

Eccentric: The Life of Dr William Price

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The subject of my lecture is the notorious Dr William Price, a name that is well-known and someone whose great legacy remains that landmark court case in 1884 that spearheaded the passing of the Cremation Act in 1902.

However, I do wonder whether Price had the aspirations of the Cremation Society in mind when he famously cremated his baby son, or was it simply due to his deep-rooted druidic beliefs, of which he claimed to be the master scholar, and his self-appointed role as Archdruid of Wales? There was much more to Dr William Price than his radical attitude to the disposal of the dead. He was undoubtedly one of the most flamboyant, romantic, and revolutionary characters in Welsh history.

People often forget that Price, a sparkling and dynamic character, was a brilliant scholar, an exemplary surgeon, an exiled political activist, and a pioneer in establishing an embryonic National Health Service. He established the first co-operative society in the principality, tried his utmost to create the first museum of Welsh life, and also fought gallantly for the striking miners and iron workers whilst also outraging a conventional society with his far-reaching druidic beliefs. Price is often portrayed as an eccentric individual whose obsession with druidism resulted in cremating the remains of his infant child. Price was eighty-four years of age when he committed his son's body to the 'cleansing flame', but history has conveniently forgotten his great achievements up until that moment.

One could argue that Price lived too long in that, by his latter years, he had become something of an almost comic but also tragic figure portrayed as a publicity-seeking buffoon in newspaper reports the length and breadth of the UK. It was a sad final chapter in the life of this 'Welsh Wizard'.

Price's childhood years were certainly difficult. He was born on 4 March 1800 into a well-known family in the village of Rudry near the large market town of Caerphilly. Price's forefathers had been tanners, publicans, or members of the clergy. One of them, Nicholas Price (1681–1757), amassed something of a family fortune as an iron master at Pentyrch near Cardiff. He may not have been one of the great 'iron kings' of towns like Merthyr Tydfil, but he certainly made an impact on the growing industrial valleys.

Price's own grandfather, Charles (1725–1786), opened a small iron blast furnace. Price's father, also named William Price (1761–1844), attended a grammar school in Cowbridge and graduated from Jesus College, Oxford with a Master of Arts degree before becoming ordained in the Church of England. Sadly, he never held a living as a parish priest as was expected of him when he returned to the small hamlet of Rudry and settled in the farmhouse of Ty'n y Coed Cae. The Reverend William Price suffered from severe schizophrenia and was listed as a 'lunatic' by his thirtieth year.

Prior to the full onslaught of his mental illness, he married Mary Edmunds (1767–1844), an illiterate housemaid, and fathered seven children, our William being the fifth. Arguably, the young William, in latter years, also suffered elements

of a mental illness but these were nowhere near as extreme as those of his father who was largely tied to his bed or armchair and was deemed a danger to himself and others. However, he did have periods of being lucid, managing to teach his children Latin, for instance.

As a family they lived a poverty-stricken existence, depending on poor relief and donations from Price relatives to survive. Young William, like his father before him, showed remarkable promise as a self-educated scholar and soon benefited from some formal education at a day school in the village of Machen. Unable to speak a word of English until the age of ten, as Welsh was the language of the home, the boy blossomed at the day school run by Mr Gatward under the Lancastrian Principle, and was even offered a teaching role by his thirteenth year.

Price was eager to follow a career in medicine, possibly in the hope he could treat illnesses like those experienced by his father or his two brothers who had died in infancy. He also saw the dramatic ill-effects of industrialization on the south Wales workforce locally, manifested particularly in long-term sickness and workplace accidents. It may be that he was influenced by the success of his extended Price cousins: some had married into the Wedgewood porcelain dynasty and one had become the private surgeon to King William IV.

Price became an apprentice to a young surgeon named Dr Evan Edwards in Caerphilly, the grandson of William Edwards, a local builder turned preacher who built the landmark Old Bridge at Pontypridd. Edwards was a brilliant physician, an expert in operating on victims of facial cancers and well-documented in the *Lancet*. For five years, Price flourished under his tutelage and progressed to study at one of Britain's foremost medical schools, the London Hospital in Whitechapel. It was there that he witnessed once more the appalling sicknesses and widespread epidemics suffered by the lower classes who often lived in unsanitary, overcrowded houses in London's deepest East End.

