

NICHOLAS, THOMAS EVAN ('Niclas y Glais'), (1879-1971), poet, minister of religion and advocate for the Communist Party

Name: Thomas Evan Nicholas
Pseudonym: Niclas Y Glais
Date of birth: 1879
Date of death: 1971
Spouse: Mary Alice Nicholas (née Hopkins)
Child: Thomas Islwyn Nicholas
Parent: Elizabeth Nicholas (née Thomas)
Parent: David Nicholas
Gender: Male
Occupation: poet, minister of religion and advocate for the Communist Party
Area of activity: Poetry; Politics, Government and Political Movements; Religion
Author: D. Ben Rees

T.E. Nicholas was born 6 October 1879 at Blaenwaun Felin in the parish of Llanfyrnach, north Pembrokeshire. Before reaching his first birthday his parents, their farmworker and their five children moved to farm Llety, a 57-acre smallholding, where he spent his childhood. His parents were country folk, Nonconformists (Independents) and his father, like his father before him, was a stone mason as well as a farmer.

The boy was reared in an independent, cultured and anti-establishment community. A younger contemporary was **D.J. Davies**, born in the small holding to which the Nicholas family moved in 1880, and who became the minister of Capel Als, Llanelli. Another from the same area was **Thomas Rees**, pioneer of the Labour Party and of adult education and Principal of Bala-Bangor College. T.E. Nicholas was educated locally at Hermon school and left to work at the Swan Inn and a grocer's shop but this came to a sudden end when the lad composed a poem satirising the priest of Eglwswrw during the campaign for the disestablishment of the Anglican church in Wales.

He left the Preseli area to work in Treherbert, Glamorganshire, but a year later he decided to prepare to enter the ministry. He enrolled at Gwynfryn School, Amanford, under **Watkin Hezekiah Williams**, 'Wacyn Wyn' (1844-1905) and **John Gwili Jenkins** (1872-1936), an advocate of the broad and liberal theological views associated with the New Theology of R.J. Campbell. T.E. Nicholas acknowledged his immense debt to **Gwili Jenkins** for opening for him the world of Christian Socialism, though he had read for himself accounts of the work of **Robert Owen** and the poetry of **Robert Jones Derfel**, Manchester (1824-1905).

Nicholas left Gwynfryn School in 1901 and was ordained with the Welsh Independents, becoming minister of Horeb chapel, Llandeilo. He married Mary Alys Hopkins, the daughter of Thomas Hopkins, watchmaker, Ammanford. She was consistently supportive of her husband and they had two children, a son and a daughter. In 1903 Nicholas received a call to the Welsh Chapel, Dodgeville, Wisconsin, USA, but he did not remain there long since Seion chapel in Glais in the Swansea Valley invited him to be their minister on 31 May 1904. He was at Glais for ten years becoming best known as 'Niclas y Glais'.

In this period (1904-14) Wales came to know Niclas y Glais as one of the most fervent Welsh speakers for Socialism and a good friend and supporter of **David Thomas** who was doing similar propaganda work for the Labour Movement in Gwynedd. Nicholas stood shoulder to shoulder with British Socialist pioneers, sharing a platform with Bruce Glasier and Keir Hardie of the ILP.

He became a favorite of the colliers of Glais, especially at Tynyfron, Llwyndu and Sisters Pit. During the disputes of the summer of 1905, and October 1909 to March 1910, and the winter of 1911 he was an advocate for the miners with owners like Evan Lewis, Glais.

He also began to write articles to the *Cenhinen* magazine on political, social and literary subjects. At the request of Keir Hardie he became the Welsh editor of *The Merthyr Pioneer*, the ILP newspaper. He supported the socialism of **R.J. Derfel** with its emphasis on brotherhood, peace and justice, equality, land nationalisation, and a Parliament for Wales, and opposition to the royal family, the brewers and the militarism. Nicholas fearlessly thundered out a prophetic gospel and he became a favorite preacher at 'Big Meetings' and public speaker. In his own chapel he supported Welsh culture, establishing a choir and an eisteddfod. He competed at eisteddfodau, religious poems at first but by 1908 poems with a socialist message. He became known as 'The People's Poet' and he won 17 chairs during his time at Glais.

On 1 December 1913 the diacons of Ebenezer, Llanyby, and Bethlehem, Llanddewi Brefi invited him to be their minister. The members of Glais chapel met Christmas afternoon to consider the invitation and unanimously decided to ask him to remain but he resolved to go and he left Glais on 11 January 1914. He served the chapels of rural Ceredigion throughout World War I and made a courageous stand as a pacifist. His standpoint can be seen in the series of articles that he wrote on 'The Unjust War' in *The Merthyr Pioneer*. By now he was under suspicion by the authorities, and especially Capt. Lionel Lindsay, the Chief Constable of Glamorganshire. He attempted to prosecute him for the address that he gave at Siloa chapel, Aberdare, at the Keir Hardie Memorial Service in 1915 but the Home Office refused to sanction this as it was a service to commemorate a prominent pacifist and socialist.

