

THE HISTORY AND FUTURE OF *THE DICTIONARY OF WELSH BIOGRAPHY*

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Abstract

First published in the 1950s, the *Dictionary of Welsh Biography* has now moved from print to digital open access, hosted by the National Library of Wales. Professor Dafydd Johnston, Director of the Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies at the University of Wales, is the current editor of the DWB and explains the history of the Dictionary, its importance for national identity, and the current programme of revisions and additions. He gives examples of how the diversity of entries is increasing so that many previously neglected figures, especially women, are now taking their rightful place in the Dictionary.

The Dictionary of Welsh Biography is arguably the Cymmrodorion Society's single most significant contribution to Welsh culture, and the Society's support over the last eighty years has been vital to its continuity. I am therefore very glad of this opportunity to look back over the history of the enterprise, to take stock of the current situation, and to talk about our plans for further development in collaboration with the National Library of Wales.

The history of biographical writing in Wales goes back a long way, especially if one includes the medieval lives of saints such as David, Beuno, and Gwenfrewy, and it has always been an important element in the formation of a sense of national identity. The first secular subject of a biography was Gruffudd ap Cynan (d. 1137), the first king of Gwynedd to make a stand against the Norman invaders, and it is interesting that his life is preserved in both the original Latin and its Middle Welsh translation.¹ Other turning points in the history of the Welsh people have also been marked by biographies, such as the life of Sir Rhys ap Thomas who played a vital role in the Tudor settlement which led to the union of Wales with England.² The adoption of Owain Glyndŵr as a national hero in the nineteenth century can be traced back to Thomas Pennant's account of his life which forms an extended excursion in his 1778 *Tour in Wales*.

The earliest collection of biographies of Welsh people was William Owen Pughe's *Cambrian Biography* of 1803, but despite its title this is more of an

- 1 For the Latin original see Paul Russell, *Vita Griffini Filii Conani* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2005), and for the Welsh see D. Simon Evans, ed., *Historia Gruffud vab Kenan* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1977) and *idem* (trans.), *A Medieval Prince of Wales: The Life of Gruffudd ap Cynan* (Felinfach: Llanerch Enterprises, 1990).
- 2 Ralph A. Griffiths, *Sir Rhys ap Thomas and his Family: A Study in the Wars of the Roses and Early Tudor Politics* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2014).

encyclopedia and contains many fictional and mythical characters. The first volume which we would recognize as an attempt at objective life writing is *The Cambrian Plutarch* (1824) by John H. Parry, like Pughe a London Welshman and member of the Gwyneddigion Society. As its title suggests, the emphasis is on lives worthy to be emulated, and that approach continued in numerous nineteenth-century collections such as Robert Williams's *Enwogion Cymru: A Biographical Dictionary of Eminent Welshmen from Earliest Times to the Present* (1852), a work originally supported by the Cymmrodorion Society.³ Around the turn of the twentieth century the National Eisteddfod promoted biographical collections through its competitions. But it was not until the 1930s that plans began for a comprehensive and authoritative biographical dictionary for Wales.

It was another London Welshman, W. Jenkyn Thomas, a schoolteacher from Merionethshire, who started the ball rolling with an appeal broadcast on West Regional Radio on 29 May 1936:

I want to see published a Dictionary of Welsh Biography which will do for Wales what that magnificent English publication, unequalled even in Germany, the Dictionary of National Biography, the D.N.B. as it is usually called, has done for the British Isles as a whole.⁴

It is evident from this that biography was very much a matter of patriotic pride, and in the competition between nations the standard had been set by the DNB, published by the Oxford University Press between 1885 and 1900. Jenkyn Thomas argued that Wales had not been given adequate representation in the DNB compared to England, Scotland, and Ireland, and for that reason needed to establish its own biographical dictionary.

It is interesting to note that the people of Scotland seem to have been satisfied with their representation in the DNB (which is very extensive it must be said), since there is to this day no full Dictionary of Scottish Biography – which I find surprising given the strength of Scottish national identity in other ways. And even though Ireland had been an independent state since 1922 it was not until 2009 that the *Dictionary of Irish Biography* was published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Royal Irish Academy. I think it would be fair to say that the dominant presence of the DNB did put a brake on national biographical enterprises in the other countries of the British Isles. And it should therefore be a matter of pride for us that the Dictionary of Welsh Biography began as early as it did.

