

THE MILLS FAMILY OF LLANIDLOES: AN EXTRAORDINARY MUSICAL LEGACY

Richard Meredith

Abstract

The article presents a family history of the Mills family of Llanidloes in mid-Wales during the nineteenth century. Born into a class of artisans, skilled workers, and later ministers, the family were distinguished by their musical talents which saw them become leading figures in the religious and social life of their community and beyond. Famous mainly as hymn-writers, their work continues to be performed today, especially that of Richard Mills (d. 1844) whose hymn collection, *Caniadau Seion*, 'Songs of Zion', made a lasting contribution to congregational singing in Wales and America.

On the evening of Thursday 3 February 1944, a celebration took place in China Street Chapel, Llanidloes to mark the centenary of the deaths of James Mills and Richard Mills (although, as I later discovered, James had actually died of typhus in 1841). It was attended by a large gathering which included several grandchildren of Richard Mills, who had travelled from various corners of the country despite restrictions imposed on movement during the Second World War. A detailed report in the County Times lists the hymns and anthems sung at the celebration, composed mainly by Richard Mills, as well as the salient points of a tribute to the brothers, outlining their contribution to the musical, religious, and cultural life of Wales.

As a young lad of seven I was too young to attend the celebration but clearly remember it as an occasion of great importance in the town. At that point, however, I had no knowledge or appreciation of who the 'Millsiad' were or why they were held in such high esteem. It was only much later, when I had left Llanidloes and started to explore my family history, that I came to realize just why they were so revered. I also uncovered my distant connection to the family through my great-grandmother, Annie Mills, the great-niece of James and Richard. My aim in this talk is to share with you what I have found out about the extent of their influence during their lifetime and its significance for the present day.

So who were the Millses? They were probably brought into mid-Wales in 1571 by Dudley, Earl of Leicester, who wanted experienced hill farmers from beyond the Welsh borders to farm his lands. Wills of the period indicate that they were capable, independent stock farmers of the yeoman class in an area covering a radius of some 15–20 miles of Llandinam, a village five miles from Llanidloes.

In Llanidloes, they settled about a mile outside the town in the direction of Y Fan – incidentally, just a couple of fields away from the home of my Meredith ancestors, who I gather became close friends of the Mills family. For the purposes of this talk, I shall focus on the three generations of the family who spanned the

LLANIDLOES UNITED GUILDS.

THE CELEBRATION
OF THE
CENTENARY
OF
JAMES MILLS & RICHARD MILLS,
And an appreciation of the work of
Y MILLSIAID,
WILL TAKE PLACE AT
CHINA STREET CHAPEL, LLANIDLOES
ON
Thursday, February 3, 1944.

Chairman ... HIS WORSHIP THE MAYOR
(Ald. Geo. F. Hamer, J.P., C.C.)

THE FESTIVAL TO COMMENCE AT 7 P.M.

**Hymns and Anthems will be sung by a United Choir, drawn
from all the Churches in the District.**

CONDUCTOR ... MR. DAVID MEREDITH.
ORGANIST ... MR. R. O. MEREDITH.
SPEAKER ... MR. IVOR REES.

J. Ellis, Printer, &c., Llanidloes.

[Fig. 1] 1944 festival programme marking the centenary of the deaths of James and Richard Mills (d. 1844)

nineteenth century. They were a remarkable family who made great contributions not only to the musical life of Wales but to its wider cultural life. On the face of it, they were of very ordinary stock, earning their living as flannel weavers. They were not professionally trained musicians but developed a deep passion for music.

Henry Mills (1757–1820)

Henry Mills, the ‘Father’ of the Mills family, was born at Tanyrallt Farm. While still young, he showed considerable musical talent and taught himself to play various musical instruments. This was considered by the zealots of those days as a frivolous accomplishment of very doubtful merit. He possessed a remarkable voice, powerful, rich, and melodious. This attracted the attention of the Rev. Thomas Charles of Bala at a service in Llanidloes, and it was through his influence that Henry Mills became precentor of the Calvinistic Methodist Church in Bethel Street, Llanidloes. Mr. Mills persevered with his task with such tact, energy, and devotion, that he soon became a musical force, not only at Llanidloes, but throughout Wales. His services were requisitioned far and near to teach music and to conduct the singing at various Preaching Festivals. He was much in demand and helped to place Llanidloes as a principal centre of Welsh choral and congregational singing for the next fifty years. Two of Henry’s sons, James and Richard, also became prominent in Welsh musical life.

James Mills (1790–1841)

James Mills was born in 1790 at Melin-y-wern, Y Fan, Llanidloes. He was taught the art of making flannel, a prosperous industry in Llanidloes in those days, and later owned the factory of Maesyllan.

