

OWEN, Sir JOHN (1600-1666), royalist commander

Name: John Owen
Date of birth: 1600
Date of death: 1666
Spouse: Janet Owen (née Vaughan)
Child: Anne Vaughan (née Owen)
Child: Katherine Anwyl (née Owen)
Child: William Owen
Parent: Ellin Eure (née Maurice)
Parent: John Owen
Gender: Male
Occupation: royalist commander
Area of activity: Military; Politics, Government and Political Movements
Author: Arthur Herbert Dodd

The eldest son of John Owen of Bodsilin, Walsingham's secretary, and of **Elin** (later lady Eure), granddaughter of **Sir William Maurice**. He was born in 1600 at Clenennau, near Dolbenmaen, Caernarfonshire, his mother's home; married Janet, daughter of **Griffith Vaughan** of Cors-y-gedol, Meirionethshire, and had some military experience before succeeding to Clenennau on his mother's death in 1626 (N.L.W. Brogyntyn 3/46). He was sheriff of Caernarvonshire in 1630-31 and of Merioneth next year, and when the Civil War broke out he was put on the commission of array for Caernarvonshire (10 August 1642) and commissioned by Charles to raise and equip from county funds a regiment from the three shires of Gwynedd. Hampered by opposition from a few neighbouring families, he was not able to put his recruits into the field till the following summer, first in operations round Oxford (May 1643), then at the siege of Bristol, where in command of the 6th brigade under Rupert he was wounded in the face (18 July), and at the first battle of Newbury (20 September). He was back in Caernarvonshire by April 1644, and in the autumn he was reappointed as sheriff of Caernarvonshire, remaining in office until the king's authority there ceased. After the successful invasion of Wales by **Sir Thomas Myddelton** he was summoned to Oxford, where the king made him governor of what became the 'ffrontiere garrison' of Conway (10 December 1644), and a week later, a knight. On 17 February 1645 he was commissioned as sergeant major general of foot under lord Byron (governor of Chester). His first task was to meet threats to Denbighshire and Flintshire which had developed during the winter (N.L.W. Rhual MSS., letter 95), but after a diversion in Lancashire had drawn the invaders off in May he was able to attend to the defences of Gwynedd. Supplies were sparse and the local gentry slow to co-operate, partly from that fear of alien military rule and occupation that found a spokesman in **archbishop John Williams** who, after lavishing his resources in organising local effort and equipping his native Conway as a depot, protested (January 1645) against his supersession by an interloper from the wilds of Eifionydd. Byron sought a compromise, but in May (with authority from Rupert) Owen forcibly entered the castle, appropriating its contents, and denounced the archbishop in terms which drew a rebuke from the king himself. Increasing Roundhead pressure took Owen into Merioneth in August but the day after Charles's defeat at Rowton Heath (25 September) he sent for him to Denbigh to confirm his commission, including custody of the castle. In response to Byron's urgent plea for co-operation after the fall of Chester (1 February 1646) **Williams** wrote a conciliatory letter to Owen on 24 April; but it was under Byron's orders that the latter precipitated a final breach by impounding stores and cattle from Gwydir and so placing **Williams**'s favourite niece and her husband, **Sir Owen Wynne**, at the mercy of the advancing Roundheads. **Williams**, exasperated, helped **Thomas Mytton** into Conway in August, but Owen held out in the castle till 9 November, when honourable terms enabled him to retire to Clenennau after taking the Covenant and Negative Oath (26 April 1647).

A fortnight before this, Rupert had written from France inviting Owen to bring over a Welsh brigade for the French service, an invitation he reluctantly declined for lack of means of transport. In the second Civil War his commission was renewed (31 March 1648), and he raised Merioneth for the king, intending to join **Rowland Laugharne** at Pembroke, but besieging Caernarvon instead when it proved too late for that. Retreating through Bangor before superior forces, with the wounded parliamentary sheriff, William Lloyd, as his prisoner, he was trapped on the seashore at Y Dalar hir, Llandygái (5 June), where his men were scattered by **Mytton** and he himself captured; the sheriff died of the rigours of the journey. Owen was committed to Denbigh castle, then brought to London for trial on charges of treason to parliament, violation of his articles of surrender, and murder of the sheriff. Removed to Windsor (26 June), he was brought back for trial after the Lords had vetoed an order for his banishment with **Laugharne** (14 November) and the Rump had resolved, two days after the king's execution (1 February 1649), to try him with the chief instigators of the second Civil War. After a spirited defence without the aid of counsel (9 February - 6 March), he was condemned to death, but next day submitted a petition for reprieve (of which numerous drafts exist), with a success which he himself attributed variously to 'interposall' of Cromwell and of James Challenor, Clarendon to that of Ireton, and other accounts to the intervention of foreign ambassadors and to the kidnapping of **Griffith Jones** of Castellmarch as a hostage. By July he was free to entertain John Evelyn in London with a Welsh harpist, and he was home in September. An attempt to wring out of his estate, already decimated (27 May 1647) by a fine of £771, sums which had been earmarked in advance (10 February 1646) for repaying loans contracted for **Myddelton**'s campaign, was thwarted by **Mytton**, and **Myddelton** seems to have behaved considerably over the work of sequestration.

