

RICHARDS, GRAFTON MELVILLE (1910-1973), Welsh scholar

Name: Grafton Melville Richards
Date of birth: 1910
Date of death: 1973
Parent: Elizabeth Richards
Parent: William Richards
Gender: Male
Occupation: Welsh scholar
Area of activity: Scholarship and Languages
Author: Brynley Francis Roberts

Born in November 1910, in Ffair-fach, Llandeilo, Carmarthenshire, the third son of William and Elizabeth Richards (the father was a railway foreman). Melville Richards was educated at Neath grammar school and entered Swansea University College in 1928 where he graduated with first-class honours in Welsh in 1931. He gained a research M.A. with distinction in 1933. His election to a University Fellowship in 1934 enabled him to continue his studies in Dublin with scholars like Osborn Bergin, Myles Dillon and Gerard Murphy and then in Paris with Joseph Vendryes, Antoine Meillet and Émile Benveniste. He was appointed Research Assistant Lecturer in Welsh in Swansea University College in October 1936 and Assistant Lecturer in April 1937.

Melville Richards was one of a number of language scholars nurtured by **Henry Lewis** and he revealed his ability very early in his career. His first area of research was the syntax of the sentence in Medieval Welsh and he published his work in a series of articles in academic journals. He served in the army, mainly in intelligence, between 1939 and 1945, the experience which he used in his only novel, *Y gelyn mewdol* (1946), an espionage story set in west Wales. He returned to the Welsh department in Swansea where he remained until 1947 when he was appointed lecturer and then Reader and Head of the Celtic Studies Department in Liverpool University. He was elected to the Chair of Welsh at the University College of North Wales, Bangor, in 1965. He was an energetic head of department and an effective dean of faculty and administrator. He gained the degree of PhD (Liverpool) in 1965.

Celtic studies and Welsh syntax were Melville Richards's first research interests. While still a young research Fellow he published *Llawlyfr Hen Wyddeleg* (1935), a handbook based on Rudolf Thurneysen's magisterial *Grammar of Old Irish* and intended to serve the same function as **Henry Lewis's** earlier handbooks of Middle Cornish and of Middle Breton. In 1938 he published *Cystrawen y Frawddeg Gymraeg*, a clear guide to the syntax of the sentence in modern Welsh though not free from criticism that it depended too heavily on 'classical' prose and the Welsh *Bible* for its examples. It was unfavourably reviewed by **T. J. Morgan** in *Y Llenor*. Richards continued to work on the syntax of Middle and early Modern Welsh, publishing a number of texts, most especially an edition of *Breudwyd Ronabwy* (1948), but in the early 1950s signs began to appear of a change of direction in his studies as he started to publish work on Welsh place-names, and henceforth onomastics were to be his primary academic interest. It is impossible to overstate the significance of Melville Richards's work. Single-handedly, he undertook to produce an historical archive of place-names in Wales and to elucidate their meaning and significance in a comprehensive Welsh onomasticon. The research took him to a range of fields of study - the history of governance and administration, of legal custom and structures, settlement patterns and demography, toponyms as well as the more strictly linguistic area.

He published *The Laws of Hywel Dda* (1954), a translation of *Llyfr Blegywryd* (**Williams** and **Powell**, 1942), a medieval Welsh law book; an edition of another law book, *Jesus College LVII* (1957), and *Welsh Administrative and Territorial Units* (1969); he edited in English and Welsh an *Atlas of Anglesey* in 1972. Scores of important articles appeared not only explaining the meaning and significance of a number of place-names but also laying out a methodology and setting scholarly standards in a notoriously hazardous area of study. The notes and articles which he published in *Y Cymro* newspaper over a long period were collected in *Enwau Tir a Gwlad* (ed. **Bedwyr Lewis Jones**, 1998). His work brought him international recognition, in his contributions to the **Batsford** *The names of towns and cities in Britain* (1970), as a member of the council of the English Place-Name Society, a member of the International Committee on Onomastic Sciences and chairman of the Council for Name Studies of Great Britain and Ireland. He was treasurer of the Society for Folk-life and he chaired a number of the sub-committees of the Welsh Schools Council. He did not succeed in publishing the volumes that he had planned but his archive of some 300,000 slips has been edited and is available on-line as **Canolfan Ymchwil Enwau Lleoedd Archif Melville Richards** (Bangor University Centre for Placenames Research the Melville Richards Archive).

Melville Richards was a generous and warm-hearted scholar; he was also a man of strong convictions and unambiguous opinions. It is fair to say that he endured much biased opposition from some in Welsh life who accused him of taking up **Saunders Lewis's** lectureship in Swansea when **Lewis** was dismissed following his protest at the bombing school at Penberth in Caernarfonshire and his subsequent imprisonment but Richards was already a member of staff, a Research Assistant Lecturer, at that time.

Melville Richards was married and he and his wife had a son and daughter. His health deteriorated about 1970 but though it was clear to his friends that he was unwell, his sudden and tragic death was unexpected. He died at his home in Benllech, Anglesey 3 November 1973; the funeral service was held in Colwyn Bay Crematorium 8 November.

Author

Dr Brynley Francis Roberts

Sources

The Times, 17 November 1973

Y Faner, 16, 22 November 1973

Studia Celtica, X/XI

Onoma, 18 (1974), 619-25, memoir and bibliography of publications

Further Reading

Wikipedia Article: [Melville Richards](#)

Additional Links

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