He succeeded his father as precentor at Bethel Chapel. He inherited his father’s abilities to a remarkable degree, and, under his guidance, congregational singing at Llanidloes reached a very high standard of excellence. In 1834 he became leader of the Musical Society of the town, the members of which included such men as his brother Richard, his nephew John Mills, and Thomas Williams (Hafrenydd). James Mills composed several hymn tunes and anthems, though most of them were never published. However, his tune ‘Hosannah’ continues to be popular today and is included in several hymnals.

James’s youngest son, David Henry, inherited his father’s musical skills and made a name for himself as a soloist and conductor in Liverpool, where his name appeared on concert programmes, which turned up years later in Llanidloes after being discovered by his great-granddaughter Miss Grace Mills who had no idea what he/they were about.

Richard Mills (1809–1844) (Rhydderch Hael)

Richard Mills was born in 1809 at Tynewydd, about two miles outside the town, in the direction of Y Fan. He composed several hymn tunes when still a young lad, which were considered worthy of publication, and was in great demand as a teacher of music throughout the length and breadth of the country. Along with his brother James he also inspired other composers such as Ieuan Gwyllt of Capel Bangor.

Richard was instrumental in starting the first Singing Festival for the improvement of congregational singing in Wales. Indeed, his contribution to Welsh congregational singing compares favourably to the one given to Wales by the earlier preacher and composer William Williams (Pantycelyn), whose most famous hymn ‘Arglwydd arwain trw’r anialwch’ is sung all over the world today to the well-known tune ‘Cwm Rhondda’. Richard Mills too realised that Wales lacked suitable music to accompany the poetry of some of his country’s greatest hymns. This impelled him to prepare a massive collection, entitled *Caniadau Seion*, ‘Songs of Zion’, in which he brought together hymns he himself had composed along with music from England and Europe, including works by Mozart, Haydn, and Handel.

In addition to *Caniadau Seion*, which he published in 1840, with a second section being added in 1842, Richard produced a further collection of hymn tunes in *Arweinydd Cerddorol*, a work in three parts published between 1840 and 1845 and prefaced by an introduction on the rudiments of music. It included for the first time in Wales the hymn tune ‘Almaen’ (‘Germany’), now widely known as ‘Mannheim’ (the tune to which the hymn ‘Lead us, heavenly Father, lead us’ is commonly sung), also known as the ‘Passion Chorale’, which Richard Mills attributed to J. S. Bach. Richard died suddenly in 1844 at the early age of 34, having jeopardized his health by overwork and frequent over-demanding travel, before he could finish part III of *Arweinydd Cerddorol*, but this was completed by his nephews, Rev. John Mills and Richard Mills (The Green), the sons of Richard Mills’s elder brother Edward.

It is generally acknowledged that the compiler of *Caniadau Seion* probably did more than any man before his day to guide, elevate, and refine the musical taste of his countrymen. His reputation extended far and wide, even to the shores of America, and after his death his many friends both in Wales and America erected a monument over his grave.

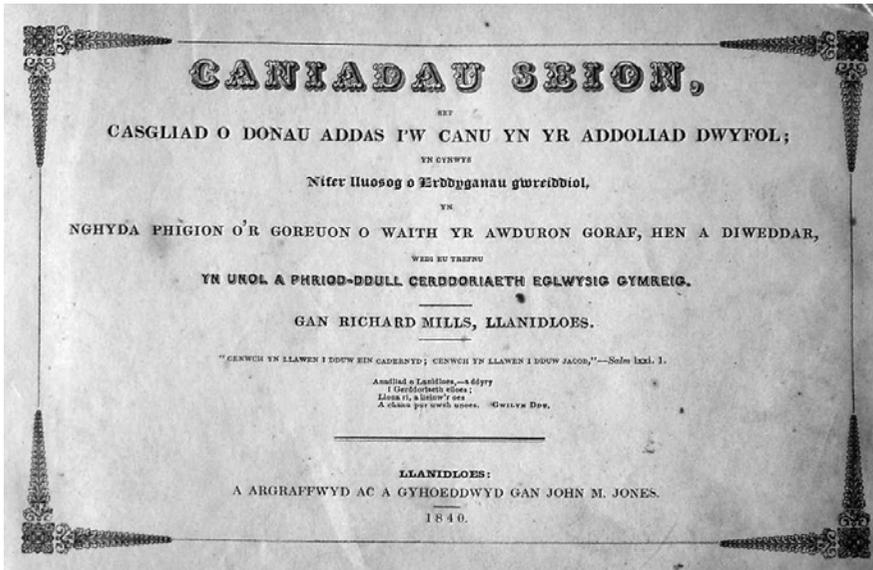
Richard Mills’s elder brother Edward (born 1780) worked as a weaver and small flannel manufacturer. He also developed a local reputation as *llaw-feddyg* (a surgeon or someone who could heal wounds). As well as possessing a splendid singing voice, his enthusiasm for reading led him to play a part in founding the town’s first Literary Society. He left a daughter and four sons who also made names for themselves.

