

Goronwy Owen: A Tale of Two Plaques

Report by the Hon Treasurer, Huw Wynne-Griffiths

Goronwy Owen was born in 1723 on the island of Anglesey in North Wales of a materially impoverished but not uncultured family of tinkers (itinerant repairers of pots and pans). Both his father and his grandfather were poets of greater or lesser distinction. Climbing up the rudimentary educational ladder of his day (he was briefly a servitor at Jesus College, Oxford) and with the aspiration of becoming a priest, Goronwy was ordained a deacon in 1746. Despite the fact that he was probably under the patronage of the well-known Anglesey family from the same area known as Morusaiad Mon ("the Morrisises of Anglesey") - three brothers of immense cultural influence who were generous patrons of the arts and science, Goronwy nevertheless lacked the essential family influence required in the gentry-dominated Wales of that time and so had difficulty in finding satisfactory employment. In 1755 he moved to London hoping to obtain a secretarial post with the London-based Society of Cymmrodorion that had been established by the Morusaiad brothers in 1751 with the object of promoting Welsh culture in the capital. In this he was unsuccessful, but the Cymmrodorion did help him secure the curacy of St. Mary's Northolt, to the west of London. The vicar at St Mary's, Dr Samuel Nicholls, further assisted him in obtaining (with the consent of the Bishop of London) the headmastership of the grammar school attached to the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, the colonial era capital of Virginia. Goronwy emigrated to Virginia in 1757. His wife and the youngest of his three children died on the outward journey. After further vicissitudes he died in obscurity in Virginia in 1769. In 1957, the Cymmrodorion erected a plaque at the College in the Swann Library, and the College continues to award the Goronwy Owen Prize each year to the student who has written an exceptional collection of poems.

Despite a reputation in his lifetime for over-partiality to drink, particularly in moments of depression, Goronwy is remembered with affection and respect today by all lovers of Welsh language literature as a poet who contributed notably to the renaissance in Welsh literary culture that occurred in the mid-eighteenth century. The political merger of Wales with England during the reign of Henry VIII might, in the words of a Tudor historian, have 'brought peace, order and prosperity in its train', but an adverse cultural consequence was a decline in the standard of Welsh-language literary composition. This followed the demise of the patronage by the Welsh gentry of poets (the 'bards' who had been traditionally employed by wealthy families to record their history and to entertain) as these gentry became more and more anglicized throughout the Tudor and Stuart periods.

When revival came, much of the impetus came from the middling professional class of Welshmen, many of whom, like Goronwy, sought livelihoods outside Wales and particularly in London. Goronwy received much encouragement to write poetry from fellow expatriates, and when doing so he drew on his considerable acquaintance with Latin and contemporary English literature to supplement his mastery of traditional Welsh metrical patterns. He sought to infuse a classicizing

spirit into Welsh literature very much in the Augustan mode. Although he never achieved his much-trumpeted ambition to write a Miltonic epic in Welsh (the subject of much correspondence between Goronwy and the Morusiad), he wrote poetry of great dignity and elegance whilst respecting the traditional Welsh poetic forms.

His efflorescence as a poet was brief. Sadly, he wrote nothing of great stature when in Virginia (possibly due to the sad loss occasioned during his voyage) and it is said that his best poetry was written during his curacy at Northolt. While at Northolt, one of his poems expressed his nostalgic longing (*hiraeth*) for Anglesey and lines from this poem are inscribed on his memorial tablet both in St. Mary's church at Northolt and on the similar memorial tablet in the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. These lines are very well-known to Welshmen and the sentiment they express remains as valid a statement today as they did 250 years ago.

Affixed to the north wall of the chancel at St. Mary's Church, Northolt is a stone tablet erected by the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion in 1923 in memory of Goronwy. The plaque has now been renovated by the Society.



Image 1: St Mary's, Northolt. The plaque is the third one in from the window.

