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Dafydd William, Llandeilo Fach: An Eighteenth-Century Glamorgan Hymn-writer*

E. Wyn James

It was late afternoon on Wednesday, 11 April 1877, at Tynewydd Colliery in the Rhondda Valley. Suddenly water broke through from old colliery workings nearby, flooding the mine. Fortunately most of the hundred men and boys had finished their shift. However, fourteen miners found themselves trapped underground. Of these, four were drowned, but the other ten were kept alive in two pockets of air, five in each pocket. The five miners in the air pocket nearest the shaft began praying, and then started singing a verse of a hymn that was particularly apt in their perilous situation:

*Yn y dyfroedd mawr a'r tonnau,
Nid oes neb a ddeil fy mhen
Ond fy annwyl Briod, Iesu,
A fu farw ar y pren;
Cyfaill yw yn afon angau
Ddeil fy mhen i uwch y don:
Golwg arno wna i mi ganu
Yn yr afon ddofon hon.¹*

The rescue-party heard them singing and succeeded in bringing four of the five out alive, and that within less than twenty-four hours of their being trapped.

The other five were imprisoned further away, about half a mile from the shaft. On the second day, the rescue-party heard them banging, but it took eight days of hard work before they succeeded in reaching them – and remarkably, they were still alive. The poet-preacher, Elfed (H. Elvet Lewis, 1860-1953), was a youth of seventeen at the time. Writing some twelve years later, he could say:

The whole nation seemed to turn its thought towards that coal-pit, and every day made the suspense more painful. The rescue-party toiled manfully day and night; and when . . . the last hope was almost given up . . . [they] were found: and they were alive, though exhausted to the verge of death. Without air, without food, despair would have driven them mad were it not for the [hymn, '*Yn y dyfroedd mawr a'r tonnau*'], which they sang over and over again with a feeling of terrible reality.²

Through the popular press this drama gripped the imagination not only of the Welsh people, but the wider British and American public. A reporter from the *New York Times* travelled all the way to Porth to cover the story, and it even gripped the imagination of Queen Victoria. A total of twenty-five Albert Medals were awarded to the rescuers, and 40,000 people congregated on Pontypridd Common to see Lord Aberdare give the colliers their medals on behalf of the Queen. (It is not without significance, perhaps, that '*Yn y dyfroedd mawr a'r tonnau*' was one of the Welsh hymns sung at Lord Aberdare's funeral in 1895.) As Professor Hywel Teifi Edwards has emphasised, the Tynewydd Disaster was an important milestone in the development (in a country still smarting from the assault on its religion, culture and morals by the notorious Blue Books of 1847) of the image of the brave, God-fearing, cultured Welsh collier³ — part of a wider Nonconformist-Liberal construct of Wales as the land of song, the land of the white gloves, of revivals, of idyllic rural neighbourhoods, of virtuous maids and intelligent mothers,⁴ the land of '*y Werin*' (that ideal of the responsible, diligent, democratic-minded common people, devoted to religion and culture, which Professor Prys Morgan has so eloquently discussed in a series of important articles).

It is little wonder, then, that '*Yn y dyfroedd mawr a'r tonnau*' became known from the time of the Tynewydd Disaster as 'The Miners' Hymn'; and it is again not without significance that this was the hymn sung by Rachel Thomas (1905-95) — that archetype of the Welsh '*mam*', born at Allt-wen, Pontardawe — in the film *Proud Valley* in 1940. However, its author was not a miner, but rather a tailor named Dafydd William. Biographical details are fairly few and far between. There is uncertainty regarding both his date of birth and his place of birth.⁵ He was most probably born in the parish of Llanedi in 1721. If so that would make him a Carmarthenshire hymn-writer, since Llanedi is to the west of the river Llŵchwr. If that were the case, he would join the

ranks of William Williams of Pantycelyn, Morgan Rhys, Dafydd Jones of Caeo, David Charles of Carmarthen, Elfed and Nantlais, to name but a few born in that great breeding-ground of Welsh hymn-writers. Dafydd William was a contemporary of Williams Pantycelyn and Morgan Rhys, and moved in the same circles in the early Methodist movement. Indeed, in 1793 Dafydd William published an elegy for Williams Pantycelyn — '*Williams fwyn*' [gentle Williams] as he calls him — even though Dafydd William had by then long since left the Calvinistic Methodist fold for the Baptists.⁶ However, Dafydd William spent a considerable part of his life on the eastern side of the river Llwchwr, near Pontarddulais, in the parish of Llandeilo Tal-y-bont (or Llandeilo Fach), so much so that he is commonly known as 'Dafydd William, Llandeilo Fach'. And between that, and the fact that he spent most of his life after leaving Llandeilo Fach in the Vale of Glamorgan, it is not inappropriate to claim him as a Glamorgan hymn-writer, wherever he was actually born!

Dafydd William experienced evangelical conversion around 1740, in the early years of the Methodist movement, probably through the preaching of Howel Harris in the open-air to a crowd gathered for dancing and cock-fighting in the vicinity of Gopa Fach in the parish of Llandeilo Tal-y-bont in March 1740. Again, there are uncertainties regarding the actual date and circumstances, but it is certain that he joined the Calvinistic Methodists during the 1740s.