Richard Mills (The Green) (1809–1896)

Richard Mills (The Green) was a publisher living at The Green in Llanidloes. He inherited a love of music from his uncles, James and Richard Mills, and



[Fig. 2] *Bethel Street Chapel, Llanidloes, where James Mills succeeded his father as precentor*



[Fig. 3] *Caniadau Seion, the collection of hymns published by Richard Mills (d. 1844)*

shared with his brothers a delight in literature and natural science; he was in the forefront of local choral societies as well as religious and temperance movements.

Rev. John Mills, F.R.G.S., F.R.A.S. (1812–1873)

John Mills was born in 1812 and went to work in his father's flannel factory at the age of thirteen. He contrived to continue his studies while working at the loom, even creating an apparatus on his loom to hold books while he was working. Entirely self-taught, he made himself thoroughly proficient in Greek, Latin, and Hebrew and was considered an authority on music. Before the age of seventeen he had written several articles on various subjects to Welsh periodicals under the nom de plume 'Ieuan Glan Alarch'.

In 1838 he published his *Gramadeg Cerddoriaeth*. This was the first book in Welsh of any note on the rudiments of music and it circulated widely throughout Wales, as its author travelled extensively, establishing Musical Societies and lecturing on his favourite subjects. In 1838 he is known to have travelled through Tregaron, Llandeilo, Carmarthen, Hirwaun, Merthyr Tydfil, and back to Llanidloes, all within a fortnight. His *Gramadeg Cerddoriaeth* probably did more than any other book to promote the knowledge of music in Wales.

It was also in 1838 that John commenced preaching, and in 1844 he became minister at Ruthin. Two years later he moved to London, to Jewin Crescent Calvinistic Methodist Chapel, to take up the work as Missionary to the Jews. John was eminently suited to this difficult task – his character, his extensive knowledge of everything Jewish, his gentlemanly bearing and sympathetic understanding gained for him admission into the most exclusive Jewish circles, and his efforts did much to break down or diminish Jewish prejudices.

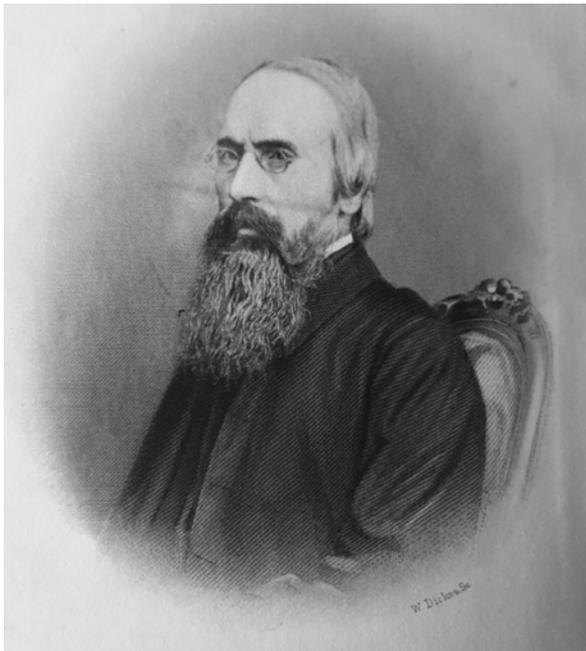
John wrote articles for both monthly and quarterly journals for forty years and was considered by eminent scholars as one of the best biblical scholars of the day. *Cassell's Bible Dictionary* quoted him as one of their authorities. In addition he was highly regarded as an authority on the Jews of Great Britain, having lived among them as well as travelling to their native Palestine. His interest in music, however, remained with him all his life and up to half of his published books were on the subject of music.

Edward Mills (1802–1865)

Edward Mills, elder brother of Richard Mills (The Green) and the Rev. John Mills, was a keen student of various sciences. In 1850 he published his *Darluniadur Anianyddol* ('Science Illustrator'), an octavo volume of 254 pages, with 80 illustrations, which dealt with astronomy, geography, and geology. He even made a model of the solar system, 66 feet in circumference, showing all the movements of the members of the system. It was considered one of the 'wonders of the age' and poets of the day sang his praises. Like most of 'Y Millsiaid', he was in great



[Fig. 4] Grave of Richard Mills (d. 1844), Bethel Street cemetery, Llanidloes



[Fig. 5] Rev. John Mills

demand as a popular lecturer but mainly on scientific subjects. The musical genes reappeared in his children and grandchildren.

