

Twentieth Century Welsh Literature

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When the writers of the turn of the century in Wales wrote in admiration of the ordinary country people they did so from intimate knowledge, for they were all of humble origin, but it was Owen M. Edwards who first wrote and published specifically for literate country people and industrial workers. He was a brilliant historian and he directed his famous periodical CYMRU towards anyone who could read and was interested in his or her country. He produced magazines for children too, and, for those people eager to learn more about Welsh literature but without access to university libraries, a series called CYFRES Y FIL (The Series of a Thousand), each concentrating on one writer. Whilst fully aware of the glories of past Welsh writing, O. M. Edwards himself wrote clear, contemporary but little polluted prose, to give his many readers accounts of his travels in Wales and Brittany, and of his own education, with good stories of Oxford, in CLYCH ADGOF (Bells of Memory), again in the CYFRES Y FIL series. We owe much to the unacademic behaviour of this academic.

Lacking the leisured middle class which fostered the growth of the novel in England and in parts of Europe, the novel languished in Wales after Daniel Owen. In the early decades of this century, and even more recently, fiction has been considered worthless because it is not true. But the short stories and novels of Dr Kate Roberts (1891-1985), are certainly true of the grim poverty of the north-west of Wales which she remembers from her childhood. Although strongly nationalist, she never allowed her political opinions to condition her view of mankind. Though her view of life is grim and painful, she remains conscious of liveliness and dignity in the human race. Her gradual, deliberate mastery of the craft of fiction has made her the outstanding Welsh novelist of this century.

A more cheerful view of life, though again as rural in background as Kate Roberts's early work and as backward looking, is that of D.

J. Williams, in his short stories, his memories of his native north Carmarthenshire and his autobiographical writing. HEN DY FARM (An Old Farmhouse), the first part of his autobiography, has been translated into English. His prose style is rooted in the racy Welsh of his region and he keeps a severe check on himself in the employment of literary devices. He writes of the past and its fullness, and his delight in these memories is tinged with bitterness at the thought of what we have lost in Wales, with very little to take its place.

Another notable writer of fiction and a prolific writer of books for children was E. Tegla Davies. TIR Y DYNEDDON, which appeared in 1922, is a fantasy highly praised by the critics, but which Saunders Lewis has found to be tainted with the same "mildew of evangelicism" as he found in Tegla's other works. Better known, and already thought of as a classic, though the same "mildew" is there, is a novel called GWR PEN Y BRYN, which has been translated into English as THE MASTER OF PEN Y BRYN.

Another interesting novelist, and a good poet too, was T. Rowland Hughes. His best known novel, O LAW I LAW, ingeniously traces the interactions of a community through a series of pieces of furniture which are sold privately, not on auction, a method of sale which is indicated by the title. In another novel, WILLIAM JONES, and this was something new for Welsh fiction, he takes us into the cultural set-up of the industrial valleys of south-east Wales, where his anti-hero, a very ordinary, nice north Walian, discovers that the people of the south can be quite decent human beings after all.

The literature and politics of Wales in the middle fifty years of this century have been dominated by the frail figure and keen intelligence of Saunders Lewis. His political writings have been in favour of Welsh nationalism, and he was president of the party now known as 'Plaid Cymru' from 1926 to 1939. It was his radio talk, 'Tynged yr Iaith' (The Fate of the Language), which drew urgent attention to the desperate plight of the language and which inspired the movements which have already resulted in a far wider use of Welsh.

Saunders Lewis's two short stories are both studies of young women, MONICA (1930) and MERCH GWERN HYWEL (1964). Drama has proved Saunders Lewis's most successful medium, with a dozen plays to his credit, dealing with the necessary power of tradition, a proud sense of responsibility towards one's forebears, the conflict between deep personal urges and authority, the need for self-sacrifice and the insufficiency of the sexual impulse. Blodeuwedd, heroine of the play of that name, who has been made

of flowers by the magician Gwydion, has no sense of human or social loyalty and unthinkingly but passionately betrays her husband and plots his killing. In SIWAN again the wife is unfaithful, but comes to realize the necessity to subdue her instincts to the social, dynastic need. Similar tensions and conflicts are worked out in what has become the most important body of drama in Welsh. Saunders Lewis's poetry is comparatively small in quantity but of the highest importance. The Catholic faith to which he was a convert gave him the mood and matter of such lovely poems as 'Difiau Dyrchafael' (Ascension Thursday), 'Mair Fadlen' (Mary Magdalen) and the agony of 'Gweddi'r Terfyn' (The Ultimate Prayer). His ode on the death of Sir John Edward Lloyd is one of the great European poems of this century.