Dafydd William's work as a tailor was peripatetic. Rather than having a fixed workshop, tailors in this period would go about their work from house to house — for some reason '*chwipio'r gath*' (whipping the cat) is the Welsh term for 'working as an itinerant tailor'! And this itinerant craft paired well with the work on which he would embark after his conversion, namely preaching, pastoring Calvinistic Methodist *seiadau*⁷ and teaching in circulating schools. Dafydd William seems to have taught in circulating schools and exhorted in *seiadau* in the Vale of Tywi in Carmarthenshire in the years immediately after his conversion, although it is difficult to be certain of his movements as there is more than one Dafydd William active in those circles at the time. However, by early 1745 he seems to have moved back to the Pontarddulais area.

He taught in circulating schools over a wide area. It is said, for example, that around 1774 he kept school as far afield as Aberangell in Montgomeryshire. Again, it is very difficult to trace his steps as a

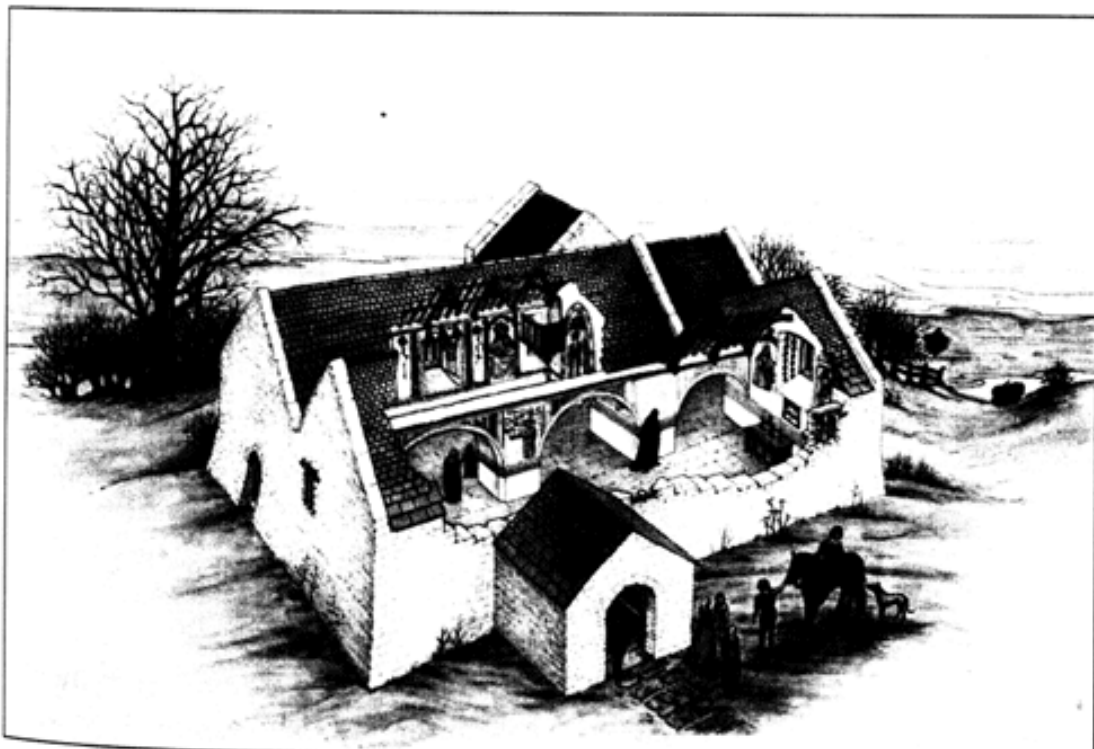
schoolteacher in any detail, but we know that he kept circulating schools in the vicinity of Margam in the early 1760s, including Y Goetre, near Tai-bach (the home for many years of that rather eccentric Calvinistic Methodist preacher, Siencyn Pen-hydd/Jenkin Thomas, 1746-1807). A pamphlet published by Dafydd William containing a poem on the subject of the dry summer of 1762 lists a number of people from the Margam and Llangynwyd area who had encouraged him to reprint that poem in 1764; and Gomer M. Roberts in his booklet, *Dafydd William, Llandeilo Fach* (1954), has shown that these were members of local Calvinistic Methodist *seiadau*.⁸ But however far he roamed, Dafydd William seems to have kept his home in the Pontarddulais area from the mid-1740s until the 1770s; and for much of that time he lived in the farmhouse called Llandeilo Fach near Llandeilo Tal-y-bont church.

For those of us who were so used to seeing the church of Llandeilo Tal-y-bont standing forlorn on the marshland as we looked north towards Pontarddulais while driving along the M4 over the Llŵchwr estuary, seeing the gap where it stood so prominently for so many centuries is rather strange and a little disconcerting. The church has not been demolished, however, but rather removed to the Museum of Welsh Life at St Fagans, where it is in the process of being re-erected and restored to a state as near as possible to the way it would have looked at the end of the Middle Ages. It is a most exciting project, well worth a visit. However, the fact that the church is now missing from the marsh has emphasised the fact that it was not alone there, for as the eye now wanders to where the church used to be, the ruins of other buildings in the near vicinity have somehow become more prominent than before, and especially the ruins of the farmhouse where Dafydd William spent so much of his life.

