

Always the Outsider: An Introduction to the Life and Literary Work of John Ellis Williams (1924–2008)

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Abstract

John Ellis Williams was a prolific literary figure in Welsh and English letters during the twentieth century. Very little has been written about him or his work. In many ways, Williams was an anti-Establishment figure to both cultures. Conformity was anathema to him. A man who could feel as much at home in his Gwynedd as with the Roma of the Sacro Monte. Brought up in the Church in Wales, experiencing the Home Guard and the RAFVR, it was the correspondence with Simone de Beauvoir and the approval of his style by Steinbeck, which reinforced his world outlook. Further, when he wrote – works of an autobiographical nature, short and children’s stories in both English and Welsh, and eight Welsh language novels were published during his lifetime – Williams broke new ground in both languages. The Welsh stories – over 200 – derive from experience; the style and contents of the English translations are considered the nearest thing to writing Welsh in that language. This paper seeks to provide a brief introduction to Williams the author and the man – a person who deserves to be considered amongst the bilingual literary giants of Wales who wrote predominantly in the previous century.

Keywords: Bilingualism, international, Literature, unconventionality, Welsh

Abstrakt

John Ellis Williams był znaczącą postacią walijskiej i angielskiej tradycji literackiej XX wieku. Jednak niewiele napisano o pisarzu i jego dziełach. Na swój sposób był

postacią antyestablishmentową dla obu kultur: konformizm był jego osobistą anatamą. Czuł się jak u siebie zarówno w rodzinnym Gwynedd jak i Monte Sacro. Był wychowany w duchu tradycji anglikańskiej Kościoła w Walii, został wcielony do obronnej organizacji brytyjskiej armii Home Guard, oraz do sił lotniczych Wielkiej Brytanii RAFVR. Korespondencja z Simone de Beauvoir jak również przychylność Steinbecka ukształtowały poglądy pisarza. Co więcej, pisarstwo Williams'a przecierało nowe ścieżki w literaturze zarówno angielskiej jak i walijskiej: tworzył on dzieła autobiograficzne, opowiadania, literaturę dziecięcą po angielsku i walijsku – za życia pisarza opublikowano osiem powieści po walijsku. Opowiadania walijskie – było ich ponad dwieście – inspirowane są doświadczeniem; styl i treści przekładów angielskich uważa się za bliskie pisarstwu walijskiemu. Poniższy artykuł jest wprowadzeniem do życia i pisarstwa Williams'a – walijszczyka, który zasługuje na miano bilingwalnego geniusza literackiego XX wieku.

Słowa kluczowe: Bilingwalizm, międzynarodowość, literatura, niekonwencjonalność, Walia

In this paper I intend to present an introduction to the Welsh literary figure, John Ellis Williams. For most of his life, he was often confused with many others who shared his surname, including John E. Caerwyn Williams, the Celtic scholar. This handicap, and his own predilection for not conforming to Welsh 'acceptable' society, nor its Establishment, meant that his talents were never fully appreciated or respected within his lifetime. This paper is intended as a starting point in redressing the balance, and it is to be hoped will encourage others to pursue further research into this remarkable and unique man of Wales.

Born in Llanddeiniolen,¹ Caernarfonshire, Williams showed his talent as a writer in both English and his native tongue, Welsh, from an early age. His 'compositions' in both languages were regularly shown up as examples to the rest of his class whilst

¹ A industrialised parish in north west Wales which recorded 56% of its population as not having any knowledge of English in the Census of 1921; three years before the birth of Williams (Davies, 1994: 497). Both of his parents, however, could speak English – his father had had a haulage business in Utica, New York State, USA prior to the First World War, and his mother had over thirty years' experience of working as a maid servant in various 'big houses' in Caernarfonshire, Anglesey, Lancashire and Staffordshire before Williams was born. The owners of these mansions were monoglot English families.

at Ysgol Brynrefail Grammar School.² Coupled with his voracious reading as a child, he particularly enjoyed George Borrow (1803–1881) and Samuel Langhorne Clemens (1835–1910).³ His appreciation of literature would stand him in good stead when he put his own pen to paper many years later.

