

THOMAS, DAVID (Dafydd Ddu Eryri; 1759-1822), man of letters and poet

Name: David Thomas
Pseudonym: Dafydd Ddu Eryri
Date of birth: 1759
Date of death: 1822
Parent: Mary Griffith (née Humphreys)
Parent: Thomas Griffith
Gender: Male
Occupation: man of letters and poet
Area of activity: Literature and Writing; Poetry
Author: Griffith Thomas Roberts

Born April 1759, son of Thomas and Mary Griffith of Pen-y-bont, Waun-fawr. THOMAS GRIFFITH was a weaver at the Glynllifon fulling-mill; he was also a Calvinistic Methodist exhorter, and he and his son John, born 8 December 1748, had charge of the cause at Waun-fawr and used to cross the mountain to Llanberis to hold the society meeting at Llwyncelyn. (JOHN THOMAS became a Methodist preacher, and after going to live at Merddyn Coch on the Llwyncelyn property took charge of the cause there. He was an acceptable preacher and we hear of him preaching with **Siarl Marc** and Thomas Evans of Waun-fawr in the first monthly meeting held at Llanberis in 1777. He died in 1831 at the age of 82 and was buried at Llanberis.)

Dafydd Ddu was given eight months' schooling by **John Morgan** (1743 - 1801), curate of Llanberis. Here he met **Abraham Williams** (1755 - 1828) of Cwmglas, who was responsible for making him acquainted with Welsh poetry. **Abraham Williams** lent him Welsh books and told him about **David Ellis**, who was **John Morgan's** predecessor as curate of Llanberis. He was allowed to borrow **Ellis's** copies of the works of the ancient poets and he himself started to collect cywyddau and englynion from various manuscripts and to write them up in a notebook - 'Golwg ar Parnassus a Helicon.' After leaving school he became a weaver and used to go to Caernarvon to visit **Robin Ddu yr Ail o Fôn** (**Robert Hughes**, 1744 - 1785), who had retired there after losing his health in London. It was **Robin** who told him about the meetings of the bards in the London taverns, and this inspired Dafydd Ddu to write a poem (in the metre known as 'Belle Isle March') at the end of the winter of 1783-4, inviting the poets to meet at Betws Bach on Lady-day; **Hywel Eryri**, William Bifan, Siôn Caeronyw, Sian Parry, and others accepted the invitation, and that was the first of a series of meetings of bards in Caernarvonshire which gave Dafydd an opportunity of teaching the rules of Welsh poetry to his 'chicks,' as he called them.

He gave up weaving, 14 July 1787, and began to keep a school at Llanddeiniolen. He originally went there to see **Thomas Edwards** (Twm o'r Nant) and his company acting in an interlude but, while there, he was invited to try his hand at keeping school and, from that time on, followed this occupation at various places - Llanddeiniolen, Betws Garmon, Llanystumdwy, Pentraeth, Waun-fawr, Llan-rug, Llanberis, and Dolydd Byrion, Llandwrog. From 1807 to 1810 he was busily engaged in collecting material for his book, *Corff y Gainc*, in travelling to and from Dolgelly to supervise its printing, and afterwards in going to Liverpool and other places to sell it.

Dafydd Ddu and **William Williams** (1738 - 1817) of Llandygai, were corresponding members of the Gwyneddigion Society and, for some time, acted for that society in North Wales. They were entrusted with the sale of the society's publications, e.g. *Gwaith Dafydd ap Gwilym*, 1789, and were asked to collect material for *The Myvyrian Archaeology of Wales*. After Dafydd had won medals for the awdl, both at S. Asaph and Llanrwst, the Gwyneddigion asked him to make the arrangements for their eisteddfodau, such as the one at Penmorfa in 1795, and much of the work connected with the Caernarvon eisteddfod, 1821, both in respect of the arrangements and of the adjudication of the poetry, fell to his lot. He did not approve of the views of some of the Londoners with regard to the French Revolution, nor did he accept **William Owen Pughe's** odd ideas about the way in which Welsh should be written. He agreed with them that it would be 'profitable to give the Welsh poets more freedom' but that 'this freedom should be sparingly used lest a way should be opened for unworthy rhymesters to break into the realm of poetry.' He was a more reliable authority on the rules of the classical metres than anybody else in his generation, and **Sir John Morris-Jones** declares that Dafydd Ddu's system, as amended by **Bardd Nantglyn** (**Robert Davies**, 1769 - 1835), and revised, either by Dafydd Ddu himself or someone else, was the basis of all that was written on cynganedd in the 19th century.

