

LLYWELYN-WILLIAMS, ALUN (ALUN RHUN LLEWELYN WILLIAMS), (1913 - 1988), poet and literary critic

Name: Alun Llywelyn-williams
Date of birth: 1913
Date of death: 1988
Gender: Male
Occupation: poet and literary critic
Area of activity: Poetry; Literature and Writing
Author: Gerwyn Williams

Alun Llywelyn-Williams was born on 27 August 1913 in Cardiff, and brought up at 39 Penylan Road, Roath, and 33 Ninian Road, Roath Park where his family moved to live when he was eighteen months old. He was the youngest of three children of [Dr David Llewelyn Williams](#) (1870-1949), a Welsh Board of Health Medical Officer originally from Bwlchgwyn, Caerhun, Talybont, in the Conwy Valley, and his wife Margaret Ann Price (1875-1948) from Rhyl. [Enid Wyn Jones](#) was his sister.

His background was different to that of most other Welsh-language writers of the time in that he had a middle-class professional upbringing in Cardiff. Although English was the main language of the home, that did not mean that the family was Anglicized: he says that he had 'a faint memory of playing by myself in Welsh as a young boy; but there must have been a danger of English taking precedence very early, because I can hear my gran's voice scolding me, and stressing to me the importance of speaking two languages, "because two windows on the world are better than one", she said' ('Theresa'). He said that an 'aunt' by the name of Rita Gould 'first led me into the kingdom of literature' ('Theresa') and introduced him to the Mabinogion through [Charlotte Guest](#)'s translation. Pressure from his father, who felt passionately about Wales and the Welsh language, led Alun to study Welsh in the sixth form at Cardiff High School for Boys where he was a pupil from 1925 to 1931. He was tutored in the language and its literature by the history teacher, [R. T. Jenkins](#), and in 1977 he repayed his debt by publishing an introduction to the life and work of his former teacher in the 'Writers of Wales' series. The Welsh course proved to be a turning point in his life: 'I was introduced quite unexpectedly to a body of literature whose finest works were clearly worthy of comparison with some of the outstanding imaginative creations in other literatures... From that moment onwards, the Welsh language had its claws in me' (*Gwanwyn yn y Ddinas*). Any intention of applying for a place at Oxford or Cambridge was forgotten, his career path was changed and he was committed to the Welsh language.

He studied at the University College of South Wales and Monmouthshire from 1931, graduating in Welsh and History in 1934, and was strongly influenced there by [W. J. Gruffydd](#), whom he is said to have idolized at one time; he wrote the essay on [Gruffydd](#) in *Gwyr Llên* (1948) edited by Aneurin Talfan Davies. He began to make a name for himself as poet, critic and editor in the mid-1930s, and like his mentor he was not afraid to go his own way or express his opinions. He ventured to criticize what he regarded as the overemphasis on the rural and the medieval in Welsh literature at the time, and his bold articles such as 'Barddoniaeth mewn Oes Ddiwydiannol' ['Poetry in an Industrial Age'] of 1935 were given a platform by [Gruffydd](#) on the pages of *Y Llenor*. But that journal was not sufficient, and his insistence that Welsh literature should have contemporary relevance was given its main expression on the pages of *Tir Newydd* ['New Ground'], a new quarterly that he established in 1935 with a fellow Cardiff student, D. Llewelyn Walters. On the model of *Cambridge Left* and *New Verse* in English, this periodical took a left-wing political position in sympathy with the working class; it was critical of Plaid Cymru under [Saunders Lewis](#)'s leadership, and pioneering in its coverage of topics such as architecture, music, surrealism, cinema, radio and television. *Tir Newydd* ceased publication after seventeen issues, due to the outbreak of the Second World War and paper shortages, but it remains one of the most significant short-lived periodicals.

In 1944 Llywelyn-Williams published the first of his three collections of poems, the short volume *Cerddi 1934-1942* containing love poems and ones recording the atmosphere of that anxious time before the outbreak of war and the march of fascism and Nazism. The love between him and Alice Phoebe Stocker (1911-2005), a nurse from Porth, Rhondda, represented an ideal of mutual trust and strength which formed a counterpoint to the destructive powers threatening the future of the world at the time: in his words years later, 'Fulfillment of the relationship between two people is for me the beginning of all goodness, and the only practical basis for complete reform of society and civilisation' (*Mabon*, 1971). The retrospective poem 'Dadrith Doe neu Cofio'r Tridegau' ['Yesterday's disillusionment or remembering the Thirties'] epitomizes his attitude as a poet in his early period: 'Yn y dyddiau dolurus hynny, gwyddem pwy | oedd y gelyn... | hawdd oedd adnabod awduron ein cancr a'n clwy' ['In those painful days we knew who the enemy was... it was easy to recognise the authors of our cancer and our wound'] (*Pont y Caniedydd*). Under the influence of English left-wing poets like W. H. Auden and Stephen Spender, and in the absence of Welsh poets from the same period with whom he could identify, his muse was a politically committed one. But the war years proved to be a personal and creative turning point for him which undermined his confidence and any 'easy' answers which he once held.