His early life was spent on the family 100 acre farm in Llanddeiniolen. This area, often referred to by Williams as ‘my own square mile’ was the setting of many of his stories (both biographical and autobiographical), which provide insight, as Hall says, into

... [W]ays of life now gone or changed beyond recognizing. He recalls that time [the 1930s] with a keen insight into its harshness and rigours, but also with a romantic longing for a lost world (1989).⁴

An only child (a half-brother, eleven years older rarely figures in the family stories), and brought up in the newly-disestablished Church in Wales by his rather domineering mother,⁵ Williams would immediately self-identify with those apart from the mainstream, including his fellow Welsh. This identification would continue (and indeed be nurtured) throughout his life.

After the Second World War broke out in 1939, Williams left school and enrolled firstly with the local Home Guard, another fruitful source of literary composition, and subsequently with the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve (RAFVR). Although he never actually took part in active combat, he was an accomplished navigator in Avro

² Conversation with Joan R. Williams, the subject’s widow, 1 July 2012.

³ Better known under his pen name of Mark Twain.

⁴ On the back cover of that book.

⁵ The state religion of Wales following the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century was the Anglican Church (the Church of England). This church was seen as being an ‘alien’ and minority church in Wales and an anglicising power, where the majority of Christians were practising Nonconformists (Baptists, Congregationalists and Methodists for the most part and attended chapels). Pressure grew to disestablish the Welsh church in the nineteenth century and it became official policy of the Liberal party in 1895 – in contradistinction to the Conservative party. The continuing growth in Nonconformism in the early 1900s and a landslide Liberal victory in the 1906 General Election presaged further moves towards disestablishment, only for the House of Lords to wield its veto to the proposals. (This veto was removed by the *Parliament Act 1911*.) Ultimately, an Act for the Disestablishment of the Church in Wales was passed in September 1914 but its provisions were postponed for the duration of the First World War. The Act finally came into force in 1920.

Ansons.⁶ With peace restored in 1945 and feeling, as he said himself, to be somewhat of a Displaced Person,⁷ he found himself attracted by the Existentialist movement, which was then burgeoning on the Left Bank of the Seine in Paris. This led to a lengthy correspondence between Williams and Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986), an exchange of books between them, and in 1971, he and his young family visited the eminent French literary figure, at her invitation, in her apartment in Montparnasse.

Williams's civilian working career began in 1946 as an auctioneer's clerk to Bob Parry of Caernarfon and he was paid £8 a week. His experiences there are reflected in part in the character of Siôn Jones in the first novel to be published in book form by Gwasg Gee in 1968, namely *Hadau Gwyllt*.⁸ In this novel there are anecdotes drawn from the author's own personal life. He recounts the experience of riding in the backs of cattle trucks to and from marts in North Wales, sitting along the livestock and clutching the day's takings – which could amount to a few thousand pounds even then – in his hands.

He married Joan Rees Edwards, a classmate from Ysgol Brynrefail grammar school and *Victrix Ludorum* 1939–1942,⁹ in March 1950. Having settled near Worcester, they would commence their professional working careers in tandem, with the husband being

⁶ The Avro Anson (in service from 1936–1968) was an aircraft that served with the British Royal Air Force (RAF) over and beyond the period of the Second World War (1939–1945). Its main role was in training pilots in flying its bomber aircraft 'cousin', the Avro Lancaster. It was also used in the training of that bomber's aircrew including the bomb aimer, gunner and navigator. Williams himself never 'graduated' however to be part of the Lancaster's aircrew.

⁷ Regular comment made during conversations between the subject and the author during the formser's lifetime.

⁸ The English title of this novel is *Place of Breezes*. Like all of Williams's translations of his novels the English versions only exist in manuscript form. It could be argued that a more appropriate title and closer to the Welsh original should be 'Wild Oats' (and the implications of a young man sowing them, as the hero Siôn does in this novel – although 'Wild Seeds' is a more literal translation) but *Place of Breezes* was the name that the author conferred upon his work.

All quotations from books and interviews are my own translations of the original Welsh material.

