Folklore and Ideology in the Religions of Wales

Mary-Ann Constantine, University of Wales, Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies

In C18-19th Wales, as across the rest of Europe, local parsons or ministers were frequently the recorders of what we now call folklore: customs, songs, tunes, sayings, dialect forms, plant and animal lore. They also became, through the medium of the local Eisteddfod (a kind of competitive cultural festival revived in the late C18th), the instigators of a more general awareness of ‘folklore’ as an object of interest and national pride. The phenomenon of clerical interest in such matters is recognized in the appellation ‘hen bersoniaid llengar’ (‘old literary parsons’) which refers to a network of men (and some women) broadly working within the Church of England in Wales, whose efforts to promote local eisteddfodau across the country helped to capture and preserve aspects of Welsh folk culture at the time. Among them are scholars like Thomas Price (Carnhuanawc) and Ifor Ceri, both of whom worked tirelessly to preserve and maintain aspects of what they felt was authentic Welsh culture, written and oral.

But Wales at this period was also the land of Dissent, of a myriad Nonconformist sects opposed to the practice and doctrine of the established Church, themselves splitting and multiplying until every tiny village could boast, besides a church, two or three chapels competing for souls: Methodists, Baptists, Anabaptists, Arminians, Calvinists, Unitarians and more. Many of these dissenting denominations have gained a reputation for being ‘opposed’ to folklore: Methodism in particular is often accused of ‘killing’ the customs of ‘Merrie Wales’, replacing ballads with hymn-singing, and encouraging a life of personal spiritual development over community activities that once focused traditional folk pursuits. Dissenting religion’s emphasis on spreading literacy in the vernacular has also been blamed for the rapid erosion of oral forms.

This paper will examine some of these assumptions about religious denomination and folklore collection in Wales. Focusing on two or three individual cases it will look at the nature of the material deemed suitable for collection (and, importantly, performance) both by the so-called ‘literary parsons’ and their Nonconformist brethren.
1. Introduction. The linguistic, economic and religious background of C18th-19th Wales with a brief survey of the various denominations in Wales. How did different sects respond to what we now all folklore?

2. The effects of the Cultural Revival: The ‘Literary Parsons’ and the local eisteddfodau: case studies John Jenkins & Thomas Price [please see biographies attached]

3. Two dramatically different examples from Dissent: case studies Edmund Jones & William Roberts [please see biographies attached].


Note: The following four lives are intended to give you a ‘thicker’ background to each character discussed in the paper, so that I can focus on their texts. They have been copied directly from the immensely useful National Library of Wales Welsh Biography Online (see: llgc.org.uk). One or two are very much of their time, and reveal some interesting attitudes to their subjects!

PRICE, THOMAS (Carnhuanawc; 1787 - 1848), historian and antiquary; b. 2 Oct. 1787 at Pencaerelin in Llanfihangel Bryn Pabuan, Brecknock, the younger son of Rice Price, vicar of Llanwrthyl in that county from 1789 to his death in 1810, and of Mary Bowen of Pencaerelin, the daughter of a vicar. In his home he heard not only the songs and traditions of the peasantry but also the cywyddau of Dafydd ap Gwilym and occasionally the strains of the harp. He attended various schools in the village and a school at Llanafan vicarage, two miles away. From 1800, when the family removed to Builth, he was for five years at a ‘classical school’ conducted by the curate of that parish. He early showed his deep love for all that is beautiful and his aptitude for skilled work. In 1805 he entered Brecon grammar school and lodged in the town. Whilst there he was a constant visitor at the home of Theophilus Jones (q.v.), then engaged on the second volume of his History of Brecknockshire. The drawings for the illustrations in this volume were largely his work while a letter of 1811 from him to Jones concerning Roman remains near Llandrindod was published in Archaeologia, xvii. He was ordained deacon on 10 March 1811 and licensed to the curacies of Llan-lyr and Llanfihangel Helygen in Radnorshire; he was priested on 12 Sept. 1812, and in April 1813, moved to Crickhowel to take charge of the parishes of Llangenny, Llanbedr Ystradyw, and Patrishow. To these in 1816 were added the neighbouring parishes of Llangattock and Llanelly. Early in 1825 he received the vicarage of Llanfihangel Cwm-du, augmented in
1839 by the curacy of Tretower. He continued to live at Crickhowel until 1841 when he built himself a house at Cwm-du. He received the rural deanery of the third part of Brecon South in 1832.

