

ANEIRIN, a famous poet who flourished in the second half of the 6th century

Name: Aneirin
Parent: Dwywei ferch Leennawg
Gender: Male
Occupation: poet
Area of activity: Poetry
Author: Ifor Williams

According to the *Historia Brittonum* of **Nennius** (c. 796), five notable Welsh poets, namely Talhaearn Tad Awen (father of song), Neirin, **Taliesin**, Blwchfardd, and Cian were eminent in Welsh poetry during the wars against Ida, king of Northumbria (547-59), and probably also during those waged against his sons. So, 'Neirin' is the first form of the name, but by 1200 it had acquired an 'a' before the 'n,' as has happened with other Welsh words. By 1632 we find **Dr. Davies** in the *Dictionarium Duplex* calling him Aneurin, and this form of the name has continued to the present day, although without justification.

Nor is there foundation whatsoever for the opinion advanced by some that Aneirin, from being (incorrectly) written Aneurin (*eurin* = 'golden'), corresponds to the **Gildas** who scourged the kings of the Britons and reviled the bards of **Maelgwn**, any more than for believing that the poet and the monk were one and the same person. Both were quite distinct in their temperaments; they did not flourish in the same half of the century, and they differed as completely in the manner of their deaths as in the manner of their living. The idea that either should choose an English pseudonym while writing in Latin is quite unbelievable - even if it could be proved that 'gild' (gold) is the root of the name **Gildas**.

In 'Llyfr Aneirin,' a MS. dating back to about 1250, there is a long poem consisting of 103 stanzas dealing with a host of Mynyddawg Mwynfawr, lord of Dineiddyn or Ysgor Eiddyn, i.e. Edinburgh, which the Scots still call Dunedin. The whole poem is called the 'Gododdin' after a tribe of Britons which lived on the banks of the Firth of Forth near Edinburgh in the region of Manaw Gododdin - the 'Votadini' of Ptolemy in the 2nd century. The subject of the poem is the march of the host or bodyguard of Mynyddawg from Dineiddyn to Catraeth (Catterick or Richmond in Yorkshire) to attempt the recapture of that place from the Saxons. The host consisted of 300 warriors, and all but one were slain. Aneirin does not describe the battle, but rather gives us individual portraits of hero after hero, each with his own distinctive traits but each brave and faithful to his lord. They 'paid for their mead.'

Mixed with the original poem are extraneous stanzas, some of much later date, and in one of these stanzas (11. 640-55) we find a bard using the 'Gododdin' in a competition, claiming a reward for reciting it, and adding: 'May the song of the son of Dwywei win.' Then he goes on: 'Since Aneirin was killed and the earth laid upon him there is no more singing of the "Gododdin".' If we may conjecture that 'the song of the son of Dwywei' is a correct description of the 'Gododdin,' this is an early testimony to Aneirin's ancestry. He was the son of Dwywei. There was, indeed, a lady of that name known in the old pedigrees; for Dwywei, daughter of Liënnawg, was the mother of **S. Deinyoel (Deiniol)**. According to **Nennius** her brother Gwallawg was the ally of Urien in the war against Hussa, son of Ida (585-92), while, according to the *Annales*, **St. Deinyoel** died in 584. Is it possible that Aneirin the poet of the 'Gododdin' was his younger brother? It might well be - but it would be foolish to suggest that there was no other Dwywei living at that time; see **Peniarth MS 75** (51), Dwywei daughter of Tegid Voel.' There is internal evidence that Aneirin was a friend and kinsman of some of Mynyddawg's host. The reference to him as one of four who escaped with their lives from the attack on Catraeth is a later addition, but the verse which says that he was rescued from captivity in the enemy's country through the valour of Llywarch's son may be accepted.

In the 'Book of Aneirin' three other old songs, apart from the 'Gododdin,' are preserved which are ascribed to him. Moreover, in later manuscripts there are 'Englynion y Missoedd' (Verses of the Months), which, it is claimed, were written by him. The linguistic form of these songs does not support the claim.

In the triads the slaying of Aneirin by Heiddyn (Heiden, Eidyn) ap Enygau (Euengat) is listed as one of the 'Three Outrageous Killings' and one of the 'Three Monstrous Axeblows.' He is there referred to as 'Aneirin Gwawdrydd, Mechdeyrn Beirdd,' i.e. king paramount of the bards; cf. '**Taliesin Ben Beirdd**' (Taliesin Chief of the Bards). But these are embroideries of a later age.

Author

Sir Ifor Williams, (1881 - 1965)

Sources

'Canu Aneirin,' in *Y Cymmrodor*, vii, 128

Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies, xii, 14

The Text of the Mabinogion â€¦ from the *Red Book of Hergest* (Oxford 1887), 303-4

Baring-Gould and John Fisher, *The Lives of the British Saints: the saints of Wales and Cornwall and such Irish saints as have dedications in Britain* iv, 369, 371

The poetry has been edited by Ifor Williams in *Canu Aneirin* (Cardiff 1938)

Further Reading

NLW Archives: [Llyfr Aneirin](#)

Wikipedia Article: [Aneirin](#)

Sound and Film

Gwyn Thomas: [Y Gododdin](#)

John Koch: [Y Gododdin](#)

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Published date: 1959

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APA Citation



Williams, I., (1959). ANEIRIN, a famous poet who flourished in the second half of the 6th century. *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*. Retrieved 9 Nov 2024, from <https://biography.wales/article/s-ANEI-RIN-0550>

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