

## LOVE, MONEY AND ART: THE DAVIES SISTERS AND A FORTUNE FOR WALES

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The story of Gwendoline (1882–1951) and Margaret Davies (1884–1963) reflects an age in Wales. They grew up in the late-Victorian years of industrial, political, and cultural combustion, their later lives mirrored in the wars and social upheaval of the first half of the twentieth century. Their collection of remarkable paintings and sculptures, works of international standing, was their enduring achievement. This they gave to the people of Wales. Their saga is not, I think, widely known in their own country.

David Davies (1818–1890), their grandfather, was an unschooled Montgomeryshire farm boy whose ambition, faith, and energy moulded him into an heroic figure. His rock was Calvinistic Methodism. His wealth helped to modernize Wales and in considerable measure assisted the transformation of its culture. Davies was the eldest of ten children. He worked on his father's Llandinam hill farm and prospered as a tree feller and sawyer, then as a reliable contractor who completed projects on time and to budget. In 1855 he became a railway engineer and built seven lines in Wales, most famously a link through the Cambrian mountains to the west coast. In 1864 he entered new territory as a Rhondda coal magnate. He delighted in his status as one of the landowning gentry. Finally, in 1884, he led Rhondda colliery owners in their battle to break the Bute monopoly in coal exports and built a new dock at Barry. Such was his celebrity that a newspaper offered photo portraits of him for five shillings.

Davies was a force in the founding of the first university college of Wales at Aberystwyth in 1872. He prized the self-reliance that education encouraged and was determined that Welsh boys should be able to compete 'with the English and the Scotch'. At a time of financial crisis, his money saved the college from closure. Edward Ellis, the college historian, wrote that 'without the sturdy support of David Davies, the one very rich Welshman whose generosity put the others to shame, it is difficult to see how the college could have avoided bankruptcy'. That act of support inaugurated the Davies family's commitment to funding the educational and cultural institutions of Wales. At fifty-five and in his imposing prime, Davies sat for the artist Ford Madox Brown. The portrait captured his shrewd and inspectorial blue-eyed gaze. In a letter, Madox Brown said Davies was 'as rough as a California bear but a kind-hearted man of genius'.

David Davies always thought big. There was something of the maharaja about him when in 1873 he invited 6,000 people to the twenty-first birthday party of Edward, his only son. He laid on trains to transport 3,000 Rhondda miners and their families to Llandinam. The 12,000 bottles of lemonade he provided saluted sobriety. In a speech to the crowd, he said: 'It is not for me to boast, but I want to draw your attention to this: I have done a great deal.' He became a member of parliament in 1874, telling the Commons, in a trademark phrase of his, that he was proud to be a self-made man. Disraeli slyly commended his praise of his creator.

As a doting grandfather, David Davies liked to summon his grandchildren to tea by hanging a towel in an upstairs window of his mansion beside the river Severn. The children lived at Plas Dinam on the other side. In 1890, they attended his funeral. A half-mile procession of mourners walked four abreast. Young David (1880–1944, later 1st Baron Davies) was aged ten, Gwendoline eight, Margaret five. Their mother had died two years earlier. The children saw their father buckle under the anxieties of managing the Rhondda collieries. On the first day of 1898, when the girls were fifteen and twelve, Edward died at home aged forty-five. Far sooner than they might have imagined, David and his sisters inherited great wealth, equivalent today to £50 million apiece. The fortune placed the sisters among the richest young women in Britain. An astonished Liberal MP, Arthur Humphreys-Owen, wrote to a friend, Lord Rendel: ‘It is almost unique for so large a fortune to go to what is absolutely still a family of peasants of the better class.’

The recollections of those who knew them describe the young sisters as shy and tongue-tied. Their governess, Jane Blaker, an assured young Englishwoman who schooled them at home in Plas Dinam, taught them French and encouraged their growing passion for art, music, and singing. When they turned seventeen they attended a happy school in Hampstead, so gentle that it imposed no exams. Photographs show them in hats and hairstyles, elegantly Edwardian. They never sat for a painted portrait. They stayed often at the family apartment in London, near Buckingham Palace, and were experienced travellers on the Channel ferry and continental railways. They were also pioneer motor-car tourists in prewar Europe.

Their education progressed during grand tours of museums and galleries in France, Italy, and Germany. Their chaperones were their stepmother, their governess, and family trustees. The sisters translated texts and wrote their notes on art, music, and architecture in rooms with a view in Venice, Paris, Pisa, Assisi, Florence, Bayreuth, Oberammergau, and Leipzig. Margaret attended a three-month art course in Dresden. Her neat journal and course notes survive.

