

# The Longing and the Legacy: Liturgy and Life in the Hymns of William Williams of Pantycelyn<sup>1</sup>

*E. Wyn James*

‘The four hundred or so hymns produced [by William Williams of Pantycelyn in the decade between 1762 and 1772, when he was at the height of his powers] have a significance in modern Welsh literature second only to the translation of the Bible.’ Thus said the late Dr Kathryn Jenkins, a former President of the Welsh Hymn Society and a former Executive Committee member of the Hymn Society of Great Britain and Ireland, who died suddenly and far too prematurely in 2009 aged 47. That is quite a claim given the commanding role the Welsh translation of the Bible played in Welsh cultural life during the centuries between the end of the reign of Elizabeth I and the beginning of that of Elizabeth II; but it is a claim which I believe is wholly justified and one which I hope to convince you of its veracity before the end of this lecture.

Kathryn Jenkins spoke those words during a plenary lecture which she delivered at the York International Hymn Conference in August 1997, entitled ‘“Songs of Praises”: The Literary and Spiritual Qualities of the Hymns of William Williams and Ann Griffiths’ — the two greatest of all Welsh hymn-writers. When I was kindly invited to give this lecture, my thoughts turned immediately to William Williams of Pantycelyn as my subject, not only because of his national and international status and significance, but also because we are approaching the 300th anniversary of his birth in 2017. However, because Kathryn had lectured on Williams Pantycelyn at a previous International Hymn Conference, I had some reservations, until I was reminded — rather frighteningly! — by the Treasurer of the Hymn Society of Great Britain and Ireland

that it is nearly twenty years since Kathryn delivered her lecture; ‘rather frighteningly’, since I remember the occasion well and since it feels in some ways almost like yesterday. Inevitably, in what follows I shall cover some of the same ground as Kathryn did in her lecture in 1997, but in ways which I hope will complement that lecture. However, before turning to the life and work of William Williams of Pantycelyn himself, let us begin by setting the scene for those who may not be very familiar with Wales, let alone its religious history.

The eighteenth century is one of the great turning points in Welsh history. It was a century of ‘awakenings’ which saw the beginnings of far-reaching demographic and cultural changes that would transform Wales and Welsh life. These included a revival of interest in the language, literature and traditions of Wales, a great expansion in popular education, increasing political radicalism, and the beginnings of major industrial developments and urbanization. It was a century, according to one author, in which the common people of Wales awoke and started to think for themselves.

Central to those changes was religion. The period from the mid-eighteenth century onward saw marked changes in religious adherence and patterns of worship. In 1700, Wales was a rural, thinly-populated country of about 400,000 inhabitants, where loyalty to the gentry and the established Anglican Church went almost unquestioned. By 1850 the population had trebled, there was much social and political unrest, and there were by then four

*The Longing and the Legacy*

Nonconformists for every Anglican. The second half of the nineteenth century would see a cultural hegemony develop in Wales that was primarily Liberal in political allegiance and Nonconformist in religion. ‘Chapel-building mania’ would lead to Nonconformist chapels becoming a dominant architectural feature in every town and village throughout the country and, partly because of the fervent hymn-singing which characterized the life of those chapels, by the mid-1870s Wales had become known as ‘the Land of Song’.

Pivotal to these developments was the powerful religious movement which began in Wales around 1735 and which is often referred to as the ‘Methodist Revival’. It was part of an international evangelical awakening in Europe and North America while at the same time being an indigenous Welsh movement. In Wales the revival was conducted mainly through the medium of Welsh, the only language of most of the population at that time. It had its roots in south Wales, but gradually spread northwards, affecting the whole of the country by the late eighteenth century. It was closely linked to a remarkable circulating charity-schools movement which began in the early 1730s and which had made Wales one of the most literate countries in the world by the mid-eighteenth century. By the 1760s almost half of the Welsh population had learned to read and the movement’s success had even reached the ears of Catherine the Great of Russia. The organizer of that movement, Griffith Jones (1684–1761), was an Anglican clergyman based in Carmarthenshire in south-west Wales, and the movement was predominantly one in the south of the country. However, in the 1780s, the influential Welsh Methodist leader, Thomas Charles (1755–1814), one of the main founders of the Bible Society, instigated an educational and evangelistic programme from his base in Bala, in the centre of north Wales, which led to a great expansion of both literacy and Methodism in the north also. Thomas Charles was a pioneer and a great promoter of the Sunday-school movement, which in Wales included classes for both adults and children and which would grow into an extremely powerful popular movement. By the 1880s, for example, around half a million people in Wales attended Sunday schools — about a third of the population at that time. Williams Pantycelyn was himself very concerned to promote charity schools like those of Griffith Jones. Indeed, one of his last publications, in 1790, was a ‘serious address’ encouraging ‘all charitable and well-disposed Christians’ to contribute to the support of such schools, and he left money in his will to that end.