Before that, for a very short period in 1936 he was an Assistant Librarian at the National Library of Wales in Aberystwyth, and then returned to his home city as an announcer with the BBC between 1936 and 1939, and during the period of the 'Phoney War' from 1939 to 1940 he worked with the BBC's Welsh-language news unit in London. One of the creative challenges which he faced in that work was the need to coin Welsh equivalents for the neologisms of the time, and thus he made a practical contribution to the modernisation of the language. During his time at the BBC he worked with some of the pioneers of Welsh broadcasting such as [Sam Jones](#), Geraint Dyfnallt Owen, Dafydd Gruffydd (the son of his former Welsh lecturer, [W. J. Gruffydd](#)), Elwyn Evans (who wrote the volume about him in the 'Writers of Wales' series in 1991), and [Wynford Vaughan Thomas](#), one of his lifelong friends. Between 1940 and 1945, he felt 'moral obligation' (*Gwanwyn yn y Ddinas*) to take action against Nazism and served as an officer with the Royal Welsh Fusiliers, the 'literary' regiment in which [Hedd Wyn](#), Robert Graves, Llywelyn Wyn Griffith, [David Jones](#) and Siegfried Sassoon served during the First World War.

After joining the army in November 1940, he spent the next six months training in Wrexham and some months after that at Sandhurst Royal College, then to Sussex and Weymouth in Dorset before being transferred as lieutenant to Brecon in July 1942 where he trained recruits. This was a part of Wales which he immortalised years later in the title poem of his second collection, *Pont y Caniedydd* (1957), and in *Crwydro Brycheiniog* (1964), the second of two travel books which he wrote; the other was *Crwydro Arfon* (1959) on his adopted county after the war. This period of military service in Britain was recorded by him in a short unpublished biographical novel, '*Gwys i'r Gad*'

['Summons to Battle']. Then in July 1944 he volunteered to serve abroad and was sent to Germany and Belgium. The war left its mark on him physically, emotionally and creatively. He was wounded in the leg in an accident on 1 March 1945, and it would always be very distressful for him to recollect that incident in which his driver was killed. The war very nearly destroyed his creativity completely: having seen language being mistreated and manipulated to serve repugnant ideologies during the war, he was afraid to use it for political purposes as he had done in his early poems. But between 1946 and 1956, he managed to creatively reinvent himself: his new attitude towards poetry is expressed in the concluding words of 'Bardd y Byd Sydd Ohoni' ['The poet of the World as it is']: 'Life goes on, and from a poet God demands | praise of the mystery and wonder of living' (*Pont y Caniedydd*). As a result, he gave poetic expression to his experience of conflict in a collection of poems which comprises a profoundly cultured meditation on modern warfare.

These poems undoubtedly confirm him as the foremost Welsh poet of the Second World War. In the long narrative poem 'Ar Ymweliad' ['On a Visit'], a British officer is depicted sheltering from a snowstorm in a 'wounded house' in France: the world of the couple who own it has been crushed by loss and grief, and despite the cultural distance between them, the poem concludes with a powerful expression of one of his main themes in this period, recognition of the common suffering which characterizes the human condition. It also acknowledges the healing power of music; indeed Williams considered music to be 'one of life's chief pleasures and greatest comforts' (*Gwanwyn yn y Ddinas*), and because of that it was a great source of pride to him that a number of his poems were set to music, e.g. 'Pan Oeddw Fachgen' ['When I was a Boy'] (1971) by **William Mathias**, and 'Gwyn Fyd y Griafofen' ['Blessed is the Rowan'] (2001) by **Dilys Elwyn Edwards** after his death. One of the creative high points of the post-war period is the trilogy of poems 'Ym Merlin - Awst 1945' ['In Merlin - August 1945']. From a historical point of view, the poems are important because they give a Welsh eye-witness account of Berlin's mighty civilisation in ruins at the end of the war. Interweaving depictions of the physical condition of Germany's capital at the time with references to our early poetry, the Heledd cycle and the prose tales of the Mabinogi, the traumatic experiences of the war are set in perspective and the destruction is never allowed to deprive the survivors of hope for the future.

