

LEWIS, HOWELL ELVET ('ELFED'; 1860 - 1953), Independent minister, hymn-writer, poet

Name: Howell Elvet Lewis
Pseudonym: Elfed
Date of birth: 1860
Date of death: 1953
Spouse: Mary Lewis (née Davies)
Spouse: Elisabeth Lewis (née Lloyd)
Spouse: Mary Lewis (née Taylor)
Parent: Anna Lewis (née Davies)
Parent: James Lewis
Gender: Male
Occupation: Independent minister, hymn-writer, poet
Area of activity: Eisteddfod; Poetry; Religion
Author: Emlyn Glasnant Jenkins

Born 14 April 1860, the oldest son of the twelve children of James and Anna Lewis, at Y Gangell, near Blaen-y-coed, Carmarthenshire. **Thomas Lewis** (1868 - 1953) was one of his brothers. His father's wage as a foreman farm-worker at Pencraig-fawr was small and was supplemented by keeping a shop in the home at Pant-y-Waun. Howell's opportunities for learning were restricted. He learnt the alphabet from the capital letters in his father's *Bible* and the home and the Sunday school nurtured him until he was eight when T.G. Miles opened a school in the chapel vestry. Howell soon showed his ability and he became a pupil teacher to his contemporaries. At no small sacrifice on his parents' part, he was sent to the grammar school at Newcastle Emlyn when he was fourteen. He started to preach and was known as the 'boy-preacher'. Whilst there he met **E. Keri Evans** who introduced him to the Welsh strict metres, *cynganedd*, and E. Griffith Jones who introduced him to English literature. He took interest also in the local publication *Y Byd Cymreig* which was in the care of the Rev. John Williams. He started to compete under the pen-name of 'Coromandel'. Two years later he passed the entrance examination to Carmarthen Presbyterian College, the second out of fourteen applicants. He won every prize during his four years there and added German lessons to his other work at the College.

In 1880 he accepted an invitation to the pastorate of Buckley chapel, Flintshire, a church that was Welsh in spirit but English in language. After four years there he went to Hull that was English both in language and in spirit. It was during this period that he turned his mind and heart towards Wales and to delight in its prose and poetry. He composed poems and essays that won prizes in many *eisteddfodau*. The national *eisteddfod* in Wrexham in 1888 is testimony to his gifts. It was called 'Elfed's *Eisteddfod*' as he won on the free-verse poem, 'Y Saboth yng Nghymru', the love poem, 'Llyn y Morwynion', and an essay on 'Athrylith John Ceiriog Hughes.' At that time he also wrote *The sweet singers of Wales* and *Emynwyr Cymru*. It was also the period when he composed a number of his popular hymns.

He returned to Wales in 1891 as minister of the English -language Park chapel, Llanelli. He devoted more of his efforts nationally. He won the national eisteddfod chair in 1894 on the subject 'Hunan aberth.' He was one of the editors of the Congregational hymnal, *Y Caniedydd Cynulleidfaol*, which was published in 1895, the same year that the National Eisteddfod was invited to Llanelli; *Caniadau Elfed* was also published and three years later *Plannu Coed*, a popular volume of sermons appeared. That year, 1898, he accepted a call to Harecourt, a wellknown church in London with connections with Cromwell and David Livingstone. After several requests, he yielded to the insistence of Tabernacl chapel, King's Cross, in 1904 and he ministered there until his retirement in 1940 when he went to live at 'Erw'r Delyn', Penarth and became a member of Ebeneser chapel, Cardiff.

His ministry at Tabernacl covered three periods: (a) *The Revival* (1904-14) when Elfed devoted his talents to promoting and directing the religious enthusiasm of those years; (b) *The Deterioration* (1914-24). He drew up a 'covenant' with the members who had been dispersed because of the war so that their relationship with the church might be safeguarded; (c) *The Depression* (1924-40). Many Welsh people received help and work through Elfed during this difficult period and his message of hope was a great comfort to the many who had come to London to seek work.

His contribution to Welsh life and culture was acknowledged by the University, the Eisteddfod, the state and the church. He was the first person that the University of Wales honoured with three degrees, M.A. (1906), D.D. (1933) and LL.D. (1949). He received every honour that the Eisteddfod could bestow on him as a competitor, as adjudicator and Archdruid. The church also honoured him. The London Missionary Board called him to its chair on two occasions, 1910 and 1922, and he was also selected to be one of three representatives to visit Madagascar to celebrate the century of the arrival of the first missionaries. He was elected national president of the Free Churches in 1926 and chairman of the Congregational Union of England and Wales in 1933. He was created Companion of Honour (CH) yn 1948.

Elfed was also fortunate in his home life. He married Mary Taylor of Buckley, in 1887. This was a happy marriage and they had seven children. However she died suddenly in 1918. He married Elisabeth Lloyd five years later but she was in poor health and died 1927. By 1930 Elfed assumed that his public life was coming to an end as his eyesight had failed completely and travelling became impossible for him. However, Mary Davies, one of the members of King's Cross, came into his life. They married in 1930 and she gave him the opportunity to continue to minister in King's Cross and further afield. She enabled him to travel to preach and lecture until his death on 10 December 1953. His ashes were interred in his home village of Blaen-y-coed.

Author

Reverend Emlyn Glasnant Jenkins, (1912 - 2002)

Sources

Personal research

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Dafydd Owen, *Elfed a'i waith* (Swansea 1964)

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Further Reading

Vona Morgan, *Elfed: 1860-1953* (Caerfyrddin 1984)

Wikipedia Article: [Howell Elvet Lewis](#)

Images

NLW: [Rev. H. Elvet Lewis Welsh Tabernacle, London](#)

NLW: [Elfed](#)

Works

H. Elvet Lewis, *Sweet singers of Wales: a story of Welsh hymns and their authors: with original translations* (London 1889)

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