Methodism in Wales in the eighteenth century was frequently strongest where the circulating schools of Griffith Jones were most numerous. The Methodist Revival brought to Welsh religious life a deeper emphasis on the experiential, with an increased focus on personal salvation. At the outset Methodism was a renewal movement within the Anglican Church, and the Welsh Methodists (who were predominantly Calvinist, and not Arminian like the followers of Wesley in England) did not formally become a Nonconformist denomination until 1811. (That denomination was initially called the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist Connection and is now usually known as the Presbyterian Church of Wales.) However, this emphasis on the experiential also increasingly affected the older Baptist and Congregational denominations during the second half of the eighteenth century, partly as a result of the series of strong evangelical awakenings which characterized Welsh religious life progressively as the eighteenth century advanced and which would continue to be a prominent feature of religious life in Wales well into the nineteenth century. As a result, by the first half of the nineteenth century a common theological and experiential ethos, Calvinist and evangelical, had come to characterize the majority of Welsh Nonconformists (and many Anglicans also).

A core element in the expression of this experiential evangelical faith was the hymn. It began to develop in earnest as a genre in Welsh with the outbreak of the Methodist Revival in the 1730s and would become one of the most common and influential expressions of popular religion in Wales during the following centuries. Prior to 1740, metrical psalms were predominant in worship, and hymns in Welsh, both in print and manuscript, may be numbered in tens rather than hundreds, written in about half a dozen different metrical forms. However, the half century between 1740 and 1790 saw a veritable ‘hymn explosion’. It has been estimated that over 3,000 hymns were composed in Welsh during that period, with the number of metrical forms mushrooming to around fifty. Over a quarter of those hymns came from the pioneering pen of William Williams of Pantycelyn.

William Williams is usually referred to in Welsh cultural circles as ‘Williams Pantycelyn’ or simply as ‘Pantycelyn’, after the name of the farm where he spent most of his life, near the bustling market town of Llandovery in north Carmarthenshire, a major junction

on the drovers' roads from west Wales to southern England. Born in 1717 and dying in 1791, his life spans the eighteenth century, and in many ways Williams is the embodiment of the profound and dramatic changes in the religious life of Wales that occurred during that period. He was born into a Nonconformist family. His father was a ruling elder in a Nonconformist church which experienced much theological conflict. This eventually led to Williams's father and others establishing a separate Calvinist congregation in 1740. When, in an epic poem he wrote in 1764, Williams warns of the turmoil and division that may result from being overzealous regarding specific points of doctrine or practice, he was no doubt reflecting in part on the experiences of his youth. Because it was not possible for Nonconformists to graduate at the universities of Oxford and Cambridge in this period, at about twenty years of age Williams went to study at a dissenting academy near Hay-on-Wye in Breconshire. Incidentally, it is possible that the influential philosopher, Richard Price (1723–91), was a fellow pupil at that academy; and as it happens, Price died in the same year as Williams Pantycelyn (as did John Wesley and the Countess of Huntingdon for that matter). Williams was intent on becoming a doctor, and indeed retained an avid interest in things medical and scientific throughout his life, as can be seen, for example, from the detailed footnotes on scientific matters which he added to the descriptions of creation in an epic poem he first published in 1756. Those interests in matters medical and scientific also surface in his hymns, such as in the English-language hymn he published in 1759, which opens:

The Moon and all her train surrounding,  
 With the lofty dazzling Sun,  
 Now are wearied in the heavens  
 Their laborious course to run ...

That hymn is a meditation on 'the end of all things' (1 Peter 4:7), and especially on death, which is personified as 'creeping forward unaware' to aim 'a blow decisive' at 'every artery and muscle'. Death, says the hymnist, has sowed an 'abundance of distempers'. However, the final

victory is that of 'the mighty glorious Jesus', for while the believer's body must 'slumber in the ground', 'every atom / Of [its] ashes will be found' on resurrection morning, 'since our nature / To the Godhead hath been wed'.

Williams's career intentions would change dramatically however when, on his way home from the academy to his lodgings one day in 1737 or 1738, he heard a fiery young Methodist by the name of Howel Harris preaching in Talgarth churchyard, passionately warning his hearers that the Day of Judgement was nigh. Williams Pantycelyn experienced an evangelical conversion under that sermon. In a Welsh-language elegy he wrote on Harris's death in 1773, Williams could say of that occasion, 'I will always remember that morning. I too heard the voice of heaven. I was caught by a summons from on high'; and elsewhere in that elegy he says that Harris's preaching was like tremendous bolts of lightning being hurled from a thunder cloud.