Llandeilo Tal-y-bont church (familiarily known in the Pontarddulais area as 'the Old Church on the Marsh') and Llandeilo Fach farmhouse are situated at the head of the Llŵchwr estuary, near a historically important crossing point on the river, in an area where the river meanders widely and is very prone to flooding, especially at high tide. It is interesting to note in this context that images relating to water occur frequently in Dafydd William's hymns, and that they more often than not have negative connotations. One of William Williams Pantycelyn's favourite images in his hymns is that of life as a journey through a wilderness, and he often refers to spiritual problems in terms of climbing



Llandeilo Tal-y-bont Church, photographed by Tal Jones, Pontarddulais, c.1970. (By kind permission of Colin Jones NMGW)



Llandeilo Tal-y-bont Church, reconstruction drawing. (NMGW)

hills. Dafydd William, on the other hand, tends to portray life's journey as a voyage over water, with the Christian sailing through storms to the heavenly haven, with God's promises as an anchor. This is not surprising, perhaps, when one remembers that Williams Pantycelyn travelled about fifty miles on horseback every week for over forty years on his evangelistic journeys through the length and breadth of Wales,⁹ whereas Dafydd William spent much of his life within fairly close proximity to the sea, and indeed spent his last days within sight of the Bristol Channel, near Barry Island. One example of the prominent place that images of water — waves, sea, rivers, springs, floods, etc. — have in his work must suffice:

*Iesu annwyl, gwêl elynion
 Yn pwysu arnaf heb ddim rhif,
 Am fy nghuro yn erbyn creigydd,
 Ac afonydd llawn o lif:
 Yng ngrym y dyfroedd a'r llifogydd,
 Rhwng y creigydd dal fi i'r lan;
 Ymysg gelynion sydd mor aml,
 Rho dy law i nerthu'r gwan.*

(Dear Jesus, see numerous enemies pressing upon me, wanting to beat me against rocks, and rivers in full flood: in the force of the waters and the floods and between the rocks, O! uphold me; in the midst of so many enemies, give your hand to strengthen the weak.)

It is not difficult to imagine Dafydd William singing such a verse while walking home over the marsh on a stormy night surrounded by the river Llwchwr in full flood.

Sometime after 1770, Dafydd William moved from Llandeilo Tal-y-bont to Basaleg in Monmouthshire, and then, about 1777, when he was around 56 years of age, he moved again, this time to Llanbedr-y-fro (Peterston-super-Ely) in the Vale of Glamorgan, where he lived, again near water, in a cottage on the southern banks of the river Ely, a cottage which would cost a fortune today if it were still standing. (A similar cottage was advertised in the *Western Mail* for £198,000 in 1989!)

Dafydd William seems to have moved in Baptist circles while in Monmouthshire, and in 1788, some years after moving to Peterston-super-Ely, he would write an elegy for the minister of the Baptist cause

in Basaleg, Evan Davies. The Baptists in that area had become more and more Methodist-like in their outlook and mode of worship by the 1770s — especially under the influence of the likes of Dafydd Jones (1741-92), another tailor by trade, who was the Baptist minister of Pen-y-garn, Pontypool, until he moved to Newcastle Emlyn in the 1780s. It is Dafydd Jones, Pontypool, who is attributed (in the words of Dr Densil Morgan) with turning ‘*enwad sidêt, lleiafrifol y Bedyddwyr yn fudiad tanllyd llwyddiannus a thorfol*’ [the sedate, minority Baptist denomination into a fervent, successful, popular movement].¹⁰ A fiery preacher, Dafydd Jones associated closely with Calvinistic Methodists such as Peter Williams the Commentator and Dafydd Morris, Tŵr-gwyn, and Dafydd William also knew him well enough to write an elegy for him.

The ‘Methodistizing’ of the ‘older’ Dissenters — the Congregationalists and Baptists — during the second half of the eighteenth century and the early years of the nineteenth, is one of the most significant developments in modern Welsh history.¹¹ It led to what R. Tudur Jones has termed ‘the evangelical consensus’ which characterised the Welsh religious scene in the first half of the nineteenth century, and paved the way for that construct of Wales as a radical Nonconformist nation which would characterise the Victorian era. And no doubt, the fervent evangelical spirit which had pervaded Baptists circles in Monmouthshire by the late eighteenth century, under the influence of Dafydd Jones, Pontypool, and others, made the transition from Methodist *seiat* to Baptist meeting-house that much easier for someone of Dafydd William’s spiritual temperament and background than if he had been in an area where the Baptists had remained closer to the spirit of earlier nonconformity, caricatured by the nickname ‘*Sentars Sychion*’, the ‘Dry Dissenters’. Be that as it may, by the time he moved to Peterston-super-Ely, he had become convinced of the truth of believer’s baptism, and was baptised with two others in the river Ely near the bridge in Peterston-super-Ely on Sunday, 29 June 1777, by another Monmouthshire Baptist, Edward Watkin of Llan-gwm.¹²

Despite the fact that he was moving into an area with a strong Methodist presence — one must remember that during this period hundreds would flock every month to Llan-gan, only about five miles west of Dafydd William’s cottage, to sit under the ministry of the Calvinistic Methodist clergyman, Dafydd Jones (1736-1810) — Dafydd

William nevertheless threw in his lot with the Baptists after moving to the Vale of Glamorgan and became one of the founding members at Croes-y-parc, the pioneer Baptist cause established in Peterston-super-Ely in October 1777, which would become the mother church of many Baptist causes in the area (including the Tabernacle on the Hayes in Cardiff). Dafydd William remained active at Croes-y-parc and among the Baptists in general until his death in 1794. But for his age, he would quite probably have been ordained minister of the cause at Croes-y-parc. He preached widely among the Baptists. It is said, for example, that he was the first Baptist to preach in the Rhondda Valley — which is most fitting when one remembers the role his hymn played in the Tynewydd Disaster a century later — and an elegy states that he had preached the gospel in all thirteen counties of Wales, no mean feat when one considers that (like Iolo Morganwg) he normally travelled everywhere on foot.

