

## JENKINS, ROBERT THOMAS (1881 - 1969), historian, man of letters, editor of Y Bywgraffiadur Cymreig and the Dictionary of Welsh Biography

**Name:** Robert Thomas Jenkins  
**Date of birth:** 1881  
**Date of death:** 1969  
**Spouse:** Myfanwy Wyn Jenkins (née Williams)  
**Spouse:** Mary Jenkins (née Davies)  
**Parent:** Margaret Jenkins (née Thomas)  
**Parent:** Robert Jenkins  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** historian, man of letters, editor of Y Bywgraffiadur Cymreig and the Dictionary of Welsh Biography  
**Area of activity:** History and Culture; Literature and Writing  
**Author:** John Gwynn Williams

Born 31 August 1881 in Liverpool, son of Robert Jenkins and Margaret (née Thomas). The family moved to Bangor when his father was appointed clerk to **William Cadwalader Davies**, registrar of the new college, but after the early death of his parents (his mother in 1887 and his father in 1888) he was raised by his mother's family at Bala; he always acknowledged a deep debt to his grandmother, Margaret, and to her husband, William Dafis, a coalmerchant. Profoundly influenced by the town of Bala, its craftsmen and his recollections of notable inhabitants, its sturdy Welsh culture, the old grammar school and the denominational colleges, it was thus natural for him often to rejoice that he had been baptized by **Thomas Charles Edwards**. He was firmly grounded in Latin by John Cadwalader Evans, headmaster of the grammar school, and in 1898 he won a scholarship to Aberystwyth, where he specialized in English under Charles Harold Herford, who fired in him an abiding interest in the history of ideas and in the literature of the 18th century. In 1901 he was placed in the first class. He tended to be critical of Aberystwyth for the remainder of his days and he left joyfully for Cambridge (where he was sizar at Trinity College). Owing to financial privation he was not very happy there either and it was Oxford which increasingly fascinated him during his maturer years. Although he had studied history and English at Cambridge, philology was his chief interest and after his examinations he was strongly urged to study the subject in Germany. Lack of funds obliged him to look for work. At first, because of a slight speech impediment, he hesitated before applying for a schoolmaster's post, but in the event he pursued this vocation with exceptional success from 1904 to 1930, at Llandysul (for some months), at Brecon from 1904 to 1917, and thereafter at the City of Cardiff High School for Boys. He lost none of his early love for the classics, English and French literature, but at Brecon he researched in earnest for some years into the origins of feudalism, equipping himself with a Cambridge LL.B. in order to understand Roman law. Although he discontinued his early research the knowledge he had acquired was of inestimable benefit to him and history henceforth became his main passion. In 1916 there appeared his first article in *Y Beirniad* on the Tudor period in Wales (the opening chapter in *Yr Apêl at hanes*), and from 1922 he contributed without intermission to *Y Llenor* until 1951. The Cardiff years were exceedingly fruitful. In 1928 there appeared a history of Wales in the 18th cent, *Hanes Cymru yn y Ddeunawfed Ganrif* (in the series entitled *Y Brifysgol a'r Werin*), which won him a secure place amongst Welsh historians, and in 1930 *Yr Apêl at hanes, Ffrainc a'i Phobl and Gruffydd Jones, Llanddowror*. In 1930 he was appointed independent lecturer in Welsh History at Bangor, though he did not become a professor until 1945, three years before his retirement. He accounted it a great privilege to be closely associated at Bangor with **Sir John Edward Lloyd** and here too he derived endless pleasure in the company of select, distinguished colleagues who met regularly to converse in lively, often mischievous fashion in the room of **(Sir) Ifor Williams**.

In 1937 he became editor of the history and law section of the *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies*, in 1938 assistant editor of *Y Bywgraffiadur Cymreig* and in 1947, after the death of **Sir J.E. Lloyd**, joint-editor with **Sir William Llewelyn Davies**. The Welsh version appeared first in 1953 and when its English counterpart, *The Dictionary of Welsh Biography down to 1940*, was published in 1959, incorporating numerous corrections and additions, he was the sole editor. He had already given substantial service to the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion for, with Helen Ramage, he had prepared *A History of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion* to celebrate the bicentenary in 1951. He was Warden of the Guild of Graduates of the University of Wales from 1940 to 1943 and a member of the Councils of the National Library and the National Museum of Wales. The degree of D. Litt. of the University of Wales was conferred upon him in 1939 and the LL.D., honoris causa (Wales), in 1956. In 1953 he was honoured with the Gold Medal of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion. In 1956 he was appointed C.B.E.