In the Llanyby area Mrs Winifred Inglis-Jones of Derry Ormond House was agitated by what she was hearing about the Independents' minister and she insisted that his congregation was opposed to him. But local people benefited from his services as a dentist and they were averse to complain about him. The Home Office came to know of T.E. Nicholas's dangerous political activities and MI5 kept a keen eye on him for two reasons. The Russian Revolution gave him new life in 1917, and secondly he received an invitation from the ILP to stand as a candidate in the Aberdare constituency in the 1918 election. His opponent was **Charles Butt Stanton** (1873-1946), a local man who had won the seat in succession to Keir Hardie. **Stanton** stood for the group called the National Democratic Party (NDP) and Nicholas was badly mistreated. He won 6,229 votes to **Stanton's** 22,824, a majority of 16,595.

In Ceredigion T.E. Nicholas organised farmworkers into a Union and in 1918 he established the Labour Party in the county. He resigned from the ministry in 1918 and established himself as a dentist in Pontardawe. His wife, and later he himself, had been trained as dentists by a good friend, David Ernest Evans (1870-1956) of Mountain Ash who also trained their son, Islwyn ap Nicholas. The family moved to Aberystwyth in 1921 and he, his wife and son set up a dental practice in the town.

He joined the Communist Party when it was formed in 1920 and he was tireless in his efforts. He became a popular lecturer on Russia, especially after 1935 when he visited the country. His lecture, 'An old man in a new world' was well known and he delivered it to hundreds on at least 200 occasions. He was in the forefront of lecturers and people travelled miles to hear him, 'the Red Prophet'. He had scores of lectures, e.g. on **Williams Pantycelyn** and the views of **Samuel Roberts**, Llanbrynmair. The same themes appeared in his weekly column, 'O fyd y werin' ('The world of the common folk') in *Y Cymro* newspaper in the 1930s, though the dangers of fascism was to become one of his main messages.

He never wavered in his support for the policies of the Soviet Union. He supported the Nazi-Soviet pact in 1939 and he was punished for his views. He was arrested in Llanbrynmair 11 July 1940 on the feeble charge of being a fascist. Together with his son Islwyn ap Nicholas he was taken to Swansea prison and then transferred to Brixton, a more secure prison. There, behind bars, he wrote 150 sonnets expressing his Christian and Communist convictions. Ministers of religion of all denominations, union leaders, especially the miners, and Members of Parliament protested and their case was taken up by two able barristers, P. N. Pritt and Ithel Davies. The Government agreed to set up a tribunal under the chairmanship of **Judge John Morris** (later Lord Justice Morris of Porth-y-gest) which met in Ascot. The two were released after four months of prison. The sonnets written in prison were published in 1942 under the title *Canu'r Carchar*, and translated into English by Daniel Hughes, **Dewi Emrys** and **Wil Ifan** as *The Prison Sonnets of T. E. Nicholas* (London, 1948)

Nicholas achieved a great deal, especially as 'the people's poet'. His was a lonely, prophetic voice, inspired by the *Bible* and the writings of Communist philosophers from Karl Marx to R. Palme Dutt. His volumes of poetry await their literary critic. They include *Salmau'r Werin* (Ystalyfera, 1909), first edition, and a second edition (Wrecsam, 1913); *Cerddi Gwerin* (Caernarfon, 1912), *Cyflog Byw* (Pontardawe, 1913); *Cerddi Rhyddid* (Abertawe, 1914), *Nadolig Arall* (Llangybi, 1915); *Dros Eich Gwlad* (Llangybi, 1915, with a second, a third (Pontardawe, 1920) and a fourth edition in 1930; *Y Gân Ni Chanwyd* (Aberystwyth, 1929); *Weithwyr Cymru, Cenwch eich hunain i ryddid* (Aberystwyth, 1938); *Sonedau'r Carchar* (Aberystwyth, 1940); *Canu'r Carchar* (Llandysul, 1942); *Y Dyn a'r Gaib* (Dinbych, 1944); *Meirionnydd* (Llandysul, 1949 second edition, 1950; *Dryllio'r Delwau* (Tywyn, 1949); and his last book of poetry, *Rwy'n Gweld o Bell* (Abertawe, 1963). These books and pamphlets sold well during the poet's many visits to various localities, especially his long poem *Weithwyr Cymru, Cenwch eich hunain i ryddid* ('Workers of Wales, sing yourselves to freedom') which sold more than any booklet of poetry in the 20th century, over 6000 copies in the days of the Left Book Club.

His attitude as a Welshman was expressed in a verse that he composed in 1903 which spoke of his love for Wales as part of a wider world. He was an internationalist, called by the Communist activist Harry Pollit in 1949 the 'greatest of Welshmen'. **W. T. Pennar Davies** said 'truly that it was strange that the prophet of the social revolution spoke through the Welsh language and that the English-speaking industrial valleys of Wales had not produced a similar poetic propagandist in English. 'The only name that comes to mind is **Idris Davies**, the object of a small cult, and who places Nicholas in a special position.'

T.E. Nicholas died at his home, Glasyns, Elmtree Avenue, Aberystwyth, 19 April 1971 aged 91. The funeral services were held at the Independent Chapel, Aberystwyth and Narberth Crematorium. His ashes were scattered on the Preselli Hills, Pembrokeshire. He left a widow and a son.

Some of T. E. Nicholas' papers are in Bangor University Manuscript and Archives collection, and T. E. Nicholas' archives (**NLW MSS 13692A** , **13693C** , **13694A** , **13695D**) and Islwyn Nicholas' papers are in the National Library of Wales. **NLW MS 13692A** , the poems that he composed on toilet paper in Brixton prison can be seen on the National Library of Wales's website.

Author

D. Ben Rees

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Further Reading

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Additional Links

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