To many, the girls appeared almost as twins. They were often photographed as a pair. Their shared lives, bereavement, fortunes, travel, a love of Plas Dinam, and joint devotion to art and music drew them together. I grew to know them through their journals, correspondence, and accounts of their war experiences. I discussed them with their family and friends. By my desk as I wrote stood one of Gwendoline’s suitcases crammed with photographs, postcards, passports, letters, journals, and fragile pressed flowers.

Ink was their medium and their pleasure. Gwendoline, in particular, detested typed letters and said she would not open them. Their writing styles were strikingly different. Margaret was self-contained, descriptive, and objective. Gwendoline’s letters were more effusive, often a reaction to the ebb and flow of emotion. She expressed excitement and irritation. She seemed to make her fountain pen harrumph. She once started a letter: ‘Damn, Damn, Damn, – Sorry! But that’s how I feel.’ Margaret, more circumspect, never wrote in that way.

The sisters inherited their fortunes on their twenty-fifth birthdays in 1907 and 1909. For the rest of their lives they donated generously to charity and to many causes, health, education, music, art, the National Museum of Wales, and the National Library of Wales. Their art collection evolved from their studies and

frequent travels. They began their serious buying in 1908. Jane Blaker, by now a friend and fixture who would stay with the Davies family for the rest of her life, recruited her younger brother Hugh Blaker to advise them. As an artist, critic, and agent he was delighted to have a role. He did not, however, direct them. They consulted other advisers, too.

From his forays in the galleries and elsewhere, Hugh Blaker sent the sisters photographs of paintings as suggestions. He was, among his many interests, curator of the Holburne museum in Bath, and he had a good opinion of himself. After winning an argument with councillors he wrote in his diary: 'I am Art in Bath.' The sisters particularly admired the landscapes and soft light of the paintings of Corot and Millet, and the sensations of Turner. When, in 1908, they opened their account they spent nearly £20,000 on seven pictures, including a Corot apiece and three Turners. They began to make their mark as serious and purposeful collectors. In their choice of pictures and sculptures, they followed their own compass: there was no family artistic tradition. They bought for their own walls. Their fortunes, after all, were new money and they were free to enjoy them. The pleasure, as Gwendoline said, lay in choosing for oneself.

They were moated by money. Their wealth reduced any prospect of marriage. They were never engaged. There was an age of Victorian constraints, proprieties, and chaperones. They certainly had a social life with cousins and acquaintances; but there never was an ideal husband in the offing. The sisters lived within the limited and protective orbit of their family and chapel; and it was unlikely that any outsider would have been considered. No doubt the sisters had exacting standards, as did their stepmother and governess. With their wealth went a deep commitment to the family philanthropic tradition. They remembered their father and grandfather: their inheritance was a covenant.

Wales as a country was not rich. At a time of national renaissance and the founding and funding of institutions, private wealth had a significant role. The sisters wrote cheques every day except Sunday. A dozen thick ledgers survive, covering fifty years of charitable donations ranging from a few pounds to hundreds, to hospitals, orphans, chapels, the blind, temperance groups, school outings, choirs, waifs and strays, eisteddfodau, the Welsh poor in London, the widow of a drowned sea captain, a £10 ticket to Australia for a local boy wanting to emigrate.

At Llandinam in 1910, the sisters and their brother David, at that time a maverick Liberal MP, met the distinguished academic Thomas Jones. He had begun his life as a working-class boy in Rhymney. In 1910, he was a professor of economics at Queens University in Belfast, and was keen to return to Wales. He had a passion for higher education. Widely known as TJ, he would become cabinet secretary, wartime confidant of Lloyd George, and ambitious founder of Coleg Harlech. The Davieses and TJ discussed tuberculosis, at that time a scourge of Wales and a killer of many young people. Shortly afterwards, the Davieses founded a major campaign to eradicate TB and donated half the start-up fund of £300,000. TJ moved to Wales as secretary of the campaign. He and the sisters began a correspondence that lasted forty years; he was their indispensable guru, sympathetic ear, and practical adviser.

In 1912, Gwendoline and Margaret lifted the reputation of their collection by buying their first Impressionists, two studies by Monet of their beloved Venice.