⁹ This award was conferred on the female athlete who acquired the most points for her school house during the annual sports day activities; points being 'won' dependent on the athlete's position with regard to her fellow competitors in the various events. Edwards did so for four consecutive years at Ysgol Brynrefail for the period indicated, the only sportswoman ever to do so in the history of the school, 1900–1950. She was in line to receive four cups to mark this achievement, but owing to the scarcity of metal during the Second World War, she was only awarded one. Further, her high jump record at the school was never broken.

employed in the local ‘big house’ as a gardener and the wife as a nanny.¹⁰ They subsequently worked together at the catalogue company Kay’s.

Shortly after seemingly setting down roots in Worcestershire, Williams’s father died from meningitis in 1951 in the old Bangor Caernarfon and Anglesey Hospital. The experience marked the author deeply and he would later incorporate the detail, with some poetic licence, into the account of the death of Siôn Jones’s grandmother in hospital following a fall at home in the novel *Hadau Gwyllt*. During Siôn’s night time vigil at the hospital he gets talking to the nurse, Stassi, who it transpires is Hungarian. Stassi had fled from Budapest after the Hungarian Revolution.¹¹ She does not know what happened to her parents; Siôn at least is with his grandmother during her final moments; Stassi is bereft of all familial links and is also in a foreign country. Yet her tenderness towards Siôn and his gentleness towards her are not artificial – indeed, they are kindred spirits, and when the grandmother dies during the night, there blossoms an understanding between them. The final sequence must surely be that felt by the author himself on the loss of his father:

Siôn went out into the hospital grounds. He sat on a dewy bench, and the sky lightened. He stayed there for a long time in a semi-stupor until the sun came out of the sea, and he stared into it until he was half-blinded. He persuaded himself that he could actually see the flames shooting out into the corona (78).

Williams from then on was employed as the chauffeur-gardener; whilst his wife would manage the domestic affairs of the ‘big house’. They subsequently moved to Betws-y-Coed,¹² Williams initially working for the Forestry Commission, before they settled in Rhos-on-Sea in the late 1960s, where positions of gardener and housekeeper were once more taken up.

¹⁰ Before marrying, Edwards had been a nurse at Alder Hey Hospital, Liverpool during the Second World War had been partly converted into a military hospital. Following the D-Day landings of 6 June 1944 on the shores of northern France, she treated injured servicemen from both sides of the conflict.

¹¹ This was in 1956, five years after the death of Williams’s father, on which the account of Siôn’s conversation with Stassi during his vigil at his grandmother’s final hours in the novel, is based. A certain amount of poetic licence therefore has been used by Williams here.

¹² A village and community in the Conwy valley in Conwy County Borough, Wales with a population of 534. Being in Snowdonia, it is a place popular with tourists.

By this time however, other adventures and pursuits had occupied the Williams'. During the winter of 1959–1960, they had retraced George Borrow's itinerary in *The Bible in Spain* (1843) around the Iberian Peninsula on a motorcycle. On the way they had lived with the troglodyte Roma in their Sacromonte community, and had enjoyed the hospitality of sardine fishermen in Portugal. In another incident, both Williams and his wife arrived late in Brussels one evening, not having booked accommodation in advance. These 'adventures' would prove useful material for written publications of all sorts, from essays in newspapers to scenes in his later bound works, in both English and Welsh. For example, the occasion of Siôn finding himself in the red light district of Brussels in *Hadau Gwyllt* is based on, as mentioned above, Williams and his wife finding a 'hotel' in the same area late one evening.¹³ As the night wore on, it soon became apparent to them both that their accommodation that night was in fact a *maison close*. However, as Williams and his wife always recounted it, they were allocated a room apart from the 'main proceedings' and the two 'businesses' of the establishment were kept strictly apart.

Williams had begun to write by the mid-1950s. His first novel *Bryndu Mawr* won the Glasgoed Chapel, Penisarwaun Eisteddfod Chair in 1959 and later that year it was serialized in *yr Herald Cymraeg*. Subsequently, a host of articles on his travelling experiences in France and stories in Welsh appeared in that publication. Finding time to write would remain a perennial problem – Williams was never a 'full-time' author – and often he would write on fertilizer bags, returning home of an evening to type out his thoughts, seldom clear of what had been composed earlier in the day. He often said that he was composing whilst strolling in his beloved north west Wales countryside, or that the characters of his works (both factual and fictional) were actually at his elbow, dictating the form of words that were to be put on paper.