As a student and surgical dresser to some of Britain's foremost surgeons, particularly Edward Grainger and John Abernethy, Price excelled and became a member of the Royal College of Surgeons in October 1821 at the age of just twenty-one. When considering his unfortunate upbringing, it is remarkable that he achieved such success, and although Price was often ridiculed for his beliefs throughout his lifetime there is no evidence to doubt his abilities as a first-class surgeon. He was exemplary, and people therefore often overlooked his idiosyncrasies, of which there were many, because he was such a gifted healer.

On the completion of his studies he established himself in south Wales, renting a farmhouse called Porthyglo and opening a surgery in the vicinity of Craig yr Helfa near the small hamlet of Newbridge – now better known as Pontypridd. At the time the area was experiencing rapid population growth due to increasing industrialization. It would be several decades before coal, the precious 'black gold', led to the expansion of surrounding valleys like the Rhondda, but south Wales was a heartland for another hugely profitable industry at the time – iron.

The Taff valley's growth was largely due to the opening of the Glamorganshire Canal in 1794 which connected the interests of the iron capital of the world, Merthyr Tydfil, under the ownership of the Crawshays, to their docklands at Cardiff. On the banks of the canal lay Treforest, regarded as a frontier town of the period.

Using his influence and possible family ancestry (a distant relative, Thomas Price, was a founder of the mighty Penydarren Ironworks), Price became surgeon of the Treforest Tinsplate works, part of the Crawshay empire, and within a short period he was elected surgeon at the other main employer of the area, the Newbridge Chainworks or Brown Lenox Chainworks. This is where the Victorian engineer Isambard Kingdom Brunel visited personally to order the chains and anchors for some of his great ships and bridges.

Price was a self-made man. His rapid progress from medical student to surgeon of a workforce of thousands and a growing community was astonishing. He was an incredibly influential man, charismatic, charming, and eloquent, who gained respect and admiration in the communities where he administered his expertise. Price also enjoyed the opportunity to mix with the gentry, enjoying the champagne balls at Cyfarthfa Castle in Merthyr.

Over the years, his friendship with Francis Crawshay, one of the Crawshay sons and manager of the Tinsplate Works at Treforest, blossomed. Together they enjoyed many of the same beliefs and interests, particularly eastern religions, Hinduism, Greek mythology, Egyptology, and the growing cult of neo-druidism that was becoming increasingly popular in Victorian Wales. They were also both incredibly popular with the local female population, with Francis, already married and the father of several children, allegedly impregnating twenty-eight women in the Treforest area alone.

Price and Crawshay cemented their friendship when in 1841 Laura Crawshay, the ironmaster's wife, came close to death whilst in childbirth. At a time prior to antibiotics and anaesthetic, Price's decision to perform a Caesarian section would in all likelihood have led to either mother, baby, or both not surviving the ordeal. Laid on the kitchen table in Forest House, Laura underwent the traumatic surgery at the hands of Price who was both fast and accurate and despite all odds remarkably saved the lives of both mother and child.

Price will be remembered as a kind and deeply caring individual who felt very strongly about the impact that industrialization was having on the health of the working classes. In equal measure he condemned injustice, often seeing through the Victorian façade for what it really was. He fought hard for better conditions and became a pioneer in creating a social health care system. Whilst at the Newbridge Chainworks he formed a service whereby workers paid him when they were well and he treated them for free when they were sick. Such a system became increasingly popular throughout the Welsh coalfields, resulting in the establishment of medical societies such as the Tredegar Workmen's Medical Aid Society which greatly influenced the town's proudest son, Aneurin Bevan, when forming the National Health Service.

Outspoken in his beliefs, Price maintained that many fellow practitioners were nothing but 'poison peddlers', making their money selling drugs and profiting off the sick rather than tackling the cause of the illness. Price advocated natural medicines wherever possible, vegetarianism, healthy food, fresh air, and exercise, and he refused to treat smokers. Price was also something of an early feminist, arguing that marriage enslaved women and denied them property, rights, and independence. He was quick to admonish the non-conformist deacons and ministers

who spouted their fire and brimstone from the pulpit at the plight of the unmarried mother.