Henry Mills (Tafonwy) (1836–1906)

This Henry was the son of Edward Mills the astronomer. He lived in Corwen and then Pontypridd. He became an accomplished musician and violinist and was also a popular and successful conductor. His children too became prominent musicians – J. Mills (leading double bass player in Drury Lane), Mrs Mills Reynolds, a soprano of repute in Glamorganshire, and Edward P. Mills.

Edward P. Mills (Cardiff) (1865–1941)

Edward was born in 1865 in Pontypridd and received tuition in music from the organist of Llandaff Cathedral. He played the *crwth* (a stringed instrument), flute, and piano. At the age of thirteen he was chosen as the organist of Graig Chapel, Pontypridd. When he left for Cardiff in 1899 he received an address and a purse of gold at a public meeting from the people of Pontypridd. He was one of the first in Wales to gain his L.R.A.M. diploma.

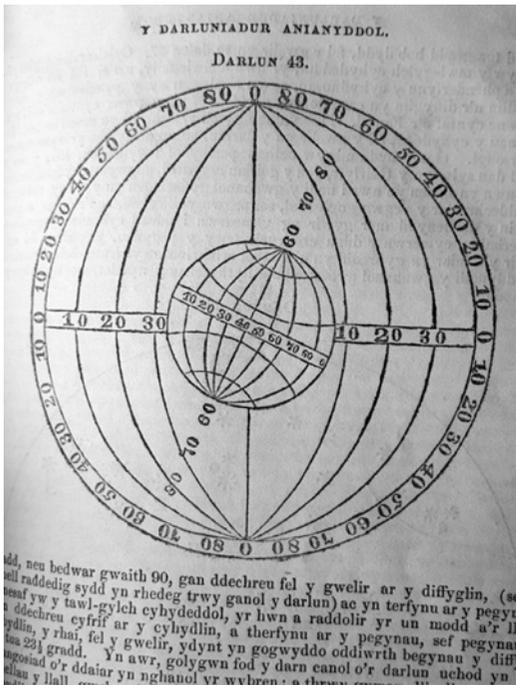
Richard Mills (1841–1903)

This Richard was the son of Richard Mills of *Caniadau Seion* fame and along with his brother John Henry inherited to a very remarkable degree their father's passionate love of music and his ardent desire to serve his generation to the best of his abilities.

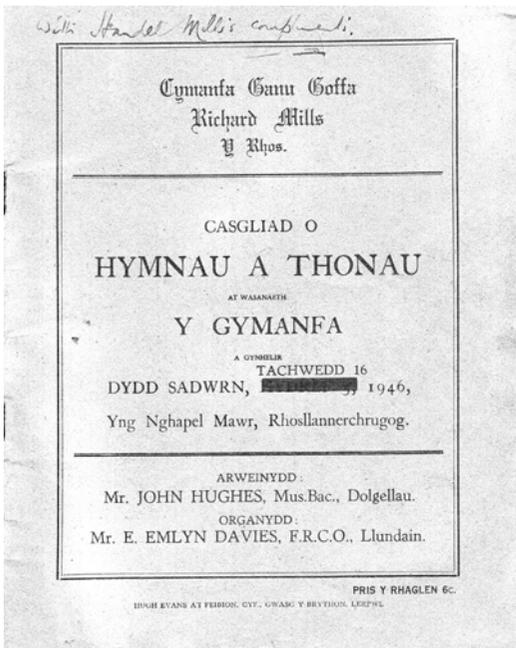
Richard was a printer by trade and entered the service of Hughes and Son, Wrexham, one of the foremost publishers of music in Wales, where his knowledge of tonic sol-fa music was a great advantage. He afterwards moved to Rhos, where he founded the *Rhos Herald* and formed the celebrated Rhos Choir, which, under his conductorship, had a very successful career. He was much in demand as a guest conductor in Cheshire and North Wales and also composed several songs and hymns of great merit. He continued to be a figure of note in Rhos long after his death in 1903: a memorial *Gymanfa* was held in Capel Mawr in Rhos in 1946, where a packed chapel sang many of his hymns.

