

## GORONWY OWEN (1723–1769) AND FREEMASONRY

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Goronwy Owen (1723–1769), the supreme Welsh poet of the eighteenth century, lived a very colourful life. Born into a poor but literate home at Rhos-fawr, Llanfair Mathafarn Eithaf to the west of Benllech on Anglesey on New Year's Day 1723, he studied at Friars School, Bangor, and very briefly at Jesus College, Oxford. He worked as a schoolmaster and then became an Anglican priest serving in various parishes mostly in England before taking a perilous, three-month voyage to America in which his first wife and youngest child died. Once in America his fortunes changed. He married twice more, had four more children, and died in comfortable circumstances owning a tobacco and cotton plantation and slaves, although his constant problems caused by his heavy drinking continued to the end.

What is not generally known about Goronwy Owen is that he was a Freemason, and the first person ever recorded to hold the office of Chaplain in a Masonic lodge, long before that office became commonplace at the end of the eighteenth century. Owen became a Freemason in 1754 whilst he was a curate at Walton-on-the-Hill, a village (at that time) just north of Liverpool. By October 1754, he was a Master Mason. Although his Masonic affiliations are not recorded anywhere in Grand Lodge records and the lodge in which he was initiated is not known for certain, he revealed his membership of the craft in two letters to his friend William Morris (1705–63), the third of the four famous Morris brothers. Goronwy Owen's connection to the Morris brothers was made early on, for his mother had been a maid at Pentre Eirianell, the Morris brothers' home on Anglesey.

In spite of Owen's behaviour towards them, which on occasion would have tried the best of friendships to the limits, the Morris brothers continued to support Owen throughout his time in Britain, even when they knew to appeal to the other members of the Cymmrodorion Society on his behalf would be pointless, such was Owen's reputation for fecklessness. They rightly recognised his wonderful poetic gift especially in the strict metres and published his works. His poems are still regarded as models of cynghanedd. In a letter to his brother Richard, dated 11 October 1754, William Morris referred to Goronwy as 'y ceryn' ('the wild duck').<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, he also stated to his brother Richard in a letter dated 20 April 1752: 'Gronw hath overtopt all the bards of this age, and brother [Lewis Morris] says of all others!'<sup>2</sup>

Owen was not just a master of the Welsh language. He was a natural linguist and was later said by Dr Beilby Porteus (1731–1809), Bishop of Chester and of London, to have been the most finished writer of Latin since the days of the Roman

<sup>1</sup> John H. Davies (ed.) *The Letters of Lewis, Richard, William and John Morris of Anglesey (Morrisiaid Mon)* (Aberystwyth: Fox, Jones & Co., 2 Vols, 1907), Vol. 1, p. 310.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.* Vol. 1, p. 196.

Emperors.<sup>3</sup> He learnt Latin and Greek at Friars School, Bangor, where the pupils were required to speak Latin in school and each week to write a poem or a letter in Latin to be read out to the rest of the class. Lewis Morris described his linguistic abilities at the age of eighteen thus: ‘He . . . understands Welsh, English, Latin and Greek Equally. He reads our Old Welsh MSS and copies them with great Exactness’.<sup>4</sup>

Whilst Owen was a curate at Walton from 1753 to 1755, his vicar was Thomas Brooke (1693–1757), the son of Sir Thomas Brooke, Bart, of Norton, Cheshire. Revd Thomas Brooke had been a pupil at Westminster School and was a graduate of Trinity College, College, Cambridge. From Owen’s descriptions of him he was a huge man but a gentle and courteous giant. Owen describes himself when he walked behind his Vicar being like a rowing boat following a ship: ‘fel bad ar ôl llong’.<sup>5</sup> Brooke was a fine preacher according to Owen: ‘na chlywais i erioed haiach well pregethwr’ [‘I never heard a better preacher’], and he was certainly very tolerant of his Welsh curate’s erratic behaviour.<sup>6</sup> He may possibly have been a Freemason too and Owen’s proposer into the craft, although it is known that Goronwy Owen met William Vaughan of Corsygedol in September 1753 a few months before he became a Freemason.<sup>7</sup> Vaughan was a senior member of the craft and may well have been the person who made Owen interested in joining, although Owen would certainly not have joined unless his Vicar had been in agreement.