The 1960s also saw the growth of televisual media in Wales. Williams wrote for children and presented children's stories for Television Wales and the West (TWW) and Granada TV,¹⁴ one of which, *Elwd y Teiliwr Bach* – 'Elwood the little tailor' – was published by Gwasg Gee in 1968, shortly before *Hadau Gwyllt* and in time for the birth of his son, Siôn Rees in May of that year.

¹³ Conversation between the author and Joan R. Williams, 1 July 2012.

¹⁴ TWW was the British Independent Television (ITV) or commercial television contractor responsible for programmes in South Wales and the West of England from 1956 to 1968. Granada TV is also a commercial television contractor broadcasting to the North of England and North Wales and has been responsible for programmes since 1956. In consequence, Williams often travelled to studios in both Cardiff (TWW) and Manchester (Granada). Welsh language output for Wales up to this time was divided between these stations and the BBC. The Welsh language channel, *Sianel Pedwar Cymru* (S4C) would cover the whole country when it started transmitting in 1982.

Another Welsh language novel, *Yr Ynys Wyr* – ‘The Glass Island’ – published by Cyhoeddiadau Modern Cymreig cyf., appeared soon after. This can be considered, along with the subsequent novels, as part of an unofficial series or chronicle of Welsh social history in the latter part of the 20th century. Williams himself always maintained that his works – notably the novels, were a reflection of events in Wales during that time. This novel for example, has as its background the events surrounding the paramilitary campaigns of the *Mudiad Amddiffyn Cymru* (MAC – ‘The Movement for the Defence of Wales’) and the more flamboyant and less militarily effective, the *Free Wales Army*. These organizations, and their sympathizers were highly active in the 1960s in Wales and some of their members carried out bomb explosions against government and public buildings, and targeted reservoir dams and pipelines which carried water from Wales to English cities, notably Liverpool and Birmingham.¹⁵ In the case of the former, the flooding of the entire Welsh community of Capel Celyn in Merionethshire in 1965, to enable the building of the Tryweryn reservoir and water for Merseyside, was still fresh in the Welsh psyche when the novel *Yr Ynys Wyr* was published. Indeed, ever since the flooding, most Welsh patriots have not forgotten (nor forgiven) Liverpool Corporation for their cavalier attitude and the destruction of the local community.

With this as a backdrop to Williams’s story, he recites an account of how members of a Welsh community, faced with a similar destruction to their way of life, plan to blow up the dam holding back the reservoir, with the aid of like-minded Celtic nationalists. In an interview with the weekly newspaper *Y Cymro* – ‘The Welshman’ – published on 13 March 1969, soon after the publication of *Yr Ynys Wyr*, Williams freely admitted that he is not of a pacifist nature, and that he believed (and indeed, did so throughout his life) in violence *if it was directed in the right way*, hence his joining the RAFVR (19–20). John Ellis Williams always maintained that the battle to preserve the Wales and Welshness he knew as a boy was worth fighting for, and in an echo of Saunders Lewis (1893–1985),¹⁶ he frequently alluded to the fact that any freedom obtained for Wales

¹⁵ For a detailed, journalistic account of the activities of these organisations and also the subsequent *Meibion Glyndŵr* campaign and a list of the geographical distribution of the targets, see Humphries (2008).

¹⁶ Lewis was a Welsh language dramatist, poet, historian, lecturer and literary critic and was also an eminent Nationalist throughout his life. He was a co-founder of *Plaid [Genedlaethol] Cymru* ‘The Welsh [National] Party’ in 1925 and was its President from 1926–1939. He promoted the (minority) view of Welsh neutrality during World War II. He failed to be elected as a Member of Parliament (MP) and for a time retreated from active Welsh politics from 1943.

