects of the economic slump in the inter-war years, he remained keenly aware of the privations and inequalities of the times. When not up to mischief, as a teenager he immersed himself in the events of the Spanish Civil War and empathized with the struggles of socialists and communists on the Continent.

In 1943 he won an open scholarship to read History at the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, but the demands of war took him instead to the battlefields of Europe. His experiences in a variety of war zones enliven the pages of his autobiographical sketch *Fishers of Men*, which was published posthumously. He used to claim that he not only lost his grasp of Welsh in the Army but also developed the debilitating stammer which plagued him for the rest of his life.

On his belated arrival at the College by the Sea, this tiny, stocky young man immediately impressed both staff and fellow students with his brilliant mind and flashing wit. He gained an outstanding first in History in 1950 and was showered with prizes. In the same year he married his childhood sweetheart Maria Fernandez, the daughter of a Spanish immigrant family, by whom he had one son. He made his first mark in the scholarly world as a medievalist and his massively documented master's thesis on the social nature of the patriciate in thirteenth-century London was eventually published under the title *Medieval London* in 1963. Between 1954 and 1963 he taught Welsh History at Aberystwyth with such brio that his classes were infiltrated by students from other departments and also by enraptured townspeople. His Marxist approach to the past made him an unusual and controversial figure, and it came as no surprise when he was invited to take up a Readership (and later a Chair) at York University in 1963. On York's radical and more congenial campus he became a popular guru of the socialist left and his range of teaching interests encompassed Italian communists, French sans-culottes, Spanish revolutionaries and American intellectuals. He was especially influenced by Gramsci's concept of 'organic intellectuals', groups of people who used their brains to build nations and promote civil and religious liberty. His best-known publication whilst at York was *Artisans and Sans-culottes* (1968), a short but critical and amusing appraisal of popular movements in Britain and France during the French Revolution.

In 1974 he was appointed to succeed Stanley B. Chrimes as Chair of History at the University College of Wales, Cardiff. But he never truly settled in the capital and failed to bring to fruition his grandiose collaborative research plans on the history of modern industrial Wales. He found lecturing to undergraduates a painful chore and had no wish to become a pen-pushing administrator. He alienated many of his starchy colleagues by becoming a passionate foe of neo-liberalism and by campaigning strongly in support of trade unionism, feminism and peace. As he became increasingly politically engaged, he published more extensively than ever before. Books on Gramsci, Spriano and Goya were designed to sustain 'the British working-class and Marxist movements', while his captivating *The Merthyr Rising* (1978) was not only infused with a profound sense of compassion but also rang to the sounds of the voices of working people in his own native patch. Although he was a man of catholic interests and tastes, he was chiefly interested in the travails of the stubborn rebels, protesters and underdogs who cocked a snook at their oppressors. *Madoc: The Making of a Myth* (1979) and *The Search for*

Beulah Land (1980) were complementary works which explored the transatlantic world of Welsh Dissent in the age of revolutions. *The Welsh in their History* (1982), a collection of essays, focused on the dynamics of socio-economic and political change in nineteenth-century Wales.

He was unable to distance himself from the political malaise of the times, and much of his writing in journals and magazines writings acquired a sharp polemical edge. Appalled by the results of the devolution campaign in 1979 and outraged by the ravages wrought by Thatcherism, he came to believe that Wales could only survive and prosper if industrial labour succeeded in overthrowing the capitalist system. 'If we are to live', he cried, 'we must act.' This was a theme which loomed large in his entertaining *When was Wales? A History of the Welsh* (1985), a history of Wales over the best part of two millennia during which, so he claimed, the Welsh nation had been moulded by a succession of conflicts, splits and ruptures.

By the early 1980s Gwyn had become so heartily sick of academic life in Cardiff that he took early retirement at the age of fifty-eight. He and his wife parted and, amid tantrums, sulks and outbursts of rage, he hovered precariously on the brink of despair. He turned to broadcasting and spent the rest of his life writing and presenting several brilliant television series for the independent television company Teliesyn, whose talented director Colin Thomas brought out the best in him. The most memorable was *The Dragon has Two Tongues* (HTV, 1985), a thirteen-part series on the history of Wales in which the fiery Marxist historian ran rings around his affable Whiggish co-presenter [Wynford Vaughan Thomas](#). Despite, or perhaps because of, his speech impediment, Gwyn's pieces to camera regularly drew prolonged applause from film crews and became the stuff of legend among the public at large. He became affectionately known as 'Gwyn Alf' and basked happily in the warmth of his reputation as 'the people's historian'. In his hands, Welsh history on the screen became a powerful usable tool, and many people would never have joined picket lines, attended anti-war rallies and championed the cause of women had they not fallen under his spell. His final programme, *Gwyn Alf: The People's Remembrancer* (S4C, 1995), though unbearably poignant, revealed that his intellectual powers and wit were as strong as ever.

Decades of chain-smoking eventually took their toll on Gwyn's health and family life. Cared for by his partner Siân Lloyd, he died of cancer at the age of seventy at his home in Dre-fach Felindre, Carmarthenshire, on 16 November 1995. People from all walks of life came to pay their respects to this extraordinarily gifted and influential historian at Parc Gwyn crematorium, Narberth, on 22 November. Appropriately, the secular ceremony was punctuated with cries of 'Viva Gwyn' and a rousing rendition of The Internationale.

Author

Professor Geraint H. Jenkins

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Further Reading

Wikipedia Article: [Gwyn A. Williams](#)

Sound and Film

HTV: [The Dragon has Two Tongues](#), 1985

Additional Links

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