So, returning to Jenkyn Thomas's appeal, he concludes by laying down a challenge:

3 Williams's first collection, *Coviant Byr, am rai o'r dynion enwocav a aned yn Nghymru er amser y diwygiad*, was published by the Cymmrodorion Society in London in 1833. On biographical writing in the nineteenth century see Brynley F. Roberts, 'Dechreuadau'r *Bywgraffiadur Cymreig*', *Y Traethodydd* (Hydref 2012), 246–58.

4 The text of Thomas's talk is printed as an appendix to Roberts's article in *Y Traethodydd* (n. 3 above).

Here is a glorious opportunity for the leaders of Welsh national life to get together with a view to providing the necessary finance, organising the work, and thereby rendering an inestimable service to their nation. What individual or society will take the initiative?

As you know, the Cymmrodorion took up that challenge, and in 1937 the Society began drawing up plans for a biographical dictionary and for the necessary fund-raising. The project was announced at a meeting of the Society at the National Eisteddfod in Cardiff on 1 August 1938 by the great historian John Edward Lloyd.⁵ J. E. Lloyd was the natural choice as editor, and he was assisted by another Bangor historian, R. T. Jenkins. So the University of Wales contributed to the venture not at an institutional level but through the professional historians which it had produced.

The third partner in the project was the National Library of Wales, which gave vital support once work began in earnest towards the end of the Second World War, from late 1943 onwards, and the partnership was formalized when the National Librarian, Sir William Llewelyn Davies, was appointed Associate Editor following the death of J. E. Lloyd in 1947. Thus began the Library's close association with DWB which continues to this day.

Publication began in 1953 with the Welsh-language volume, *Y Bywgraffiadur Cymreig Hyd 1940* (the handy term *bywgraffiadur* for a biographical dictionary having been coined by T. H. Parry-Williams), and the corresponding English-language volume in 1959, *The Dictionary of Welsh Biography down to 1940*. Further volumes were published to cover people who died in the following three decades up to 1970, the most recent appearing in 2001.

The issue of language was addressed by J. E. Lloyd on the occasion of the launch of the project in 1938, and it is interesting to note his arguments for giving priority to English in publication:

There is, first and foremost, the question of language. Are we to issue the Dictionary in English or in Welsh? There are precedents for either course, as you will have already realized. But to my mind the argument in favour of an English work is decisive. In this matter, I draw a clear distinction between work on Welsh literature and that in Welsh history. Any one who wishes to read a volume dealing with, let us say, Dafydd ap Gwilym or Aneirin or Ellis Wynne may be presumed to know the language, and serious scholarship may very properly decline to cater for the requirements of the dilettante who wants to study an author whose work he cannot read in the original. But the history of the country is on a different footing. The fact that the work is issued in English does not preclude its issue in Welsh, for the research work will have been done.

5 The speech which Lloyd delivered on that occasion, 'A Dictionary of Welsh Biography', was printed in *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion* (1938), 67–75.

Having always assumed that bilingual publication was a key principle from the start, and one of the main reasons for producing a separate biographical dictionary for Wales, I was surprised to see that for Lloyd publication in Welsh was not a priority at all. His attitude, of course, reflects his own practice as a historian, publishing primarily in English as the language of international scholarship. Nevertheless, precedence was in fact given to the Welsh versions of all the volumes, although that was not necessarily advantageous since the later English versions contain updates and corrections.

The English volume covering the period 1941–1970, published in 2001, was the last to appear in print. The contents of all the print volumes were then digitized by the National Library and made freely available on a bilingual website in 2007.⁶ The decision was taken at that time to publish new material online only. The change from print to digital happened during the editorship of Dr Brynley Roberts, who served for 26 years from 1987 to 2013, long after his retirement as National Librarian. I am glad of this opportunity to pay tribute to Brynley's enormous contribution to the DWB project.