In 1962 however, he broadcast the BBC radio speech *Tynged yr Iaith* ‘The Fate of the Language’ where he predicted that the Welsh language would be dead by the beginning of the 21st century

by the shedding of blood had to be done by the shedding of *Welsh* blood, and thus proving that the sentiment of the national anthem was not in fact merely a pious lie.¹⁷

In a similar vein, when ‘newer’ extreme exponents of the nationalist credo appeared – *Meibion Glyndŵr* and their arson campaign against second homes in Wales during the 1980s and 1990s –¹⁸ he stated quite categorically that he would not pour water on their matches, nor turn in any member of that organization if he or she came to the door, being pursued by the forces of law and order. In this respect, he would seem to adopt a more radical tradition, something far less common amongst his fellow Welsh, who once again would consider such behaviour unacceptable, whilst Williams contented himself on noting on what he considered the ‘febleness’ of contemporary Welsh political nationalism – thus not endearing himself once more to *any* Establishment.

Despite or because of these viewpoints, Williams also stresses that nationalist movements can also be damaged by the very violence and objectives that they have – the more

unless ‘revolutionary tactics’ were adopted by Welsh people. This led to the establishment of *Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg* ‘The Welsh Language Society’ the following year, which immediately adopted a form of ‘non-violent disobedience’ in order to win status and respect for the language. Much of the gains in recognition that the Welsh language has enjoyed since then has been down to the continued work of this and other pressure groups. A sound file of Lewis’s broadcast can be heard on the National Library of Wales’s website, <http://www.llgc.org.uk/ymgyrchu/iaith/Tyn-gedlaith/index-e.htm> [Accessed 4 January 2013]. More details about *Cymdeithas* can be found on their website, cymdeithas.org. [Accessed 4 January 2013].

¹⁷ *Ei gwrol ryfelwyr, gwladgarwyr tra mad, / Tros ryddid collasant eu gwaed.* – ‘The land whose stern warriors were true to the core, / While bleeding for freedom of yore.’ (Bilingual version of all three verses and chorus taken from <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Functions/anthem.html> [Accessed: 4 January 2013]).

¹⁸ ‘The Sons of Glyndŵr’ were said to be an extreme Welsh Nationalist movement who carried out over 200 cases of arson to English-owned holiday homes and threatened other English-owned premises in Wales from 1979 to the mid 1990s. The use of these holiday homes had created a crisis amongst numbers of the local population who could not afford their own housing. As with the previous extreme groups of the 1960s mentioned above and *Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg*, and unlike Ireland, no individuals were ever targeted in person by *Meibion Glyndŵr* – rather, they concentrated their efforts on damaging private property. Throughout the period of *Meibion Glyndŵr*’s activities no individual was ever convicted for their actions and it is believed by some that they were in fact a front organization set up by the British Secret Service, MI5, to discredit the Welsh nationalist movement generally, including *Plaid Cymru* and *Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg*. For more information on *Meibion Glyndŵr* (and indeed MAC and FWA from the 1960s, see Humphries, 2008).

so when factions within the group start springing up and each member believes that they have a right to have their say. As one of the main characters, Jen Pendennis MA, comments in *Yr Ynys Wydr*:

[I]n nine cases out of ten when violence obtains its place in a national movement, you get the money lovers and adventurers. The movement itself becomes a secondary thing, and it's the innocent who suffer (Williams 1969, 66).

As we shall see from the subsequent works, this theme of the 'nationalist-outsider-protagonist' becomes key in much of Williams's subsequent literature. It also helps to bear in mind that the main characters of subsequent novels are indeed often characters based on John Ellis Williams himself, but also that they, and indeed others in the books, are also spokespeople for various aspects and thought processes of the author himself.

The north east Wales idyll of the late 1960's did not last long. The family decamped to West Sussex in early 1970, where work as the chauffeur-gardener was resumed by Williams. He now devoted more of his spare time to writing and by the end of the decade, three other Welsh novels had seen the light of day: *Modd i Fyw* 'Having a field day' published by Llyfrau'r Faner, 1970, *Paul Jones a'r Tywysog* 'Paul Jones and the Prince of Wales' published by Gwasg Gee, 1975 and *Gwynt i Oen* 'Wind for a lamb' published by Gwasg Gwynedd, 1976.

Again, all three of these novels detail some aspect of Welsh local and national history – at one and the same time there is the microcosm of society and its various characters, used by the author as pawns against the backdrop of more important events, and even those of world significance. *Modd i Fyw* chronicles the situation in North West Wales on the termination of the Faenol Estate and how as a result, all the smallholdings that were dependent on it were broken up, and in certain instances became part of larger 'super farms' with others.