John Henry Mills (1845–1905)

John Henry Mills, brother of Richard, also a printer and stationer by trade, exercised his musical talents as a very capable and enlightened precentor of China Street C.M. Church in Llanidloes. The congregational singing during his time was justly considered to be second to none in the Principality. As a conductor of the



[Fig. 6] Page from *Darluniadur Anianyddol* by Edward Mills (1850)



[Fig. 7] *Gymanfa* in memory of Richard Mills (Rhos) (d. 1903), held at Capel Mawr, Rhos, 1946

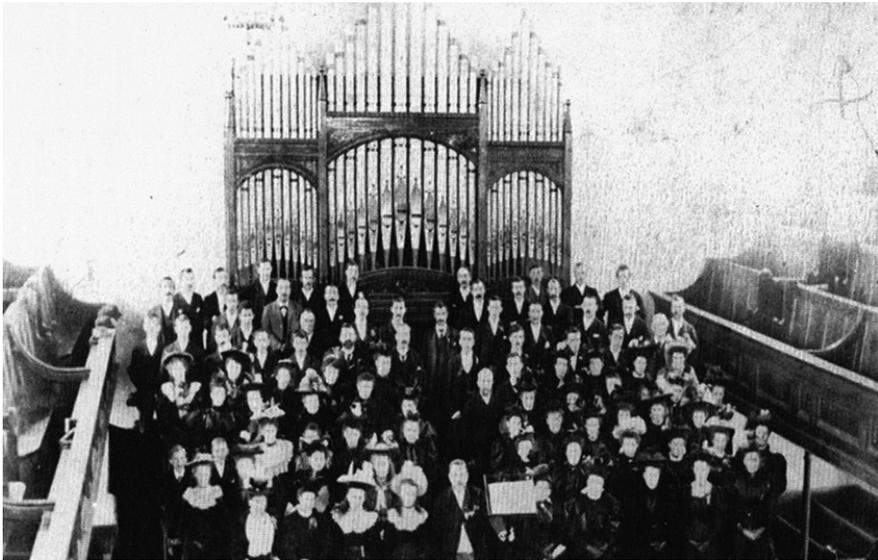
Llanidloes Choral Union, he had no equal. He was the founder and editor of the *Montgomeryshire and Radnor Echo*.

Members of the Mills family continued to make their mark in the twentieth century, mainly as printers and editors of notable newspapers, but it was the three generations of the nineteenth century who influenced so profoundly the musical life of Wales.

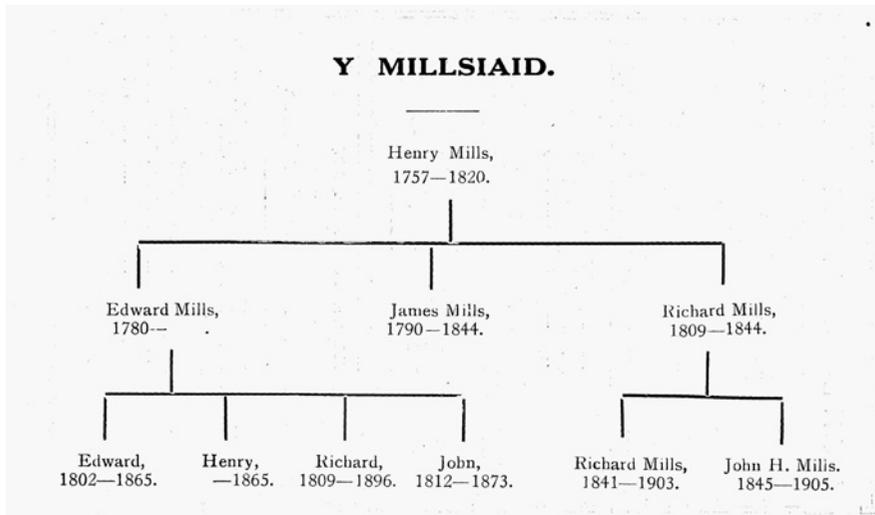
The names may no longer be so familiar but their legacy continues: not only did they revitalize non-conformist Welsh hymn singing with their own compositions, which were more suited to the idiom and musicality of the Welsh language and many of which are still sung today, but their music undoubtedly inspired succeeding generations of composers.

And they not only broadened the musical taste of ordinary people, but through the singing schools they established they provided new opportunities for choral singing, an important tradition at the heart of many Welsh communities which survives to this day.

Finally, bearing in mind that this talk is given as the June Gruffydd Memorial Lecture, herself a woman of Montgomeryshire, it seems particularly fitting that this year's subject should feature a distinguished Montgomeryshire family, Y Millsiaid, and I thank you for the honour of sharing their story with you.



[Fig. 8] *J. H. Mills conducting a choir at the opening of the organ in China Street Chapel, Llanidloes, 1896*



[Fig. 9] *Mills family tree*



[Fig. 10] *Old Market Hall, Llanidloes*