R.T. Jenkins was a many-sided man. His interests extended into various directions, including theology and architecture. France always remained close to his heart. As early as 1922, in an article in *Y Llenor*, he drew his countrymen's attention to the Catholic reaction in France. He had often travelled in France and he loved her fertile valleys and her tiny castellated towns, especially in those areas where the remains of Rome and of the middle ages were most marked. Yet his interest in Brittany was slight and Pan-Celtic ideas he considered bogus. His book on France and her people, *Ffrainc a'i Phobl*, endures as an exceedingly readable introduction for the Welsh-speaking Welshman who wishes to understand the roots of French civilization. He had an unusually tenacious memory - rather like glue, he once said - but he was not overwhelmed by the detailed information always at his finger-tips. Indeed, he was never much enamoured of the formal apparatus of scholarship for his works aimed at a wider readership than a band of experts and he was loath to bewilder the ordinary, intelligent reader with the many footnotes which are handmaidens to other scholars. On the whole, *The Moravian brethren in north Wales* (1938) is rather an exception, though it is certainly very readable. His chief purpose was to discover the individual in his own habitat and to weigh the ideas and motives which impelled him to act as he did in fair weather and in foul. He compressed his astute remarks within the bounds of short paragraphs where others multiplied words over many pages. (Consider, for example, his treatment of conservatism in *Hanes Cymru yn y bedwaredd ganrif ar bymtheg* (1933), pp. 29-32, or of the differences between the old Dissenters and the Methodists in *Yng nghysgod Trefeca* (1968), pp. 22ff). Like **Sir J.E. Lloyd**, whom he so much admired, he had a thorough knowledge of the land and soil of Wales, and on foot, by bus or in a friend's car he measured by the pipeful the travels which were the firm foundation of his historical writing. Although it was for children that he wrote on the roads of Wales, *Y ffordd yng Nghymru* (1933), it would be difficult to find a better introduction to the history of Wales. He succeeded in conveying the magic and the flavour of the centuries, but his chief field was the 18th century, especially Methodism. He was sufficiently close to that tempestuous movement to understand the fiery forces released by successive revivals and yet to remain sufficiently impartial and sound of judgement to reject the old denominational prejudices which had poisoned the history of religion in Wales until his own day. It is not surprising that it was this Methodist who was invited to write an account of a notable Congregational cause, the excellent *Hanes cynulleidfa hen gapel Llanuwchllyn* (1937). He has been compared to Macaulay, J.R. Green and Maitland, and although there is a grain of truth in each of these assertions, his own ideal was G.M. Trevelyan. Yet, at bottom he was unique and in Wales there has been no one like him. Nor should he be lightly dismissed his work, together with William Rees (his former pupil at Brecon), in preparing *The Bibliography of the history of Wales* (1931), nor on any account his selfless commitment to *The Dictionary of Welsh Biography*. In addition to his editorial duties he wrote six hundred pieces, and both versions have guided our footsteps.

A number of essays appeared in *Casglu Ffyrdd* (1956), *Ymyl y ddalen* (1957), *Yng nghysgod Trefeca* (1968) and *Cyfoedion* (1974). It was the essay which appealed to him most, and doubtless his conversational style, his use of brackets and italics were more appropriate here than in other literary forms. During World War II he became convinced that it was his duty to prepare light literature for the public at large rather than scholarly studies. He cooperated happily with **D.R. Hughes** and others to prepare the monthly, *Cofion Cymru* distributed gratis to Welsh-speaking Welshmen who served in the armed forces throughout the world to keep them in touch with Wales and their heritage. He believed that he had contributed to every issue of *Cofion*, and his short stories appeared under the pseudonym Idris Thomas, which he also used to disguise his authorship of *Ffynhonnau Eilim* (Llyfrau'r Dryw, 1945), where the conversation is in a south Wales dialect. His other novel was the splendid masterpiece *Orinda* (1943), which recreates the troubled atmosphere of the Commonwealth and Restoration and its effect upon a Fellow of Jesus College, Oxford. Shortly before his death there appeared a volume of his memoirs, *Edrych yn ôl* (1968), surely the most entertaining autobiography ever written in Welsh. As schoolmaster and lecturer he was peerless; learning and humour flowed from him and he won the affection of his pupils, 'my younger friends', as he called them. It was in Bangor that he spent the greater part of his life; there he reached his full maturity and there the recollection of him is at its sweetest and most fragrant. He died 11 November 1969, his remains being buried in Bangor cemetery. After a national appeal, the R.T. Jenkins memorial lecture was founded in the college in 1972.

He married twice: (1) in 1907 to Mary Davies, Aberystwyth (who died in 1946) and (2) in 1947 to Myfanwy Wyn Williams, Aberdare.

### Author

Professor John Gwynn Williams

### Sources

Alun Llywelyn-Williams, *R. T. Jenkins* (Cardiff 1977)(1977) and the sources listed there  
G. Nuttall, *The Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion*, 1977, 181-194  
personal knowledge

### Further Reading

Wikipedia Article: [Robert Thomas Jenkins](#)

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