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Gwyn A. Williams.

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## DAVID WILLIAMS

GWYN A. WILLIAMS

University College, Cardiff

"You all know Lytton Strachey," said the Sir John Williams Professor of Welsh History at Aberystwyth, peering over spectacles at the serried ranks of flowered hats of a bien-pensant cultural weekend, "he was the man who took drum and trumpet history and made it bum and strumpet history".

David Williams, in his impeccable and slightly unexpected Hector Powe lightweight suits, annually renewed in strict routine, his equally unexpected Italian shoes, his no less impeccable and then slightly unusual Hillman Minx, piloted by a trim and, in Aberystwyth, decidedly unexpected wife, was a man of style, wit and panache; he was also a man who made Routine a creative passion, logged his hours as Dean as meticulously as a computer in the service of the TUC, snubbed petitioners if they had not remembered he was a professor, hid his widower wine and whisky from his landlady ("Academics are funny people, Mr. Cobb," said she, "who else would drink whisky from teacups?") and remained so rooted a Baptist from seminal Rhydwylym that his friend Christopher Hill of Balliol (and he earned, kept and merited such friends) once called him a peasant.

"How clever of you to recognise a Notre Dame gargoyle", he said to me once, after I had spotted a miniature in his elegant and impeccable room in the Tower (higher than any other senior and strategically placed to keep tabs on a junior)—"Take a seat in the Parker Knoll Chair of Welsh History". Recovering from this characteristic put-down, I commented on the bust of Voltaire which was his favourite talisman . . . "Well, Gwyn," he said, "I may not share your advantage in rejecting an impartial view of history, but I **am** a Baptist of Voltairean persuasion . . ."

In several important respects, a Voltairean Baptist he was, and had been from his early days as a student of the French Revolution. He was, too, a scholar of wide and deep European and American erudition who had worked under Meinecke and Carlton Hayes, and spent a Christmas Day in the New York Public Library. The pious mythology of Welsh History served the role of Voltaire's **infame**. After a celebrated lecture he gave on radio once about the two 'tarnished heroes' of Rebecca, a Welsh Nationalist journal reported that a man "well known in Welsh cultural life" turned to a friend and said . . . "Well, I'd rather be wrong with Tradition than Right with Professor Drip". This delighted David Williams; he reverted to the term constantly. I was then making my first sortie into radio documentary and, having written in a historian's part, labelled the speaker Dry-as-Dust. When David Williams vetted the text (quite normal in those unliberated days) he meticulously deleted this every time it occurred and replaced it with Professor Drip.

He earned this reputation among many. What never ceased to amaze me was his resolute refusal to permit any of his wit (often as dry and salty as a manzanilla sherry) his humour (often no less salty) or his sheer panache (often very French, as many of his generation were) to make even the most fleeting

appearance in his published and serious work. It was as if he put on his Sunday suit to lecture in. By any standards, he was a giant in the historiography of Wales; we all stand on his shoulders. He was quite literally a pioneer; after him, the history of Wales could never be the same. Yet there was this element of withdrawal from the implications of his own discoveries, a deliberate self-restraint which sometimes came close to self-mutilation.

He seemed to fear imagination. This was partly a functional necessity in his generation of Welsh history which had to clear the ground of myth. It was their categorical imperative. One corollary, however, was a tendency to be **ashamed** of myth (which had turned us into a people who would not be taken seriously) and a consequent crippling of the craftsman's imagination. David Williams's colleague, the medievalist Tom Jones Pierce, a no less brilliant and no less self-mutilated man, sometimes seemed to serve as the last of the Actor-Managers in Welsh History, but he was often more inspiring to students in that he let imagination **play**. David Williams could never bring himself to believe in the Welsh State of the thirteenth century because he could never fully bring himself to believe in Jones Pierce ("Venedotian Imperialism").

Looking back, I suppose it was a **Respectability** in the fullest sense which ultimately governed him and, in the last resort, subjected his own very real and powerful imagination (witness his brilliant essays on John Evans and the Madoc myth, his perception of the American and Atlantic dimension of the Welsh experience: his **Rebecca** is one of the most unusual and pioneering, as well as magnificent, essays in social history ever written—"A gem! a gem! a gem!" cried the American historian of Chartism, Art Schoyen) to Conventionality. "Unsavoury" was one of his favourite adjectives (applied to Hugh Williams the Chartist, for example); he sometimes seemed to feel that "debunking" was enough.

Partly for those reasons, however, his achievement **towers**. Systematic, detailed, precise and impeccable scholarship, by its very routine, became a creative power. He walked Wales and knew it, like a palaeographer knows a cherished palimpsest. He could point out houses where the first Methodist seiat had been held in any bro. This he learned from that other giant R. T. Jenkins, who also made boots part of a historian's equipment, in David's much-loved Cardiff. (Typically, however, this permanent yearning for Cardiff was not strong enough to overcome routine; to succeed William Rees would have meant running **two** departments). He built up modern Wales like a coral-reef, every crystal duly authenticated.

His impact on his students and acolytes was long-term, indirect and permanent. I personally, now that I am into the male menopause, increasingly recognise a certain unlikely affinity, which goes further than a shared interest in Jacobins and Welsh America. Characteristically he secured my entry into the academic profession, largely because he could not bear to go on giving lectures which had already appeared as his **Modern Wales**; characteristically, he could not conceive of reshaping those lectures, which would have broken a creative routine. No less characteristically, he remembered me because I was the only student in a class once who laughed at one of his rare jokes (at the expense of the Methodists, of course).

He could not entirely approve of the direction into which my work carried me, but he could not fail to recognise either that it was a direction which his own work had suggested.

David Williams meticulously mapped a continent and cleared it of monsters and ghosts; in some corners, he reshaped it entirely. It is up to us to confront the kind of creative craftsmanship he established with problems which would have disconcerted him. For his work finds echoes in unexpected places. In the unforgettable spring of 1945 I was in the ruins of Berlin; I crossed into the Russian Zone. The first thing I saw amid the ruins was a bookshop and the first thing I saw in that bookshop was David Williams's **John Frost**. When I told him this, he was simultaneously delighted and afraid of what people might say.

I expect he will react to our work in much the same way, as he sits back now in his Parker Knoll chair in some Elysian salon designed by Thomas Jefferson and tries to explain Rhydwylym Baptist to Voltaire.

As his apprentices, we can expect no more and no less. If we do a tenth of what our Master did, we will have been industrious apprentices indeed. David Williams, Welshman, Frenchman and American, historian grandson of Rebecca, has slipped out of our history as unobtrusively as his fellow Baptist Morgan John Rhys did. He will not have to wait a hundred years to be remembered. Our work will see to that.