During the last year of his life, ill health prevented Dafydd William from preaching. In this period he was cared for by some members of the cause at Croes-y-parc who lived in the old thatched farmhouse of Holton, or Hollltwn, in Barry, where the Baptists of Croes-y-parc had a preaching station. (Holton Road is to this day the name of one of the main streets in Barry.)¹³ Dafydd William died at Holton in late October or early November 1794, and is buried at Croes-y-parc,¹⁴ only a stone's throw from where the church of Llandeilo Tal-y-bont now stands at St Fagans, the church he spent so many years living in its shadow at the other end of Glamorgan!

But why did Dafydd William end his life in east rather than west Glamorgan? Tradition has it that it was because of marital problems. Dafydd William married one of the daughters of William John Rhydderch¹⁵ of Nant-y-moel Uchaf farm on the mountain road between Pontardawe and Ammanford (the Congregationalist chapel, Baran, was built in 1805 on land belonging to the farm). It is not known when they married, but it would seem to have been before Dafydd William became a Methodist in the early 1740s. They had at least one child, a son called Israel, born around 1745. A tailor like his father, Israel was also, like his father, a member of the Calvinistic Methodist *seiat* at Gopa Fach, Pontarddulais. There is mention of Israel going to Bristol in 1808 to visit some of his children, and it is interesting to note in this context that one of Dafydd William's pamphlets was printed in Bristol around 1773.¹⁶

There is a widespread tradition that Dafydd William was unfortunate in his choice of wife; that she was sharp-tongued and short-tempered, and out of sympathy with his religious convictions. And tradition places the blame on Dafydd William's wife, not only for his leaving the Pontarddulais area, but also for his leaving the Calvinistic Methodist fold. Selling alcohol in houses near parish churches was a common phenomenon in eighteenth-century Wales. It is said that there were constant tensions between Dafydd William and his wife, but that the main bone of contention was her desire to sell alcohol at Llandeilo Fach in order to supplement what must have been a fairly meagre income. In its present form, the tradition would seem to me to post-date the temperance movement of the 1830s. Before that date there is plenty of evidence of the Methodists being more than willing to consume alcohol in moderation. Scores of gallons of malt liquor were prepared to welcome those attending the Calvinistic Methodist Association meetings in Carmarthen in 1827, for example. The various denominations had rooms designated for their use in the more respectable, or 'religious public houses', as they were called; and a familiar Welsh term in pre-temperance days was '*cwrw'r achos*' (lit. 'the beer of the cause'), the beer provided for the use of Nonconformist preachers in the chapel-house (which was replaced in some places by peppermint after the temperance movement took hold!).¹⁷ Be that as it may, it is said that the feeling that Dafydd William was unable (in the words of 1 Timothy 3:4) to 'rule well his own house', ran so high that he was disciplined in some way by the Calvinistic Methodist *seiat* at Gopa Fach — barred from preaching or holding office, perhaps — and that as a result he decided to leave both the area and the Methodists. Although these traditions regarding Dafydd William's wife are widely-held, there is no concrete evidence to confirm them, and they have been hotly disputed by Baptists, who have argued strongly that it was his Baptist convictions and not his wife's behaviour that led to Dafydd William turning his back on the Methodists.

Dafydd William's wife also features prominently in another tradition, this time relating to the composition of his most famous verse, 'The Miners' Hymn', '*Yn y dyfroedd mawr a'r tonnau*'. The first inkling we have in print of the tradition is in an article by Dr Thomas Rees (1815-85), the prominent Nonconformist historian. Writing on Dafydd William in 1851, over half a century after his death, Thomas Rees suggests that the hymn-writer might have been inspired to write the

verse while walking melancholily in the fields between Llandeilo Tal-y-bont church and the river Llwchwr, having been forced out of the house by his wife's vicious tongue. It is far from impossible that Dr Thomas Rees was drawing on local tradition rather than his own fancy in making that suggestion. Certainly by the 1860s the story was being treated as a fact, or at the very least, a strong tradition. The story has been retold numerous times and in numerous forms since then, and continues to this day in oral tradition. The details vary. In the version given by Morris Davies in an article in the periodical *Y Traethodydd* in 1872, for example, Dafydd William was not driven out of the house following a stormy encounter with his wife, but rather locked out of the house when he returned at a late hour from a preaching engagement. His wife had banked up the fire, locked the door and gone to bed, and would not get up and open for him. He was tired and the weather stormy, says Morris Davies, and there was nothing to be done but to go and shelter in a nearby outhouse. As he sheltered there, he could see in the moonlight the river Llwchwr flowing by, with its waves washing its banks, and his thoughts ran upon the river of death he would have to face one day, and how — whereas his earthly marriage-partner was rejecting him, and acting unnaturally toward him — his heavenly marriage-partner, Christ, would remain faithful unto death, holding his head above the waters, and enabling him to sing in the surge of Jordan.¹⁸