There was relatively little Masonic activity in North Wales in the eighteenth century although Sir Watkin William-Wynn (1749–1789) of Wynnstay and William Vaughan (?1707–1775) of Corsegedol mentioned above were notable Freemasons. The former was a Provincial Grand Master for North Wales and held a warranted lodge at Wynnstay from 1771. The latter was also a Provincial Grand Master for North Wales and the first President of the Cymmrodorion Society in 1751. Lodges existed briefly in Dolgellau (1743–1780); Holywell (1761–1787); Welshpool (1766–1775); Caernarfon (1786–1809); and Denbigh (1787–1811). There was also an earlier lodge at Holywell than that noted above. There is documentary evidence of its meeting at the ‘Sign of Star’ at Holywell in 1749 and it may well have dated from around 1728 having possibly been founded by the then Provincial Junior Grand Warden for Chester, John Coleclough, who lived at Holywell.<sup>8</sup> Even the oldest Masonic lodge in Wales today holds a warrant dating only from the nineteenth century. There was, however, a long tradition of Freemasonry in Chester, dating back well beyond 1717, the date of the founding of the Premier Grand Lodge of London and Westminster. Indeed, the prime mover behind the founding of the Grand Lodge was George Payne, himself a Chester Freemason.

<sup>3</sup> Rev. Robert Jones, *The Poetical Works of the Rev. Goronwy Owen (Goronwy Ddu o Fon) with his Life and Correspondence* (London: Longmans, Green & Co, 2 Vols, 1876), Vol. 2, p. 7

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Branwen Jarvis, *Goronwy Owen* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1986), p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Jones, *op.cit.* Vol. 2, p. 69.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.* Vol. 2, p. 68.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.* Vol. 2, p. 116.

<sup>8</sup> W. J. Songhurst (ed.), *Masonic Reprints* Vol. X (London: Quatuor Coronati Lodge, 1913), pp. 73–4; A. E. Evans, ‘Wessel Linden and the Holywell MS’ *Ars Quatuor Coronatorum*, Vol. 58 (1945), p. 128.

Goronwy Owen's first link with Freemasonry was when he became curate at Walton-on-the-Hill. It is most likely that Owen belonged to the lodge that was warranted on 25<sup>th</sup> June, 1736 and met at St George and Dragon, Tithe Barn Street, Liverpool, between 1736 and 1755, at the Custom House by the Old Dock in Liverpool between 1756 and 1771, ending up at the African Coffee House, Liverpool, between 1772 and 1775, when it was erased. The lodge had various numbers under the Premier Grand Lodge of England during its lifetime: 147 (1736–1739); 132 (1740–1754); 81 (1755–1769); and 67 (1770–75). It is possible that Owen belonged to an unwarranted lodge, but this is unlikely. Moreover, Tithe Barn Street and the Custom House were very close to Liverpool's waterfront and Princes Dock. This adds credence to it being the lodge Owen joined since he refers to its members as coming from Wales, England, Ireland, Scotland and the Isle of Man. A Masonic lodge near Liverpool's docks would certainly have had quite a few seafarers as members and as visitors.

The first passage concerning Goronwy Owen and Freemasonry comes in a letter he wrote to William Morris from Walton on 16 October 1754.

Walton, Hydref y 16, 1754

Mi fum yn brysur yn nghylch diwedd y Gorphenaf yn paratöi i gyfarfod yr Esgob i geisiaw ei dadawl ganiattad i bregethu, etc., yr hyn a gefais yn ddigon rhwydd a fy arian; ond nis gorfu arnaf gymmeryd yr un *License* am yr ysgol.<sup>9</sup> Ac er pan glywais y newydd o'r Castell Coch mi fum yn dâl wrthi ddyena gallwn i baratöi ychydig o bregethau tra bai'r dydd yn hir, fal y gallwn gael y gauaf i brydyddu wrth olau'r tân fal arfer. Nid gwaith i'w wneuthur wrth ganwyll ddimai yw prydyddu; ac nid mewn undydd unnod yr adeiledir y Castell Coch. Dyma'r Llew<sup>10</sup> wedi gyrru imi rai defnyddiau tuag at yr adeilad orchestol hono; ac y mae'n dymuno ei fod yn agos attaf i gludo *morter*; ond am y rhelyw, ei fod yn cwbl ymddiried i gelfyddyd yr adeiladwr. Ie, ie, ond buchan a wyr o fod yr adeiladwr yn *rhydd* ac yn *freiniawg* o'r gelfyddyd. (How do you translate 'a free and accepted Mason?') Ie, ac yn un o'r pen meistriaid hefyd! 'Wele, wfft i'r dyn!' meddwch' Pam hyny? Odid bwngc yn y byd o ddysgeidiaeth y bydd dyn gwaeth erddo, os paid a'i gamarferu. Fe haeddai'r gelfyddyd glod pe na bai dim rhinwedd arni ond medru cadw cyfrinach; ac fal y dywaid y dysgedig awdur, Mr. John Locke, am dani, 'Pe hyn fai'r holl gyfrinach sydd ynnddi, sef, nad oes ynnddi gyfrinach yn y byd, etto nid camp bach yn y byd yw cadw hyny yn gyfrinach'. Ond y peth pennaf a'm hannogodd i i spio i'r ddirgel gelfyddyd hon ydoedd, fy mod yn llwyr gredu mai caingc ydoedd o gelfyddyd yr hen hynafiaid, y Derwyddon gynt, ac nid drwg y

