

SAUNDERS, SARA MARIA ('S.M.S.') (1864 - 1939), evangelist and author

Name: Sara Maria Saunders
Date of birth: 1864
Date of death: 1939
Spouse: John Maurice Saunders
Child: Mair Saunders
Child: Olwen Saunders
Parent: Robert Joseph Davies
Parent: Frances Davies (née Humphreys)
Gender: Female
Occupation: evangelist and author
Area of activity: Religion; Literature and Writing
Author: Rosanne Reeves

Sara Maria Saunders was born in March 1864 in Cwrt Mawr, Llangeitho, Ceredigion, the eldest of the ten children born to landowners **Robert Joseph Davies** (1839-1892) and his wife Frances (née Humphreys, 1836-1918). She had three sisters, Mary (1869-1918), **Annie Jane** (1873-1942) an international peace campaigner, and Eliza ('Lily', 1876-1939), and six brothers, Bertie (1865-1879), David Charles (1866-1928), Edward (1867-69), **John Humphreys Davies** (1871-1926) who became Principal of the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, Walter Ernest Llewelyn (1874-1941), and George (1877-1877). On her father's side S.M.S. was a great-great-granddaughter of **David Charles**, brother of **Thomas Charles** of Bala, and on her mother's side a great-great-granddaughter of the Biblical commentator **Peter Williams**. In the home of her grandparents, **Robert Davies** and Eliza (née Charles), Stryd Fawr, Aberystwyth, the Methodist Constitution and Confession of Faith was drawn up in 1823.

Cwrt Mawr was a small mansion on the outskirts of Llangeitho. When her father and mother became landowners, Welsh speaking, totally committed to Calvinistic Methodism, they were the leaders of their community, mainly through the activities of Capel Gwynfil, her father being a head deacon and justice of the peace and her grandmother, when she became physically less able, supervizing the Sunday School classes from the Cwrt Mawr homestead. Under the influence of her family, especially her mother and grandmother who were strong religious presences with outgoing personalities, combined with her education in a public Methodist school in Liverpool and her childhood in **Daniel Rowland**'s village, in the sound of villagers' recollections of the Revival led by **Dafydd Morgan** Ysbyty Ystwyth (1859), Sara experienced a Christian religious conversion as a young girl. Following her marriage in 1887 to John Maurice Saunders (1863-1919), a member of another well-known Methodist family who lived in Liverpool (son of **Dr D. D. Saunders**), Sara dedicated the rest of her life to her vocation as an evangelist and author.

John Saunders was ordained in Bwlchgwyn chapel, Tregaron in 1890, and following a short period in Llandoverly they went to live in Penarth at the very time that the Forward Movement was founded by **John Pugh** in 1891, the missionary arm of Methodism in the industrial south. S.M.S.'s special interest in the destiny of girls and women, her awareness of the difficulties they faced and her faith in their potential now became evident. Through her own efforts and those of other female members the Women's Section of the Forward Movement was founded in Llandrindod in 1903. In the same year S.M.S. launched a branch for the Women of Swansea, where she and her husband were by now living with his widowed mother (sister of **Dean Howell**, St David's). Their two daughters, Mair and Olwen, were born there in 1901 and 1903.

In 1908 a permanent women's refuge was established for the Forward Movement in Cardiff. 'Mainly through the efforts of some of the women of our Movement, led by Mrs J. M. Saunders', says the *Monthly Treasury*, 'we decided to purchase more commodious premises at Kingswood, Canton, where we might carry on Rescue as well as Preventive Work'. To this end the *Torch* notes that 'Mrs J. M. Saunders collected £750 to meet **Mr John Cory**'s offer of £250' and following this a guild of women, 'Sisters of the People', was set up to run the refuge.

The ambition of S.M.S. and her fellow evangelists was to witness another revival. Therefore, alongside her practical work for the Forward Movement, she now set out to use her innate story-telling talent as a powerful way of saving souls. Her sister Annie recalled her ability to mesmerise her sisters and brothers through her entertaining stories, confirmed by her daughter Mair a generation later, who said, 'Mother was a marvellous raconteur and could really hold audiences of children or adults quite spellbound.'

Between 1893 and 1896, she published her first series of stories yn **Y Drysorfa**, the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist monthly (the first female author to publish fiction in that periodical). In line with her aim to re-kindle the flame of past revivals, these are stories about the blessings experienced by the residents of Llanestyn (a village based on Llangeitho) during the 1859 Revival, 'the people,' she said, 'among whom I had the privilege of spending the first years of my life'. Such was the popularity of the stories that they were collected and published under the title *Llon a Lleddf* ['Cheerful and Sad'] (Treffynnon: P.M. Evans a'i Fab, 1897).

S.M.S. was confident that her aspiration would be realised. As she said in *Y Traethodydd* in 1903, p.459, 'I know that many good people believe that we will never again see great revivals like in the past... It is very difficult to accept this doctrine after witnessing the powerful effects of Gipsy Smith's ministry'. And after a year, her dream came true, when the Revival of 1904-05 arrived, in her words, 'like a storm of thunder and lightning'.

