

PUGHE, WILLIAM OWEN (1759 - 1835), lexicographer, grammarian, editor, antiquary, and poet

Name: William Owen Pughe

Date of birth: 1759

Date of death: 1835

Spouse: Sarah Elizabeth Pughe (née Harper)

Child: Aneurin Owen

Parent: Anne Owen

Parent: John Owen

Gender: Male

Occupation: lexicographer, grammarian, editor, antiquary, and poet

Area of activity: History and Culture; Literature and Writing; Poetry; Scholarship and Languages

Author: Griffith John Williams

Born in Llanfihangel-y-pennant, Meirionnydd, 7 August 1759, the son of John Owen of Rhiwyerfa near Abergynolwyn and his wife Anne Owen. The family moved shortly afterwards to the farmhouse of Egryn in Arduwy. He claimed that in his youth he had heard Arduwy singers in his home and had seen companies playing interludes, but what influenced him most was the reading of *Gorchestion Beirdd Cymru*, which was published in 1773. He was sent to school at Altrincham, near Manchester. Then, in 1776, he went to London, where he resided for thirty years. We do not know what occupation he followed at first, but in 1802 he was teaching arithmetic and penmanship in a girls' residential school kept by a Mrs. Stevenson in Queen's Square. His letters show also that he served as private tutor to the children of gentlemen.

He contributed to English periodicals such as *The Gentleman's Magazine* and *The Monthly Magazine*, and was paid by **Owen Jones** (Owain Myfyr) and by some publishers for performing various tasks. He was also an amateur artist (see Mysevin MS. 30 in N.L.W.). It was a meagre existence, undoubtedly, particularly about the years 1804-6 after the residential school had been closed. During this period he was allowed to live rent-free in a house which **Owain Myfyr** had bought, the latter also paying him a salary of £100 a year for furthering his plans. A change came in 1806 when a relative of his, the Rev. Rice Pughe, of Nantglyn, Denbighshire, died, leaving him an estate in Denbighshire and Merioneth. It was then that he began to use the surname 'Pughe.' Thereafter he made his home at Egryn, near Nantglyn, but he spent a considerable time in London and travelled here and there. He died 4 June 1835 in his native land of Merioneth, and was buried at Nantglyn. He had three children, one of whom, **Aneurin Owen**, developed into a Welsh scholar.

Owen Pughe says that he met **Robin Ddu o Fôn** in London in 1782 - that was the beginning of a new phase in his career. He came into touch with **Owain Myfyr** and other members of the Society of Gwyneddigion and was received as member in 1783. In 1784 he was the secretary of the society; he was president in 1789, 1804, and 1820. It may be that in 1784 he was a member of the Society of Cymmrodorion - at any rate, he used to be invited to the meetings. At this time he began to read the manuscripts of the **Morris**es of Anglesey and resolved to compile a Welsh-English dictionary. The work grew to an enormous extent. The first part appeared in 1793; in 1803 the whole work was published in two large volumes, which included a Welsh grammar also. It was Owen Pughe who assisted **Owain Myfyr** to edit *Barddoniaeth Dafydd ap Gwilym*, 1789; in 1792 he published the poetry of **Llywarch Hen**, with an English translation. He edited the English magazine, *The Cambrian Register* (1796 and 1799), and he was the principal editor of *The Myvyrian Archaiology of Wales* (1801 and 1807), and was responsible for almost all the work of preparing the material for the press. At the same period he completed our first biographical dictionary, viz. *The Cambrian Biography*, 1803. He was one of the editors of the journal of the Gwyneddigion and the *Cymreigyddion - Y Greal* (1805-7). He also prepared new editions of *Llyfr y Resolusion*, viz. *Dyhewyd y Cristion*, 1802, and of *Rhetoreg neu Rheitheg*, 1807, the work of **Henri Perri**, originally issued under the title of *Eglwyrn Phraethineb*. He translated other works and gave assistance to several English authors when they were dealing with Welsh or Celtic subjects. He also attempted to compose poetry. In 1819 he published *Coll Gwynfa*, a translation of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and, in 1822, a *cywydd* in three 'cantos' entitled *Hu Gadarn*.

He won renown as lexicographer and grammarian, and he was regarded as the principal authority on the Welsh language and on everything relating to Welsh scholarship. He was a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries, and in 1822 received the degree of D.C.L. from the University of Oxford. His letters show that he corresponded with some of the principal writers in England and that scholars sought his opinion. But in the latter half of the last century the position was completely changed and he was looked upon by **Sir John Rhys** and his followers as a pretentious quack. Both views were incorrect - he was the child of his age. As did so many of his contemporaries, Owen Pughe thought that Welsh was closely related to the primitive mother tongue and that the meanings of the original elements could be discovered by studying the language. In consequence he twists and changes words in his dictionary and forms and coins words according to a principle that is completely erroneous. He changed the orthography in order to show the origin of words according to this theory, and that was the beginning of the orthographic controversy of the last century. Moreover, he maintained that the role of the grammarian was to describe the language as it ought to be, and that is what he did in his grammar. This had a disastrous effect upon grammarians of the first half of the last century, and that is why later scholars regarded him as a quack. But he did no more than to apply the ideas of the age to the Welsh language. In truth, he performed considerable service to Welsh learning by the publication of his grammar. He had read the old literature fairly carefully and he succeeded in explaining the meanings of a host of words which had been obscure to all hitherto. And his dictionary was constantly in use by Welsh scholars of the last century. Moreover, it has to be borne in mind that it was because of his zeal and devotion that **Owain Myfyr** succeeded in publishing the old Welsh literature.

Author

Emeritus Professor Griffith John Williams, (1892 - 1963)

Sources

Robert Williams, *Enwogion Cymru. A Biographical Dictionary of Eminent Welshmen* (1852), 427-8
Geirlyfr Bywgraffiadol o Enwogion Cymru (1870), 864-8
Oxford Dictionary of National Biography
T. Mordaf Pierce, *Dr. W. Owen Pughe* (Caernarfon 1914)
Mysevin Manuscripts in the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth
and see under [Rowland Jones, 1722-1774](#)

Further Reading

Glenda Carr, *William Owen Pughe* (Caerdydd 1983)
Wikipedia Article: [William Owen Pughe](#)

Works

NLW Archives: NLW MS 13248iB: Dyddgoviant William Owen [-Pughe], 1811-1835
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Owen Jones, William Owen Pughe, *The Myvyrian Archaiology of Wales* (1801-1807), Volume 1
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