

## PEATE, IORWERTH CYFEILIOG (1901-1982), Curator of the Welsh Folk Museum, 1948-1971, scholar and poet

**Name:** Iorwerth Cyfeiliog Peate

**Date of birth:** 1901

**Date of death:** 1982

**Spouse:** Ann Peate (née Davies)

**Child:** Dafydd Peate

**Parent:** Elizabeth Peate (née Thomas)

**Parent:** George Howard Peate

**Gender:** Male

**Occupation:** Curator of the Welsh Folk Museum, 1948-1971, scholar and poet

**Area of activity:** Art and Architecture; History and Culture; Literature and Writing; Poetry; Scholarship and Languages

**Author:** Trefor M. Owen

Born 27 February 1901, at Glan-llyn, Llanbryn-Mair, the home of his parents George Howard and Elizabeth Peate (née Thomas). His elder brother Dafydd Morgan Peate (born 1898) became a bank manager and his younger sister Morfudd Ann Mary (born 1910) married Liefelys Davies the chairman of the Milk Marketing Board on New Year's Day 1942. A brother, John Howard Peate, died as a baby in 1899. Iorwerth Peate was educated at Llanbryn-Mair Elementary School and Machynlleth Grammar School where the headmaster H. H. Meyler influenced him. His father and grandfather were carpenters in the old tradition, but Iorwerth Peate, with a feeling of guilt, turned his back on this tradition and entered the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth in 1918 amidst the ex-service students who had returned after the war and led a lively social life in which he took a prominent part. He won chairs for poetry in the college and inter-college eisteddfodau and became editor of *The Dragon*, the students' magazine. During his period at Aberystwyth he met Nansi (Ann) Davies (1900-1986) whom he married on 9 September 1929. He studied Colonial History and Geography (the latter, a new subject in the university, under Professor Herbert John Fleure). Fleure's influence was soon to be seen in the volume *Gyda'r Wawr: Braslun o Hanes Cymru'r Oesoedd Canol* (1923) (ed. H. J. Fleure) which looked at medieval Wales from a human geography viewpoint. He was responsible for writing the text and his three co-authors prepared the maps and illustrations: he never had much to say for the use of maps, one of the distinctive tools of the geographer. After graduating in 1921 in Colonial History and Geography and Anthropology in 1922 he carried out a study of the physical anthropological characteristics of the natives of the Dyfi valley, their dialect and folklore for which he was awarded an M.A. in 1924. From 1923 to 1927 he lectured to classes of the College's Department of Extra-mural Studies in rural Ceredigion and Meirioneth before changing his career and moving to Cardiff.

He was appointed in 1927 to the staff of the Department of Archaeology in the National Museum of Wales with the task of cataloguing what came to be called 'the folk collections'. His work *The Guide to the Collection of Welsh Bygones* (1929), belongs to this period, as does his *Cymru a'i Phobl* (1931) which interpreted Fleure's ideas on the human geography of Wales to Welsh readers. He was given responsibility for the Sub-department of Folk Culture created within the Department of Archaeology in 1932 and promoted Keeper of the new independent Department of Folk Life created in 1936 following the influential visit in 1934 by the Irish scholar from Dublin, Séamus Ó Duilearga, and two eminent folklore scholars from Sweden, Åke Campbell from Uppsala and C. W. von Sydow from Lund. He came to emphasise the concept of 'folk' increasingly in the 1930s alongside his earlier emphasis on craft. He published *Y Crefftwr yng Nghymru* ('The Craftsman in Wales') (1931), *Guide to the Collection illustrating Welsh Folk Crafts and Industries* (1935), *Welsh Society and Eisteddfod Medals and Relics* (1938) and *Clock and Watch Makers in Wales* (1945). The high-point of this period was his *Diwylliant Gwerin Cymru* (1942), revised and published in translation as *Tradition and Folk Life* in 1972.

Peate had already published his pioneering volume, *The Welsh House* inspired by Åke Campbell's work on Irish houses, in 1940. His intention was to publish a series of regional studies on the same subject but this was thwarted in 1948 when he was appointed Keeper-in-Charge (later Curator) of the new Folk Museum created in the grounds of St. Fagans Castle. Henceforth he devoted his attention to the selection of suitable buildings for re-erection at St. Fagans, as had been done in Skansen, the pioneering open-air museum near Stockholm. He paid special attention to the collection and recording of craft terminologies and dialects by his staff and publicised the new institution by lecturing extensively throughout Wales and contributing numerous articles to the press. He published his ideas on the new institution in a popular bilingual volume *Amgueddfeydd Gwerin / Folk Museums* (1948). Through the financial support of local authorities, charitable trusts and a public appeal he saw the realisation of a dream that he had when he first heard of the pioneering open-air museums of Scandinavia from his Norwegian friend Alf Sommerfelt who had been studying the spoken Welsh of Iorwerth Peate's native Cyfeiliog in the 1920s. He was not, however, to see St Fagans become an independent institution as he had hoped.