<sup>9</sup> Although Goronwy Owen had been working at Walton since April 1753, he was not officially licensed until 22 July 1754, by Edmund Keene, Bishop of Chester.

<sup>10</sup> Llewelyn Ddu o Fôn was the bardic name of Lewis Morris.

dyfelais – ond dyd! dyd! fe fu agos imi annghofiaw pwy a pha beth ydwyf; am hyny rhaid attal fy llaw. Ond fe allai eich bod chwi eich hun yn un o'r freiniawl frawdoliaeth.<sup>11</sup>

[I was busy around the end of July preparing to meet the Bishop to seek his permission to preach, etc., which I got easily enough and my money; but I was not forced to take the same *Licence* for the school.<sup>12</sup> And since I heard the news from Castell Coch I paid my respects so that I could prepare a few sermons while the day was long, so that I could have the winter to compose by the light of the fire as usual. Composition is not work to be done by candlelight; and Castell Coch is not built in a single day. It is Llew [Lewis Morris] who has sent me some materials towards that magnificent building; and he wishes he was near me to carry *mortar*; but for the rest, that it is entirely entrusted to the art of the builder.<sup>13</sup> Yes, yes, but little does he know that the builder is *free* and *privileged* in the art. (How do you translate 'a free and accepted Mason?') Yes, and one of the chief masters too! 'Well, to hell with the man!' you say 'Why is that?' There is no point of learning which harms a man so long as he does not abuse it. The Craft would deserve praise were there no other virtue in it than its capacity to keep a secret; and as the learned author Mr John Locke says of it: 'Even if this were its whole secret, namely that it has no secret, yet it is no small feat to keep that a secret'. But the main thing that urged me to look into this secret craft was that I fully believed it to be a branch of my old ancestors, the Druids of yore, and I didn't guess badly. But, tut, tut! I nearly forgot who and what I am, and must restrain myself. But possibly you too are one of the privileged fraternity.]

From this letter it is clear from the phrase 'and one of the chief masters too' that by the time he wrote it Owen was a Master Mason, the third degree of craft masonry.

*Castell Coch* [the Red Castle] to which Owen refers was the home of Henry Herbert, 1st Earl of Powys (1703–1772). Lewis Morris met the Earl in August 1753 and persuaded Goronwy Owen to write a poem for him. On 11 October 1754, the week before Goronwy Owen wrote this letter, William Morris wrote to his brother to tell him that hopefully the poem was progressing: 'bod Cywydd y Castell y'mynd ymlaen, etc'. ['that the Castle Poem is coming along, etc.'].<sup>14</sup> Turning the poem into a Masonic metaphor, Owen likened the building of a castle to the writing of a long poem and that he needed materials (money to live on) in order to have the time to write it. In the postscript to a letter to his brother William dated 8 July 1754, Lewis Morris stated: 'Gronwy hath been helped for ye present'.<sup>15</sup> Clearly Lewis Morris had

<sup>11</sup> Robert Jones *op.cit.* Vol. 2, pp. 172–77.

<sup>12</sup> See footnote 9.

<sup>13</sup> See following paragraph.

<sup>14</sup> Davies *op.cit.* Vol. 1, p. 310.

<sup>15</sup> Davies *op.cit.* Vol. 1, p. 296.

given him ‘materials’ and Owen was working on the poem.

