

SAMWELL (SAMWEL, SAMUEL), DAVID (1751 - 1798), naval surgeon and poet

Name: David Samwell

Date of birth: 1751

Date of death: 1798

Parent: William Samuel

Gender: Male

Occupation: naval surgeon and poet

Area of activity: Eisteddfod; Medicine; Military; Poetry

Author: William Llewelyn Davies

Born 15 October, and christened 2 November 1751, son of William Samuel, vicar of Nantglyn, Denbighshire - he was, therefore, grandson of **Edward Samuel**, of Betws Gwerfil Goch and Llangar. Details of his youth are not known but it seems evident from his work and interests that he received a good education. In 1775 he qualified at the Royal College of Surgeons for the position of medical officer in the Navy in the rank of 2nd Mate, 3rd Rate. The following year he sailed with captain James Cook on a voyage of discovery as surgeon's 1st mate on the *Resolution*; he returned from the voyage as surgeon of the *Discovery*. When Cook was killed in a skirmish with Indigenous Hawaiians (February 1779) Samwell witnessed the whole incident and recorded it in *A Narrative of the Death of Captain James Cook*, which was published in 1786 after his return to England; this work is considered an important source-book by biographers of Cook. This book also included Samwell's attempted refutation of the (now widely accepted) theory that Cook's crews introduced sexually transmitted diseases like syphilis and gonorrhoea into Hawai'i, eventually contributing to significant Indigenous depopulation. From 1780 to 1796 Samwell continued to act as naval surgeon, serving in seven different ships of war. During the last part of his life he was surgeon to British prisoners of war at Versailles. He returned to London in September 1798, died on 23 November of the same year in his house in Fetter Lane, and was buried in S. Dunstan's churchyard, Fleet Street.

Samwell was deeply interested in letters - he read Horace during the voyage with Cook - and in Welsh culture in particular. He was author of several pieces of occasional verse both in English and Welsh - for example, an *englyn* written when the *Resolution* reached the Cape of Good Hope on the outward journey, *penillion* written on S. Davids Day, 1777, when he was at sea between Aotearoa / New Zealand and Tahiti, etc., and particularly, '**The Padouca Hunt**' in which he made his witty contribution to the controversy as to whether a Welshman named Madoc had discovered America before Columbus and was the progenitor of a tribe of Welsh-speaking descendants still living amongst the Indigenous inhabitants (further details are given in the major article noted in the bibliography below).

Of greater importance than his verse was the support which he gave to Welsh cultural organisations. He was one of the earliest members (1774) of the Gwyneddigion Society founded in 1770, became its secretary in 1788, and its president in 1797. He supported the 'Gorsedd' held in the capital for London Welshmen and the eisteddfodau promoted in Wales by the society; at the latter, his blind partisan support of the claims of **Thomas Edwards** (Twm o'r Nant), whom he idolised, appeared to reveal a headstrong and intolerant nature. He assisted in the task of collecting for publication the poems of **Dafydd ap Gwilym** and of **Huw Morys**. A portrait of Samwell is reproduced in the first article noted below.

Authors

Sir William Llewelyn Davies, (1887 - 1952)

Revised by the editorial team, 2024

Sources

W. Ll. Davies, 'David Samwell (1751-98), Surgeon of the Discovery, London-Welshman and Poet,' in *The Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion*, 1926-7, 70-133, and the sources noted

W. Ll. Davies, 'David Samwell: A Further Note,' in *The Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion*, 1938, 257-8, and the sources noted
Mysevin Manuscripts in the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth in N.L.W.

Leathart, *Origin and Progress of the Gwyneddigion Society of London* (London 1831)

Seth Archer, *Sharks Upon the Land* (Cambridge 2018)

Further Reading

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APA Citation



Davies, W. Ll., (1959). SAMWELL (SAMWEL, SAMUEL), DAVID (1751 - 1798), naval surgeon and poet. *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*. Retrieved 9 Nov 2024, from <https://biography.wales/article/s-SAMW-DAV-1751>

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