Owen now lived absorbed in dogs and hawks at Clenennau, forbidden to travel without a pass, and three times put under preventive restraint: at Denbigh (with several absences on pass) in August - September 1651; at Chester in July 1655 (when plots were rife) until appeals to the Protector and his henchmen (including **John Jones the regicide** (1597? - 1660), procured his release on 17 August; and again in Beaumaris for three weeks in 1658. Apart from an appeal to Cromwell against his assessment to the decimation tax in 1655 he took no known part in politics until he began openly consorting with Cavaliers in May 1659, and on receiving a letter from the duke of York in exile in July, joined Booth's revolt, bringing on himself a fresh sequestration order in November, which was, however, suspended through the efforts of his brother next month. On the king's return he petitioned for redress for his wrongs (31 July 1660), and was given the vice-admiralty of North Wales, while as deputy-lieutenant he joined **William Griffith** of Cefnamwlch in rounding up the fallen faction in Caernarvonshire, turning the tables on some who had been busy with his sequestration but fourteen months earlier. He died at Clenennau in 1666; the inscription placed on his tomb in Penmorfa church by his granddaughter (now almost obliterated) is quoted in *Trans. Shropsh. Ant. Soc.*, II, iv, 54, and contemporary drafts exist in Latin, Welsh, and English. But his best epitaphs were written by two bards when he first became sheriff: 'Gwr purffydd ... a gwr a nerthai'r Goron,' and 'mae rhinwedd ar eich cledd clau' (Brogyntyn 3/437 (397)); for he was fundamentally a soldier, apter in strategy (the only branch

of knowledge in which he enriched the family library) than in speculative politics or theology or the sort of diplomacy needed in public affairs when (in **archbishop Williams's** phrase) 'valour will not do the business.'

His brother WILLIAM OWEN (1607 - 1670), who inherited **Porkington** (now Brogyntyn), Salop, also received a colonel's commission from the king (15 June 1643), helped to organise supplies as sheriff of Merioneth, 1645-6, and was governor of Harlech from 16 May 1644 to its surrender on honourable terms on 13 March 1647, when only Raglan still held out. In 1648 he went to Scotland with Langdale to join in Hamilton's invasion, was imprisoned in Nottingham castle on its defeat, and having compounded at £400 for his estates (which were freed by 1651) was allowed to go abroad. He was back at Porkington by the end of 1655, when he successfully pleaded exemption from the decimation tax. After the Restoration he petitioned frequently for preferment in compensation for his losses, but little came of it beyond a colonelcy in the Denbighshire militia (21 March 1661). He was the patron of the royalist poet **Huw Morys**. His marriage with Mary, widow of **bishop John Hanmer**, producing no heir, his estate was reunited on his death with Clennau, inherited by Sir John's son WILLIAM OWEN (1624 - 1677), who had been with his father at the siege of Bristol; married **Katherine Anwyl** of Park, Meirionnydd, and lived during the Interregnum on the **Anwyl** estate of Llanddyn. His son, Sir ROBERT OWEN (1658 - 1698), educated at Oriel College, Oxford (matriculated 20 April 1674), and at the Inner Temple (entered 1677), was knighted next year (16 July), and further extended the family's territorial influence in Wales by marrying **Margaret**, co-heiress of **Owen Wynn** of Glyn, Merioneth. A keen politician, he vigorously upheld the Crown and the Anglican establishment, and in December 1689, was made sheriff of Merioneth in place of the original nominee, **John Jones**, who as the **regicide's** son was naturally identified with the Dissenting interest. He represented Merioneth in the parliament of 1681, despite some opposition because of his support of the duke of York, to whom as James II he remained loyal (offering to raise forces against William of Orange as late as November 1689) until the king's flight. After the Revolution he represented Caernarvonshire (1689-97). Although living mainly in Salop he identified himself closely with Wales, filling many local offices and taking over on his great-uncle's death the patronage of **Huw Morys**, who wrote his elegy. He was, however, disappointed both of the constableness of Harlech and of the vice-admiralty of North Wales. A succession of English marriages, issuing in the devolution of the estate on the Anglo-Irish family of **Ormsby-Gore**, failed to break this connection, the family alternately representing Welsh and Salop constituencies in Parliament, till in 1876 it entered the peerage with the territorial title of Harlech.

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