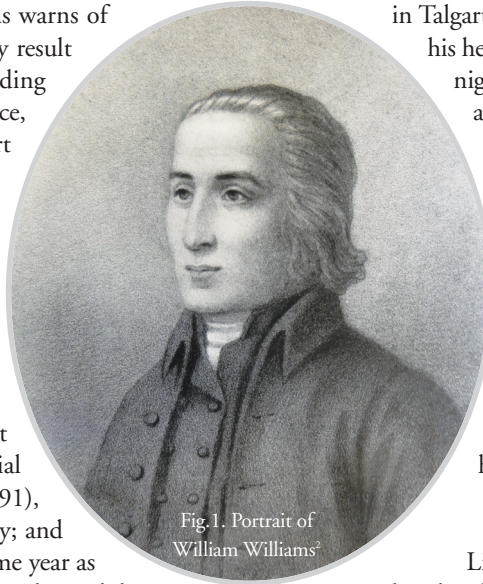


Fig. 1. Portrait of William Williams<sup>2</sup>

Life would never be the same again. Rather than becoming a doctor, Williams now set his sights on being a physician of souls. However, his Methodist conversion made him look towards the Anglican ministry rather than the Nonconformity of his upbringing, and he served for a few years in the early 1740s as curate of some mountainous parishes near his home. Although he would dedicate himself to the Methodist cause for the rest of his life, and would remain technically an Anglican until his death, it is important to note that the Nonconformist influences of his youth continued in various ways. Williams has been portrayed as a forerunner of Romanticism, and it is indeed possible to see pre-Romantic elements in his work, as one can also see in him strong Enlightenment influences, despite his fear of rationalism; but in many ways he should be regarded primarily as an heir of the Puritans, as may be seen from the fact that, when looking back over his life from his deathbed, Williams noted the great influence on him of works by Puritan divines — those of Thomas Goodwin and John Owen, for example, which he said had helped 'sharpen' his mind in matters theological.

*The Longing and the Legacy*

During his period as a young Anglican curate, Williams became increasingly prominent as a Methodist leader. Howel Harris could say of him at that time: 'Hell trembles when he comes and souls are daily taken by Brother Williams in the gospel net.' Harris makes other comments about his preaching during that period which grow in significance when viewed in the light of William Pantycelyn's subsequent development as a hymn-writer and the themes of his hymns. For example, in February 1743 Howel Harris notes in his diary: 'Brother Williams preached on Luke 7:47: he showed the difference between Christ in the head and Christ in the heart'; and he adds: 'My soul was inflamed with love in listening.' Again, in December 1743, Harris notes: 'Brother Williams preached on Exodus 15:25. He spiritualized the Israelite journey. There came very great power indeed and there was great crying out.'

Because of his Methodism, and his itinerant preaching in particular, the Anglican authorities were unwilling to confer full priest's orders on Williams and in 1744 he left his curacies in order to devote himself entirely to the Methodist cause, becoming a sort of unofficial curate to the Anglican cleric, Daniel Rowland, who (together with Howel Harris) was the main leader of early Welsh Methodism. Rowland was an extremely powerful preacher, who drew thousands from all parts of Wales to Llangeitho, the small village in mid-Wales where he lived, in order to sit under his ministry.

Williams Pantycelyn would develop into one of the most able Methodist leaders of his generation. For over forty years he travelled extensively throughout Wales — over 2,500 miles annually on horseback, on what are not the best of roads even today! — shepherding the Methodist flock and evangelizing. In a letter to the Countess of Huntingdon in 1769 he describes his travels as 'roving and ranging over the rude mountains and wild precipices of Wales in search of poor illiterate souls chained in the dens of darkness and infidelity'. Writing at the end of his life, Williams estimated that those travels from the 1740s onward were the equivalent of encompassing the globe more than four times. Little wonder, then, that images of travel and pilgrimage occur so frequently in his hymns.

His home base during those long years of travel was Pantycelyn farm. Williams was very happily married and had eight children in all; six girls and two boys. He and

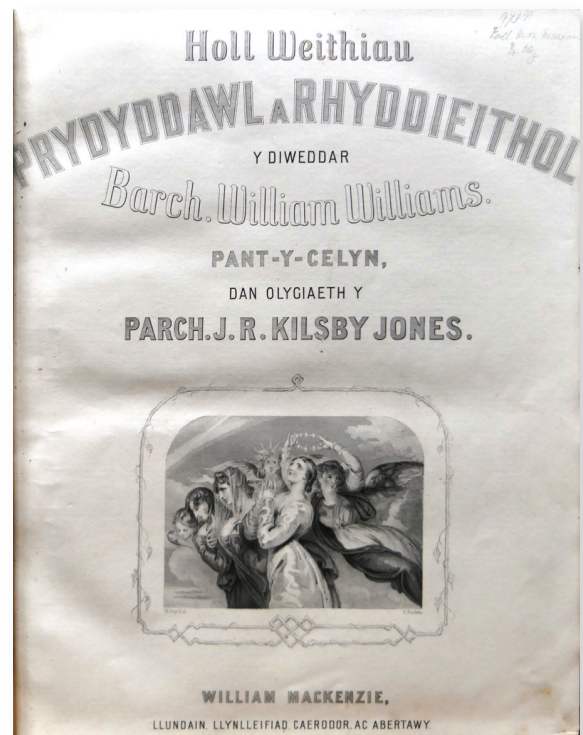


Fig. 2. Title page of the 1867 edition of the Collected Works of William Williams, opposite the frontispiece portrait shown in Fig. 1. Reproduced courtesy of Carmarthenshire Museum, Abergwili.

