

# 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.  
Gwenallt Jones (1899-1968), usually known as Gwenallt, 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'.  
(Gwenallt's keening lament, 'Trychineb Aberfan' (The Aberfan Disaster),  
refers  
back to the frightful loss of life at Senghenydd.) Gwenallt 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  
craftmanship, 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, Gwena'llt was  
a  
central figure in the middle decades of this century.

A slightly younger contemporary of Gwena'llt 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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