

DILLWYN, ELIZABETH AMY (1845 - 1935), novelist, industrialist and feminist campaigner

Name: Elizabeth Amy Dillwyn

Date of birth: 1845

Date of death: 1935

Parent: Elizabeth Dillwyn (née de la Beche)

Parent: Lewis Llewelyn Dillwyn

Gender: Female

Occupation: novelist, industrialist and feminist campaigner

Area of activity: Literature and Writing; Business and Industry

Author: Kirsti Bohata

Amy Dillwyn was born on 16 May 1845 into a wealthy and distinguished Swansea family, the daughter of [Lewis Llewelyn Dillwyn](#) and Elizabeth (Bessie) Dillwyn (née De La Beche). Her father was a scientist, industrialist and long-serving Liberal MP for Swansea who campaigned for Disestablishment in Wales. Her mother reputedly contributed to the designs of the Cambrian Pottery owned by her husband. Amy Dillwyn's uncle was [John Dillwyn-Llewelyn](#) of Penllergare [sic] who, along with his wife Emma Thomasina Talbot, his sister Mary Dillwyn and his daughter, Amy's cousin, Theresa Story Maskelyne, was a pioneer of early photography. Her grandfathers were the naturalist [Lewis Weston Dillwyn](#) and geologist Henry De La Beche. On the Dillwyn side, the family were originally Quakers and her great-grandfather was [William Dillwyn](#), the anti-slavery campaigner from Pennsylvania, USA.

Amy Dillwyn was the third of four children. Her older sister Mary (Minnie) Nichol of Merthyr Mawr was an entomologist, traveller, climber and mother of five. Dillwyn was particularly close to her only brother Henry (Harry), her senior by one year; he was an unhappy barrister, a founder member of the Century Club which supported advanced Liberal politics and an alcoholic which led to an early death. A younger sister Sarah (Essie) was involved in a divorce case after leaving her alcoholic husband and her five children. She became an actress and remarried, but died in impoverished circumstances, leaving one daughter from her second marriage who was the major beneficiary of Amy Dillwyn's will.

In her youth, Dillwyn's life looked set to follow that of other wealthy debutantes. She was presented to society at a Royal Drawing Room in 1863 where the grieving Queen Victoria was represented by her daughter, the Crown Princess of Prussia. Though briefly engaged, Dillwyn never married. Her fiancé, Llewelyn Thomas of Llwyn Madoc, died in February 1864 shortly before their wedding, relieving her of the prospect of a marriage without love (on her side at least). She furiously rejected several subsequent offers of marriage from a Swansea clergyman. The love of her teenage years and regular companion throughout her twenties was Olive Talbot (1842-1894) of Margam and Penrice, who Dillwyn came to think of as her wife.

After the death of her mother in 1866, Dillwyn reluctantly took over the duties of running the household and acted as her father's companion in many of his engagements in Swansea and London. In London, they were often guests at the Prince of Wales's 'Drawing Rooms' in Buckingham Palace, attended lavish diplomatic balls such as that for the Sultan of Turkey in 1867 at the India Office and regular events at the Foreign Office (some of which were later satirised in one of her novels). Struggling to find a purpose in life, Dillwyn for a time considered joining an Anglican Sisterhood attached to her beloved church of All Saints, Margaret Street in London. When at home in Wales, she taught at Sunday school in Killay and volunteered at the village day school. Seeking ways to raise funds for the school and other charitable causes she took to writing allegories, some of which were published by the Christian Knowledge Society (later the SPCK). Prevented from teaching evening classes by her father, she nevertheless contributed to the establishment of a Reading Room for working men at Killay and there participated in musical events with local singers. Indeed, her first love was music. Her fine contralto voice was trained under the celebrated Sir John Goss (1800-1880) though her experiments as a composer generally met with the disapproval of her tutor.

A recurring illness, probably gynaecological and possibly psychosomatic, restricted her movement and left Dillwyn confined to the family home at Hendrefoilan [sic] for much of her thirties and forties during which time she ran the Home Farm and published seven novels and a handful of short stories and poems. She was a regular reviewer for *The Spectator* from 1880 to the end of 1896, and a contributor to the short-lived periodical *The Red Dragon: The National Magazine of Wales* (1882-1887).