his wife were successful farmers, and the income from the farm at Pantycelyn, together with land and capital that he and his wife had inherited, meant that the family were comfortably provided for financially. In material terms, then, Williams Pantycelyn was certainly not a 'pilgrim [in a] barren land'! A further source of income was his publications which (together with tea) he would sell on his travels. Williams was a prolific writer. Between 1744 and his death in 1791, he published over 90 books and pamphlets, almost all in Welsh. A wide variety of material flowed from his pen. Among his publications are two epic poems. One, entitled *Golwg ar Deyrnas Crist* ('A Prospect of Christ's Kingdom'), is a panoramic overview of the history of the world, from the eternal decree which preceded creation up until the end of time, while the other epic, *Bywyd a Marwolaeth Theomemphus* ('The Life and Death of Theomemphus'), focuses in detail on the spiritual progress of a representative (albeit larger-than-life) Methodist convert from cradle to grave. Over 30 funeral elegies form a substantial body of elegiac verse that provides important insights into the development and

ethos of the Methodist Revival in Wales. Williams also wrote eight original prose works and published a number of translations into Welsh of works by authors on both sides of the Atlantic, including Ebenezer Erskine, Thomas Goodwin and James Ussher. The common factor which links almost all of his writings is that they were produced for utilitarian reasons. They are not the polished products of a conscious 'man of letters'. Indeed, Williams tends to be rather careless of detail in matters of style and grammar. Rather they are the work of a born, if rather undisciplined, literary genius, spurred on by the need to provide practical literature for the Methodist converts, to help them understand their spiritual experiences and to build them up in their faith. For example, among his original prose works are a treatise on envy (which he compares to a crocodile tearing its prey into pieces), a discussion on the stewardship of material wealth and a volume of marriage guidance. The main exception to this pragmatism is his encyclopaedic *Pantheologia*, a 654-page study of the religions of the world, which is not only brimful of information about the various faiths and belief systems, but also contains much about the history, geography and customs of the lands in which those faiths were to be found. It is a volume which shows Pantycelyn to be an heir of 'enlightenment' as well as 'enthusiasm'.

It is difficult to overemphasize the importance of this literary corpus and its influence on the religious and cultural life of Wales. Through it Williams Pantycelyn became the predominant literary voice of the Methodist Revival in Wales and one of the most significant figures in Welsh literature in the modern period. With Pantycelyn, say the literary critics Kathryn Jenkins and Dafydd Glyn Jones, began 'a preoccupation with spiritual experience and personal salvation' and with 'self-searching and self-discovery [... and] the realization of an ideal good', that would be a dominant feature of Welsh literature, both 'sacred' and 'secular', for the next two centuries. But despite the significance of Pantycelyn's literary corpus as a whole, and his epics and original prose works in particular, pride of place must be given to his hymns. He wrote over 850 hymns in Welsh and is rightly regarded as 'the father of the Welsh congregational hymn'.

Written primarily for the use of the Methodist community, his hymns cover the whole range of evangelical Christian experience and are a balanced blend of the theological and the experiential. Williams Pantycelyn is in fact a fascinating combination of balance

and extremes. He was an enthusiastic, energetic person, strong yet genial and gentle, chatty and cultured, down to earth and full of humour — the sort of person you would like to invite to tea! — but he was also one who lost his temper easily and who often plunged into the depths of melancholy. He was balanced in his theology and yet, experientially, everything is in superlatives. Spiritually it is either the height of summer or the depth of winter, and images of heat and cold, light and dark, abound in his work. We see a balance between objective and subjective in the 'theory of hymnody' he develops in the prefaces to his collections of hymns. Aspiring hymn-writers, he says, should immerse themselves in works of poetry, and especially in the poetic books of the Bible, in order to recognize the essence of great poetry and master stylistic devices. But in addition to such technical mastery, Williams also emphasizes that only those who have experienced 'true grace', who truly know God in Christ, should turn their hand to writing hymns, and even then only when they 'feel their souls near to heaven, under the breezes of the Holy Spirit'. And ultimately, more than anything else, it is the passion that pervades his work which makes Pantycelyn the great hymn-writer that he is. Thomas Charles could say of his hymns: 'Some verses in his hymns are like coals of fire, warming and firing every passion when sung.'

In style, Williams Pantycelyn mixes literary Welsh (and in particular that of the majestic Renaissance translation of the Bible into Welsh) with the Welsh of the marketplace to develop a new, supple poetic diction with which to explore and express the world of the soul and the self that had opened to the converts of the revival. Although uneven as a hymn-writer, at his finest Pantycelyn uses this new poetic diction sensuously and dramatically, with great lyrical power and metrical prowess, to create an exceptional and very influential body of verse, which (to quote H. A. Hodges) would 'cast a spell over the mind of Welsh-speaking Wales' for many generations and which played a key role in the rise of the new popular evangelical culture that was increasingly transforming Welsh life as the eighteenth century progressed.

