

WILLIAMS, WALDO GORONWY (1904-1971), poet and pacifist

Name: Waldo Goronwy Williams
Date of birth: 1904
Date of death: 1971
Spouse: Linda Williams (née Llewellyn)
Parent: Angharad Elizabeth Williams (née Jones)
Parent: John Edwal Williams
Gender: Male
Occupation: poet and pacifist
Area of activity: Poetry
Author: Robert Rhys

Waldo Williams was born in Haverfordwest, Pembrokeshire on 30 September 1904, the third of five children of John Edwal Williams (1863-1934) and Angharad Williams (née Jones, 1875-1932). His father was headmaster of Prendergast School in Haverfordwest and English was the language spoken within the family. Following periods of nervous illness which left a lasting impression on his young son, in 1911 J. Edwal Williams was appointed headmaster of Mynachlog-ddu School, located in the same county but in a Welsh-speaking community in the shadow of the Preseli hills. This move was of great significance in Waldo Williams's development. Waldo (he is often referred to by his first name only) stated that he learnt Welsh playing on Mynachlog-ddu schoolyard, an experience recorded in an early poem, 'Yr Iaith a Garaf' (The language I love). The family moved again in 1915 to Clunderwen on the border with Carmarthenshire; a few months later the family's eldest child, Morvydd Money, died.

At some point after this and during the Great War Waldo had an experience or vision in the gap between two fields, Weun Parc y Blawd and Parc y Blawd, on Cross farm, Clunderwen. He later described it as a realisation 'sudden and vivid, that men were above all things brothers to each other'. This event would have confirmed the pacifist convictions held and expressed by his parents. Towards the end of his life he recollected listening to his father in 1916 reading T. E. Nicholas's anti-war poem 'Gweriniaeth a Rhyfel' (Democracy and War) to his mother in their home. It seems that the young boy began to write poetry in Morvydd's company; in doing so he was following in an uncle's footsteps. His father's brother William 'Gwiliamus' Williams (1867-1920) published a volume of poetry and was a pioneer of vers libre in Welsh.

Waldo went to Narberth County School and from there to the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth in 1923 to study English and History. He played an active part in student life, editing *The Dragon* during the 1926-7 session. As well as writing editorial pieces he published his own English and Welsh poems anonymously in the magazine. After graduating he worked as a supply teacher in his native county for some years, without ever constructing an orthodox and successful professional career. This can be attributed in part to periods of mental illness, and later in his career to his pacifist commitments.

Most of the poems composed in the years up to 1939 did not appear at the time; many of these were in a light hearted vein. He published a series of poems in *Y Ford Gron* during the early 1930s; these included the lyric 'Cofio' (Remembrance) which was then included by T. H. Parry-Williams in *Elfenau Barddoniaeth* (The Elements of Poetry, part manual, part anthology) in 1935. This proved to be one of his most popular poems, but the poet was not satisfied with its derivative mode of expression. In 1936, he published jointly with his friend E. Llwyd Williams a book of poetry for children, *Cerddi'r Plant* (Children's Poems). A more ambitious poetic vision was also given expression in the years up to 1939; inspired by the Crown competition at the 1929 National Eisteddfod he wrote an unfinished long poem or pryddest 'Y Gân ni Chanwyd' (The Song Unsung); an awdl, a strict-metre ode on the subject of 'Tŷ Ddewi' (St Davids), was sent to the Chair competition at Fishguard National Eisteddfod in 1936. (This was first published in revised form in *Dail Pren* in 1956.) The long strict-metre poem 'Y Tŵr a'r Graig' (The Tower and the Rock, 1938) was an important milestone. Written in response to a movement towards military conscription in Britain, the poem used concrete images taken from the Pembrokeshire terrain to represent the militaristic state on the one hand and on the other the common people whose independence of thought had not been extinguished by the state.

The following year was marked by the commencement of the Second World War and has to be considered a productive turning point in the poet's career. In many of the poems written in 1939 and the following years Pembrokeshire became a contested site between the opposing forces portrayed in 'Y Tŵr a'r Graig', and poems such as 'Daw'r Wennol yn ôl i'w nyth' (The swallow shall return to its nest) 'Ar Weun Cas' Mael' (On Puncteston Common) 'Gŵyl Ddewi' (Saint David's Day) and 'Preseli', written in a variety of forms, owe much of their power and passion to this antithesis. 'Preseli' is regarded as the crowning achievement of the powerful body of socio-political work written between 1939 and 1946. The background was a campaign in Pembrokeshire against the War Office's plans to establish a military training area on the Preseli hills. The poet sang his support from Kimbolton in England, where he had been working as a schoolteacher. The poem's closing line is one of Waldo's most famous ones: 'Cadwn y mur rhag y bwystfil, cadwn y ffynham rhag y baw' (rendered in Waldo's English version as 'To the wall! We must keep our well clear of this beast's dirt'). 'Preseli' uses two phrases which are crucial to an understanding of his social and pacifist vision: 'annibyniaeth barn' (independence of thought) and 'bro brawdoliaeth' (region of brotherhood). Although the poem's main thrust is clear it is more challenging and difficult in terms of imagery and expression than his earlier poems, confirming an emerging pattern in the post-1939 poetry, and reflecting the poet's wish to align with D. Gwenallt Jones and Saunders Lewis in breaking free from the conventional lyric and sonnet forms.