Price was passionate in many other ways, particularly in his love for Wales and its language, culture, and history at a time when the country appeared lost. This was a period when the sense of Welsh identity was at its lowest ebb, the people and their language considered inferior by the growing middle class of mainly monolingual English speakers who came to the principality as *nouveau riche* colliery owners and ironwork managers. The Welsh psyche was damaged, and while it fuelled the British empire through its rich mineral resources, its culture and sense of ‘Welshness’ were diminished.

Price’s knowledge of Welsh history was vast, but much of it was drawn from the manuscripts of antiquarian Edward Williams (1747–1826), a stonemason of the Vale of Glamorgan known by his bardic name of Iolo Morganwg. Iolo, whose great contribution to Welsh culture was the creation of the Gorsedd or bardic throne at the National Eisteddfod of Wales, fabricated much of his evidence in an effort to re-ignite an interest in Wales’s celebrated past. In doing so, Iolo, himself a follower of the work of archaeological pioneer and Stonehenge expert William Stukeley, claimed Glamorganshire, from where he took his bardic surname, was the epicentre of the Welsh people, the place from where their druidic ancestors had ruled early British society before annihilation under Roman rule. Categorizing the ancient standing stones and burial tombs of the county as druidic temples and shrines, Iolo used his druidic cult to great effect, claiming that druidism and the bardic tradition was uniquely Welsh. In doing so, he attempted to portray Wales as an ancient cultural heartland that could rival Sir Walter Scott’s vision of Scotland.

Price was one of an army of disciples who believed Iolo’s every word, with scholars taking almost a century to realize he had fabricated much of his work – possibly during periods when his addiction for laudanum was at its worst. Owing to Iolo’s influence, numerous druidic ‘lodges’ opened with remarkable frequency, along with bardic circles and poetry societies who pledged to preserve and enhance Wales’s literary history. Such organizations served the important purpose of inspiring the Welsh people at a time when they most needed it.

Following a series of social protests in south Wales, with the Newport rising, Merthyr riots, and Rebecca riots as prime examples, the British government became concerned over the education system in Wales and a public inquiry took place in 1847. It led to the Reports of the Commissioners, compiled in three large blue-covered volumes, which became known as *Brad y Llyfrau Gleision* or ‘Treachery of the Blue Books’. These reports claimed that the Welsh were ignorant, lazy, and immoral due to their use of the Welsh language and Nonconformity. A furious reaction ensued.

Price was part of a growing Welsh consciousness that wanted to change public perceptions and promote Wales and its attributes. He was joined by Lady Charlotte Guest (1812–1895), an ironmaster’s wife who painstakingly translated the Welsh legends, *The Mabinogion*, into English to provide the world with a view of the rich folklore of the principality. Her colleague, Lady Augusta Hall (1802–1896), Baroness Llanover, was equally passionate about Celtic studies, establishing eisteddfod competitions and reinventing the image of the pure Welsh woman in

national costume described in her prize-winning essay at the National Eisteddfod in Cardiff in 1834.

As for Price, he was determined to showcase Wales by establishing a museum of its own, choosing a mountain view above Pontypridd as the location. It was here that an ice-age stone glacier stood. Known locally as Y Maen Chwyf or the Rocking Stone, the new Circle of Bards at Pontypridd gathered for druidic ceremonies and eisteddfod events (with Iolo Morgannwg also appearing on one occasion). It was here that Price, the great orator, began to hold court with a whole range of fellow neo-druids, from clockmakers and publicans to milliners, journalists, and, more famously, one Evan James, who wrote an ode to the doctor prior to penning *Yr Hen Wlad Fy Nhadau*, the Welsh national anthem.

In 1839, Price began a fundraising campaign for £1,000 to build the ten-storey museum on the mountainside, but failed in his endeavours through lack of support. When he learned of Parliament's £40,000 investment in a new stable block at Windsor for Queen Victoria's horses his outspoken beliefs for political change came to the forefront and with continued letter writing, public meetings, and newspaper reports highlighting his radical attitudes, he was soon recognised by the Chartists. These political reformers, devoted to their six points of Parliamentary reform, needed inspiring leaders like Price. Knowing his influence over such a large workforce which could, in theory, see him mobilize an entire army of his own, they appointed Price as leader of Pontypridd and the surrounding valleys. For months he gathered support, apparently using Welsh language lessons as a cover for gun-training. It was also said he owned seven parts of a cannon in preparation for action.