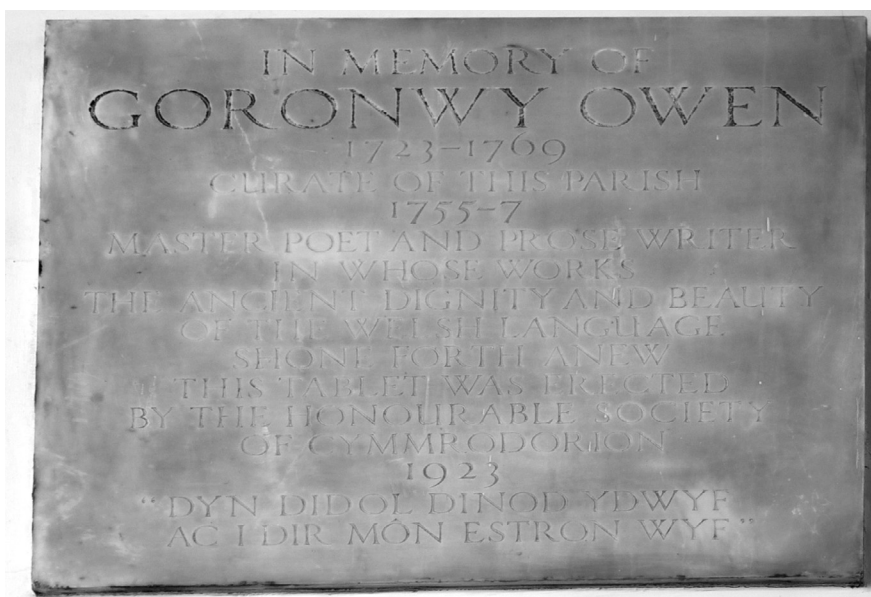


Image 2: The plaque before restoration

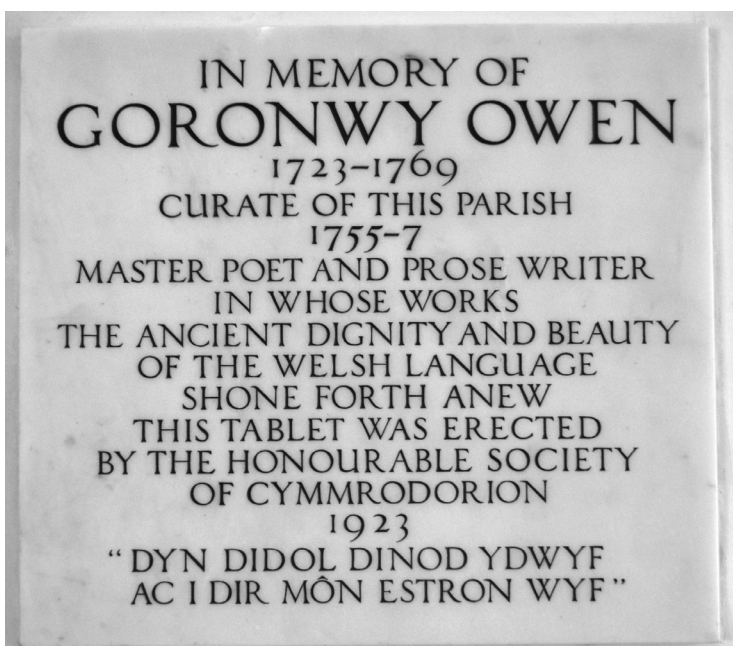


Image 3: The plaque after being restored by the Society

The plaque states:

IN MEMORY OF
GORONWY OWEN
1723-1769
CURATE OF THIS PARISH
1755-7
MASTER POET AND PROSE WRITER
IN WHOSE WORKS
THE ANCIENT DIGNITY AND BEAUTY
OF THE WELSH LANGUAGE
SHONE FORTH ANEW
THIS TABLET WAS ERECTED
BY THE HONOURABLE SOCIETY
OF CYMMRODORION
1923
DYN DIDOL DINOD YDWYF
AC I DIR MÔN ESTRON WYF

The Welsh quotation at the end, written by Goronwy Owen, may be translated broadly as:

I am a man of no particular note who is alone
and I am exiled from the land of Anglesey.

The beauty of the quotation lies not only in the sad words that express Goronwy's longing and distant separation from his homeland but also in the very technical nature of the strict rhythmic style required of this kind of Welsh poetry.

A further photograph shows the second plaque in memory of Goronwy, positioned on a wall in the library at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia, USA.

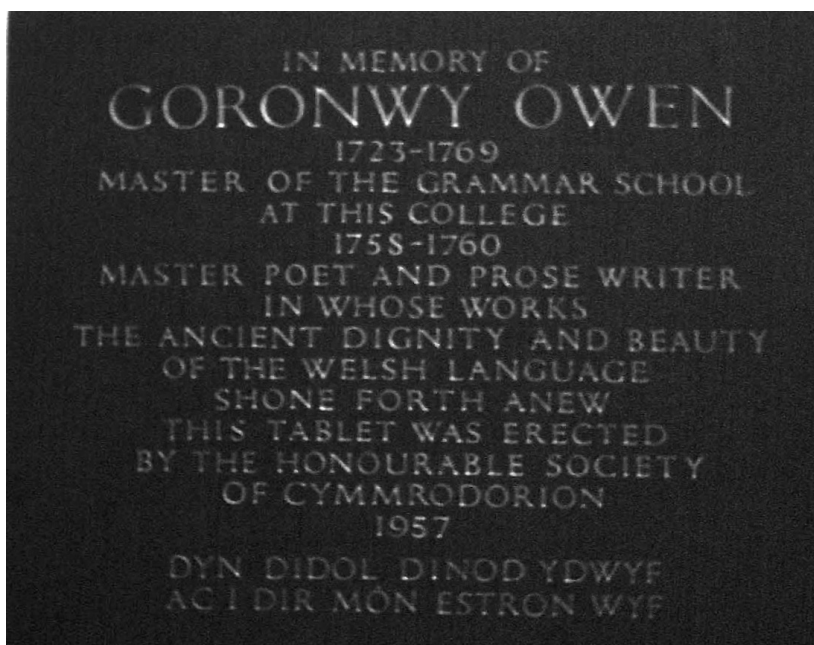


Image 4: The plaque at the College of William and Mary, USA

The plaque reads:

IN MEMORY OF
 GORONWY OWEN
 1723-1769
 MASTER OF THE GRAMMAR SCHOOL
 AT THIS COLLEGE
 1758-1760
 MASTER POET AND PROSE WRITER
 IN WHOSE WORKS
 THE ANCIENT DIGNITY AND BEAUTY
 OF THE WELSH LANGUAGE
 SHONE FORTH ANEW
 THIS TABLET WAS ERECTED
 BY THE HONOURABLE SOCIETY
 OF CYMMRODORION
 1957
 DYN DIDOL DINOD YDWYF
 AC I DIR MÔN ESTRON WYF

Despite the passage of thirty four years between the erection of each tablet, the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion chose to mark the memory of Goronwy in very much the same words.