But the period from 1939 onwards, productive and exciting ones in terms of poetic development, saw Waldo's personal life marked by loss and anguish. On 14 April, 1941 he married Linda Llewellyn in Blaenconin Chapel. His stance as a conscientious objector on pacifist grounds led to appearance before the South Wales Tribunal, sitting in Carmarthen in February 1942, when he was exempted from military service conditionally upon continuing in his occupation of teaching. Concerned about his future employment in Pembrokeshire Waldo had already applied successfully for a post at Botwnnog County School in Llŷn. He began to work there on 1 March. His wife's health deteriorated after the move and she died from the effects of tuberculosis on 1 June 1943. Consumed with grief at this loss the poet eventually left Llŷn for England, working in schools in Kimbolton and Lyneham between 1945 and 1948. He returned to Wales in 1949, to a supply post in Builth Wells; within a year he was back in Pembrokeshire, and it was there that he would remain, teaching in schools and taking extramural classes. He died in St Thomas Hospital, Haverfordwest, on 20 May 1971, having spent months there as a result of a serious stroke.

Personal suffering no doubt contributed to his ability to empathize with the grieving and bereft in profound poems such as 'Almaenes' (German woman), 'Die Bibelforscher' and 'Geneth Ifanc' (Young girl). 'Mewn Dau Gae' (In two fields), written so as to be included in the volume *Dail Pren* (Leaves of the Tree) in 1956, is rightly regarded as the apotheosis of his poetic career. The poem recollects the vision experienced between two fields around forty years earlier in the light of Waldo's present concerns about militarism and conscription. He had protested against government policy during the Korean War and afterwards; bailiffs sequestered his possessions when he refused to pay income tax, and he spent terms in prison in 1960 and 1961.

Raised within the Baptist denomination, by the 1950s he had made his spiritual home with the Society of Friends, the 'Quakers', from whom he received great practical support. His political affiliations also evolved; in the 1920s he was a staunch supporter of his friend Willie Jenkins, a pacifist and Labour parliamentary candidate in Pembrokeshire. Later, due in part to the influence of **D. J. Williams**, Fishguard, he joined Plaid Cymru, and stood as a parliamentary candidate in Pembrokeshire at the 1959 election.

Dail Pren was the only volume of poetry for adults published by Waldo Williams in his lifetime. As a collection, including as it did both light hearted verse and poetry of agonizing complexity, it reflected the variety and instability of his life and work. And yet since his passing in 1971 no other Welsh-language poet has attracted so much attention. He has been extensively discussed by literary critics who find in his work some of the most rewarding and challenging poems of the twentieth century, and in his prose an invaluable companion to the poetry. His canon has been significantly enlarged in the twenty-first century with the publication of a substantial selection of his prose writings and an edited collection of his extant poetry.

He has come to be regarded as a prophet and visionary by those who share his convictions regarding pacifism and brotherhood. He greatly influenced nationalist thinkers and leaders; in the 1960s the philosopher **J. R. Jones** often quoted Waldo's poetry in his articles on Welsh identity. He has inspired artists (e.g. Aneurin Jones) and musicians; the remarkable popularity of his lyric 'Y Tangnefeddwyr' (The Peacemakers) in the twenty-first century is due in no small part to Eric Jones's choral arrangements. He attracted translators of the highest quality, Rowan Williams in their midst. Homage has been paid to him by erecting a series of memorials; the chief memorial stone is on Ros-Fach common in Mynachlog-ddu, inscribed with the opening lines of 'Preseli', 'Mur fy mebyd, Foel Drigarn, Carn Gyfrwy, Tal Mynydd / Wrth fy nghefn ym mhob annibyniaeth barn' ('Wall of my boyhood, Foel Drigarn, Carn Gyfrwy, Tal Mynydd, In my mind's independence ever at my back'); plaques have been placed at other places connected to him, including Puncteston School in Pembrokeshire and Kimbolton School in Huntingdonshire. A society, Cymdeithas Waldo Williams has been formed with the aim of continuing to promote his work and vision.

Author

Robert Rhys

Sources

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Robert Rhys, *Chwilio am Nodau'r GŴŷn* (1992)

[Cymdeithas Waldo Williams website](#)

Further Reading

NLW Archives: [A Vote for Waldo is a Vote for Wales](#)

NLW Archives: [Plaid Cymru for Progress and Vitality... Waldo Williams The Plaid Cymru Candidate](#)

[Waldo Williams \(1904-1971\)From Warfare to Welfare website](#), viewed 30 May 2019

[Wikipedia Article: Waldo Williams](#)

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