After his discharge from the army in 1946 he returned to the BBC for a while as Organiser of Radio Talks in Bangor until 1948, before being appointed as Director of the Extra-mural Department at the University College of North Wales, a post in which he remained for the rest of his professional career. He was awarded a Personal Chair in 1975, and was made Professor Emeritus on his retirement in 1979. His time in Bangor after the war represented a period of stability in his life. He had married Alis - the Welsh spelling which she adopted after learning the language - on 10 September 1938 and settled in Rhiwbina; the first eight years of their married life were disrupted by a series of separations like hundreds of thousands of similar couples at the time. In Bangor, the young couple united after the war brought up their two daughters, Eryl born on 13 November 1940 in Old Colwyn where his parents lived by then (the poem 'Y Wers ar y Piano' ['The Piano Lesson'] in *Pont y Caniedydd* is about her) and Luned born in Cardiff on 7 September 1942. In Bangor the family lived in three houses in turn: Menai Fron, Upper Bangor (1946-49); Pen y Lan, Belmont Road (1949-79) which was their main family home; and on his retirement, Cwm Bychan, 11 Ffordd Ffridoedd (1979-88).

Pont y Caniedydd came out in 1956, an annus mirabilis for modern Welsh poetry considering that **Waldo Williams's** *Dail Pren* and Euros Bowen's *Cerddi* were published in the same year. With his rhythmic control and careful attention to craftsmanship, Alun Llywelyn-Williams is considered one of the greatest masters of vers libre in Welsh. But he was never a productive poet - indeed, he once confessed that writing poetry was a laborious process which gave him little pleasure - and he published a selection of his poems, a total of just ninety, in the volume *Y Golau yn y Gwyll* ['The Light in the Gloom'] in 1979. Having been so aware of the tension between rural and urban Wales as a young man, it is significant that the final poem in this collection seems to reconcile his differing experiences of Welshness: in 'Tynfyedw' he records how a farmhouse near Llanuwchllyn which he visited on a walking tour in his youth was bought by his daughter Luned and her husband, Dafydd Meredith. In 1975 he published a book of a kind rarely seen in Welsh, an autobiography set in Cardiff, *Gwanwyn yn y Ddinas* ['Spring in the City'], which is full of a sense of civic pride and is a vibrant tribute to his native city. His main aim in writing his 'fragment of autobiography' - which finishes when he is 27 and has just enlisted in the army - was 'to explain to himself how he unexpectedly grew into a poet who was determined to write in Welsh'.

His main critical writings were collected in the volume *Nes Na'r Hanesydd* ['Closer than the Historian'] (1968) and in *Ambell Sylw* ['A Few Observations'] (1988) which appeared in December after his death with the assistance of his friend and former colleague, **Dyfnallt Morgan**. The last essay in that selection is 'Y Llenor a'i Gymdeithas' ['The Writer and his Society'], the BBC Radio Lecture of 1966 which is an impassioned argument for the importance of the writer within a bilingual Welsh society, including the work of Emyr Humphreys and R. S. Thomas. Indeed, he had been a strong advocate of the two literatures of Wales since the days of *Tir Newydd*. But his most substantial scholarly contribution was *Y Nos, Y Niwl a'r Ynys: Agweddau ar y Profiad Rhamantaidd yng Nghymru 1890-1914* ['The Night, the Mist and the Island: Aspects of the Romantic Experience in Wales 1890-1914'] (1960), a partial adaptation of an MA thesis which he completed in 1957 under the supervision of **G. J. Williams** in his old department in Cardiff.

He played a prominent part in the public life of Wales and in various cultural circles, for instance as a member of the Welsh Committee of the Arts Council (1958-67); a member of the Welsh Academy (1959-88) and its Chair (1979-82); a Board member of Cwmni Theatr Cymru (1967-81); a member of the executive committee of the North Wales Arts Society, its Chair (1977-1982) and its Vice President; a member of the Welsh Committee of the Independent Broadcasting Authority (c. 1966/67); one of the founders of HTV and a Director on the Board of HTV Ltd (c. 1966/67-83/84); a board member of the Welsh Films Board; and Vice President of Coleg Harlech.

He was honoured by his alma mater, University College of Wales Cardiff, which made him a fellow; he received a D.Litt. from the University of Wales and the Main Poetry Prize of the Arts Council of Wales for his volume *Y Golau yn y Gwyll* in 1980. His poems were translated into various languages: German, Danish, French, English, Chinese and Japanese. *The Light in the Gloom*, Joseph P. Clancy's translation of *Y Golau yn y Gwyll*, was published in 1988, and part of *Gwanwyn yn y Ddinas* was translated by Luned Meredith for *A Cardiff Anthology* edited by **Meic Stephens** in 1987. A recording of him reading two of his poems, 'Ar Ymweliad' and 'Gwyn Fyd y Griafofen', can be heard on the CD *Lleisiau Beirdd Cymru* ['Voices of Poets of Wales'] released by Sain in 2014.

For the last nine years of his life he was in such physical pain, and able to rest only with the help of strong sleeping tablets, that he published virtually nothing. Alun Llywelyn-Williams died of a heart attack on 9 May 1988 and his remains were buried in Bangor city cemetery. His papers were deposited by his family in Bangor University Archive.

Author

Gerwyn Williams

Sources

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