A series of articles by Carnhuanawc appeared in *Seren Gomer* in 1824 and he continued to be a frequent contributor to Welsh periodicals down the years. He was also an enthusiastic supporter of the provincial eisteddfodau established in the years following 1819. His eloquent speeches were a prominent feature of these gatherings while he won prizes for essays on the early relations of the Armoricans and the Britons (*Welshpool*, 1824), the history of the Welsh princes (*Liverpool*, 1840), the comparative worth of the literatures of Wales, Ireland, and >Scotland (*Abergavenny*, 1845), and the Statutes of Rhuddlan (*Abergavenny*, 1848). He was deeply interested in Celtic antiquities and travelled in Europe in 1825, in Ireland and in Scotland within the following two years, and in Cornwall in 1839. He was largely responsible for making the Welsh and the Bretons aware of their ancient kinship. He learned the Breton language and from 1824 to 1835 he was constantly in correspondence with the Bible Society concerning the translation of the Scriptures into Breton, a task which as early as 1819 he had urged the society to undertake. He examined critically the translation prepared by Le Gonidec, and in 1829 crossed to France with a copy of Dr. John Davies’s Latin and Welsh *Dictionarium* to facilitate the completion of the work. On this journey he searched the libraries of Brittany and Paris in vain for Welsh or Breton manuscripts. As early as this he was suggesting that a literary society be established so that the Celticists of Britain and of Brittany might interchange ideas and also that a number of Welshmen should cross to Brittany to organize an eisteddfod. His name appears amongst those who assisted in founding the *Cambrian Quarterly Magazine*, 1830.

In 1829 he published *An Essay on the Physiognomy and Physiology of the present Inhabitants of Britain* to counter Pinkerton’s views on the origin of races. His greatest work, ‘*A History of Wales to the Death of Llywelyn ap Gruffydd*’ was written in Welsh and appeared in fourteen parts between 1836 and 1842. Though this careful work was marred by a cumbrous Anglicized style and an inadequate conception of the historian’s task, no worthier history of Wales appeared for many years. His essay on *The Geographical Progress of Empire and Civilisation*, first published in German in the *Augsburg Gazette*, appeared in English in the *Athenaeum* and again in book form in 1847.

Price was an ardent advocate of the cause of the native language and culture of Wales. About 1820 he founded, at his own expense, a Welsh school at Gelli Felen, while in 1833 he was agitating in the press for the use of Welsh in Sunday and day schools. As rural dean he insisted that the clergy under his jurisdiction should instruct their Welsh parishioners in their native tongue. In 1844 he wrote a series of scathing but unsigned letters to the press.
condemning the way in which church services were conducted in English for the convenience of a few rich people, and bishoprics and livings conferred on men whose ignorance of Welsh should have disqualified them from holding benefices in Wales. Through his efforts the Welsh Literary Society of Brecon was established in 1823. Soon afterwards he succeeded in establishing the Welsh Minstrelsy Society and for some years obtained sufficient subscriptions to maintain a school for blind harpists at Brecon. Throughout his life he took an intense interest in everything concerning the triple harp. When the Welsh Society of Abergavenny was established in 1833 Price's name was placed first in the list of members as a unanimous token of respect; the society did not survive long after his death. He participated in the work of the Welsh Manuscripts Society, editing the Iolo Manuscripts after the death of Taliesin Williams (q.v.) Though he won the esteem and co-operation of the gentry who supported the Welsh societies and eisteddfodau of the period he publicly expressed his admiration for the way in which the common people cherished the national heritage. He was recognized as one of the foremost Celtic scholars of his day and among the numerous people with whom he corresponded were men like John Jenkins of Kerry (q.v.), Le Gonidec, and Hersart de la Villemarqué.

Carnhuanawc was always clad in clothes made entirely of home-produced materials. A remarkably handsome man, he was by nature generous and ingenuous, noble and lovable. He d. on 7 Nov. 1848, and was buried at Llanfaelangel Cwm-du. A number of his essays were collected in the Literary Remains (Llandovery, 1854-5), a biography by Jane Williams (Ysgafell) (q.v.), appearing as a second volume.

Bibliography:

- J.E. Lloyd in *Dictionary of National Biography*;
- *National Library of Wales Manuscript 964-5, 3306, 6606, 6598*

Author: Brinley Rees, (-2001), M.A., Bangor.

JENKINS, JOHN (Ifor Ceri; 1777 - 1829), cleric and antiquary; b. 8 April 1777 at Cilbronau Farm, Llandoedmor, Cards. He was educated at the local school; then went to Carmarthen Academy, and thence to Jesus College, Oxford, from which he moved to Merton College, where he graduated B.A. in 1791. The same year he was ordained deacon and went as curate to his uncle, Dr. Lewis, rector of Whippingham, I.O.W. In 1799 he became chaplain to H.M.S. Agincourt in the West Indies, being later transferred to H.M.S.
Theseus. He returned home to recover his health, and after convalescence was appointed rector of Manordivy, Pembs., and, in 1807, vicar of Kerry, Mont., the living being in the gift of Thomas Burgess, bishop of S. Davids. He d. 20 Nov. 1829.