*Gwendoline Davies**Margaret Davies*

His magic stole their hearts. Their adviser, Hugh Blaker, was pleased. He deeply admired the adventurous and controversial Impressionists for their part in the creative ferment of Paris. If it was a struggle for the avant-garde in France, it was even harder for them to penetrate the conservative fortress of art in Britain. The Davieses, however, continued to make up their own minds. They chose beauty and believed in its power. Their gathering of paintings and sculptures would, ultimately, be their gift to Wales. In a world of art dominated by men, they were rare female collectors, and, being sisters and spinsters and Welsh and Nonconformist, unique. Few women of that time possessed the necessary attributes: an independent fortune, an educated eye, and a strong collecting urge. They acquired their Impressionist and post-Impressionist paintings between 1912 and 1923.

In 1913, they lent thirty-eight of their pictures to a landmark exhibition in the city hall in Cardiff. Like other contributors, they were anonymous. Most of the 26,000 people who crowded into the exhibition had never seen such art. The sisters also lent Rodin's masterpiece *The Kiss* (1889), the first in their collection of nine of his works. It had pride of place, a sculpture of great tenderness and beauty, but a controversial one. Later in 1913, Gwendoline bought Renoir's painting *La Parisienne* (1874) for £5,000. Renoir had painted it for the first Impressionist exhibition in Paris in 1874 when he was thirty-three and in the flood of his talent. An excited critic wrote of it: 'This little lady is trying hard to look chaste,' and found the tilt of her hat 'daringly coquettish'. As for the dress, he admired its 'heavenly blue' but complained that it was not revealing enough.

The pioneering Impressionist exhibition in Paris, the first of eight, was a financial failure. Renoir sold *La Parisienne* to a private collection in Paris where it spent the next thirty-eight years. After the death of the owner, Henri Rouart, Gwendoline saw *La Parisienne* in London and loved it instantly. Years later, *The Times* noted that at that time in Britain 'it took great courage' for Gwendoline to buy such a fine Impressionist work.

As German forces surged across Belgium at the onset of war in 1914, the Davieses financed a daring rescue of ninety-one artists and musicians and their families. The resourceful Thomas Jones and two others crossed to Belgium, rounded up the refugees and took them to England in the last but one ship leaving Ostend. They were housed in Wales and partly supported by the Davieses for the duration of the war.

Independent-minded, the sisters were determined to undertake war work in France. In 1916, Gwendoline left to run a French Red Cross canteen for troops at Troyes, 100 miles south-east of Paris. Before leaving, she arranged a large bequest for the university in Aberystwyth in case she did not return. She and Margaret also gifted money to the National Library for the purchase of rare manuscripts. Margaret joined Gwendoline in France in 1917. The canteen work, serving coffee and soup and cigarettes to countless soldiers, was exhausting and harrowing. The French soldiers were on their way to and from Verdun. 'Do you wonder,' Margaret wrote in her journal, 'that they are grown older before their time?'

David Davies fought in the trenches in 1915–16 and then became an adviser to Lloyd George. LG sacked him for his unwelcome opinions in 1917. The sisters grieved for their two cousins, one killed in action at Gallipoli in 1915, the other in 1917 in Palestine. Towards the end of the war, Gwendoline made occasional trips to Paris and bought two Cézanne masterpieces there in 1918. Two years later she purchased Van Gogh's *Rain – Auvers* (1890), one of the first of the artist's works in a British collection. The Davieses' collection of French Impressionist and post-Impressionist art was by then the largest in Britain.

In 1921, Gwendoline offered Cézanne's *The François Zola Dam* (1877) as a loan to the National Gallery and then the Tate. Both refused it. As an admirer of Cézanne, Hugh Blaker exposed the rebuff in an angry letter. He saw establishment bias. This detonated a celebrated row. The anti-Cézanne camp eventually backed off and the work was displayed. It was greatly admired, not least by Samuel Courtauld who said: 'I felt the magic and I have felt it in Cézanne's work ever since.' Like the sisters, he believed that paintings were civilizing influences to be shared. Social and economic devastation in Wales led Gwendoline to stop buying art in 1926. Her last purchase was an eighteenth-century landscape by the Montgomeryshire-born Richard Wilson (1713/14–1782).

The Davies sisters travelled to the Middle East in 1923 and made adventurous journeys by car to Beirut, Damascus, and Baghdad and to the ruins of Babylon and Petra. In that same year, David Davies asked his sisters to leave Plas Dinam to make more space for his family. They moved to Gregynog, a mansion in the Elizabethan style, half-hidden in glorious woods seven miles away. In France, Gwendoline had dreamed of founding an island of peace, a rendezvous for artists and musicians, for concerts and conferences. At Gregynog, she and Margaret turned aspiration into reality.