At around the same time, agriculture was becoming more machine and less manual labour based, which led to a continuous drift from the land and extreme rural depopulation. From the 1950s onwards the numbers of farming jobs, both full-time and part-time, regularly fell,¹⁹ and out-migration, principally of young, active, Welsh speakers, also caused body blows to the Welsh heartland communities. Consequently too, rural

¹⁹ Full-time male workers on Welsh farms fell from 31,301 in 1951 to 14,237 in 1968, and continued to fall thereafter. *A Strategy for Rural Wales*: Report by the Welsh Council, March 1971.

services and the hearts of Welsh speaking communities were being lost at a rapid rate – chapels, schools, post offices and pubs closed, as the Welsh language element that sustained them broke down. Additionally, what industry that did exist in these areas, notably slate-quarrying, entered a period of prolonged decline after the end of the Second World War as newer, cheaper alternatives to slate, such as tiling, increased its share of the market. The native, Welsh language culture that the quarries engendered suffered as a result.

Whilst emigration from Wales continued, a steady influx of in-migration of monolingual English retirees, dropouts and self-exiles from the English cities became established in these communities, further diluting an already fragile linguistic hinterland. Some of the newcomers, but by no means all, did adapt to their new communities, but for the most part sought to retain their own way of life, based on materialism and competition. These previously alien concepts to Wales and Welshness, together with the overwhelming numbers of those speaking what locals that remained still perceived of as a foreign language, has transformed substantially the Welsh speaking areas in which the English had settled, so much so in fact, that ‘the Wales of yore’ cannot now be recreated.

This issue of in-migration has continued ever since and remains a problem for large parts of Wales in trying to integrate and assimilate these newcomers to their own areas.²⁰ Williams clearly saw the threats to his own square mile in this respect at a very early stage, and subsequent books, stories and correspondence show a man deeply perturbed by the loss of his own form of Welshness and ‘the Welsh *mode de vie*’. Williams’s favourite novel *Gwynt i Oen*, too, focuses on the problems facing rural North West Wales from the perspective of local characters who speak with a broad Llanberis accent. Indeed, not only are the dialogues conducted through the medium of this Snowdonian dialect, but the rest of the novel is too.

Paul Jones reprises the idea of the anti-hero, unconventional, nationalistic, outsider. The eponymous hero is an adolescent who aims to make a name for himself by assassinating Charles Windsor, during the latter’s Investiture as Prince of Wales at Caernarfon Castle in July 1969. Critics have been quick to point out the similarity between the psychology of Paul Jones and that other disturbed youth, Holden Caulfield in Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye* (1951).²¹ Once more, it is ‘fear’ which enables the creative process. Williams himself is on record as saying:

²⁰ For a detailed sociolinguistic analysis of this matter, based on the 10-yearly Censuses, see for example, Aitchinson and Carter (1994).

²¹ See, e.g. Gareth Meils in *Tafod y Ddraig* the official magazine of *Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg* ‘The Welsh Language Society’, Hydref [October] 1975, 11–12.

Literature is born as a result of fear. Everyone carries some particular idea of life but suddenly something happens to dispel this particular notion and the previously cherished idea is destroyed. This causes stress, strain and the destruction of images. As a means of trying to re-establish some order for himself, an artist, must create some account which is understandable to him and on his own terms. If he is an author, he must do so through the only medium available to him – composing a story and manipulating the written word. All other routes are barred as being ‘senseless’ in the meaning of being ‘without sense’ or ‘without meaning.’ In such a way, creative literature is born (1969, 19).²²