When Brynley decided to retire from the editorship in 2013, I was invited by the Cymmrodorion Society to take over as Joint Editor with the National Librarian, Dr Aled Gruffydd Jones, the project to be a partnership between our two institutions, with the National Library taking responsibility for maintaining the website and the staff of the Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies (CAWCS) for its content. My colleague Dr Marion Löffler acts as Assistant Editor. An Advisory Board was established with a wide range of expertise, including two representatives of the Cymmrodorion Society, Gruffydd Aled Williams and Arwyn Lloyd Hughes.

The major task facing us is that of filling the many gaps which had arisen since publication of the last print volume, i.e. amongst people who have died since 1970. I have a list of gaps between 1970 and 2010 running to over 800 names. To fill those we need to mount a fund-raising campaign to enable us to devote more staff time to the project, both at CAWCS and at the Library. At least two full-time staff are needed, one in each institution, to deal with the work of commissioning and editing, and also encoding and uploading of new articles to the website.

I should remind you that, because DWB is freely available online (unlike the Oxford DNB and the *Dictionary of Irish Biography* which both charge for access), we have no regular source of income. But open access is certainly the way things are going, and we should not turn away from that. It is a key principle for the National Library of Wales, and it is what public and charitable funders expect.

Unfortunately, as I am sure you are all aware, the National Library has had its problems over the last few years, which led to Aled Jones's resignation in August 2015. I am currently sole editor, but I am glad to say that the present National Librarian, Linda Tomos, is extremely supportive of the partnership and sees DWB as one of the Library's priorities. Work has already begun on enhancement of the website to meet user expectations, and I will say more about some of those improvements in due course.

In the meantime we continue to make slow but steady progress, publishing

6 <<http://yba.llgc.org.uk>> [accessed 1 June 2017].

about one new article per week on the website, all available in both Welsh and English, publication in both languages simultaneously being a key principle. There is no shortage of material coming in, and we have managed to fill some of the more obvious gaps amongst people who have died since 1970, such as Saunders Lewis, Kate Roberts, and Kyffin Williams.

I must say that I have been very heartened by people's willingness to contribute to DWB on a voluntary basis. Unlike the DNB, we are not able to pay a fee for articles, but that has not been a problem and contributors do seem to support DWB because of its importance as a national scholarly resource. And they are often keen to ensure proper representation of their own area of interest, such as Welsh sports-people, or musicians, or ministers, or scientists and so on. I myself feel that Wales is very fortunate to have its own biographical dictionary, in both its national languages, and that this is something which is really worth maintaining and developing.

That is not to say that DWB is perfect or even satisfactory as it stands – far from it. The Oxford DNB was recently (2014) thoroughly revised to make it fit for the twenty-first century, in terms of factual accuracy and incorporation of new knowledge, but equally importantly in terms of social attitudes, especially relating to the coverage of women. Balance is a key principle in any biographical dictionary, both balance between the various fields of endeavour and, crucially, gender-balance. I am ashamed to say that the proportion of women in the first volume of DWB was less than 5% – although I would add that the old DNB was not much better, and even in the revised DNB only about 11% of the subjects are women. Apparently the Dictionary of New Zealand Biography has the highest proportion of women at 22%, with the American National Biography at 18%.⁷

One legitimate reason for this imbalance is that before the middle of the twentieth century there were far fewer opportunities for women to make their mark in the public sphere in ways which would justify inclusion in a dictionary of national biography. As our society has changed in recent decades and women are playing a greater role in public life, so too will biographical dictionaries gradually come to present a more balanced coverage. But that is not the whole story, and feminist historians have done important work recently in drawing attention to neglected women who made pioneering contributions in a wide range of fields throughout history.

A striking example of one such who certainly should have had her own entry in the first volume of DWB is the industrialist and novelist from Swansea, Amy Dillwyn (1845–1935). The only reference to her in that volume is as one of the two unnamed daughters noted in the article on Lewis Dillwyn, which neglects to mention that his zinc works was close to bankruptcy when he died in 1892 and that Amy turned it into a profitable business which she eventually sold to the German firm Siemens, and on top of that published half a dozen novels promoting women's

7 Figures quoted by Susan Ware in her lecture, 'Why Gender Matters: Fostering Diversity in the American National Biography', at the *True Biographies of Nations?* conference held by the Australian National University, Canberra in 2016; for podcast see <<http://ncb.anu.edu.au/biographies-of-nations>> [accessed 1 June 2017].

rights. One can only wonder what a woman had to do to earn her place in DWB at that time. Anyway, I am glad to say that we are expecting an article on the life and work of Amy Dillwyn very soon.