A militant supporter of the cause, he also recognised that lack of planning could result in its downfall. His failure to support Welsh Chartist leader John Frost, whom he distrusted, on his 'march on Newport' to create a republican town, was the right decision given the dreadful failure of the plot and the dramatic consequences that followed. Fearing his influence over the masses, the local magistrates and constabulary searched for Price. Escaping to France for several months until the Chartist investigations were over, an obsessive Price embroiled himself still further in druidic legend. It was during a visit to the Louvre in Paris that his apparently life-changing moment came.

Claiming it was something of an epiphany, he spoke eloquently of the day he viewed a large 2,000-year-old Greek stone in the ancient collection. Covered in hieroglyphics and portraying a figure he claimed was the Primitive Bard Addressing the Moon, Price said only he as a druid could read and understand the words on the stone. Such a claim saw him later write a small book on the subject, entitled *Gwylllys Fy Nhad*, 'The Will of My Father' (1871).¹ In it he prophesied that his first-born son would be a new Messiah, but not of Christianity. Instead, the second coming was a child of druidism that would sweep modern religion from the British Isles and re-establish its pagan ancestry. Price went so far as to copy the design

1 The title of the book as published was *Gwyllllis yn Nayd*, a deliberate corruption of the well-known religious phrase and hymn title. For further details, see Dean Powell, *Dr William Price: Wales's First Radical* (Stroud: Amberley Publishing, 2012).

of the figure on the Greek stone, commissioning a copy of the costume which he often wore when lecturing on the history of the ancient Britons. On his return to Wales from France in 1840 he continued to support the Chartist movement, recognising how some of his 'workforce' were being boycotted by shopkeepers for their political activism. It led him to establish the Pont-y-ty-pridd Provision Company, the first co-operative society in Wales, which continued for several years until becoming defunct, probably due to Price's generosity in offering too much credit.

By this time he had become much more flamboyant in his dress, growing his black hair below his shoulders as he thought an ancient druid might have done. Wonderful outfits were tailor-made, the bronze buttons depicting portrayals of the goats that he kept on his farm. His crown was the body of a fox, its legs dangling over his shoulders, an emblem, he believed, of a healer in pre-Christian Britain. Few realise that although he was remarkably colourful and larger-than-life, he was in fact just five feet and five inches tall.

Price, the rebellious maverick, was a great philanthropist, supporting fundraising efforts for the elderly and sick and for orphans. He helped raise donations for the building of the Victorian bridge over the river Taff in Pontypridd, a growing market town where he also promoted and financed a professional theatre company to perform Shakespeare's *Othello* to the masses. His determination to open a museum to showcase Welsh history, literature, and culture continued for almost twenty years. Eventually, he succeeded in commissioning the building of two gate-houses, now listed buildings and known as the Round Houses of Glyntaff. Although the land, part of Baroness Llanover's estate, was rented by him, it was a disagreement with her husband, the formidable Benjamin Hall MP (Minster of Works responsible for building the clock tower at the Houses of Parliament and arguably the reason why its bells are called 'Big Ben'), who wished to build a tramroad on the land to access a proposed new colliery at Bryntail, that Price's project failed once and for all.

Price's aspirations to father a son did not dwindle with the passing of time. In fact he fathered three daughters by three different women in just a few years. The surviving daughter by his housekeeper Ann Morgan (1817–1873) was named, incredibly, Gwenhiolen Hiarhles Morganwg (Gwenllian, the Countess of Glamorgan) Price (1841–1928). She accompanied her father to frequent court hearings over the coming years as Price developed a new obsession for litigation. This allowed Price, the blatant showman, to find an arena where he could express his rage against the establishment, often causing absolutely chaos in the court by refusing to swear oaths on bibles that allegedly contained inaccurate maps of Judea within, or turning to his infant daughter and naming her 'my learned counsel'. However, Price always defended himself brilliantly and, with his extensive knowledge of the legal profession, became an awkward litigant. He often won in the court room, some of the cases ranging from small-debt and estates claims to charges of perjury and even manslaughter.