He built a new parsonage at Kerry, and the poets called it ‘The Court of Ifor Hael,’ for during the first week of every year he kept open house for ‘all comers provided only that they could compose an englyn, sing a song, or play the harp.’ In Aug. 1818, bishop Burgess came to Kerry and the two decided ‘to make an attempt to rekindle the bardic skill and ingenuity of the principality … by holding eisteddfodau in different places in the four provinces.’ The first of these eisteddfodau was held in the Ivy Bush inn, Carmarthen, on 8 and 9 July 1819; that was how the provincial eisteddfodau came into being. Ifor Ceri directed all of them until the 1829 eisteddfod at Denbigh when he opined that English influence was gradually creeping in and that they were becoming an ‘Anglo-Italian farce.’ He wrote articles in The Cambrian Quarterly Magazine and the Gwyliedydd. His manuscripts are in the N.L.W. His main interest was the collection of old airs and melodies, some of which were published by Maria Jane Williams (q.v.) of Aberpergwm in Ancient Welsh Music, and many by Bardd Alaw (q.v.) in his Welsh Harper


Author: David Gwenallt Jones, M.A., (1899-1968), Aberystwyth.
Ebwy Fawr (probably in Ty-Ilwyn), on which occasions the subsequent leaders of Methodism in Monmouthshire were converted, notably John Powell (3, q.v.) and Morgan John Lewis (q.v.). Though friendly to Harris, Jones feared that the progress of Methodism among Nonconformists might draw many of them to the Established Church, as Harris desired, in hope of reforming it from within. He therefore actively encouraged some societies, as at Devynnock and Neath, to form themselves into Independent churches, and this caused differences between Harris and himself. But the strong Calvinistic views of both were a common bond to the day of Harris’s death. Edmund Jones’s piety and evangelical zeal were admired both by Whitefield and the countess of Huntingdon, and he was always welcome at the latter’s Trevecka college. He was married but childless; his wife Mary (b. in 1696) d. 1 Aug. 1770. Their married life was very happy, but it is a baseless legend that Whitefield decided to find a wife after seeing their happy state. Jones was always poor, but always generous. He was known to have given his greatcoat on one occasion and his shirt on another to poorer people whom he met on his travels. An indefatigable preacher, he itinerated frequently in Wales and in England. In 1782 he travelled 400 miles on foot in North Wales, preaching twice daily; even in 1789 when 87 years of age, he preached 405 times. He was not, however, a popular preacher. Apart from various volumes of sermons he is best known for his *Historical Account of the Parish of Aberystwyth*, 1779, a competent piece of work which requires several readings for the right appreciation of many of the facts incidentally or implicitly referred to in it, and also his *Relations of Apparitions in Wales*, 1780, which is a farrago of the most astonishing superstitions, in all of which he firmly believed; hence he was frequently referred to as ‘Yr Hen Broffwyd’ (The Old Prophet). His diaries for nine years survive at the N.L.W., having been rescued from use as wrapping paper in a Pontypool shop shortly after his death. Edmund Jones was a man of dual personality — fearless in preaching and in founding new churches, a zealous evangelical and a firm Calvinist, yet frightened of apparitions and terrified by bad omens. He was devoid of poetic feeling but an incessant recorder and chronicler of religious developments, and his name recurs in almost every work dealing with 18th cent. Wales. An excellent article on him appeared in *Yr Adolygydd*, 1850, by Evan Jones (Ieuan Gwynedd), reprinted later in his collected works.

**Bibliography:** Edmund Jones’s diaries (National Library of Wales Manuscripts 7021-30); Howel Harris’s letters and diaries, also in N.L.W.; T. Rees, *History of Protestant Nonconformity in Wales*. 1861; 2nd edition, 1883, 152-4, 367-70, 430-5; Hanes Eglwysi Annibynnol Cymru, and, 1871–5, 1891 (five volumes), 67-71; *Memoirs of the life of the Rev. G. Whitefield … Faithfully selected from his original papers, journals, and letters*, London, 1772, 1772, 260; *Enwogion y Ffydd*, and, 1880, iii; ‘Spiritual Botanology,’ 1771, preserved in manuscript at Newport Public Library; *Seren Gomer*, 1825, 1851; *Y Cofiadur*, 1825.
Author: Mrs. Annie Grace Bowen-Jones, Rhuthun

