

## DAVIS, ELIZABETH (BETSI CADWALADR) (1789 - 1860), nurse and traveller

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**Name:** Elizabeth Davis

**Date of birth:** 1789

**Date of death:** 1860

**Partner:** H\_\_\_

**Partner:** James B\_\_\_

**Partner:** Thomas Harris

**Parent:** Judith Cadwaladr (née Humphreys)

**Parent:** Dafydd Cadwaladr

**Gender:** Female

**Occupation:** nurse and traveller

**Area of activity:** Medicine; Travel and Exploration

**Author:** Gwyneth Tyson Roberts

Betsi Cadwaladr was born on 24 May 1789 at Penrhiw near Bala, Merioneth, and was apparently the thirteenth of the sixteen children born to **Dafydd Cadwaladr** (1752-1834), farmer, and his wife Judith (née Humphreys or 'Erasmus', died 1800). She was christened at Llanycil on 26 May 1789. According to her *Autobiography*, Betsi changed her surname from 'Cadwaladr' to 'Davis' when she was living among English people unable to pronounce 'Cadwaladr'. She adopted 'Davis', as had her older siblings in a similar situation, because it derived from her father's first name and thus used the traditional Welsh patronymic system.

A well-known preacher with the Calvinistic Methodists, **Dafydd Cadwaladr** was a member of Selina Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion and a close friend of the Rev. **Thomas Charles** of Bala. Betsi's younger sister Bridget (1795?-1878) became maid to **Lady Augusta Hall** in London and Llanover, which helps explain the support which her autobiography received from **Lady Llanover**.

It is important to emphasize that all the detailed information about Betsi Cadwaladr's life, apart from the dates of her birth and death and of the beginning and end of her service as one of Florence Nightingale's nurses, derives from *The Autobiography of Elizabeth Davis a Balaclava Nurse Daughter of Dafydd Cadwaladr Edited by Jane Williams (Ysgafell)*. Originally brought out in two volumes in 1857, it was reissued by Honno Press in 1987 and 2015. The latter edition is the first since 1857 to restore the full original text. **Jane Williams**'s preface had been omitted from previous reprints, and cuts and changes had been made to the narrative.

According to her autobiography Betsi Cadwaladr spent her early years on her father's farm. She was treated badly by her elder sister who ran the household after their mother's death in 1795-6, and ran away to the house of her father's landlord, **Simon Lloyd** of Plas-yn-dre in Bala. She lived there for five years, receiving a good education and training as a domestic servant. Having promised to stay with the Lloyd family for another year, she decided that she 'must see more of the world', and made off again, this time to Liverpool. There, she spent several years working as a domestic servant in more than one household. With the family of one of her employers in Liverpool she appears to have travelled widely in Europe around 1815-16. She also appears to have become a keen theatre goer and actress during those years.

Through the Liverpool Welsh community Betsi met her first fiancé, merchant ship captain Thomas Harris, who hailed from Solfach in Pembrokeshire. He was drowned two days before their wedding, when his ship was wrecked off Liverpool harbour. She later entered into several other engagements, such as that to a James B\_\_\_, a house-painter from Chester, fleeing to London two days before their wedding, where she stayed in the house of **John Jones** (Jac Glan-y-gors), with whom she claimed distant kinship. During the following period in London, where she worked as a domestic servant, she briefly became engaged to an upholsterer whom the *Autobiography* designates only as H\_\_\_.

In November 1820, she was hired as maid to the wife of the captain of a merchant ship sailing to the West Indies. Following this first voyage to the West Indies, and working for a succession of captains' wives, she visited and stayed in southern Africa, South America, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore and the islands of the Pacific, as well as Greece, Turkey and Egypt. During this period she gained practical experience of nursing, often under difficult conditions, when passengers or crew members were ill or injured. She also delivered several babies.

As she grew older she spent more time back in Britain, working first as a servant in north Wales in 1844-5 and south Wales in 1849. She then spent approximately a year as a nurse at Guy's Hospital in London, later hiring as a private nurse in patients' homes. In the autumn of 1854 she read a newspaper report of the Battle of the Alma, the first major engagement of the Crimean War, and immediately wanted to go to the Crimea 'to see what was going on, and to take care of the wounded', according to her *Autobiography*. She volunteered as a nurse, but was too late to join the party of nurses led by Florence Nightingale.