In the version in circulation in the Pontarddlais area in the mid-twentieth century, it was high tide that night and the estuary in full flood, with the church of Llandeilo Tal-y-bont and Llandeilo Fach farmhouse on a virtual island in the middle of a vast lake. According to that version, the verse was not composed in the outhouse of the farm, but rather in the graveyard with the waters lapping the surrounding walls, and with the hymn-writer therefore literally above the waters.¹⁹ In another version still in circulation in the Pontarddlais area, the hymn-writer was not locked out of the house by his wife because he was returning home at a late hour from a preaching engagement or a *seiat* meeting, but rather because he was drunk! This is a very interesting example of weaving two different traditions together, of combining the story of Dafydd William's wife wanting to keep an ale-house with that of him being locked out after returning home at a late hour from a religious meeting. This 'drunken' version has been reinforced in local tradition by the fact that the hymn '*Yn y dyfroedd mawr a'r tonnau*' is often sung to the hymn-tune 'Ebenezer', nicknamed 'Tôn y Botel' (the

Bottle Tune). This tune became very popular following its prominence in the 1904 revival and was considered by Ralph Vaughan Williams to be among the world's one hundred finest tunes. It was composed in 1896 by Thomas John Williams (1869-1944), an organist born in Ynysmeudwy, Pontardawe, who named it 'Ebenezer' after the chapel in Rhos, Pontardawe, where he was a member.²⁰ As a practical joke, a boy had claimed to some friends that the tune was an anonymous one he had found in a bottle on a beach on the Llŷn peninsula in north Wales. This story received wide circulation before it was disproved, and as a result the tune became known as 'Tôn y Botel'. However, in the oral tradition circulating in the Pontarddulais area today, this nickname has been taken to refer to a bottle of alcohol, and the tune's name, together with its rather swaying rhythm, are seen as further proof of the drunken origins of the hymn!²¹

One can say with some certainty that the verse was not written as a result of inebriation on the part of Dafydd William! But does the verse have its origins in the stormy relationship between Dafydd William and his wife? Maybe — and maybe not! Ultimately, the important fact, of course, is that Dafydd William composed such an influential verse, whatever the circumstances. It is certainly a verse which has been held in very high regard. One author, writing in 1895, compared it to the greatest pearl in Victoria's crown,²² while the poet and theologian, Gwili (John Gwili Jenkins, 1872-1936) — himself a Baptist hymn-writer from Llanedi parish — writing in 1904, could say of the verse that it was worth having a peevish wife if that was what it took to compose it!²³

Dafydd William was quite productive as a poet. Some of his earlier compositions were published in almanacs, and then from 1760 until his death in 1794, and especially after joining the Baptists in 1777, a flood of booklets and pamphlets, around forty in all, appeared from the press. Most of these were printed in Carmarthen, with a fair proportion of the remainder in Brecon, together with two in Cowbridge, two in Trefeca, one in Trefriw and one in Bristol.²⁴ He composed his hymns and poems in Welsh, but he was fluent enough in English to produce Welsh translations of some English poems and to translate twenty-two of his own hymns into English. English translations of Welsh hymns are rarely successful in capturing the spirit of the original, and Dafydd William's translations are far from being masterpieces. They were printed in a booklet entitled *Joy in the Tents of Zion* in Brecon in 1779, and were

reprinted side by side with the Welsh originals in Aberystwyth in 1826 by Esther Williams, one of the few female Welsh printers. It is no accident, perhaps, that these English translations were published shortly after Dafydd William settled in the Vale of Glamorgan, for although (as Mr Brian James has shown) Welsh was gaining significant ground in the Vale in this period,²⁵ there were still many monoglot English and bilingual inhabitants there; but neither must one forget Dafydd William's Bristol connections as a possible catalyst for these translations.

The Welsh hymn was born in the spiritual ferment of the Evangelical Revival of the eighteenth century, and flourished well into the nineteenth century. To generalise, one of the main differences between the hymn-writers of the eighteenth century and those of the nineteenth, is that those of the eighteenth are hymn-writers first and foremost, who also composed other religious verse, while those of the nineteenth are poets who wrote hymns as part of a wider portfolio of poetry. Dafydd William falls into the former category. Hymns form the bulk of his work. But, like many of the other eighteenth-century hymn-writers, his poetry also falls into two other categories — elegies and a more amorphous category often described as '*caneuon crefyddol*' (religious songs), the sort of material that often found its way onto broadside ballad sheets. He published eighteen elegies, almost all of them to people from Glamorgan and Monmouthshire, and six of them to women. Not surprisingly the elegies increase in number as he gets older, and it is therefore not unexpected that most commemorate Baptists, although he does not wholly forget his old companions among the Calvinistic Methodists. He published a similar number of religious songs or ballads, some of which had quite a wide currency; however, in contrast with the elegies, poems in this category tend to decrease in number as time goes on.

Despite his diligence as a preacher and teacher, and as an author of elegies and religious ballads, it is as a hymn-writer that Dafydd William's name lives. He is regarded as one of the major Welsh hymn-writers, in a field where there is plenty of competition. Eight of his hymns are included in the new interdenominational hymn book, *Caneuon Ffydd* (2001), and it is difficult to imagine a Welsh hymn book without such hymns as '*O Dduw, rho im dy Ysbryd*' (O God, give me your Spirit) and '*O Arglwydd, dyro awel*' (O Lord, send a breeze).

