

THOMAS, ROBERT (Ap Vychan; 1809-1880), Independent minister and tutor, poet and man of letters

Name: Robert Thomas
Pseudonym: ap Vychan
Date of birth: 1809
Date of death: 1880
Parent: Dafydd Thomas
Gender: Male
Occupation: Independent minister and tutor, poet and man of letters
Area of activity: Education; Eisteddfod; Literature and Writing; Poetry; Religion
Author: Richard Griffith Owen

Born at Tŷ Coch, Pennantlliw-bach, Llanuwchllyn, 11 August 1809, the third of ten children, his father, DAFYDD THOMAS (Dewi ap Didymus; 1782 - 1863) being from the parish of Llangower and his mother having been born at Tŷ Coch. Dafydd Thomas was a man of culture and had educated himself far above the average; hymns written by him will be found in the Independent *Caniedydd*; some of his work appears in *Cymru (O.M.E.)*, iv, and Ap Vychan published a memoir of him in 1863. As his circumstances did not permit him to send his children to school he himself instructed them and taught Ap Vychan to read, write, and count, and, in addition, initiated him into the mysteries of writing poetry. The family moved to a larger house, called Tan-y-castell, which was built by the father; and in his autobiography the son speaks of the precarious days of his childhood. Before he was 10 years of age he had obtained a situation as a shepherd boy with Evan Davies and his wife at Tŷ Mawr near his home. Here the family was noted for its piety, and the impression it made on his mind was to last him all his life. **Michael Jones** was the minister of the 'Old Chapel,' the Sunday school flourished in the district, and the boy was not backward in snatching at every opportunity of acquiring knowledge. By the time he was 14 he could shape an englyn, and on the strength of this ability was admitted a member of the Cymreigyddion Society of Llanuwchllyn. On 1 March 1826, **Michael Jones** made him a grant from the **Dr. Daniel Williams** bequest (to enable poor children to learn a trade), and on the strength of this he was apprenticed to Simon Jones, a local blacksmith. After serving his apprenticeship he went to Tŷn Cefn, near Corwen, where he remained for six months before turning his face, in September 1829, towards South Wales. Here, he worked at Tredegar and Dowlais but returned the following year to his old master at Lôn. He did not stay with him long for, in May 1830, he moved to Oswestry to work for **Edward Price**. At Oswestry he had the opportunity of getting acquainted with the English language and immediately joined the English church which was then under the ministry of **Dr. T. W. Jenkyn**. He now set about studying the works of **Dr. Edward Williams**, Fuller, Jonathan Edwards, and others. There were some who were anxious to see him begin preaching in the English chapel but at the beginning of 1835 he left and went to Conway and that summer he preached his first sermon at Henryd, which was not far away. He soon became known and received a call to Dinas Mawddwy, where he was ordained, 19 June 1840. In 1842 he went to Liverpool to take charge of the new Salem chapel, where he remained until 1848 when he moved to Rhosllannerchrugog. In 1855 he came to Bangor as successor to **Dr. Arthur Jones** and remained there until, in 1873, he was appointed tutor in divinity at Bala Independent College and minister of the local church. He died 23 April 1880 and was buried in Llanuwchllyn churchyard.

He twice won the chair at the national eisteddfod, once at Rhyl in 1864 and once at Chester in 1866. After the Rhyl eisteddfod he was known as Ap Vychan from the pseudonym he had adopted on that occasion - a pseudonym adopted because he was descended from the distinguished family of **Vaughans of Caer-gai, Llanuwchllyn**. He edited *Cofiant Cadwaladr Jones, Dolgellau*, and was joint editor of the *Dysgedydd* from 1865 to 1880. He was chairman of the Union of Welsh Independents in 1876. He had early attracted attention as a preacher and retained his popularity until the end; he had a great gift for swaying the congregations at a preaching festival. As far as his tenets were concerned he insisted that he was a moderate Calvinist.

He had a most gracious personality and his opinion and advice were eagerly sought. He was one of the very few who kept their reputations untarnished throughout the 'Battle of the Constitutions' in connection with Bala College; and he stood firmly by the side of his friend **M. D. Jones** to the end.

ELLIS THOMAS (1823 - 1878), blacksmith and poet

Ap Vychan's brother. He was born 2 April 1823 at Tanycastell, Pennantlliw-bach, Merionethshire. When the family moved to Meifod, Montgomeryshire, the son worked on farms in that county; later, he worked at Rhuddlan and Kinsford, Flintshire, and at Ellesmere, Salop, as a blacksmith. He emigrated to the U.S.A. in 1852, settled in Utica, and worked as a blacksmith on railways which were being constructed in Oneida County. He died 5 October 1878. Many years after his death a selection of his poetical works was published (at Utica, 1900) under the title of *Caniadau yr Efall*.

Author

Reverend Richard Griffith Owen, (1890 - 1973)

Sources

Hanes Eglwysi Annibynnol Cymru, i, 428; iii, 271-2, 328; iv, 27, 32, 458

M. D. Jones, D. V. Thomas (eds), *Cofiant a Thraethodau Duwinyddol y Parch. R. Thomas (Ap Vychan), Bala (Dolgellau 1882?)*

Ap Vychan, O. M. Edwards (ed.), *Gwaith Ap Vychan* (1903)

Y Traethodydd, 1903, 429

Cymru (O.M.E.), xxii, 293; xxiv, 133; xxv, 53

NLW MSS 3292,4616, 5672,6436-7

Further Reading

David Evans, *Cymeriadau hynod, Adgofion* (Bala 1903?), pp.40-45

Works

Ap Vychan, *Cadwaladr Jones, Dolgellau ei fuchedd, ei weinidogaeth, ei ddefnyddioldeb cyffredinol, a phrif linellau ei nodweddiad*(Liverpool 1870)

Dolenni Ychwanegol

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