

## POWYS, JOHN COWPER (1872 - 1963), novelist, poet, literary critic and popular philosopher

**Name:** John Cowper Powys  
**Date of birth:** 1872  
**Date of death:** 1963  
**Spouse:** Margaret Alice Powys (née Lyon)  
**Parent:** Mary Powys (née Cowper-Johnson)  
**Parent:** Charles Francis Powys  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** novelist, poet, literary critic and popular philosopher  
**Area of activity:** Education; Literature and Writing; Poetry; Scholarship and Languages  
**Author:** Belinda Humfrey

The only one of the eleven children of the Rev. Charles Francis Powys to lay special claim to his father's Welsh ancestry. As he narrates in *Autobiography* (1934), his father would announce his descent from 'Roderic Mawr, King of all Wales'. His father's ancestry can be traced back some six centuries to Powyses of Montgomery, and to, more recently, the first Sir Thomas Powys of Lilford (died 1719). From his mother, Mary Cowper-Johnson, he derived the more literary blood of the poets John Donne and William Cowper. Born 8 October 1872 in Shirley, Derbyshire, his father's first parish, but in 1879 the family moved to Dorchester, Dorset, then, in 1885, to Montacute vicarage, Somerset. He was educated at Sherborne School and Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, and in 1894 drifted into the post of lecturing at several girls' schools at Hove, Sussex. His first publication, 1896, was *Odes and Other Poems*. In the same year he married Margaret Alice Lyon; they had one son; both wife and son predeceased him. In 1899, after a preliminary lecture on Sir John Rhys he was appointed peripatetic lecturer for Oxford University Extension and began his life of wandering, first in England and to pioneer courses at Dresden and Leipzig, then, from 1905, in America. He began his highly successful lecturing career in America with a winter tour under the auspices of the Philadelphia -based Society for the Extension of University Teaching; from 1909 to 1929 he lectured full-time in America (with summers in England), visiting all but two of the States. In 1914 his stage manager, Arnold Shaw, a Yorkshireman, turned publisher, and Powys's writing career began, with an essay on *The Menace of German Culture*. In two to three years he produced for Shaw his first two novels, *Wood and Stone* and *Rodmoor*, two volumes of literary criticism, *Visions and Revisions* and *Suspended Judgements*, and two volumes of poetry, *Wolf's Bane* and *Mandragora*, and his large part of *Confessions of Two Brothers* (with Llewelyn Powys) for another publisher. He went on writing, mainly philosophical works on 'the Art of Happiness', in trains and hotel rooms, until the publication of *Wolf Solent* (1929). Then in retirement in Upstate New York, he wrote *A Glastonbury Romance*, *Weymouth Sands* and *Autobiography*. In 1934 he returned to Dorset, and in 1935 he retired finally to north Wales, according to a wish cherished from youth, first to Corwen, then, in 1951, to Blaenau Ffestiniog, where he died, 17 June 1963 aged ninety-one. The Wessex novels carry Welsh characters and subjects, but in Wales he wrote the novels *Morwyn* (1937), *Owen Glendower* (1940) and his 'masterpiece' *Porius* (1951) set in a Wales of 499 A.D. His other notable works of this prolific period include books on his masters *Dostoevsky* (1947) and *Rabelais* (1948) and experimental fiction like *Up and Out* (1957), *Homer and the Aether* (1959) and *All or Nothing* (1960). He learned Welsh and corresponded with many distinguished Welshmen of letters; his non-fictional writings about Wales and the Welsh were collected in *Obstinate Cymric* (1947).

### Author

Belinda Humfrey

### Sources

Personal research

see also Jeremy Hooker, *John Cowper Powys* (1973)

and *The Powys Review*

### Further Reading

NLW Archives: NLW MS 22215B: Diaries of John Cowper Powys, 1939

Wikipedia Article: [John Cowper Powys](#)

### Additional Links

NLW Archives: [John Cowper Powys Manuscripts and Papers](#)

Archifau LIGC: NLW MS 22807A: Diary of John Cowper Powys, 1929

NLW Archives: NLW MSS 22206-41B: Diaries of John Cowper Powys, 1930-1961

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