His energy, despite advancing years, is truly breathtaking and quite literally there was never a quiet moment. However, a change came in 1871 when he decided to leave Treforest, the Tinplate Works, Chainworks, and his surgery for a new life

in the medieval hilltop town of Llantrisant. Although in decline, the town was still recognised for its rich heritage, in particular the fact that it was once a sophisticated early British community as far back as the sixth century and therefore, in Price's eyes, a genuine druidic settlement. It was in this remarkable little town with its dwindling market, unclean streets, and quarrelsome families that he opened a new surgery at his home of Ty'r Clettwr and on his eighty-third birthday took the hand of a new love and performed a pagan marriage ceremony at the Rocking Stone in Pontypridd.

His partner, the niece of a patient in Llanharan, was Gwenllian Llewellyn (1859–1948). The daughter of a farmer from Cilfynydd, and almost sixty years his junior, Gwenllian was able to realize all his hopes and dreams for a new druidic Messiah with the birth of their son on 8 August 1883. Believing the child deserved a name that the world would recognise and worship, he named his son Iesu Grist (Jesus Christ) Price. Sadly, less than five months after his birth, the baby suffered a convulsion and died in his father's arms on 10 January 1884. What followed was the well-documented event of an open-air cremation on East Caerlan, the dominating hill overlooking Llantrisant's quaint, unplanned town. On a Sunday evening William Price met Gwenllian at the Cross Keys public house. She passed the baby's corpse to him wrapped in flannels and with his paraffin cask climbed the hilltop, which he owned, and began a pagan ritual of his own.

The question is, why did he do it? Was it because of druidism? After all, evidence from Salisbury Plains seemed to confirm that the druids had cremated their dead and, as a community that worshipped the sun, moon, and nature, they may have believed that burial was a pollution of their beloved earth. This may well have been Price's reasoning. However, he was also well aware of the aspirations of the Cremation Society of Great Britain, formed a decade earlier by Sir Henry Thompson (1820–1904) who argued it was necessary to grant cremations as overcrowded cemeteries could potentially cause widespread diseases. Cremation would also prevent premature burial and reduce the expense of funerals. One of the founder members of his Society was none other than Rosemary Crawshay, a relative of the same Francis with whom Price had socialized many times at Cyfarthfa and had quite possibly discussed the topic.

As Price, dressed in white, held his ceremony that cold, wintry evening, he was aware that congregations of the town's chapels and churches were leaving evening service and would have seen the flames dancing on the hilltop. Some three hundred people reached the summit and when a local constable kicked the cask, revealing the baby's corpse rolling onto the ground aflame, the mob flew into a fury. One can only imagine the impact the event had on these God-fearing simple townfolk. The landmark court case that followed under the expert hand of Justice James Fitzjames Stephen (1829–1894) drew hundreds to the Glamorganshire Assizes in Cardiff. Somewhat enamoured with Price the radical, Stephen had spent time in India and witnessed a traditional Hindu open air cremation, whilst also sympathizing with the plight of the Cremation Society in Britain.

Price, in his wonderful outfits, defended himself throughout the two-day trial as he faced the charges of cremating a baby before an inquest could be held into its death and causing a public nuisance by holding an open air cremation. The trial

provided the weighty support the Cremation Society needed to see their Act finally become law. Price's words ring with sincerity as he proclaimed to the court room: 'It is not right that a carcass should be allowed to rot and decompose in this way. It results in a wastage of good land, pollution of the earth, water and air, and is a constant danger to all living things.'

On being found not guilty, Price demanded the return of his son's body. Initially the response of the Llantrisant townspeople to the verdict was unfavourable. One evening, they heard Price chopping food for his cattle, and, believing he was destroying the corpse, they attempted to break into his stable. Price, still agile despite his age, escaped to his home only to find the windows smashed and his now pregnant wife Gwenllian holding back the crowd with a pack of Irish wolfhounds and a pistol in each hand. Determined to the last, Price eventually cremated his child at East Caerlan in March 1884. The police constables watched from the ruins of the old Norman castle, once the prison for Edward II. The once-angry mob paid their respects in a peaceful manner and to commemorate the event Price had 3,000 bronze oval coins minted, which he sold at 3d each.