As is the case with all hymn-writers of the eighteenth-century Evangelical Revival, the Person of Jesus Christ, his atoning death on the

cross, and a longing to be with Him in heaven, are the main themes of Dafydd William's hymns.²⁶ In counterpoint to the longing for heaven, the hymns also portray the problems and trials the Christian faces here on earth. Dafydd William often depicts the Christian's life as a hard battle or a difficult journey, and frequently complains of his spiritual lethargy and coldness. However, it would be wrong to think of Dafydd William as a someone in a state of depression and despondency. Quite the opposite! Joy and confident faith are among the primary characteristics of his verse. It is no accident that the title of the main collection of his hymns is *Gorfoledd ym Mhebyll Seion* (Joy in the Tents of Zion). However difficult the circumstances, a sure and certain hope springs eternal to his breast, one based on God and His promises, on Christ's victory over all his enemies, and on the certainty that the Holy Spirit will lead him safely through all life's trials to the eternal haven. Although Dafydd William may begin a hymn groaning, he always finishes in joyful praise.

This joy and confidence is reflected in the style of his hymns. 'Bubbly' is one word that springs to mind, and their very rhythm makes one feel that one is marching confidently to victory in Christ's army. Dafydd William is very fond of repeating words and phrases over and over again, a feature which contributes significantly to the brisk, confident style of his hymns. He also had a vivid imagination. His hymns burst with imagery, and this extensive use of imagery — of 'pictures in words' — is one reason why his verses have proved so popular in oral tradition, as can be seen, for example, in the relative frequency they are to be found in collections of '*emynau llafar gwlad*' (folk hymns) such as *Gwreichion y Diwygiadau* (lit. 'Sparks of the Revivals'), published by O. M. Edwards in 1905. Sometimes Dafydd William sustains and develops one image throughout a verse, as in the following example, where he combines the spiritual armoury listed by Paul in the sixth chapter of his letter to the Ephesians, with more contemporary weapons:

*Duw, rho 'mi gleddy'r Ysbryd,
A chanon gweddi'r ffydd,
A helm yr iechydwrïaeth,
Rwy'n credu caffi'r dydd;
Bwleti o fân och'neidiau,
A'r powdr gorau ei ryw
O sicrwydd diamheuol,
A thân o gariad Duw.*

(God, give me the sword of the Spirit, and the cannon called the prayer of faith, and the helmet of salvation, I believe I will carry the day; little sighs for bullets, and the best of powders, which comes from indubitable certainty, and fire from the love of God.)

At other times, images fly in all directions. Both in his general style and in his effervescent use of imagery, Dafydd William is perhaps the most energetic of all Welsh hymn-writers, a veritable decathlon athlete!

The hymn-writers of the Evangelical Revival had a common reservoir of phrases and imagery, drawn mainly from the Bible and the idiom of the *seiat* and the prayer meeting. But despite this common reservoir, individual hymn-writers also have their own pet phrases and imagery, to which they return time and again. Dafydd William is no exception. He is fond of imagery drawn from the weather (sun, wind, clouds, etc.), and often refers to the singing of birds and the playing of harps, to wine and to feasting. As already mentioned, images relating to water are frequent; but perhaps most common of all are those from the world of warfare. For Dafydd William, this life is a spiritual battlefield, and a major enemy in the war is Unbelief, as can be seen from his great hymn, '*Anghrediniaeth, gad fi'n llonydd*' (Unbelief, leave me alone), with its dramatic personification of Faith and Grace battling against Unbelief. Here are the first two verses of that hymn in the original Welsh:

*Anghrediniaeth, gad fi'n llonydd,
Onid e mi godaf lef
O ddyffryn adfyd, lle rwy'n gorwedd,
Oddi yma i'r lan i ganol nef;
Mae yno Frawd yn eiriol drosof,
Nis gad fi'n angof nos na dydd;
Brawd a dyr fy holl gadwynau,
Brawd a ddaw â'r caeth yn rhydd.*

*Ychydig ffydd, ble rwyt ti'n llechu?
Cymer galon, gwna dy ran;
Hedyn gras, pa le rwyt tithau?
Tyn dy gleddau o blaid y gwan;
Anghrediniaeth, cil o'r llwybyr,
Ni phery'r frwydr ddim yn hir,
Er mai eiddil yw fy enw,
Er hynny 'gyd rwy'n ennill tir.*

And here is Dafydd William's own, rather awkward, English translation of those verses:

Unbelief, do not disturb me,
 Or else I will lift up my cry,
 From woe's valley, where I'm lying,
 To the midst of heaven above the sky;
 There I've a brother interceding,
 Without forgetting thinks of me,
 A Brother chains in pieces breaking,
 A Brother setting captives free.

Little faith, where art thou lurking?
 Take courage, now thy help afford;
 Seed of grace, what art thou doing?
 For the weakling draw thy sword;
 Unbelief, away be going,
 The battle will not long endure;
 Altho' my name is a poor weakling,
 Of getting ground my soul is sure.²⁷

Although Dafydd William has his favourite imagery, to which he returns again and again (*ad nauseam* at times!), most of that imagery can be found here and there in the work of his fellow hymn-writers. But occasionally, and more often in the case of Dafydd William than with most other hymn-writers, one comes across a less common image. One of the most striking of these is the image of a ladder which is to be found in the second verse of his hymn, '*O'r nef mi glywais newydd*' (From heaven I heard some news). The ladder is described as having the promises of God as its rungs, all close together and faultless, so that he can climb it easily ('*hawdd ei dringad*'), however short his step might be. The image of the ladder in the verse is derived ultimately from the vision of the ladder linking heaven and earth in Jacob's dream in Genesis 28. However, it is striking to find similar imagery, and indeed similar wording, in a Christmas carol written in 1621 by one Risiart Dafydd, probably a gamekeeper at Margam, in which he emphasises that the Incarnation joins heaven and earth like a ladder, easy to climb ('*hawdd ei dringad*') to the generous Father. No one who climbs need fear falling, he says, for the rungs are faultless. Perhaps the similarities are coincidental, but the emphasis in both the hymn and the carol on the strength of the rungs and the ease of the climb, elements that are not found in Genesis 28, suggest the strong possibility of a common source; and perhaps it would not be too far-fetched to suggest that Dafydd William had heard the carol, or a similar composition, during his time in the Margam area in the 1760s.²⁸