There has never been so much activity, on such a broad front of writing, in Wales, as we have seen during the past few decades. D. Gwennallt Jones (1899-1968), usually known as Gwennallt, has been of all the poets of this century in Wales the most aware of the contemporary situation and the most prepared to face it in his poetry, something which his great predecessor, T. Gwynn Jones, did uncharacteristically in 'Senghenydd'. (Gwennallt's keening lament, 'Trychineb Aberfan' (The Aberfan Disaster), refers back to the frightful loss of life at Senghenydd.) Gwennallt moved, with passion and often with fury, through socialism, pacifism and nationalism to a complete acceptance of Christianity and a profound sense of his own sin. He sees the Wales which persisted until it was corrupted by capitalism and industry as the product of Christianity and his nationalism is often couched in terms of a return to the faith. He himself experienced the effects of industry on the landscape and people of the Swansea valley, and he expresses his detestation of what has happened in south Wales.

In his work we see sense images transmuted into symbols in a direct, uncomplicated way, and his own sin is stated in remarkable poems on animals, 'Y Twrch Trwyth' (the Wild Boar of Celtic legend), 'Y Draenog' (The Hedgehog), 'Y Sarff' (The Serpent) and 'Y Ffwlbart' (The Polecat). A powerful poem on Christianity, 'Y Gristionogaeth', exemplifies his skilful use of cynghanedd in the freer metres. His craftsmanship, often daring and effective in its blending of elements, is not always consistent, but it is the intensity and honesty of his reaction to the life about him, and the power and clarity with which he wrote about so many important aspects of Welsh life and the human condition in general,

these are
the qualities which have impressed readers and writers of poetry much
younger
than himself. Prophetic and didactic in much of his work, Gwenaït was
a
central figure in the middle decades of this century.

A slightly younger contemporary of Gwenaït was Waldo
Williams, who died in 1971, a poet whose output was small but whose
every poem
we treasure. The variety in his work stems from an impish sense of
humour
alternating with a profound, mystical, and therefore sometimes obscure
view of
the world immediately about him and of the universe that extends out
from his
loved background of Preseli. He was a pacifist and a Quaker, but it is
for
anyone who reads his poetry to judge whether his humanitarianism sprang
from
his religion or whether that was a formal pattern he accepted to
crystallize
his instinctive love of mankind in general. And Quakerism is surely the
least
formal religious pattern he could have found. Waldo Williams's thought
is
sometimes difficult to follow, but his language is always pure and near
to the
colloquial. In 'Cofio' (Remembering), he shows nostalgia for cultures,
languages and faiths that have disappeared. Pembrokeshire is full of
memorials
of ways of living and thinking that are otherwise little known or
understood
today. Could he have been moved to fear that the Welsh culture and
language may
vanish just like those others ?

Waldo's patriotism and nationalism are of a kind we have
seen too little of, for it has nothing of the swollen, false
St David's Day rhetoric of
memories of battles and blood, rather it is based on a sensitive
awareness of
more peaceful qualities in the Welsh culture that they have almost
lost...

O Gymru'r
gweundir gwrwm a'i garn

Magwrfan
annibyniaeth barn.

(O
Wales of the purple moorland and its cairn, / the place where
independence of judgement was born.)

His poem 'Dewi Sant' (St David) comes nearest to anger
when the poet contemplates the pollution that has come to south-west
Pembrokeshire. In spite of his gentle nostalgia for a more civilized
way of
living, Waldo Williams took a loving and hopeful view of the universe.
In a
poem called 'Yr Heniaith' (The Old Language) he has hopes of the
survival of

the Welsh language as well. Now that he is dead he appears to us not only as a great poet but as the conscience of Wales in the twentieth century.

I have been speaking of committed poets : the Reverend Euros Bowen (1904-88) stands apart in splendid luxuriance. I say apart not only because there is nothing didactic or propagandist in his poetry but because he belongs to no school, having, in the words of Dafydd Elis Thomas, developed a new poetic in Welsh. He is certainly not apart in the sense of not having paid attention to other writers ; he read widely in French and English literature, he was a classical scholar who delightfully translated Virgil's eclogues into Welsh, and his poems display his debt to T. Gwynn Jones, Dafydd ap Gwilym and the poetic tradition from which he broke away. He has been thought obscure and has suffered eisteddfodic criticism on that account, but this is surely the impertinence of those who think that any poem should give up its secrets at first reading. Dafydd Elis Thomas, the member of parliament and critic of poetry, has shown that the structure of a poem by Euros Bowen is not a logical progression but an interaction of images controlled by the imagination rather than the reason. Out of these images symbols grow which give the poem meanings which cannot be separated from the structure of the poem. His lack of general popularity may come from his being in many ways a poets' poet, and in fact a number of his poems are about poetry. Sometimes the poem is about the poem itself. 'Y Gerdd' (The Poem) is a remarkable twenty-line development of the idea of a poem as a place to live in. But his poems nearly always spring from a sense experience, and Euros Bowen's delight in the natural world is unflinching, giving the reader immediate pleasure before the symbol begins to emerge.

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