S.M.S. now doubled her literary efforts in an attempt to maintain the momentum. A series appeared in *Yr Ymwelydd Misol* in 1906-7, which was published under the title *Y Diwygiad ym Mhentre Alun* ['The Revival in Pentre Alun'] (Gwrecsam: Hughes a'i Fab, 1908), followed by another series for *Yr Ymwelydd Misol* in 1908, namely *Llithiau o Bentre Alun* ['Tales from Pentre Alun'] (Gwrecsam: Hughes a'i Fab, 1908). While her first series captured the memories of the joys of the past, these two titles were a jubilant celebration of the present. Following their huge success amongst her readers she was asked to contribute another series of stories, Hen Bobl Llanestyn ['The Old People of Llanestyn'] for *Yr Ymwelydd Misol* in 1914. Even though she did not publish any more fiction as individual titles, her Welsh language writings, fictional and factual, appeared in *Y Gymraes*, *Y Drysorfa*, *Y Traethodydd*, *Yr Efenglydd*, and *Cymru: Heddyw ac Yforu* until 1930.

Editors of English language periodicals were also drawn to her talent, and since S.M.S. arguably cared as much, if not more, for the promotion of Methodism than the future

of the Welsh language, between 1892 and 1929 she published articles and fiction in [The Christian Standard](#) , [Monthly Treasury](#) , [Young Wales](#) , [The Torch](#) and [The Treasury](#) , some of which broke new ground by being adaptations of her stories for previous Welsh language publications.

There was a pause in her writings for Welsh publications when she and her family moved in 1912 to live for six years in New Zealand, where John Saunders was invited to become the minister of St David's Presbyterian church in Auckland. Through S.M.S.'s personal efforts, by 1914, the sum collected annually by St David's for the foreign mission jumped from £198 to £441.

Under her care, the number of girls who attended the Bible classes increased to fifty, and in the periodical *The Harvest Field Presbyterian Women's Missionary Union*, and the *Outlook*, the New Zealand Presbyterian publication, constant reference is made to her contribution as an orator, chairperson or organiser. In his chapter about John Saunders in his book, *The Story of St Davids' Presbyterian Church, Auckland 1874-1921* D. J. Albert described S.M.S. as 'highly educated, splendidly gifted and deeply consecrated... if he [Mr Saunders] needed a scholarly advocate with a silver tongue, then Mrs Saunders was perhaps the most convincing and charming speaker in Auckland'. A series of her stories soon appeared in the *Outlook*, also versions of her Welsh-language stories about the characters of Llanestyn. Due to John Saunders's ill health, they left New Zealand in 1918 and moved to live in Southern California. John Saunders died there in 1919.

With her responsibilities as the wife of the manse having come to an end, S.M.S. invested her energies in the work of the Foreign Mission. She herself missed the opportunity to become a missionary as a young girl, since she was married before single girls were allowed by their denomination to go to India. But her great interest in the cause and her knowledge and work on its behalf was highlighted over and over again. According to D. J. Albert, '[she] possessed a large library of Foreign Mission books, and was conversant with every detail of the subject,' a declaration confirmed in *Y Cenhadwr* in 1924, where it was said that she had the best missionary library in Wales. As one with all the knowledge at her fingertips, S.M.S. published *A Bird's Eye View of Our Foreign Fields* (Caernarvon: Calvinistic Methodist Book Agency, 1919), translated by W. T. Ellis, and published under the title *Rhamant Ein Cenhadaeth Dramor*, (Caernarfon: Llyfrfa'r Methodistiaid Calfinaidd, 1924).

Following some time back in Wales, when she lived in Cardiff, she moved in 1920 with her daughters to live in Liverpool, the headquarters of the female Welsh Methodist missionaries. For the rest of her life she worked tirelessly for the young women who had 'gone out'. She shouldered the responsibilities of a real missionary returning for a period of furlough, spending a week of every month travelling and lecturing. In her final series for the *Treasury* in 1929, 'The Autobiography of Angharad' - her only semi-autobiographical story, one can sense a feeling of longing and personal sadness. By allowing Angharad to venture to India as a young and enthusiastic young missionary, one could argue that this story is a kind of catharsis which helped S.M.S. to come to terms, in her old age, with the opportunity that she herself missed.

Sara Maria Saunders died in Liverpool in January 1939, and was buried in Allerton cemetery. Apart from one brief reference in the *Cambrian News*, as far as is known, no tribute appeared in the publications of the denomination to which she had contributed so much throughout her life. Her highly readable writings, with their depictions of female members of the chapels of rural Wales, their lively style, wit and use of the dialect and turns of phrase of the colourful late nineteenth-century characters of Llangeitho, testify to the way she moved Welsh women's writing a huge step forward.

As a result of the recent renewal of interest in Welsh women's writing, S.M.S. today is regarded as one of the literary mothers of the generation that followed her. Her work has been analysed by Jane Aaron, Katie Gramich and Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan, and in the opinion of E. Wyn James, *Y Diwygiad ym Mhentre Alun* is the most important fictional work to emerge from the 1904-05 Revival. A collection of her most entertaining stories was published by Honno, the Welsh Women's Press, in 2012 under the title *Llon a Lleddf a Storiâu Eraill*.

Author

Rosanne Reeves

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David Edward Pike, [Welsh Revivalists John & Sara Saunders](#)

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