Gender-balance is not just a matter of inclusion of more articles on women, but also of acknowledging women's roles in men's lives. And again this does come down very often to naming or the lack of it. For example, Edward Williams, better known as Iolo Morganwg, romantic poet and inventor of the druidical pageantry of the Eisteddfod, was much indebted to his aristocratic mother Ann for his early education and to his long-suffering wife Peggy for maintaining his family in Glamorgan while he spent time pursuing his literary ambitions in London, and yet neither is named in the DWB article on him by that great scholar Griffith John Williams. They are mentioned as mother and wife, but not named, and he is said to be simply 'son of Edward Williams'. We are told that 'his mother was an able woman', but not who she was, and that 'he married in 1781', but not who his wife was. That sort of thing just won't do any more. And the lack of a name in the text means that Iolo's mother and wife do not feature in any index or online search.

My colleague Marion Löffler has focused on increasing the representation of women in the DWB, and she has recently enlisted the help of members of the Welsh Women's Archive, a group which promotes the history of Welsh women, and we are beginning to see improvements. For example, to coincide with the National Eisteddfod at Abergavenny in 2016, we published an article by Marion herself on Lady Augusta Hall of Llanover, who previously only appeared in DWB under her husband Benjamin Hall, of 'Big Ben' fame, although she is arguably better known than him in Wales and certainly merited an entry in her own right highlighting her contribution to the development of the Eisteddfod and the national costume.

New articles about women added recently include the journalist Jennie Eirian Davies, the actress Rachel Thomas, famous for playing the role of the 'Welsh Mam' in films such as *The Proud Valley* (1939), the harpist Nansi Richards who died at the age of 91 in 1979 (the recent play about her life by Angharad Price was a spur to fill that gap), and Val Feld who died in 2001, the first ever member of the National Assembly for Wales to die in office. None of those four features in the DNB, and this indicates an important role for DWB in recording lives of people who were important in the Welsh context more than the British or international one (although Rachel Thomas and Nansi Richards both had successful international careers).

Another valuable contribution which DWB can make is in reminding us of the Welsh origins of people whose connections with the country may not be immediately obvious, such as the singer Dorothy Squires, who was born in Pontyberem in 1915 and brought up in Dafen near Llanelli. And although birth in Wales is one of the criteria which ensure eligibility for inclusion in DWB, it is not an essential one. Anyone who made a significant contribution to life in Wales is eligible for inclusion no matter what their background, a prime example being the German Egyptologist and Welsh-language novelist Kate Bosse-Griffiths, who recently took her place in DWB alongside, but quite rightly independent of, her husband J. Gwyn Griffiths.

Other articles which are the product of our push to improve the coverage of

women include those on Menna Gallie, the novelist from Ystradgynlais, and on the folk-singer Dora Herbert Jones, who was allegedly the first woman to work in the House of Commons, as secretary to the MP John Herbert Lewis, and later served as secretary of the Gregynog Press in the 1930s.

Revision of existing articles can be just as important as the addition of new ones, as is evident in the revised version of the entry on Frances Hoggan (born Frances Morgan in Brecon), the first Welsh woman to qualify as a medical doctor, which she did at the University of Zurich in 1870. The Learned Society of Wales recently established the Frances Hoggan Medal to be awarded to women who make an outstanding contribution in the sciences, so it is timely that we should publish a fuller account of her life and work than the brief entry in the original DWB (which says almost as much about her father as it does about her).

As I said earlier, we do not have the resources at the moment to undertake a thorough-going revision of all the original articles, but we are revising selected articles on an ad hoc basis where there is substantial room for improvement and interest in the subject. So, for instance, I have commissioned a new article on Owain Glyndŵr by Gruffydd Aled Williams, and Ffion Hague (another member of our Advisory Board) has agreed to write a new entry on David Lloyd George giving appropriate attention to his extra-marital affairs (of which the reader of the Welsh-language article, in particular, would have no idea).

