

ROBERTS, JOHN (1910-1984), preacher, hymnist, poet

Name: John Roberts
Date of birth: 1910
Date of death: 1984
Gender: Male
Occupation: preacher, hymnist, poet
Area of activity: Poetry; Religion
Author: Derec Llwyd Morgan

Born 2 June 1910 in Llanfachraeth, Anglesey, only son of William Roberts, farm-worker, and his wife Elizabeth, who soon moved to Glan-yr-afon in Llanfwrog. William Roberts was brought up as a Congregationalist, and his wife was an Anglican, but for some unknown reason they joined the Calvinistic Methodists, and it was with them that the son was nurtured. He went to Ffrwd Win School (but not until he was seven), and afterwards took a clerical course at "Owens' College" in Holyhead. He worked for a short time with an insurance company in Wrexham, but from early youth his ambition was to become a preacher. In 1928 he entered the Connexion's preparatory school in North Wales, Ysgol Clynog, which in 1929 was transferred to Rhyl. He notes that it was the school's principal, **R. Dewi Williams**, who led him to read and love literature; for the rest of his life the English Romantics and the Welsh lyricists were a rich source of enjoyment for him. Between 1931 and 1937 he was a student at the University College of North Wales, Bangor, where he graduated in Welsh and Theology. Before the end of the following year which was spent on the pastoral course at Bala College he was already being invited to preach at preaching festivals, and he had already been called to be minister of Carneddi Chapel, Bethesda, Caernarfonshire. On 23 August 1938 he married Jessie Martin (born 1914), from Kingsland, Holyhead, a nurse whom he had met three years previously. Their two eldest daughters, Elisabeth and Judith, were born in Carneddi, the youngest, Gwen, in Porthmadog.

All his ministerial work was carried out in North Wales. He moved to Garth Chapel, Porthmadog at the beginning of 1945. From there he went, in 1957, to Capel Tegid, Y Bala, and then, in 1962, to Moriah Chapel in Caernarfon where he remained until he retired in 1975. He wrote the history of Moriah's third half-century, *Muriau Cof* (1977), finishing it, as he notes in the Foreword, 'the evening before the fire that destroyed the Chapel' in July 1976. But this North Wales minister was well-known as an excellent preacher throughout Wales. His work as a minister was characterised by meticulous preparation: he was conscientiously studious, and an elegant composer. His preaching, too, was conscientious and elegant, but full of fervour as well. Straight-backed, clean-cut and handsome, he had a commanding presence in the pulpit and a sonorous voice with a wonderful register, what old-stagers called 'the ancient talent of Anglesey', and a touch of the rolling -r. He also possessed poetic and narrative rhetorical skills, polished eloquence, a gift for figures of speech, a talent for story-telling, and a stock of memorable phrases used by the preachers of yesteryear. For a man who considered preaching to be the most important work in the world, the religious relapse in the second half of the twentieth century Wales was agonising, as it was, of course, for his colleagues. From the nineteen-seventies onwards, his greatest agony was a daughter's tribulations; but it could be claimed that that enhanced his preaching powers. More than five hundred sermon-notes, written on cards, are deposited in the National Library. He also delivered a host of lectures (they too are extant), including the John Williams Brynsiencyn Memorial Lecture on "Preaching" and the Davies Lecture (on "The Devotion of Silence": he was trying to understand the appeal of Quakerism to one of his sons-in-law). He claimed that he couldn't really lecture because every lecture became a sermon. He never held an office in the Connexion, partly because he didn't wish to do so.

He came to some prominence as a minor poet when he won the Chair at the Dyffryn Ogwen Eisteddfod for a series of lyric poems adjudicated by **R. Williams Parry**, a series of poems published, along with elegies composed on the death of **Williams Parry** and other poems, in the only volume of verse he published during his lifetime, *Cloch y Bwi* (Gwasg Gee, [1958]). The poems are simple well-crafted poems about everyday things, poems that no-one would claim are heartrending or terribly original. Amongst them there are charming hen benillion, a few englynion, three sonnets and a hymn ('Pan fwyf yn teimlo'n unig lawer awr'), which became the forerunner of a small but valuable number of hymns that place John Roberts in the forefront of late twentieth-century Welsh hymn-writers (not that there are many). Like a host of preachers who took sustenance from the great eighteenth- and nineteenth-century hymn-writers, he'd regularly quote line after line from them, blending them into his sermons and his public prayers. He studied them, too. In the 1950 National Eisteddfod he won first prize for a Selection of Hymns suitable for Secondary Schoolchildren. A few years later he could have put together a volume of his own lectures on the classic hymn-writers. Although he didn't rate contemporary hymn-writing highly, soon, in the wake of his studies, using his lyrical talent and his fervent imagination, he began to compose more hymns himself, meditative hymns containing exhortation, entreaty and praise, which were, in his mind, necessary characteristics. He also said that hymns 'needed to contain theology, ... theology that had been through the furnace of experience.' Their experiential, trustful sympathy with the human condition is what made his hymns such useful favourites with the fragile congregations of these late times. His most famous hymn is probably "Gweddi Heddiw" ('O, tired i'n gwaredu, Iesu da') for which Haydn Phillips composed the prize-winning tune "Bro Aber" at the 1983 National Eisteddfod in Anglesey. A good selection of his poems and hymns were published in *Glas y nef* (Gwasg Gee, 1987).

He always said that he wished to be remembered as a preacher, but because of the permanence of the printed word it's more likely that he'll be remembered for his hymns. He died on 22 November, 1984 at Stanley Hospital, Holyhead, and was buried in the churchyard in Llanfwrog.

Author

Derec Llwyd Morgan

Sources

Rev. *John Roberts Llanfwrog Papers* in the National Library of Wales

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information from the Rev. Trefor Jones, Caernarfon, and from his daughters

personal knowledge

Additional Links

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