*'The Bound Christ' depicted in wall painting, Llandeilo Tal-y-bont Church.
(NMGW)*

It is worth taking one further, tantalising step in the case of the ladder imagery. The most striking discovery made at Llandeilo Tal-y-bont church during the process of its removal to the Museum of Welsh Life was a remarkable series of late medieval wall paintings found under layers of whitewash inside the church, paintings which had been obliterated following the Protestant Reformation. Among these paintings is a version of the *Sessio*, the 'Bound Christ', also known as 'Christ's Last Rest' or 'Christ in Distress', which depicts Christ bound and seated in front of the cross, immediately prior to the crucifixion. Often portrayed in scenes connected with the crucifixion were the so-called 'Instruments of the Passion', including the crown of thorns, a spear, dice shakers, and a ladder; and a ladder is to be seen in the background in the version of the 'Bound Christ' at Llandeilo Tal-y-bont.²⁹

I am not suggesting that there is any direct connection between the ladder imagery in Dafydd William's hymn and the wall painting at Llandeilo Tal-y-bont. The painting had disappeared under layers of whitewash long before Dafydd William came to live next to the church — although it is worth emphasising that folk memory can be remarkably tenacious. It should also be remembered that Dafydd William may have been familiar with other examples of the ladder as one of the 'Instruments of the Passion'. Such portrayals were not uncommon in late medieval Wales, and a number have survived to the present day, including one carved on a medieval chest in Coety church.³⁰ Yet, although I am not suggesting any direct influence on Dafydd William's hymns from medieval visual imagery, I am suggesting another similarity. In her fascinating book, *Images of Piety: The Iconography of Traditional Religion in Late Medieval Wales* (2000), Dr Madeleine Gray argues convincingly that medieval visual imagery was meant not just to convey core beliefs and basic biblical knowledge to the ignorant, but also 'to reflect complex theological ideas and arguments and to inspire the devout contemplation of abstruse concepts'. Such imagery communicated 'complex theological arguments . . . to the majority of the people . . . [in] a period in which literacy for most people meant visual literacy, the reading of pictorial representations, and . . . cultural literacy, the ability to recognise references and to appreciate and interpret the implications of the choice and juxtaposition of images'.³¹ And although different in medium and theology, the same can be said of the hymns of Dafydd William and the other hymn-writers



'Instruments of the Passion' depicted on the Easter sepulchre chest at Coety Church.

(By kind permission of Madeleine Gray)

of the Evangelical Awakening of the eighteenth century, of their imagery and of their biblical references. In some ways, in the realm of popular religious culture and communication, the words in pictures on the walls of the medieval church at Llandeilo Tal-y-bont and the pictures in words in the hymns composed by Dafydd William next door, at Llandeilo Fach farmhouse, in the eighteenth century, were not as far removed as we might sometimes suppose.

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NOTES

- 1 This verse was sung at the funeral of Lord Aberdare (H. A. Bruce) in 1895. The Welsh hymns sung at his funeral were translated into English by J. W. Wynne Jones (1849-1928), Vicar of Caernarfon, and published in O. M. Edwards's periodical, *Wales*, II, No. 12 (April 1895), 163. The translation of the verse in question is as follows:

In the mighty surging waters
 Who shall raise my sinking head,
 But the faithful bridegroom Jesus,
 Who upon the rood hath bled?
 Only friend in death's dark river,
 Thou shalt hold me, thou shalt keep;
 I shall sing, if I but see thee,
 In the river's utmost deep.

There have been at least eight other English translations of the verse: Joseph Morris, *Favourite Welsh Hymns Translated into English* (Carmarthen, 1854), 7; H. Elvet Lewis (1860-1953), *Sweet Singers of Wales* (London, [1889]), 79; L. J. Hopkin-James (1874-1937), *Welsh Melodies in the Old Notation for Hymns in English* (Cardiff, 1911), no. 41; A. Olwyn Jones, in the second edition of the hymnal published by the Committee of the Gospel Hall, Ammanford, *Hymnau o Fawl/Hymns of Praise* (Ammanford, 1928), no. 319; Daniel Hughes (1875-1972), in the Welsh Presbyterian Church of Detroit's hymnal, *Mawl a Chân: Praise and Song* (Detroit, Michigan, USA, 1952), no. 103; together with three translations made at the time of the 1904-05 Revival—see Noel Gibbard, *Caniadau'r Diwygiad* (Bridgend, 2003), 27-8, 107.

- 2 H. Elvet Lewis, *Sweet Singers of Wales*, 79.