But the sojourn in Sussex was not solely devoted to novels, nor indeed to chauffer gardening. As previously mentioned, Williams by now had a son. He took upon himself therefore to play not only the dutiful father, but the children’s stories writer and educator – and that in many subjects, none of which he was properly qualified to teach in; but in so doing, he kindled and nurtured a love of literature and knowledge in the boy. One of his favourite recreations was the love he had for astronomy and of pointing out the constellations, the stars and the planets to his son on many a night. Whilst his pronunciation would be affected by his native northern Welsh speech and would have been decried by scientific purists, he showed an immense wealth of understanding and more importantly a *passion* for the subject. So although he would not be able to explain the physics of Sirius, he knew it was the brightest star in the sky and that it was located in the constellation of Canis Major. Likewise, the three stars of Orion’s Belt were so often repeated as a chant that their names were always kept fresh in the mind, by both teacher and student. Again, watering hanging baskets became lessons in world geography and river recognition. The liquid falling onto the cobbles formed various streamlets, each ‘competing’ with each other to form the longest and most powerful water course. And indeed, over there one could see the Amazon, whilst alongside there was the Nile and just starting off on their courses would be the Orinoco and the Danube.

Yet, as previously mentioned, perhaps the greatest debt owed to John Ellis Williams at this time was his real talent in language and literature and promoting knowledge through his storytelling. Children’s stories, which were tried out on his son in the first instance, proved to be mutually beneficial. He recorded the stories on tape, allowing the child to listen to them at any time and a typed manuscript was also supplied. At a stroke, two language skills were taught to the infant in his native language – a rare

²² In the interview for *Y Cymro* on 13 March.

privilege living in monolingual Sussex during his formative years (2–9 years old) and inculcated him with a love for literature. Further, and during the daytime, Williams and the child insisted on communicating with each other solely through the medium of Welsh – at a time when they could have lost the use of their mother tongue forever, having no others to communicate with through the medium of that language.²³

Reminiscences, fiction, and stories for adults continued to flow from Williams's pen. He was a natural Celtic story teller. Two further novels were published in his lifetime: *Wrth Ddychwel* 'Native Heath' published by Cyhoeddiadau Mei, 1982 and *Nes Adref* 'Nearer Home' published by Gwasg Carreg Gwalch, 1996. Again, there is the theme of the Welsh outsider in these novels. In the first, Handel Jones, a returnee from Liverpool, comes back to Wales in much the same way as the Williams family itself did at Christmas 1976. The 'hero' seeks to re-establish himself in his original community, but he fails – unlike the real life family. What he sought from the past is no longer available to him and in any case, he was also considered an outsider to those with whom he should feel more at home. He has been away too long and fails to realize that not only that he has, but also that his 'own' part of Wales has moved on in ways beyond his understanding of what life during his youth was like.

Nes Adref returns to the theme of contemporary nationalist politics in Wales – in this case the *Meibion Glyndŵr* affair. Echoing the sentiments of the character in *Yr Ynys Wyr* mentioned earlier, it is indeed the innocent who end up suffering when the violent actions of *Meibion Glyndŵr* appear. Based on true events, the elderly widowed Tom Roberts is falsely arrested as a sympathizer, or indeed perpetrator, of the arson campaign. However, it needs to be stressed that Tom is very much the author himself and his comments with regard to the loss of the *Cymreictod* of his 'native heath' are all too apparent, Williams himself was never arrested for any nationalistic comments or behaviour – but others were falsely accused and brought to trial.

By the 1980s, Williams had returned, if not to 'the old farm' of childhood, but to his own 'native heath' in the parish of Llanddeiniolen. This provided him with scope to write about his experiences and of local characters, both in Welsh and English. These included the volumes, *Straeon Cyfar Main* 'The *Cyfar Main* Stories' published by Cyhoeddiadau

²³ Williams's wife was a native speaker of Welsh, but preferred to express herself and to read through the medium of English, reflecting her previous secondary education at Ysgol Brynrefail and her work in Liverpool during the Second World War, as previously mentioned. Further, she did not speak Welsh to her son, leaving this to the father.

Mei, 1985 and also dramatised on BBC Radio Cymru, and *Dychweliad y Deryn Mawr* ‘The return of the *Deryn Mawr*’ published by Gwasg Carreg Gwalch, 1990. He desisted from writing an autobiography, but *Clouds of Time and Other Stories* published by Gwasg Carreg Gwalch (1989) and *Rare Welsh Bits* published by Gwasg Carreg Gwalch (2001),²⁴ all feature some accounts of his early life in north-west Wales, interspersed with other less serious pieces, and accounts of some of his travels in Continental Europe. These tales had previously either appeared in Welsh, in such publications as the women’s magazine *Pais* or the local community newspaper *Eco’r Wyddfa* (where they total over a hundred contributions in this publication alone), or in English for *The Countryman* magazine.

