

## RICHARDS, WILLIAM (1749 - 1818), General Baptist minister, theological and political controversialist, and antiquary

**Name:** William Richards  
**Date of birth:** 1749  
**Date of death:** 1818  
**Parent:** Henry Richards  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** General Baptist minister, theological and political controversialist, and antiquary  
**Area of activity:** History and Culture; Politics, Government and Political Movements; Religion  
**Author:** Robert Thomas Jenkins

Born about the end of 1749 at Pen-rhydd, Pembrokeshire, near Cardigan. His parents were Baptists, the father (Henry) a member of Rhydwylym, and the mother of Cilfowyr. Their son was baptized (1769) at Rhydwylym; but in 1758 the family had removed to Pen-coed, Meidrym, Carmarthenshire, and it was Henry Richards who sold the land for building Salem Baptist chapel near Meidrym (1769); in that chapel (1773) William Richards began preaching. As a child he had little schooling, but in 1775 he entered the Baptist Academy at Bristol and was there for one year only. He was settled as pastor at Pershore in 1775, but removed in 1776 to King's Lynn, where he spent the rest of his life, apart from fairly frequent sojourns in his homeland - notably during an illness which lasted from September 1795 till March 1798, and again when from the end of 1799 till the beginning of 1802 he resided at Parc-Nest near Newcastle Emlyn. He was a fair classical scholar, and developed a vigorous English style, but none the less clung to his Welsh, as is proved by his scathing pamphlets in Welsh, not to mention his *English-Welsh Dictionary* (1798; the Welsh - English section was left in manuscript) - indeed, his 'Cambrian accent' aroused amusement among his English fellow-ministers. His ministry at Lynn was energetic for a long time, but after 1802 became little more than nominal. He abandoned Calvinism quite early, and later also Trinitarianism; yet he abjured the designation 'Unitarian', and seems rather to have been a Sabellian. But he never parted with baptism by immersion and 'close communion,' holding that the practice of the Early Church in both matters was forever binding upon Christians. Indeed, his interpretation of the whole history of the Church was that it was a process of deterioration from primitive Christian standards - see, e.g., his pamphlet *The History of Antichrist* (1784; Welsh version *Llun Anghrist*, 1790); his daily life was ordered by asceticism, and his charities frequently impoverished him. He first aroused public notice (1781) in debates on baptism, with English Independents; and from 1788 till 1791 he and Benjamin Evans of Dre-wen (1740 - 1821) contended in Welsh on this subject. It must be confessed that Richards, in his debates, would lose all self-control; his sufficiently prickly fellow-heretic Charles Lloyd could say of him that 'his irritability was incredible.'

Richards's political views resembled those of his friend M. J. Rhys. He greatly admired America, and left his library to Rhode Island University, which in its turn conferred a LL.D. degree upon him; he was a firm believer in the 'Madoc' legend. Though a hater of Popery, he pleaded for Catholic Emancipation. He welcomed the French Revolution, and defended it; hence his *Reflections on French Atheism and English Christianity*, 1794, and his *Food for a Fast-day*, 1795 (Welsh version, *Ymborth ar Ddydd-Ymryd*). He was considerably angered by the persecution of some West Wales Dissenters which followed the French landing at Fishguard in 1797, and although the Welsh pamphlet *Cŵyn y Cystuddiedig*, 1798, and its English version *The Triumphs of Innocency* are anonymous, nobody doubts that Richards was their author.

Before and after the West Wales Baptist schism of 1799, Richards rushed into the fray, against Calvinism and against the 'Methodistical' and revivalistic tendencies of the Particular Baptist leaders. He poured forth a series of 'Occasional Leaflets' (*Papurynnau Achlysurol*); these are now very scarce. His chief opponents were Evan Jones (1777 - 1819) of Cardigan and Joseph Harris (Gomer); the pamphlets, on both sides, are scurrilous and even libellous. After the death of his wife (a daughter of Maneian-fawr farm near Parc-Nest) in 1805, Richards was long a hermit. In these years he published his *History of Lynn* (2 vols., 1812), which is well spoken of, and his biographical and historical articles in the *Monthly Repository* - afterwards published in volume form, *The Welsh Nonconformists's Memorial*, 1820. Only a few cronies were admitted to his company in his last years. He died 13 September 1818.

### Author

Emeritus Professor Robert Thomas Jenkins, (1881 - 1969)

### Sources

John Evans, *Memoirs of the life and writings of the Rev. William Richards, LL.D. : who died at Lynn, September 13, 1819 [i.e. 1818] in the sixty-ninth year of his age. With some account of the Rev.*

*Roger Williams, founder of the state of Rhode Island, as well as the first assertor of complete religious liberty in the United States of America* (Chiswick 1819)

Alexander Gordon, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*

*Trafodion Cymdeithas Hanes Bedyddwyr Cymru*, 1930 (corrections in the 1931 issue), with fuller references, and excerpts from Richards's pamphlets

*Journal of the Welsh Bibliographical Society*, vii, 32-6.

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