

WILLIAMS, DAVID (1738 - 1816), littérateur and political pamphleteer

Name: David Williams
Date of birth: 1738
Date of death: 1816
Spouse: Mary Emilia Williams
Child: Emilia Williams
Parent: William David
Gender: Male
Occupation: littérateur and political pamphleteer
Area of activity: Literature and Writing; Politics, Government and Political Movements
Author: David Williams

Born in 1738 at Waunwaelod (later the Carpenters' Arms), in the parish of Eglwysilan, near the Watford chapel, on a by-road between Caerphilly and Cardiff. His father was William David (born at Llwynybarcud, in the parish of Llanharry). He was educated at a school kept in the neighbourhood by his namesake, [David Williams](#) (1709 - 1784), Dissenting minister of the Trinity chapel, Womanby Street, Cardiff, and of Watford chapel. It was this minister who was instrumental in bringing [Howel Harris](#) to Glamorgan in 1738, and among the evangelist's converts was David Williams's father. In response to his father's dying request (1752) Williams decided to enter the Dissenting ministry. From 1753 to 1757 he was a student at the Carmarthen Academy. In this period the Academy was notorious for its heterodoxy, and this, no doubt, influenced Williams's ideas. He was successively minister at Frome (1758-61), Exeter (1761-9), and Highgate, Middlesex (1769-73). He abandoned the ministry because of the inadequacy of the stipend to support the mode of life which he desired.

He had already written on liturgical reform and on the theatre when he opened, in 1773, an expensive boarding school in Lawrence Street, Chelsea. He was now married, his wife's Christian name being Mary Emilia. On 9 December 1774, a daughter, Emilia, was born to them, and on 20 December the mother died. The child was christened on 12 February 1775, but nothing further is heard of her and she may have died in infancy. Williams abandoned the school on his wife's death. He had, however, already written his *Treatise on Education*, 1774.

His writings had attracted the attention of Benjamin Franklin, who, on one occasion, 'took refuge from a political storm' in Williams's house in Chelsea. Together they formed the 'Thirteen Club,' a group of deists for whom Williams produced *A Liturgy on the Universal Principles of Religion and Morality*, 1776. This received eulogies from Frederick II, Voltaire, and Rousseau. On its appearance Williams institute' a 'cult of nature' in a chapel in Margaret Street, Cavendish Square. But Franklin had returned to America, and many of the worshippers lapsed into atheism, so that the experiment was a failure.

Williams wrote *Letters on Political Liberty*, 1782, in defence of the American colonists, advocating a very radical programme of political reform. These were translated into French by Brissot and established his reputation in France. In October 1792, he was made a French citizen and was invited to Paris to assist in drawing up a Girondist project of a constitution. He remained in Paris from early December 1792 to early February 1793, and on his return was entrusted by the French foreign minister, Le Brun, with overtures for peace.

He maintained himself by taking private pupils (many of them adults of defective education who wished to take part in public life), by delivering courses of public lectures, and by literary hackwork. His most voluminous production was his *History of Monmouthshire*, 1796. He visited France after the Peace of Amiens, apparently at the request of the British government, and produced a manuscript report on the state of public opinion with regard to Bonaparte.

His chief claim to fame lies in his establishment of the Literary Fund (first meeting, 18 May 1790) to assist indigent authors. During his last years he lived at the headquarters of the Fund at 36 Gerrard Square, Soho, and he died there on 29 June 1816.

Author

Emeritus Professor David Williams, (1900 - 1978)

Sources

Alexander Gordon gives a full account of Williams in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, listing the majority of his books (he published some twenty-six)

This account utilises an unfinished memoir by Morien in the *Cardiff Weekly Mail*, 31 May 1890

Much biographical detail is given in an anonymous article (by Dr. T. W. Thomas) in *Pebyll Seion. Hanes Ymdaith Cynnulleidfaoliaeth yn y Watford, Groes Wen, Tonyfelin, Rhydri, Caerffili, Glandwr Taf, Senghenydd, Llanbradach, Abertridwr. Gyda darluniau o leoedd nodedig a Phersonau Enwog* (Cardiff 1904) (ed. Tawelfryn Thomas and E. Bush), 1904

H. Prosser, 'David Williams,' *Wales, the National Magazine for the Welsh People*, 1912, has further biographical detail

E. V. Lucas, *Williams, David, Founder of the Royal Literary Fund* (London 1920), 1920, is a brochure on that aspect of his work
Writer's article 'The missions of David Williams and James Tilly Matthews to France (1793),' in *The English historical review*, 1938, deals with his French associations
see also 'Franklin's Religious Ideas,' *American Historical Review*, 1938, and 'Un document inédit sur la Gironde,' *Annales historiques de la Révolution Française*, 1938
H. G. Jones, 'Pwy ydoedd "Shôn Gwialan"?' in *Caernarvonshire Historical Society Transactions*, 1940, and O. Llew Owain, 'Pwy ydoedd "Shôn Gwialan"?' in *Y Traethodydd*, 1947, deal with his attack on the bishop of Bangor, written at the instigation of **ThomasWilliams**, Llanidan
His manuscripts are in Cardiff Free Library and N.L.W. There seems to be no trace of the papers said by Morien (and *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*) to be in the possession of Mr. Joseph Evans, The Bank, Caerphilly

Further Reading

Wikipedia Article: [David Williams](#)

Additional Links

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Wikidata: [Q3018998](#)

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