

## PENNANT, THOMAS (1726 - 1798), naturalist, antiquary, traveller

**Name:** Thomas Pennant  
**Date of birth:** 1726  
**Date of death:** 1798  
**Spouse:** Anne Pennant (née Mostyn)  
**Spouse:** Elizabeth Pennant (née Falconer)  
**Child:** Sarah Pennant  
**Child:** Arabella Pennant  
**Child:** Thomas Pennant  
**Child:** David Pennant  
**Parent:** Arabella Pennant (née Mytton)  
**Parent:** David Pennant  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** naturalist, antiquary, traveller  
**Area of activity:** History and Culture; Nature and Agriculture; Travel and Exploration  
**Author:** Ellis Davies

Born 14 June 1726 at Flintshire, the son of David Pennant and Arabella (née Mytton). His father only entered into possession of Downing in 1724, on the death of Thomas Pennant, the last survivor of a younger branch of the family, who bequeathed it to him. The original home of the Pennants was Bychton in the same parish (Whitford). The first to settle in Downing was John Pennant the great-great-grandfather of the above-mentioned Thomas, who in 1626 married the heiress and enlarged or rebuilt the house. Downing was burnt down in 1922, and remains in ruins.

Most of the information that is known of Thomas Pennant is derived from his *Literary Life* published in 1793. He tells us that he first acquired a taste for ornithology, and indeed natural history generally, at the age of 12 when a book by Francis Willoughby on birds was presented to him by his relative, **John Salusbury**, of Bachygraig, Tremerchion, the father of **Mrs. Piozzi**. He received his early education in a school in Wrexham (see *Tours*, i, 379). After further tuition in London he entered, at the age of 18, Queen's College, Oxford. Though he resided there for some years he left without taking his degree. While still at the University he paid a visit (in 1746 or 1747) to Cornwall where he met the noted Dr. W. Borlase, rector of Ludgvan, who instilled into him a strong liking for geology. In subsequent years he travelled widely, visiting Ireland, the Isle of Man, the Continent (Europe), Scotland, the Hebrides, and various parts of England and Wales. The accounts which he wrote of his journeys in Scotland, to London, and especially in North Wales, are among his best literary works. The first volume of his *Tours in Wales* was published in 1778, the second in 1781 (the first part under the title *A Journey in Snowdonia*). An edition in three volumes, edited by **Sir John Rhys**, was published in 1883. Pennant's account of his journey on the Continent did not see the light of day till 1948. The manuscript owned by the N.L.W. was published by Bernard Quaritch, Ltd., London, for the Ray Society (*Tour of the Continent*). His principal work on zoology (*British Zoology*) appeared between 1761 and 1777, in four volumes (new ed. 1812). He also wrote on the zoology of India and the Arctic region. His most ambitious literary undertaking was *Outlines of the Globe* in twenty-two volumes (manuscript). Only four of these have been published, two by himself, and two by his son, David Pennant. As for the rest, they remained in the custody of the inheritors of the Downing property, the Feilding family, till 1938, when they were sold with many other books and manuscripts which belonged to Thomas Pennant and his son, by Christie, instructed by the executors of the late viscount Feilding, lord Denbigh, for £300, the purchasers being Maggs Brothers, booksellers, London. The twenty-two volumes of the *Outlines* are now in the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich.

Two years before his death, Pennant completed a volume on his native parish and that of Holywell where some of the family lived (*Whiteford and Holywell*, 1796).

During his lifetime Pennant received many honours and marks of distinction, foreign as well as British. The one he most appreciated was his election in 1757 as a member of the Royal Society of Upsala. Before that, in 1754, he had been elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries, which he resigned in 1760. Honours came to him from Norway, Sweden, and America, and in 1767 he was made F.R.S., while in 1771 he received the honorary degree of LL.D from Oxford University. Scotland conferred on him several honours, including the freedom of Edinburgh.

Among Pennant's foreign correspondents were several distinguished persons, such as Linnaeus, Le Comte de Buffon, Dr. Pallas (The Hague), and Gronovius (Leyden). The English naturalist, Gilbert White, the author of *The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne*, also had correspondence with him. Of Welshmen with whom he had association and to whom he was indebted were the following: the **Morris** brothers of Anglesey (**Richard**, **William**, and **Lewis**), **Hugh Davies**, the author of *Welsh Botany*, **John Lloyd** (1733 - 1793), rector of Caerwys, who accompanied him on all his Welsh travels ('To his great skill in the language and antiquities of our country I am myself much indebted'), **Moses Griffith**, a native of Bryncroes, Llyn, his faithful servant and self-taught draughtsman who travelled with him almost everywhere and illustrated his works.

Pennant was twice married. His first wife was Elizabeth, daughter of James Falconer, of Chester, by whom he had two children, David, his heir, and Arabella. His second wife was Ann, daughter of **Sir Thomas Mostyn**, who bore him a daughter, Sarah, and a son, Thomas.

The health of Pennant began to fail in 1793. He died 16 December 1798, at the age of 72, and was buried 'near the altar' in Whitford church, where there is a monument to him by Westmacott (junior).

### Author

**Canon Ellis Davies**, (1872 - 1962)

## Sources

Thomas Pennant, *The literary life of the late Thomas Pennant, Esq. By himself*(London 1793)  
Thomas Pennant, *The history of the parishes of Whiteford and Holywell*(London 1796)  
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*A Tour (Tours) in [North] Wales*, 1883 (biography by W. Trevor Parkins)  
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Charles W. J. Withers, 'Pennant, Thomas', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography Yr Haul*, 1948 and 1949  
J. E. Griffith, *Pedigrees of Anglesey and Carnarvonshire Families* (1914), 214-5

## Further Reading

NLW: Thomas Pennant, A tour in Wales  
Curious Travellers: Thomas Pennant  
Curious Travellers: The Letters of Thomas Pennant  
Wikipedia Article: Thomas Pennant

## Images

Coflein: DOWNING HALL, WHITFORD

## Works

Thomas Pennant, *History of quadrupeds* (London 1781), Vol.I Div.I; Div.II Sect. I-II; Div.II Sect.III  
Thomas Pennant, *Indian zoology* (London 1790)  
Thomas Pennant, *Some account of London* (London 1791), Vol.I; Vol.II  
Thomas Pennant, *Outlines of the Globe* (London 1798-1800), Vol.I; Vol.II; Vol.III  
Thomas Pennant, *A tour from Downing to Alston-Moor* (Oriental Press 1801)  
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## Additional Links

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