As one might expect of an evangelical hymn-writer, Pantycelyn's hymns are Christo-centric and cruci-centric. Although in one sense Williams Pantycelyn was at the cutting edge of a new way of expressing faith, at the same time he embraces the central age-old tenets of orthodox Christianity. In his hymns, Williams never strays far from

*The Longing and the Legacy*

the person and work of Christ, and from the foot of the cross in particular. The predominant theme of his work is that his beloved Jesus far surpasses all and everything. Having said that, there is a sense in which Williams travels widely in his hymns. They are Biblio-centric. They abound with scriptural allusions and imagery and make extensive use of typology, a technique which draws the Methodist believer of the eighteenth century dramatically and dynamically into the biblical narrative. As can be seen in his best-known English hymn, 'Guide me, O thou great Jehovah', one of the most prominent of these images is that of the believer as a pilgrim, travelling longingly through the barren wilderness of this world towards his heavenly home. Here Pantycelyn draws especially on the wanderings of the Israelites in the desert on their way from captivity in Egypt to the Promised Land, as depicted in the book of Exodus. He prays for divine guidance and protection on that journey, through all the trials and temptations that he must face, until he lands 'safe on Canaan's side' of Jordan, the river of death.

The other main image in Pantycelyn's hymns, drawing in this case especially on the Song of Solomon, is that of Christ as Lover and Beloved, and of the Saviour as Bridegroom. An intense love for Christ runs through Pantycelyn's hymns. Even salvation itself is worthless without Christ: 'the word "forgiveness" is nothing to me [...] unless I see thy countenance', says Pantycelyn in one of his Welsh hymns. Kathryn Jenkins is right to emphasize that in his hymns 'Williams concentrates mainly on the I-Thou dialectic, making consistent use of the second person imperative, whereas Ann Griffiths relies chiefly on the I-Him relationship'. This intimate dialogue is one reason, perhaps, why the major Welsh literary critic, Saunders Lewis (1893–1985), described Williams's poetry as 'feminine poetry in the finest sense of the word', as opposed to the more 'masculine', 'cerebral' poetic voice of Ann Griffiths; and in that context it is interesting to see the following couplet in one of Williams's English hymns: 'He my God, my Friend, my Saviour, / I His sister and His bride.' However, as regards the use of the first person singular, it is always important to remember that the 'I' in his hymns does not necessarily equate with William Williams of Pantycelyn. Unlike Ann Griffiths, Williams wrote his hymns for congregational use, and he emphasized that his aim was to create a range of songs which would voice the variety of spiritual conditions found among evangelical believers. Be that as it may, a deep longing for heaven pervades all of Pantycelyn's work, since

heaven means, above all else, being with Christ. Indeed to Williams, Christ is heaven: '*Fy Iesu yw'r nefoedd i gyd.*'

By way of example, let us consider one of Williams Pantycelyn's most famous hymns, first published in 1764, and described by a Professor of Welsh, Sir John Morris-Jones (1864–1929), as one of the most perfect lyrics in the Welsh language. Here it is in full with a literal English translation:

Mi dafla' 'maich oddi ar fy ngwar  
Wrth deimlo dwyfol loes;  
Euogrwydd fel mynyddau'r byd  
Dry yn ganu wrth dy groes.

Os edrych wnaif i'r dwrain draw,  
Os edrych wnaif i'r de,  
Ymhlith a fu, neu ynteu ddaw,  
'Does tebyg iddo Fe.

Fe rodd ei ddwylo pur ar lled,  
Fe wisgodd goron ddrain,  
Er mwyn i'r brwnt gael bod yn wyn  
Fel hyfryd liain main.

Esgyn a wnaeth i entrych ne'  
I eiriol dros y gwan;  
Fe sugna f'enaid innau'n lân  
I'w fynwes yn y man.

Ac yna caf fod gydag Ef  
Pan el y byd ar dân,  
Ac edrych yn ei hyfryd wedd,  
Gan' harddach nag o'r bla'n.

I cast my burden from off my shoulders  
As I feel divine anguish;  
Guilt like the world's mountains  
Turns to song at thy cross.

If I look to the east yonder,  
If I look to the south,  
Among those who have been, or are yet to come,  
There is no one like Him.

He stretched his pure hands wide,  
He wore a crown of thorns,  
So that the filthy might be white  
Like lovely fine linen.

He ascended into highest heaven  
To intercede for the weak;  
He will draw up my soul fully  
To his bosom before long.

And there I shall be with Him  
When the world goes on fire,  
And gaze into his lovely countenance,  
A hundred times more beautiful than before.

In structure the hymn develops robustly from sin to salvation. Pilgrimage is suggested by the oblique reference in the first verse to the scene in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* where the burden of sin is loosed from off the shoulders of the pilgrim as he approaches a wayside cross. The cross of Christ is literally at the heart of this hymn, being depicted in the middle verse; and the biblical allusion to Revelation 19:8 ('for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints') gives further depth to that depiction. But although he is not referred to once by name, it is the Saviour himself, and the matchless beauty of the Beloved, which is central to the hymn from start to finish. The emphasis is on the visual, and while such gazing means that there is an objectivity at work to a degree, the mood is extremely subjective throughout. In the original Welsh the rhythms and word patterns combine to create an evocative atmosphere and a consummate whole. Each verse is a single sentence which develops effortlessly, reaching a climax in the last line; and like movements in a symphony, each verse not only reaches its own climax, but leads on from verse to verse to the ultimate climax where the believer is in highest heaven gazing sensuously on the Beloved's unsurpassable countenance.