ROBERTS, WILLIAM (Nefydd; 1813 - 1872), Baptist minister, printer, author, eisteddfodwr, South Wales representative of the British and Foreign Schools Society, etc.; b. 8 March 1813 in Bryngoleu, in the parish of Llannefydd, Denbs., son of Robert Roberts, shoemaker, and Anne his wife (see N.L.W. MS. 7000 for the names of some of the ancestors of the parents). He received but little education in his boyhood. He was taught his father’s craft, and after a while went to Llanddulas to work for one Humphrey Jones. He was baptised in 1832 by John Evans, Glanwydden, began to preach in Jan. 1834 and, in the summer of the same year, went to Llansilin to be prepared for the ministry by John Williams (1806 - 1856) (q.v.); Robert Ellis (Cynddelw, q.v.) was a fellow-pupil. In 1835 he settled at Mold as a Baptist home missionary. On 25 June 1837 he was ordained as minister of the Welsh Baptist church in Stanhope Street, Liverpool (see N.L.W. MS. 7127). He m. Jane, daughter of Daniel Jones (1788 - 1862) (q.v.), then minister of the Baptist church in Crosshall Street, Liverpool. Nefydd moved in 1845 to Monmouthshire to become minister of Salem church, Blaenau Gwent (the modern ‘Blaina’), where he spent the remainder of his days, busily engaged in a variety of ways. He became prominent as an eisteddfod competitor and as adjudicator. His best-known printed work, a composite production, was written for eisteddfodau. This is Crefydd yr Oesoedd Tywyll, neu Henafiaethau Defodol, Chwareu-yddol, a Choelgrefyddol: yn cynnwys y Traethawd Gwobrwyol yn Eisteddfod y Fenni ar Mari Lwyd … ynghyd a Sylwadau ar lawer o hen Arferion tebyg i Mari Lwyd … (Carmarthen, 1852).

He set up his own printing press at Blaenau (in 1864) and printed and published Y Bedyddiwr for four years; he edited Seren Gomer for some years, but it is not known whether he printed more than one number of that journal (N.L.W. MSS. 7077-9). Prominent in Baptist circles, he became well-known in educational circles also, particularly after he had been appointed (in 1853) South Wales agent for the British and Foreign Schools Society (N.L.W. MSS. 7096, 7106-7). For eleven years he was busy with the task of establishing and inspecting schools and arranging for the training of teachers; he had conducted his own ‘night school’ at Blaenau at one time. Throughout the years he had been building up a library which eventually reached a total of about 600 volumes, besides several manuscripts of historical or literary interest. Amongst the manuscripts was a copy of the ‘Red Book of S. Asaph’ (N.L.W. MS. 7011), collections of older and later Welsh poems (e.g. N.L.W. MSS. 7012, 7014-7), and the diaries of Edmund Jones (q.v.), Pontypool (N.L.W. MSS. 7021-30). He also, for a time, kept a book-shop. In addition to material on the history of the Baptists collected by himself, Nefydd acquired material on the same subject accumulated by Ellis Evans (q.v.), Cefn-mawr (who was Baptist minister at Llanefydd when Nefydd was a young boy) and others. Amongst the contents of the two groups are several hundred letters from ministers and laymen. Part of this composite collection came into the hands of J. Spinther James (q.v.), and was used by him when he was writing his Hanes y Bedyddwyr; by now the Spinther collection (which was
bought by principal J. H. Davies) and the main portion of the historical material which had remained in the Nefydd library have been reunited in the N.L.W. (For some details about Nefydd’s printed books, see an article by E. I. Williams in *Jnl. Welsh Bibliog. Soc.* , ii, 246-50). Nefydd d. 18 June 1872, and was buried in the burial-ground of ‘Blaenau Gwent’ chapel at Abertillery. His first wife, Jane (Jones), had died soon after the removal to Blaenau; the second wife was the widow of Jenkin Edwards. The Nefydd manuscripts (including letters) were transferred to the N.L.W. in 1930 in two groups (N.L.W. MSS. 7011-7175 and 7176-89), to be followed in 1933 by a third group (N.L.W. MSS. 7768-79) and, in 1934, by a fourth group (N.L.W. MSS. 9637-9); for details see *N.L.W. Handlist of MSS.* , x, 231-4.

**Bibliography:** To the sources listed in the text add *Seren Gomer*, May 1895:

- *National Library of Wales Manuscripts* 7100, 7108, and 7181;

**Author:** Sir William Llewelyn Davies, M.A., LL.D., F.S.A. (1887-1952), Aberystwyth