Nightingale had given instructions that no more nurses were to be sent out from Britain until she requested them. However, a second party of nurses led by Mary Stanley, of whom Betsi Cadwaladr was one, was recruited and left London on 2 December 1854. Nightingale was not informed of this until a week before their ship arrived at Istanbul, when it was too late for them to be turned back. As a result, they found themselves unwanted, with inadequate accommodation and nothing to do. Cadwaladr, bored and frustrated, blamed Florence Nightingale, for whom she is said to have formed a deep dislike the moment she heard her name.

Cadwaladr's intention had always been to go to the Crimea. After ten days at the British military hospital at Scutari outside Istanbul, and as the result of an acrimonious confrontation with Florence Nightingale (who could be high-handed with those she considered her social inferiors), she succeeded in getting posted to the British military hospital at Balaclava. By her own account, her energy, resourcefulness and lack of squeamishness enabled her to work effectively on the wards there. After approximately six weeks, however, she was put in charge of the kitchen which provided food for men too weak or ill to stomach British Army rations. She worked there alone, for most of the time, from five in the morning to midnight, seven days a week, for more than seven months. By then, the long hours, hard work and difficult living and working conditions were affecting her health. She suffered from diarrhoea and dysentery, and was invalided back to Britain in November 1855. Her resentment at the treatment she had received by Nightingale culminated in a dispute over the amount of pay owed her when she left the Crimea.

She returned to Britain, 'in broken health ... and unprovided for', in the words of the *Autobiography*'s appeal for donations. There is no record of how much money, if any, was raised by sales of the book. She died on 17 July 1860 at her sister Bridget's house in east London and had a pauper's burial in Abney Park Cemetery. In 2012, her place of burial was identified and a memorial stone to her erected by the Royal College of Nursing, Wales. It bears the bilingual inscription 'Y fyddlonaf o Nyrsys Ei Mawrhydi' and 'The faithful[]jest of Her Majesty's Nurses'. The English version, according to her *Autobiography*, stemmed from a reference written for her by Margaret Wear, under whom she had worked at Balaclava.

The narrative of her life and experiences in the *Autobiography* is lively and energetic. The accounts of her travels, in particular, are full of dangerous and exciting adventures, many of which demonstrate her intrepidity, physical courage, resourcefulness, and presence of mind. It records more than twenty proposals of marriage, her most determined suitor, a Portuguese merchant named Barbosa, following her halfway round the world and attempting to kidnap her to force her into marriage. She appears to have found them all wanting in comparison with Captain Harris. The predominant characteristics which the *Autobiography* communicates are her spirit of independence and her proud Welshness, which is emphasized from the first page of the narrative to the last. She appears to have resisted secular authority in whatever form it presented itself, but nevertheless she was a devout Christian and treasured the small Welsh bible given to her as a child by **Thomas Charles**.

It is important to bear in mind that this narrative of her life is sometimes unreliable. A pertinent example is her age. The register of Florence Nightingale's nurses shows that on enrolment in autumn 1854, Cadwaladr gave her age as 55. Her true age of 65 would have meant immediate rejection and she was determined to go to the Crimea. The age given in the *Autobiography* is half way between the two, perhaps because her true age would have revealed her lie on enrolment to friends of Nightingale, while her age in the Nurses' Register could have seemed equally suspicious to friends who had known her in early life. The result is that her age in the *Autobiography* is demonstrably inaccurate in relation to some events. For example, while the *Autobiography* says she was five years old when her mother died, the parish register for Llanycil records her mother's burial on 10 February 1800, when Cadwaladr was ten.

The 'Preface' to the *Autobiography* by **Jane Williams** (Ysgafell), one of Wales's first female historians, indicates the extent of her contribution to the book's content. Williams appears to have filled in, where possible, the gaps in Cadwaladr's memory in relation to details of events, chronology, geography and the names of people and places. She also contributed to its style. Some sentences record Cadwaladr's own words, while others are Williams's pastiche of Cadwaladr's speaking style. Some footnotes question or contradict statements in the narrative to which they relate in a way which indicates that Cadwaladr decided what information went into the narrative, but that Williams had control of the footnotes. The result of Williams's contributions to the book is that, rather than being regarded as 'a chronicle of true facts', the *Autobiography* should be seen as the result of an often complex collaboration.

## Author

**Gwyneth Tyson Roberts**

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Wikipedia Article: [Betsi Cadwaladr](#)

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