The Welsh Methodists had no formal liturgy. During the eighteenth century they remained technically members of the Anglican Church, and to that extent the liturgy of the Book of Common Prayer remained theirs. However, from the outset the Methodists met together in what they called *seiadau* (or 'society meetings'; the singular form is *seiat*, and it derives from the English word 'society'). In them, people of similar spiritual convictions and conditions would gather regularly for worship, instruction and mutual encouragement. They would share their spiritual experiences with one another in those meetings and put them under the microscope, which is why they were called *seiadau profiad* ('experience meetings'). Williams Pantycelyn is said to have been especially skilful at leading such meetings and he published a guide on how to conduct them. These society meetings would begin with the singing of a hymn, and those present would often continue singing for hours after the meeting had formally concluded. The Methodist leadership arranged for singers to visit the societies to teach them tunes. One of these was a Dorothy Jones, whom Howel Harris described as 'a sweet soul, [...] singing almost continually when set free', and a report of one society meeting held in a Carmarthenshire farmhouse in 1741, where Dolly Jones was present, notes that she and some of the others attending that *seiat*

meeting stayed up all night long. The Methodist *seiat* can in many ways be regarded as the cradle of the Welsh congregational hymn, since one of the main incentives for Williams Pantycelyn and others to write hymns was in order to meet the demand for them from the society meetings.

Under revival influences Welsh Methodist worship could be very fervent, not to say energetic. It is not without cause that the Welsh Methodists were nicknamed 'Welsh Jumpers' — and it was not because of their woollen garments! Williams Pantycelyn's hymns were central to this fervent worship, whether in a society meeting or at a preaching meeting. While in Swansea in 1763, John Wesley commented rather disapprovingly on a report he had heard that

It is common in the congregations attended by Mr. W[illiam] W[illiams of Pantycelyn] and one or two other clergymen, after the preaching is over, for any one that has a mind, to give out a verse of an hymn. This they sing over and over with all their might, perhaps above thirty, yea forty times. Meanwhile the bodies of two or three, sometimes ten or twelve, are violently agitated; and they leap up and down, in all manner of postures, frequently for hours together.

Daniel Rowland's famous response to such disapproval was: 'You, English, blame us, the Welsh, and speak against us and say, "Jumpers, jumpers." But we, the Welsh, have something also to allege against you; and we most justly say of you, "Sleepers, sleepers."' Similarly, Williams Pantycelyn, includes a cameo in a pamphlet he published in 1763 defending such fervent worship, in which a married couple, Formalistus and Florida (Williams is fond of using Latin names for the characters he creates) take afternoon tea with their parish priest. Over tea both they and the vicar strongly criticize the Methodists' fervent worship, but they then go with the vicar to vespers, where they devotionally utter their responses to his exhortations from the Psalms and the Book of Common Prayer to clap hands and sing God's praises with shouts of joy!

Williams Pantycelyn's hymns were central to the impassioned Methodist worship of eighteenth-century Wales, but they would also be central to the more disciplined, institutionalized hymn-singing of Victorian Wales, with its choirs and *cymanfaoedd canu* ('hymn-

*The Longing and the Legacy*

singing festivals'), as well as to the 'four-hymn sandwich' which was so common a pattern in Welsh chapel worship until recently, and still is in many situations. Some of the first Welsh Calvinistic Methodist hymn-books were little more than a collection of Williams's hymns with an appendix of hymns by other authors. Gradually during the nineteenth century his hymns became a significant percentage in the hymnals of the other Nonconformist denominations, and even today his work forms the core of Welsh-language hymnody, as is seen by the fact that 87 out of the 872 hymns in the interdenominational Welsh hymnal, *Caneuon Ffydd* ('Songs of Faith'; 2001), are by Williams Pantycelyn.

In addition to his Welsh-language hymns, Pantycelyn also wrote over 120 in English, bringing his total output to almost 1,000 hymns. Although some of his English hymns are still found in hymnals today, it is fair to say that in general they lack the passion, vigour and lyrical beauty of their Welsh counterparts. Having said that, one of his English hymns, 'Guide me, O thou great Jehovah', is among the best-known and most popular hymns in the English-speaking world. Another of his English hymns, 'O'er those gloomy hills of darkness', was very popular at one time. Williams Pantycelyn was a post-millennialist, who believed that there would be an extended period — the 'Millennium', or 'Thousand Years' — prior to Christ's Second Coming when the Christian gospel would hold sway in all parts of the globe and when Christ's kingdom would be established throughout the world. The hymn, 'O'er those gloomy hills of darkness', first published in 1772, is an expression of that hope and of Williams's own longing for its fulfilment. It is a prayer that the 'thousand years [might] soon appear' and that the 'glorious light' of gospel dawn might 'chase the night' until God's 'sceptre sway[s] the enlightened world around'.