As previously mentioned, he did not write solely for adults – a wealth of children’s’ stories was produced in both languages, some of which were published in book form. As well as *Elwd y Teiliwr Bach* mentioned above, *Owen the Goat of Snowdon* published by PeniPrint (1980) and *Chwedlau Siôn ac Eleri* ‘Siôn and Eleri Fables’ published by Gwasg Carreg Gwalch (1992) supplied younger readers with Welsh historical, geographical and folkloric elements as well as encouraging them to take care of their natural surroundings and be environmentally friendly.

What needs to be stressed, however, is that the works in Welsh (as indeed much of Williams’s literary output) were often translated very soon after into English by the author himself – as such, much of Williams’s work has been considered to be

...[t]he nearest thing to writing ‘Welsh in English’; a direct result, so I’m told, of the author’s long practice of composing syntax concurrently in both languages (Edwards 1989, 6).²⁵

Although Williams, back in Wales, certainly felt more ‘at home’ than he had done in England, he was only too aware of what had been lost (and what was being lost) in the Welsh speaking communities around him. He would not consider himself a Nationalist in so many words, and by that I mean a *Plaid Cymru* member and activist:

²⁴ The choice of title was an unintended pun by the author on ‘Welsh Rarebit’ (itself a humorous version of ‘Welsh Rabbit’ or ‘cheese on toast’ – said to be principle food of the poor Welsh peasantry). Williams’s own contention was that the collection comprised diverse pieces of literature, in different genres which were quite uncommon in their content and form (retaining as they did so the ‘flavour’ of their original Welsh background and language), and so the title would be the most appropriate to be given to the work.

²⁵ Edwards read some of the stories in this volume on BBC Radio 4 and BBC Radio Wales in the late 1980s.

his apartness from the mainstream would militate against that, and the failure of his Welsh compatriots to accept him as ‘one of them’ for diverse reasons, would also prove to further alienate him from them and them from him. Yet, he embodied a fierce local (and sometimes national, Welsh) patriotism and would contribute letters regularly to the Press in both languages, in fluent and elegant prose on diverse subjects, both political and of local interest. Only towards the end of his life were his literary accomplishments appreciated – and that in a limited capacity. He was elected a Fellow of the Welsh *Academi* (but only for his contribution to English language literature in Wales). Few books on ‘Anglo-Welsh authors’ (a term he actively abhorred for himself) actually feature him.²⁶ The *Gorsedd* made him an Honorary Ovate in the year of his death under the name of *Fy Machgen Gwyn* ‘My White/Holy Boy’.^{27 28} John Ellis Williams died in his sleep in December 2008, and his ashes were returned to the fields of his farming youth in Llanddeiniolen.

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²⁶ Rare examples are Stephens (ed.) (1998, 2nd ed.) and Carradice (2010).

²⁷ *Gorsedd Beirdd Ynys Prydain* ‘The *Gorsedd* (Assembly) of Bards of The Island of Britain’ is an association of literary figures (poets, dramatists, writers), musicians, artists and other individuals who have made a distinguished contribution to the Welsh language and culture. The *Gorsedd* plays a key role in the week-long celebration of Welsh culture and the arts which is the *Eisteddfod Genedlaethol Cymru* ‘The National Eisteddfod of Wales’ which generally takes place during the first week of August every year, in a different venue, alternating between North and South Wales. Some of its members have passed examinations in the Welsh language in order to gain admission, whilst others are appointed to its ranks as green-robed Ovates or white-robed Druids on an honorary basis only to reward their contributions to Welsh life. (Blue-robed Bards are appointed only after successful completion of the three *Gorsedd* examinations). It was in recognition of his literary work that John Ellis Williams was awarded the Green robe at the Cardiff National Eisteddfod in August 2008, a few months before his death.

²⁸ A very popular folk song from Wales, and maybe chosen by Williams in memory of his much-remarked upon blond hair of his youth.

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