Not much of his work appeals to the modern reader. His obituary englynion and his cywyddau on the opening of the Caernarvon eisteddfod, 1821, are the best examples of his work in the classical metres, while his lyric 'Fy Annwyl Fam fy Hunan,' a translation of the English lyric 'My Mother,' may be cited as an example of a translation which continued to be popular long after the original had been forgotten.

He spent the last year of his life at Fron Olau, Llan-rug, but used to visit his friends in the neighbouring districts. When returning from Bangor after one such visit he slipped while crossing the river Cegin, near Bach Riffri, and was found drowned, 30 March 1822. He was buried in Llanfihangel (Llan-rug) churchyard, and a tombstone was erected by his friends over his grave.

Apart from *Corff y Gainc*, published in 1810, another small book written by him appeared in 1815 - this was *Arddwriaeth Ymarferol*, a translation of two English treatises. He also had a hand in editing, jointly with **Ieuan Lleyn**, the periodical *Greal neu Eurgrawn sef Trysorfa Gwybodaeth*, published and sold by **T. Roberts**, Caernarvon, 1800, and, jointly with the **Rev. P. Bailey Williams**, Llan-rug, *Trysorfa Gwybodaeth neu Eurgrawn Cymraeg*, Caernarvon, 1807. There are seventeen of his articles to be found in the *Cylchgrawn Cymraeg* (of **Morgan John Rhys**), 1793-4, among them his 'Traethawd ar ddim,' the first attempt to write in Welsh a light essay in the English manner; a number of englynion and an essay written by him are also to be found in *Geirgrawn* (Holywell, 1796).

His elder brother was

HUMPHREY THOMAS (1745 - 1805), schoolmaster

He was christened 9 June 1745, in the parish church of Llanbeblig, Caernarfonshire. He served as an official in the customs house at Caernarvon, and as a schoolmaster at

Llanddeiniolen, Caernarfonshire. On his death, his collection of manuscripts came into his brother's possession. A Welsh grammar or word and phrase book entitled 'Arweinydd i'r Gymraeg,' composed by him in conjunction with his brother, is to be found in **NLW MS 21B** . This work was intended for publication. He died 22 December 1805, and was buried at Betws Garmon, Caernarfonshire, on Christmas Day.

Author

Griffith Thomas Roberts

Sources

For John Thomas and Thomas Griffith see *Methodistiaeth Cymru* (1851â€“6) ii, 209

Y Drysorfa, August 1831

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Y Gwyllyedydd, November 1822, 92

NLW Archives: **Cwrtmawr MS 72B**

For D. Thomas: *Corph y Gaingc, neu Ddifyrwrch Teuluaidd sef holl gyfansoddiadau barddonawl y diweddar Dafydd Thomas (Dafydd Ddu o Eryri) ynghyd a'i ddetholion o waith beirdd ereill hefyd, buchedd-draith yr awdur* (1810; 1834) (1834 ed.), ix-xxviii

J. Jones ('Myrddin Fardd'), *'Adgof uwch Anghof.'* *Llythyrau lluwys o Brif Enwogion Cymru*(1883), 11-76

Robert Hughes, William Hughes (ed.), *Hunan-gofiant ynghyda phregethau a barddoniaeth y diweddar Barch. Robert Hughes, (Robin Goch), Uwchlaw'rffynnon: wedi eu casglu ganddo ef ei hun, ac wedi eu trefni a than olygiaeth ei fab* (Pwllheli 1893), 15

The Cambro-Briton, 1822; iii, 427

Additional Manuscripts in the British Museum 14884, 14993, 15015, 15024. 15027, 15029, 15030

NLW MSS 17, 18, 109, 119, 346, 1640, 344, 171, 322, 325

Bangor Manuscripts at University College North Wales Library, Bangor Gwynedd 5, 9, 11, 12, 14, 15, 16, 19, 24

J. H. Davies, *Catalogue of Additional Manuscripts in the National Library of Wales*

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Y Brython, 1860, 165

David Thomas, *Awdlau ar destynau Cymdeithas y Gwyneddigion: i'r eisteddfodau yn B.A. 1789, 1790, 1791; sef, ystyriaeth ar oes dyn, rhyddid a gwirionedd*(Llundain 1791)

Further reading

Cynan Evans-Jones, *Tad Beirdd Eryri: Dafydd Tomos ('Dafydd Ddu Eryri') 1759-1822, The Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion*, 1969, Part I, pp. 7-23

Images

Robert Hughes, *Dafydd Ddu Eryri*

NLW: Mr. David Thomas, Eryri

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