The press coverage of Price's court case was widespread and one avid reader of the case wrote a serial for a Saturday journal which he entitled 'The Bloodstone Tragedy'. It was none other than Arthur Conan Doyle, written a year before 'A Study in Scarlet' welcomed a famous detective to the world of literature. This was not the only time Price was celebrated on paper. Through his friendship with the notorious Dr Richard Anderson of Carmarthen, forever dressed in Wild West costume and known as 'Evans y Crogwr', for he had once been a hangman, Price visited his home of Fernhill. It was the same farm immortalized in words by Dylan Thomas who, on realizing Price had also visited the family home, wrote a dark and macabre short story entitled 'The Baby Burning Case' which was later published.

As for Price and Gwenllian, they had two further children. The first was born a few months after the court hearing and named Iesu Grist II (1884–1963). He was followed two years later by Penelopen Elizabeth (1886–1977). On a winter's morning in January 1893, Price stood alongside those two children at the doorway of his Llantrisant home and said: 'I will lay on my couch and I shall not rise again.' On 23 January, Gwenllian, kneeling at his side, suggested he drank some cider. Price whispered: 'No, give me champagne.' Enjoying his favourite drink he laid back and, looking into the eyes of his young wife, gently passed away.

Price had left strict plans in place for his own cremation and it was Gwenllian who fought the establishment to ensure it went ahead as he had wished. After securing the support of the local constabulary, magistrate, and even the Bishop of Llandaff (who, while demanding a Christian service, agreed to change the order to include the phrase, 'I commit this body to fire', for the very first time), Gwenllian oversaw the plans for Dr Price's own cremation which took place on 31 January 1893. Nine tonnes of coal were delivered to the spot on the summit of East Caerlan where two walls and an iron grid had been built to hold the coffin, which was specially made at a blacksmith's shop in nearby Brynsadler. With everything in place, Gwenllian followed the doctor's instructions and issued tickets for the event. In total, 20,000 people ventured to Llantrisant, arriving from 4.00am. By noon, every one of the twenty-seven pubs in the town had run dry of ale as a carnival

atmosphere prevailed. Price's body was carried from his home, followed by his family members all dressed in Welsh costume.

Dr William Price had hoped that Llantrisant would be the location of the first fully-functional crematorium in Wales. Although that was not to be, it was fitting that Glyntaff was chosen as the location in 1924 as it was in the proximity of his former surgery, the Roundhouses, and the Rocking Stone. The Price family remained in Llantrisant for the next eighty years. Gwenllian re-married in 1896, to a local publican named John Parry, and together they had a daughter, Rachel (1899–1985). On selling Dr Price's property, including Ty'r Clettwr which was demolished and replaced by a Nonconformist chapel, the Parrys built a house on East Caerlan hill where they opened a farm. The marriage failed, and Gwenllian died in 1948 aged eighty-nine. Gwenhiolen Hiarlhes Morgannwg, who lived for many years with Thomas Williams, a railway engineer whom she married at seventy-one, lived her final years at the house with her younger siblings before she died in 1928. Iesu Grist II was renamed Nicholas, in honour of his ironmaster ancestor. A weight-lifter and bare-knuckle boxer, he died at East Caerlan in 1963 aged seventy-eight.

Penelopen Elizabeth remained faithful to the memory of her father, unveiling a stained glass window to him in Glyntaff Crematorium and attending the opening of Thornhill Crematorium in Cardiff. She also worked with the Cremation Society of Great Britain and attended several events during her lifetime, including unveiling a bronze plaque to her father at Zoar Chapel, on the site of Ty'r Clettwr, on 17 September 1947. The plaque was refurbished and re-dedicated in September 2011 before members of the Society at Llantrisant. Penelopen died in 1977 aged ninety-one. None of Dr Price's known children had children of their own. Rachel Parry, half-sister to the older children, died in 1985 and although many of Dr Price's outfits and personal items were donated to the Museum of Welsh Life in St Fagans (an organization he would have been proud of), the remainder were auctioned, along with the house at East Caerlan, and the proceeds donated to the British Red Cross.

Today, more than 200 years since his birth, Dr William Price deserves to be remembered in Welsh and British history as one of the most remarkable individuals ever to have lived.