New publications sometimes offer an opportunity to commission a revised article, such as the recent book on the pioneering mathematician from Tenby, Robert Recorde, the first in the new 'Scientists of Wales' series published by the University of Wales Press. The author, Gordon Roberts, willingly contributed an excellent account which has just been added to the DWB website.

And neglected Welsh people just keep coming to light, such as Gareth Hughes (1894–1965), an actor from Llanelli who achieved fame in the silent movies in Hollywood, and after his career came to an end during the Depression he became a missionary with the Paiute tribe of Native Americans in Nevada. His remarkable life story can now be read in DWB.

We are keen to fill gaps in the field of sport, and I am glad to say that we now have an article on the boxer Johnny Owen, the 'matchstick man' from Merthyr Tydfil. The new article on the multi-talented Wilf Wooller is one of several which make Glamorgan cricketers one of the best-represented groups in DWB, perhaps second only to Methodist ministers.

Local knowledge can make all the difference in showing the continuing importance of sporting heroes, for instance the pre-match ritual amongst Swansea City supporters of tapping the boot of the Ivor Allchurch statue outside the Liberty Stadium, referred to by Richard Huws in his recent article on Allchurch.

Revision is also a matter of correcting errors, mostly minor points of detail, but occasionally some surprising confusions. It only recently came to my attention that the first volume of DWB contains two separate articles, by different authors, on the same man, under the variant names Ifan Tomos Rhys and Evan Thomas, an eighteenth-century poet from Ceredigion. Fortunately the two articles do not actually contradict one another. But then the original DNB had two separate articles on the Glamorganshire poet Llywelyn Siôn, one listed under Siôn and the other

under Llywelyn. In a way it is heartening to know that even professional historians can be confused by Welsh naming practices!

I will finish by saying a little more about the ongoing enhancement of the website by National Library staff. Articles are now more clearly set out and easier to read, as you will have already noticed I hope. They include date of first publication, and corrections noted in later volumes are gradually being incorporated into the body of the relevant article. And the most exciting development is the addition of images through NLW's viewer platform.

Over one hundred articles now have images of their subjects attached from the Library's collections, and although this is a small proportion of the total of around 5,000 articles in DWB, it does show the potential for further development. These are not all just individual images; some show multiple views of the same subject. The photographer Julian Sheppard was commissioned by the Welsh Arts Council in 1967 to photograph a number of Welsh authors, and he took a series of pictures capturing them in informal poses in their own homes. The DWB articles on T. H. Parry-Williams, his wife Lady Amy Parry-Williams, Kate Roberts, Cynan, and Gwenallt all have some thirty photographs of each which are a most revealing addition to the text of the article. Another outstanding photographer whose archive is held by NLW is Geoff Charles. One of Geoff's most famous pictures is that of Richard Griffiths, better known as Carneddog, and his wife Catrin on the day they were due to leave their home in the Carneddi hills after a lifetime spent farming there, to live out their days with their son in Hinckley. This iconic image has come to represent the passing of a way of life, and I am glad to say that it is attached to the DWB article on Richard Griffiths. And we now have an article on Geoff Charles himself by NLW's expert on photographic collections, William Troughton, illustrated by self-portraits.

There is of course huge potential in NLW's portrait collection, as shown by the marvellously evocative painting of the philosopher Richard Price. And images are not confined just to portraits of the subjects of articles, but can take in digitized items from the Library's collections which are examples of their work, such as Peniarth 109, a manuscript in the hand of the fifteenth-century Carmarthenshire poet Lewys Glyn Cothi, and an almanac published by Thomas Jones in 1683. These examples all show the advantages of being able to draw on such an extensive and varied repository, and the Library's volunteer scheme has now taken on the task of identifying images which relate to DWB articles.

I hope I have said enough to show you that the Dictionary of Welsh Biography is in good hands, and is developing constantly. We will need the support of the Cymmrodorion Society as much as ever in order to deal with the considerable challenge facing us in the future, not least that of fund-raising. And any offers of articles will always be gladly considered!