The connection with the Earl of Powis continued, for on 15 July 1755 Lewis Morris wrote to his brother William to tell him that Goronwy Owen was writing a poem to celebrate the birth of a son to the Earl:

My last told you *fod mab i’r Castell Coch* Ymhowis, sef Lord Viscount Ludlow, a llawenydd mawr sydd yno; Duw ai llwyddo i gyd, a most amiable family. Mae Gronwy yn llunio cywydd iddo, croeso i’r byd. A new subject I suppose; I gave him the *testyn* [subject] in writing.<sup>16</sup>

My last told you that Castell Coch in Powis has a son, that is Lord Viscount Ludlow, and there is great joy there; God bless all of them, a most amiable family. Goronwy is composing a new poem for him, welcome to the world. A new subject I suppose; I gave him the subject in writing.

Owen then praises Freemasonry for its secrecy, noting the well-known sentiment that Freemasonry’s great secret is that there is no secret. He also makes it clear that what took him into Freemasonry was his belief that there was a link between the Freemasons and the ancient Druids. Many men joined Freemasonry in the eighteenth century because of its alleged antiquity. The link to the Druids was a popular fancy in Wales and with Freemasons such as Dr William Stukeley (1687–1765), an early surveyor of Stonehenge, who was a friend of the Morris brothers. Owen ends his paragraph by wondering whether William Morris himself was a Freemason. There is no evidence that any of the four brothers ever joined the craft.

The second passage concerning Freemasonry occurs in a letter Goronwy Owen wrote to William Morris two months later on 2 December 1754.<sup>17</sup>

Walton, December 2, 1754

Ai e? Crefft yn ddiystyr yw eiddo’r Seiri cerrig yn eich tyb chwi? gadewch iddi. [‘Is it? So you think that the Stonemasons have a meaningless craft? Leave it alone.’] I do verily believe that as it is now practised, it has lost a great deal of its primitive beauty. But still I do not think it quite so insignificant as your friend represented it. Whoever your friend was, I wish he had been more his own friend, if he was a real Mason of any degree above an apprentice.<sup>18</sup> ‘Gwae a lygro ei gydwbybod heb ennill dim’. [‘Woe to him who corrupts his conscience without gaining anything’.] But as to associating with those you do not like, that neither is, nor can be, any just objection to the craft; for surely to shake hands and give a ‘How do you?’ are but

<sup>16</sup> Davies *op.cit.* Vol. 1, pp. 359–60.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Jones *op.cit.* Vol. 2, pp. 186–92.

<sup>18</sup> Entered Apprentice is the first degree of Freemasonry.

acts of common civility, and may be done to any acquaintance, Mason or no Mason; and to any more the craft does not bind you. But you will say: – ‘You sit in the same room on Lodge nights’. True. And so do you and many a wicked vile fellow every Sunday; and yet, whatever these do out of doors, you are not afraid of being tainted by their presence at that place; and the reason is, because they are not there at liberty to play any of their dog tricks. We are here as to nation, Welsh, English, Irish, Scots, and Manks [Manxmen]; and as to religion, Protestants and Papists: and as to politics, high and low fliers, but all Georgites, [subjects of King George II] within doors at least, and yet so far are we from national reflexions, that the only appellation is, ‘brother’; and as I have the honour to be Chaplain, I can assure you our form of prayer, which is in English, as being the common language, is such as no Christian would refuse to join in, of what persuasion so ever he should be. And as to politics, our whole contention consists in this, viz.: ‘Who shall be the best man, the best subject, and the best Mason’. In short, if there is ever a brother that is not as good as we could wish him, I am sure that he would not have been better, but worse, without Masonry. But I do not think that I intend this an apology for the craft. No; no. As it is a mystery, it cannot be apologised for by those who know it to strangers; and to those who know it, it needs no apology. A dyna ben am hyny o ymgomio. [‘And that’s the end of that debate.’]

As is often the case in historical study with letters between correspondents, only one side is extant, so we can only guess at the contents of William Morris’s letter to which Goronwy Owen was replying. Clearly, Morris had a friend who was critical of Freemasonry and knowing that Owen was a Freemason he seems to have asked his opinion about what his friend had said about the craft. Owen tells Morris of Freemasonry’s openness to all nationalities, religions and political affiliations (although he notes that they are all Hanoverians, that is, not Jacobites). His view is entirely positive and I do not think any Freemason today would argue with anything Owen has to say about the craft.

There are no further references to Freemasonry either in Goronwy Owen’s letters or in his poetry. As like as not, his early enthusiasm for the craft waned and he probably took no further part in Freemasonry after he left Walton and his Liverpool lodge in 1755.