In 1956 he established in international scholarly English-language journal *Gwerin* ('Folk') modelled on the Scandinavian journal *Folk Liv* published in Stockholm. When the Society of Folk Life Studies was established in 1961 with Iorwerth Peate as President, *Gwerin* was replaced by *Folk Life* as the journal of the new society. He was elected President of Section H of the British Association for the Advancement of Science in 1958 and set out his views in his presidential address 'The Study of Folk Life and its part in the Defence of Civilisation'. He had strongly held views on the subject and was opposed to the adoption of the term 'ethnology' which had by then replaced 'folk life' in Scandinavia and on the continent. Although he had been a pioneer of the historical study of houses, he refused to have anything to do with the Vernacular Architecture Group which had been partly inspired by his early work.

Throughout his life he was greatly influenced by the radical tradition of 'Yr Hen Gapel' (the old Congregational chapel of Llanbryn-Mair) with its emphasis on Reason and Freedom. He claimed a family link with Samuel Roberts (1800-1885), the main upholder of that tradition. He recognised in W. J. Gruffydd (whom he came to know when he moved to Cardiff and became his neighbour in Rhiwbina) a kindred spirit sharing the same ideas on religion, literature, politics and social matters. He contributed extensively to Gruffydd's journal *Y Llenor* and a number of his articles appeared in his volumes *Sylfeini* (1938), *Ym Mhob Pen* (1948), and *Syniadau* (1969). His poetry was published in five volumes, *Y Cawg Aur a cherddi eraill* (1928), *Plu'r Gweunydd* (1933), *Y Deyrnas Goll a cherddi eraill* (1947), *Cerddi Chwarter Canrif* (1957) - which included a selection of his earlier poetry - and *Cerddi Diweddar* (1982). In the opinion of some critics his poetry was old fashioned and belonged to the 'Golden Age' of Welsh literature of the beginning of the twentieth century. His typically robust response was to berate the present age as 'The Dirt Age' and to implore his readers to help him to

restore Reason and Tolerance to a deranged world. He acted as a National Eisteddfod adjudicator many times over the years, contributed a regular column in the Welsh language newspaper *Y Cymro* as a reviewer and was not afraid to express himself forcibly on matters of the day, especially the deterioration of the Welsh language in the press and on the radio. He wrote with enviable ease and clarity. He was a fervent pacifist and was registered as a conscientious objector in 1941. He lost his post in the National Museum at the time as a result of a dispute following an unofficial enquiry he had made on behalf of a colleague concerning the reserved status of museum posts during the war. He recorded with pride in his autobiography *Rhwng Dau Fyd* (1976) how he was reinstated in his post with the active support of leading Members of Parliament at a meeting of the Museum Court.

He received many honours. In addition to the D.Sc. (Wales) in 1940 for his book *The Welsh House*, he was awarded the honorary degree of D.Litt (Celt) from the National University of Ireland and, on his retirement in 1970, a D.Litt. from the University of Wales. He was presented with the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion Medal in St. Fagans in 1978. He retired in 1971 and moved to St Nicholas where he died on October 19, 1982. His final volume *Personau* (partly biographical) appeared shortly after his death. His ashes, and those of his wife, were buried, as he had requested, in the cemetery of the Unitarian chapel, Capel Pen-rhiw, in the Folk Museum. His only son Dafydd (1936-1980) is also commemorated on the gravestone. A plaque on the wall of Glan-llyn, the house where he was born, was unveiled in 1996

## Author

Trefor M. Owen

## Sources

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T. M. Owen, 'Iorwerth Peate a Diwylliant Gwerin', *The Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion* (1988)

*Portreadau'r Ffanner* (Bala 1961)

*Y Cymro* 26 October 1982

## Further Reading

Eurwyn Wiliam, *Man, Myth and Museum: Iorwerth C. Peate and the Making of the Welsh Folk Museum* (Cardiff 2023)

Coflein: [St Fagans Museum](#); [Welsh Folk Museum](#); [Museum Of Welsh Life, St Fagans](#)

Wikipedia Article: [Iorwerth Peate](#)

## Additional Links

NLW Archives: [Papurau Iorwerth C. Peate](#)

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**Published date:** 2009-03-27

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### APA Citation



Owen, T. M., (2009). PEATE, IORWERTH CYFEILIOG (1901-1982), Curator of the Welsh Folk Museum, 1948-1971, scholar and poet. *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*. Retrieved 16 Nov 2024, from <https://biography.wales/article/s6-PEAT-CYF-1901>

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