In the 1920s and 1930s Gregynog was alive with musicians, conductors, music, and voices. There were six successful festivals of music and poetry. Gwendoline played the organ in the music room and she and Margaret sang in the choir. As Prys Morgan has noted, 'There was no house quite like Gregynog, nor aesthetes quite like the Davies sisters anywhere.' Their paintings looked marvellous on the

walls of Gregynog's music room. *La Parisienne* seemed to be greeting visitors at the door. The young Swansea artist Ceri Richards remembered: 'I was staggered by the paintings and Rodin's bronzes, fascinated most of all by Monet. Imagine their effect on someone who dreamed of great paintings but had seen none at all.' Alarmed that the paintings might be a fire risk, the sisters recruited 18 employees as the mansion's fire brigade. Meanwhile, to save money, a servant carried the sitting room fire on a shovel into the dining room to warm it at dinner time.

During the 1920s and 1930s, Margaret founded charities for women and girls from mining valleys where they could rest and eat adequately. Their reticence persisted. In the 1930s they were described as 'gentle sisters who dispensed great beauty in hushed undertones'. An American who in the 1930s worked at Gregynog recalled them as 'the most timid and darling little people, scared to death of me but awfully nice, enjoying Gregynog, yet in a frightened way'. In the same period, their brother David supported the building of a grand 6,000-seat concert hall at Newtown, and increasingly he devoted his time and money to the League of Nations.

In many ways, Gwendoline's dream of a printing press producing beautiful books was fulfilled. The first book from the Gregynog Press, *Poems by George Herbert*, was published in December 1923. 'It is worth producing a beautiful thing for its own sake,' she wrote to Thomas Jones. For all their talent, some of the artists vexed her, and the press had difficult times. One of her staff admitted he was 'a bit afraid of artists. They so often run away with other people's wives or play shovepenny with the boys in their employ'.

Through the years, Tom Jones was ever a sympathetic and practical adviser. A disciple of the craftsman poet William Morris, he shared the sisters' belief in the social purpose of art. Writing to him was for Gwendoline a solace and joy. She could be angry and delighted, caring and lyrical. Her letters reveal an affectionate and platonic friendship. In 1946 she wrote to him:

I have been wanting to write this note for a long time. What I want to say you know already, I think, but I want you to hear it from me direct. It is just to tell you that you have been the big thing in my life. I was so hungry for affection and encouragement; the last war had knocked my life and health to pieces, and it all had to be rebuilt and you were the builder and restorer. We planned and worked together. I do want to thank you from the bottom of my heart for all you have given me and done for me. It has been like a warm fire glowing within me for years. It has raised my life out of the humdrum rut of existence until I felt I could tackle anything with your help. All I have been able to do during the last thirty years has been entirely your doing.

Gwendoline died in 1951, aged sixty-nine. She bequeathed all of the pictures and sculptures she collected from 1908 to 1926 to the National Museum of Wales, seventy-eight oil paintings including the work of Monet, Manet, Renoir, Cézanne, Corot, Millet, Daumier, Whistler, Turner, Gainsborough, and Constable. John Steegman, Keeper of Art, praised Gwendoline's 'crowning benefaction to her

native country'. *The Times* wrote that 'Miss Davies had not only an adventurous but a catholic taste.' Margaret bought paintings to complete the Davies collection. She died in 1963 aged seventy-eight. Her own bequest included 108 oil paintings. The Davies collection is the core of art in the National Museum, a cultural enrichment of Wales. John Ingamells, Assistant Keeper of Art, made the point that the Davies collection embodied a determination to acknowledge their debt to the Rhondda.

Three centuries ago, the antiquarian Robert Vaughan said his great national book collection grew from 'a love of my country and our ancestors'. The same spirit surely moved the Davies sisters. Opening an exhibition of their paintings in Paris, a French curator said their collection was 'a consequence of acts of love'. This was the heart of it all. The sisters loved their paintings and wished others to have the opportunity to love them, too. The delight of the generations who discover their art is monument enough.

It is fitting that in the National Museum of Wales the Madox Brown portrait of David Davies and Renoir's *La Parisienne* are fairly close to each other. The 'old California bear' and his fortune are the beginning of the story. *La Parisienne*, in her heavenly blue, had her debut in the first Impressionist exhibition in Paris. She shines and endures as a popular emblem of the Davies collection, the wonderful gift Gwendoline and Margaret made to their country.