

## WILLIAMS, ALICE HELENA ALEXANDRA ('ALYS MEIRION') (1863-1957), writer, artist, and voluntary welfare worker

**Name:** Alice Helena Alexandra Williams

**Pseudonym:** Alys Meirion

**Date of birth:** 1863

**Date of death:** 1957

**Partner:** Fanny Mowbray Laming

**Parent:** David Williams

**Parent:** Annie Louisa Williams (née Williams)

**Gender:** Female

**Occupation:** writer, artist, and voluntary welfare worker

**Area of activity:** Art and Architecture; Literature and Writing; Philanthropy

**Author:** Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan

Alice Williams was born at Castell Deudraeth, Penrhyndeudraeth, Merioneth, on 12 March 1863, the youngest of seven daughters and five sons of **David Williams** (1799-1869), landowner, and Annie Louisa Loveday (née Williams, died 1904), of Peniarth Ucha, Merioneth.

The family was radical in politics: Alice Williams's father was the first Liberal to be elected as MP for Merioneth; her brother Sir Arthur Osmond Williams, first baronet, who followed their father as Liberal MP for Merioneth in 1900, was a vocal supporter of women's suffrage. Despite the family's radical outlook and belief in the importance of education, Alice received only a very limited education at home and as the youngest daughter was expected to remain single and become a companion to her mother, who settled in London soon after being widowed. There Alice Williams, a lively and intelligent woman, began to develop her talents as an amateur actress and writer of light verse and plays, as well as honing her artistic skills, decorating correspondence with lively drawings and sketching events such as eisteddfodau and suffrage meetings. After her mother's death, she began at last, at the age of forty, to enjoy an independent life. She joined the Lyceum, a newly founded social club for women, in London in 1905 and went on to develop branches in Berlin that year and in 1907 in Paris, her main home until the First World War. There she met, around 1909-10, Fanny Mowbray Laming, a half-French musician and public speaker, who became her life's companion. In Paris Alice also developed her artistic skills, especially as a landscape painter in watercolour. In 1914 she was invited to become a member of the Union Internationale des Beaux-Arts et des Lettres; she also belonged to the Union des Femmes Peintres et Sculpteurs de Paris, exhibiting her work in London as well as Paris.

She continued to travel widely on the Continent and was in Munich when Britain declared war on Germany in August 1914. After some difficulty she managed to reach Switzerland where she worked for the Red Cross and sold her watercolours in aid of Belgian refugees. Back in Paris, in January 1915 she set up Le Signal, a bureau to assist those seeking news of missing persons, whether taken prisoner, wounded, or killed, opening a London branch two months later. Later that year, she began fund-raising for the French Wounded Emergency Fund and became its Organising Secretary for Wales, making her headquarters at Cae Canol, a house near Castell Deudraeth, until December 1917. As comfortable among her compatriots as in diplomatic, artistic and literary circles in London or abroad, she made fund-raising tours around Wales, a pioneering motorist in her faithful Ford. On these tours she addressed meetings and staged her two new plays, *Liz* and *Britannia*; the latter, described as a 'patriotic pageant-play' for women and girls, was translated into Welsh by **Alice Gray Jones** ('Ceridwen Peris'). For her work with the Fund Alice Williams was awarded the Médaille de la Reconnaissance Française.

Her commitment to providing wider opportunities for women's social, educational, and cultural development remained central to her life. She founded the fourth Welsh branch of the Women's Institute on her home territory of Minffordd in 1917, presenting the branch with a meeting house on a site provided by her brother, Arthur. After the formal opening she travelled to Birkenhead to attend the National Eisteddfod where she was admitted as a 'dramatic authoress' to the Gorsedd of Bards, taking the name 'Alys Meirion'. A bardic chair won in 1899 by 'Bryfdir' (**Humphrey Jones**, 1867-1947), one of her sponsors, had been presented to her by Deudraeth WI. She played a formative role in the National Federation of Women's Institutes, serving as its first Honorary Secretary and Treasurer from 1917, organising major art and craft exhibitions and launching in 1919 its magazine *Home and Country*, which she edited until June 1920. In 1919, with Fanny Laming, she founded the Forum Club in Grosvenor Place, London, a residential club providing women with a social centre with all the facilities of a gentlemen's club, including a cocktail bar. The ethos was radical but politically unaffiliated, professional but full of fun. For thirty-five years it was a haven for single women and especially those in the professions, where new career opportunities had opened up. Members included the artist Laura Knight and the aviator Amy Johnson as well as the actress, author and suffragist Elizabeth Robbins. The lively Welsh section included Alice Williams's friend, the novelist **Berta Ruck**, who cheerfully joined her in the amateur dramatics. Williams continued to paint, putting on annual shows at the Forum and elsewhere, and remained a faithful supporter of Deudraeth WI. When Castell Deudraeth and its estate were sold to her nephew, Clough Williams-Ellis, in 1931 her family retained Borth-wen, a house overlooking the estuary, and this became her local base during her regular visits. She approved the conversion of the castle into an hotel, persuading well-heeled friends from London to stay there. During this period she continued to be a pioneer, being the first woman elected to the committees of both St George's and King Edward's hospitals in London, and was in 1937 awarded the CBE for outstanding public service.

The next years proved difficult. 1939 brought the death both of Fanny Laming and of her brother, **Dr Leonard Williams**, to whom she had been close since childhood, and in 1944 the Forum Club's premises were badly damaged in the blitz. Later, in her ninetieth year, she oversaw the move to new premises, but the Club would not long outlive her. Her failing eyesight put an end to her painting, but she retained her sly humour and lively spirit and was a popular and generous aunt. Alice Williams died at her home, 43 Cadogan Place, Chelsea, London, on 15 August 1957, and a memorial service was held for her in London on 11 October 1957.

### Author

**Dr Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan**

### Sources

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University Women's Club, London: private collection of watercolour paintings

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## Further Reading

Wikipedia Article: [Alice Williams](#)

## Additional Links

Wikidata: [Q18572211](#)

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