As a novelist, contemporaries welcomed her unsentimental portrayal of the working classes, her fresh and plausible first-person voices and her dry humour. Her first novel, *The Rebecca Riotes: A Story of Killay Life* (1880) drew on the Rebecca Riots of 1843. Her father and uncle, both magistrates, were directly involved in catching some of the rioters at Pontarddulais, but Dillwyn's story is told from the perspective of one of the rioters. Its radical perspective led to it being translated instantly into Russian. Her second novel *Chloe Arguelle* (1881), a satire of the ruling class and again including violent class conflict and organised riots, was also published in Russia as *The Lie*. Alongside her interest in social justice is a persistent feminist focus in her writing including her rejection of feminine upper class gender norms and a focus on strong, inventive and independent women and girls. While some of her heroines marry, Dillwyn's novels often focus instead on the improving nature of unrequited love, often between women. In *A Burglary, or Unconscious Influence* (1883) the tomboyish Imogen is in love with her cousin, a wealthy heiress a few years older than her, meanwhile Sylvester - a gentleman thief - is slowly redeemed by his secret infatuation with Imogen. Her fourth novel, *Jill* (1884), was the most commercially successful. In it a young woman disguises herself as a maid and runs away to London where she falls in love with her mistress. This picaresque novel includes a passionate argument for cremation which was not yet sanctioned in Britain and ends with Jill inheriting her estranged father's estate with not a husband in sight. Perhaps due to the success of *Jill*, Dillwyn penned a sequel, *Jill and Jack* (1887) in which the mannish spinster Jill is paired with the dandy Jack. Initially competing with each other in acts of chivalry in the service of a damsel in distress, the antagonistic pair slip into a partnership that ends in marriage. A serialised novel, *Nant Olchfa*, appeared in *The Red Dragon* (1886-1887) and a novel aimed at a younger audience, *Maggie Steele's Diary*, was published in 1892.

Upon her father's death in 1892, Amy Dillwyn was turned out of Hendrefoilan (which was entailed to the male line) and she moved into inexpensive lodgings in West Cross.

Her father's residual legatee, Dillwyn inherited a spelter works on the banks of the river Tawe which she rescued from debt and eventually sold for a handsome sum to a German metallurgy company in October 1905. She employed a manager to run the works on a day to day basis, but worked daily at her offices dealing with correspondence in French and German and overseeing the finances. Aged nearly 60, she led a trip to Algeria in February 1905, seeking a source of high-quality calamine (zinc ore). Inspecting mines and journeying into the snow-covered Atlas mountains by donkey, she tutored her nephew and heir, Rice Nichol, in the intricacies of export licenses and the art of bargaining.

During her time as a businesswoman and for the next twenty years, she served in various civic roles in Swansea, including membership of the organising committee of the National Eisteddfod held at Swansea in 1906, and as Chairman of the Hospital Board (during which time she raised funds for a new convalescent wing). She stood for election to the Council in 1906 and Swansea Harbour Board (neither were successful, the local press identifying her gender as her primary disability). A generous supporter of the militant Women's Freedom League from its early days in 1907, Dillwyn later served as President of the Swansea Branch of the constitutionalist NUWSS. She campaigned in support of dressmakers who went on strike in 1911, sharing a stage with trade unionist and future Labour MP and minister Margaret Bondfield (1873-1953) and Mary MacArthur (1880-1921) who was also a trade unionist and suffragist. Dillwyn remained active in Liberal politics into her eighties.

As a rare female industrialist, 'Miss Dillwyn' was the object of much public attention at the turn of the century. She was known for her unconventional clothing, which was practical, durable and 'mannish', as well as her formidable administrative skills and dedication to economy. Regularly appearing in the press, including a caricature in the popular Ally Sloper cartoon in 1904, from 1902 she was featured in a flurry of articles around the world. Noting her success in business, journalists marvelled at her habit of smoking 'a man's cigar'. Upon her death on 13 December 1935, her cigar - an emblem of her individuality, her refusal to conform and her success in a male-dominated world - and her Trilby hat featured prominently in obituaries from Wales to Australia. Amy Dillwyn was cremated and her ashes interred in the graveyard of St Paul's Church, Sketty.

Author

Kirsti Bohata

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