By the end of the eighteenth century many evangelicals, including Williams Pantycelyn, believed that this millennial dawn was imminent. That belief gave much impetus to the Protestant overseas missionary movement which began in earnest in the 1790s, not to mention movements for social reform, such as the campaign to abolish the slave trade which also began in earnest in Britain in the 1790s. Williams Pantycelyn was the first person to condemn the transatlantic slave trade in print in Welsh and he also translated the first slave narrative to appear in Welsh, that of Ukawsaw Gronniosaw in 1779. Williams had died four years before the founding of the

London Missionary Society in 1795, but his words were a prayer on the lips of the large congregation that gathered at Spa Fields Chapel, London, in September 1795 for the inaugural meeting of that influential society, for the opening hymn on that occasion, which was sung with great emotion, was 'O'er those gloomy hills of darkness'. That hymn, with its references to purchase and redemption and its eager hope of a millennial dawn and a blessed jubilee, was also among the most popular of the hymns sung by the freed slaves who sailed from North America for a new life in Sierra Leone in the early 1790s.

As is the case with African American spirituals, words and phrases in Pantycelyn's hymns such as 'Lord, I groan under the burden / Of my bondage' and 'Until that jubil when I'm called / To glorious liberty' possess an ambiguity which means that it takes only a small step to apply them not only to the spiritual realm but also to the physical world of the slave. The same could be said of other contexts. Because of the familiarity of so many Welsh speakers with his hymns until fairly recently, it could be claimed that no-one over much of the past 250 years had more influence on the minds and world view of the Welsh than Williams Pantycelyn; and that influence was not only spiritual. From the days of Bonnie Prince Charlie to those of the French Revolution, Williams Pantycelyn and other Methodist leaders strongly protested their loyalty to the crown and the establishment. However, when the common people in the Methodist societies sang hymns by Williams Pantycelyn which placed them within a salvation drama of cosmic and eternal significance, and located them not as insignificant pawns but rather as sons and daughters of the Heavenly King, that would ultimately have far-reaching consequences in the social as well as the spiritual realm. Hymns can be a potent influence on hearts and minds in all sorts of ways.

What of Williams Pantycelyn's legacy? For many he remains an iconic figure in Welsh cultural life despite the significant secularization of that culture by today. His works are still acknowledged by literary critics of all persuasions as one of the highlights of Welsh literature. His poetic diction and metrical prowess made him an important forerunner of the lyric poetry which flourished in Welsh in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Socially and politically, Williams's emphasis on the standing of the individual in the sight of God, whatever his or her social status might be, contributed significantly, albeit indirectly, to the great growth in radicalism and



socialism experienced in Wales from the late eighteenth century through to the early twentieth century. Similarly, the familiarity with and popularity of Williams Pantycelyn's hymns among significant sections of the Welsh population in all parts of the country (not to mention among the Welsh diaspora) during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries contributed towards social cohesion among the Welsh and helped promote a sense of Welsh national identity. Dr Glyn Tegai Hughes could open his insightful volume on Williams Pantycelyn in 1983 with the words:

A Welsh Nonconformist, brought up in the years before the [Second World] War, will have scores of lines by William Williams of Pantycelyn singing in his head. For nearly two hundred years these hymns were the dominant expression of a national culture; Pantycelyn was, incomparably, the folk poet of the Welsh.

Dr Hughes proceeds: 'Now [in 1983] the religious pattern that produced him, and which then nourished itself on his verses, is in ruins.' If that was true in 1983, then Welsh Methodism and Nonconformity are in an even more ruinous state today. And yet, Williams Pantycelyn's influence has not totally evaporated. His hymns are still sung in Christian worship in every part of Wales every Sunday, and indeed wherever Welsh people gather to worship world-wide; and of course, 'Guide me, O thou great Jehovah' is sung regularly throughout the English-speaking world. Hymns still form a large percentage of the popular songs which Welsh people sing when they gather informally in public houses and on various social occasions. They continue to be a staple element in the repertoire of Welsh choirs, and Welsh hymn-singing programmes continue to be popular on television and radio. To some extent, then, hymns remain a badge of Welsh national identity. At every international rugby match, the Welsh crowd, eager for more points, regularly roars 'Feed me till I want no more', to the strains of the well-known hymn-tune, *Cwm Rhondda*. One of the plastic charity bags that comes through our doors in Wales even carries the slogan, 'Fill me 'til I want no more!' These are but superficial indicators of a long and deep legacy which continues to some degree; and many Welsh Christians today still receive great spiritual sustenance from singing and meditating upon Williams's hymns. Speaking personally, if I had to choose one book apart from the Bible to take with me to a desert island, it would be the

collected works of William Williams of Pantycelyn. If you cannot speak Welsh, all I can say is that you don't know what you're missing!

