

PARRY, ROBERT WILLIAMS (1884 - 1956), poet, university lecturer

Name: Robert Williams Parry
Date of birth: 1884
Date of death: 1956
Spouse: Myfanwy Parry (née Davies)
Parent: Jane Parry (née Hughes)
Parent: Robert Thomas Parry
Gender: Male
Occupation: poet, university lecturer
Area of activity: Education; Eisteddfod; Poetry
Author: Thomas Parry

Born 6 March 1884 at Madog View, Tal-y-sarn, Caernarfonshire, son of Robert and Jane Parry (his father was a half-brother of **Henry Parry-Williams**). He received his education at Tal-y-sarn elementary school, Caernarfon county school, 1896-98, and the new Pen-y-groes county school for one year. He spent three years, 1899-1902, as a pupil-teacher. He entered the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, in 1902, but left in 1904 having taken part of the degree course and trained as a teacher. He taught at various schools till 1907, when he became a student at the University College of North Wales, Bangor, and completed his degree. From 1908 till 1910 he was Welsh and English master at Llanberis (Bryn'refail) county school. He then returned to college at Bangor and spent some months in Brittany working for an M.A. degree, which he gained in 1912 for a dissertation entitled 'Some points of contact between Welsh and Breton'. After a year, 1912-13, as schoolmaster at Cefn-ddwysarn, he left for Barry county school. In 1916 he was appointed English master at the Cardiff High School for Boys. He was in the army from November 1916 till December 1918. After demobilisation he returned to Cardiff, and in 1921 became headteacher of Oakley Park School, Montgomeryshire. After a brief stay he left early in 1922 on being appointed lecturer at the university college, Bangor, to serve part-time in the Welsh Department and part-time in the Extra-Mural Department. He remained in this post till his retirement in 1944.

Williams Parry started his literary career as a strict-metre poet, having received instruction from two Tal-y-sarn poets, Owen Edwards ('Anant'), a quarry man, and H.E. Jones ('Hywel Cefni'), a shopkeeper, both of whom competed regularly at local *eisteddfodau* and published their successful *englynion* in periodicals, especially *Y Geninen*. As early as 1906 Williams Parry wrote an *awdl* on 'Dechrau Haf' for an *eisteddfod* at Ffestiniog. In 1907 he was a competitor for the chair at the national eisteddfod held at Swansea with an *awdl* on 'John Bunyan', but was unsuccessful. The following year he was awarded the chair at the Bangor students' eisteddfod for an *awdl* on 'Cantr'r Gwaelod', but was again unsuccessful at the London national eisteddfod on the subject 'Gwlad y Bryniau' in 1909. Success came however at Colwyn Bay in 1910 with the poem 'Yr Haf', the best known and admired of all the *eisteddfod awdlau* of the 20th c. Five long poems in so many years was a remarkable output, and the poet was never again to produce so much in the strict metres. In 1911 there were signs of a very different metrical development in the form of a sonnet in full *cynghanedd* to greet his friend G.W. Francis on his marriage. During World War I he wrote several sonnets - 'Pantycelyn', 'Mae hiraeth yn y môr', 'Cysur Henaint', 'Gadael Tir', and those which deal directly with the war, like 'Y Cantin Gwlyb' and 'Y Ddrafft'. But he retained his love of *cynghanedd*, as can be seen in the memorial *englynion* to friends and acquaintances, and especially to those who fell in battle, like the famous sequence to **Hedd Wyn** (Ellis Humphrey Evans).

The years between the wars were very productive. In the sonnet 'Adref', written in 1917, the poet vowed that he would renounce the allure of medievalism and reflect on matters of the present day. This he did, but to the exclusion of industrial conurbations, preferring the peace of the countryside and all that dwells in it, as in the poems 'Eifionydd', 'Tylluonod', 'Clychau'r Gog', 'Y Llwynog'. Another product of these years is the remarkable poem 'Drudwy Branwen', which embodies all the notable features of Williams Parry's work - a skilful versification, powerful imagination, and meaningful imagery. Towards the end of the period the poet's style underwent a change. He had long abandoned the verbal exuberance of 'Yr Haf', but carefully observed the refined language which he held was the hallmark of poetry. Now he modified his view and practice (largely under the influence of the poetry of his cousin **T.H. Parry-Williams**) and made use of the *syn* - tax and vocabulary of prose and of the spoken language. The sonnet 'Gwenci' is a good example. There was another change too, a change in the poet's reaction to human standards and behaviour. With satirical vehemence he condemned the materialism of the age. The initial impetus for this response was the anger which he felt at what happened following the fire at the bombing range in Llŷn in 1936, when **Saunders Lewis** was dismissed from his post. Much of this satirical writing was expressed in a new metrical form, sonnets whose rhythm depended on combining three-syllable feet with the traditional iambs.

Williams Parry was well versed in English poetry, and came under the influence of the Romantic poets, especially Keats. He had a great deal in common with the Georgian poets, whose imagery is sometimes reflected in his poems. But in spite of all influences, Williams Parry's acute observation, his independent outlook and his meticulous attention to the mode of expression created a body of poetry which has its own special features and is a unique contribution to Welsh literature. Two volumes of his poetry were published, *Yr Haf a cherddi Eraill* in 1924, and *Cerddi'r gaeaf* in 1952. Some poems not included in these volumes were published by T. Emrys Parry in *Barddoniaeth Robert Williams Parry*, (1973). The complete collection edited by Alan Llwyd appeared in 1998.

Williams Parry acted as adjudicator at many eisteddfodau, including the chief competitions of the National Eisteddfod. His adjudications were not a mere recital of errors and shortcomings, but a constructive attempt to improve the competitors' poetic sensibility and expression. He published articles in periodicals on various aspects of the poetic craft, commenting approvingly on all forms of lyrical poetry in particular, and the two masters of the formal lyric, **Ceiriog** (J. Ceiriog Hughes) and **Eifion Wyn** (Eiuseu Williams). His own prose shows a strength of conviction and also sharp wit. He was one of the best prose writers of his day. A selection of his prose appeared in *Rhyddiaith R. Williams Parry*, edited by Bedwyr Lewis Jones.

Williams Parry was of a retiring disposition, and never willingly joined a crowd, but he delighted in the company of a few real friends. He was a nationalist by conviction and was for a time chairman of the Caernarfonshire branch of Plaid Cymru, but his activities were limited, as he did not wish to be seen or heard in public.

He married in 1923 Myfanwy Davies of Rhosllannerchrugog. He died 4 January 1956 and was buried at Coetmor cemetery, Bethesda. There were no children.

Author

Sir Thomas Parry, (1904 - 1985)

Sources

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Published date: 2001

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APA Citation



Parry, T., (2001). PARRY, ROBERT WILLIAMS (1884 - 1956), poet, university lecturer. *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*. Retrieved 9 Nov 2024, from <https://biography.wales/article/s2-PARR-WIL-1884>

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