#### FURTHER READING

The biography by Dr Eifion Evans, *Bread of Heaven: The Life and Work of William Williams, Pantycelyn* (Bridgend: Bryntirion Press, 2010), is a substantial volume which contains detailed references to sources. Dr Glyn Tegai Hughes's monograph, *Williams Pantycelyn*, in the 'Writers of Wales' series (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1983), is one of the most important discussions in English on his work. 'The Revival of 1762 and William Williams of Pantycelyn', a lecture by Professor R. Geraint Gruffydd, published in Emyr Roberts and R. Geraint Gruffydd, *Revival and Its Fruit* (Bridgend: Evangelical Library of Wales, 1981), is an erudite examination of the extraordinary expressions of emotion associated with that revival and Williams Pantycelyn's defence of them. Dr Kathryn Jenkins's 1997 lecture, '“Songs of Praises”: The Literary and Spiritual Qualities of the Hymns of William Williams and Ann Griffiths', was published in *The Hymn Society of Great Britain and Ireland Bulletin*, no. 214, vol. 15:5 (January 1998); see also her chapter on Williams Pantycelyn in *A Guide to Welsh Literature c. 1700–1800*, ed. Branwen Jarvis (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000), together with the bibliography of English-language discussions of the life and work of Williams Pantycelyn which is appended to that chapter.

While much of my own published work is in Welsh, over the years I have published a number of items in English which discuss in greater detail some of the matters raised in this lecture:

“The New Birth of a People”: Welsh Language and Identity and the Welsh Methodists, c. 1740-1820', in *Religion and National Identity: Wales and Scotland c. 1700-2000*, ed. Robert Pope (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2001).

'Bala and the Bible: Thomas Charles, Ann Griffiths and Mary Jones', *Eusebeia: The Bulletin of the Jonathan Edwards Centre for Reformed Spirituality* (Toronto, Canada), 5 (2005); reprinted in the *Journal of the Merioneth Historical and Record Society*, 15:2 (2007). An electronic version is to be found on the following website: <<http://www.anngriffiths.cardiff.ac.uk/bible.html>>.

*The Longing and the Legacy*

'Welsh Ballads and American Slavery', *The Welsh Journal of Religious History*, 2 (2007). An electronic version is to be found here: <<https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/special-collections/subject-guides/welsh-ballads/slavery>>.

'The Evolution of the Welsh Hymn', in *Dissenting Praise: Religious Dissent and the Hymn in England and Wales*, ed. Isabel Rivers & David L. Wykes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

'Griffith Jones (1684–1761) of Llanddowror and His "Striking Experiment in Mass Religious Education" in Wales in the Eighteenth Century', in *Volksbildung durch Lesestoffe im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert / Educating the People through Reading Material in the 18th and 19th Centuries*, ed. Reinhart Siegert (Bremen, Germany: Edition Lumière, 2012).

'Blessèd Jubil!': Slavery, Mission and the Millennial Dawn in the Work of William Williams of Pantycelyn', in *Cultures of Radicalism in Britain and Ireland*, ed. John Kirk, Michael Brown & Andrew Noble, 'Poetry and Song in the Age of Revolution' series, vol. 3 (London: Pickering &

Chatto, 2013).

'Cushions, Copy-Books and Computers: Ann Griffiths (1776–1805), Her Hymns and Letters and Their Transmission', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 90:2 (Autumn 2014).

'German Chorales and American Songs and Solos: Contrasting Chapters in Welsh Congregational Hymn-Singing', *Hymnologi – Nordisk Tidsskrift*, 44:3–4 (December 2015); reprinted in *The Bulletin of the Hymn Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, no. 295, vol. 22:2 (Spring 2018).

*Flame in the Mountains: Williams Pantycelyn, Ann Griffiths and the Welsh Hymn; Essays and Translations by H. A. Hodges*, ed. E. Wyn James (Tal-y-bont: Y Lolfa, 2017).

'Popular Poetry, Methodism, and the Ascendancy of the Hymn', in *The Cambridge History of Welsh Literature*, ed. Geraint Evans & Helen Fulton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

## NOTES

1. A keynote lecture delivered on 31 July 2015 at the International Hymn Conference held at Robinson College, University of Cambridge, England. It was first published in *The Bulletin of the Hymn Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, no. 286, vol. 21:5 (Winter 2016) and then (in English with a German translation) in *Hymns in Liturgy and Life / Kirchenlieder in Liturgie und Leben*, ed. Martin J. M. Hoondert, 'IAH Bulletin, vol. 43' (Tilburg, The Netherlands: International Fellowship for Research of Hymnology, 2016).
2. This portrait of William Williams (1717–91) of Pantycelyn was first published in an edition of his collected works in 1867. It is based on a sketch made by one John Williams (b. 1772) from the parish of Llanddarog in Carmarthenshire, who remembered Williams Pantycelyn coming regularly to preach near his home during his youth and who drew the resemblance from recollection many years after Pantycelyn's death. The original sketch by John Williams is in Swansea Central Library, in a manuscript which came to the library as part of the collection of Rev. Robert Jones (1810–79), Rotherhithe.