- 3 Hywel Teifi Edwards discusses the Tynnewydd 'drama' and the response to it in his volume, *Arwr Glew Erwau'r Glo* (Llandysul, 1994), 114-38. Marie Trevelyan could say in *Glimpses of Welsh Life and Character* (London [1893]), 118, that '*Yn y dyfroedd mawr a'r tonnau* had become the most popular Welsh hymn of the day as a result of the Tynnewydd Disaster.
- 4 See Sian Rhiannon Williams, 'The True "Cymraes": Images of Women in Women's Nineteenth-Century Welsh Periodicals', in Angela V. John (ed.), *Our Mothers' Land: Chapters in Welsh Women's History, 1830-1939* (Cardiff, 1991), 69.
- 5 For a fuller discussion of Dafydd William's life, see my Welsh-language article, 'Dafydd William, Llandeilo Fach', *Trafodion Cymdeithas Hanes y Bedyddwyr*, 2001, 37-62.
- 6 Ann Hughes, 'Marwnad i'r Perganiedydd', *Cylchgrawn Hanes Cymdeithas Hanes y Methodistiaid Calfinaidd*, VII (1983), 30-4.
- 7 The *seiat* (pl. *seiadau*; derived from the English word 'society') was a gathering of converts primarily for the sharing of religious experience and for counselling. William Williams of Pantycelyn's classic guide to the nature and conduct of a *seiat* — *Templum Experientiae Apertum; neu, Ddrws y Society Profiad wedi ei Agor o Led y Pen* (1777) — has been translated into English by Bethan Lloyd-Jones, *The Experience Meeting* (Bridgend, 1973).
- 8 Gomer M. Roberts, *Dafydd William, Llandeilo Fach* (Llandysul, 1954), 15-16.
- 9 Gomer M. Roberts, *Y Pêr Ganiedydd*, vol. 1 (Llandysul, 1949), 195; cf. Glyn Tegai Hughes, *Williams Pantycelyn*, 'Writers of Wales' series (Cardiff, 1983), 3-4.
- 10 D. Densil Morgan, *Christmas Evans a'r Ymneilltuaeth Newydd* (Llandysul, 1991), 162.
- 11 See, for example, R. Tudur Jones, *Grym y Gair a Fflam y Ffydd* (Bangor, 1998), chapters 7, 13 and 14.
- 12 R.T.W. Denning (ed.), *The Diary of William Thomas, 1762-1795* (Cardiff, 1995), 626.
- 13 Gomer M. Roberts, *Dafydd William, Llandeilo Fach*, 12. Holton farm stood near the site now occupied by the Vale of Glamorgan Council Offices in Holton Road, Barry.
- 14 The diary of William Thomas has the following entry under 6 November 1794: 'A burying in this days [*sic*] at the Anabaptist Meeting House at Corner Park in St. Nicholas from Molton in Lancarvan one David Wm an Anabaptist Preacher' (*The Diary of William Thomas, 1762-1795*, 1011).
- 15 I am grateful to Professor Prys Morgan for this information.
- 16 Gomer M. Roberts, *Dafydd William, Llandeilo Fach*, 8; D. Huw Owen, 'Hopcyn Bevan, Llangyfelach', *Cylchgrawn Hanes Cymdeithas Hanes y Methodistiaid Calfinaidd*, VII (1983), 18; Eiluned Rees, *Libri Walliae* (Aberystwyth, 1987), no. 5234.
- 17 D. D. Williams, *Hanes Dirwest yng Ngwynedd* (Liverpool, 1921), 25-6;

- John Thomas, Liverpool, *Jubili y Diwygiad Dirwestol yn Nghymru* (Merthyr Tydfil, 1885), 36.
- 18 For the versions of the story by Thomas Rees and Morris Davies, see my Welsh-language article, 'Dafydd William, Llandeilo Fach', 43-4.
- 19 'Awduraeth Yn y Dyfroedd Mawr a'r Tonnau', *Bwletin Cymdeithas Emynau Cymru*, I, No.3 (July 1970), 63-4.
- 20 Huw Williams, *Tonau a'u Hawduron* (Caernarfon, 1967), 195; Cliff Knight, *A Companion to 'Christian Hymns'* (Newport, 1993), 69. It is often incorrectly stated that the tune was first published in the Baptist hymn-book, *Llawlyfr Moliant* (1890).
- 21 I am grateful to my colleague, Professor Peter Wynn Thomas of the School of Welsh at Cardiff University, for information regarding this oral tradition.
- 22 Iago Ddu, Pontarddulais, 'Dafydd Williams, Awdwr "Yn y Dyfroedd Mawr a'r Tonau"', *Seren Gomer*, 1895, 247.
- 23 Gwili, 'Dafydd Wiliam, Llandeilo Fach', *Seren Gomer*, 1904, 47.
- 24 An annotated bibliography of his published works is to be found in Gomer M. Roberts, *Dafydd William, Llandeilo Fach*; some additional titles are listed in Eiluned Rees, *Libri Walliae*.
- 25 Brian Ll. James, 'The Welsh Language in the Vale of Glamorgan', *Morgannwg*, XVI (1972), 23-8.
- 26 A fuller discussion of Dafydd William as a hymn-writer is to be found in my Welsh-language article, 'Dafydd William, Llandeilo Fach', 49-57.
- 27 Dafydd William, *Joy in the Tents of Zion/Gorfoledd yn Mhebyll Sion* (Aberystwyth, 1826), 6.
- 28 See my Welsh-language article, 'Dafydd William, Llandeilo Fach', 52-3, 61-2, for the text of the hymn stanza by Dafydd William and the section of the carol by Risiart Dafydd which contains the ladder imagery, together with some further references.
- 29 Madeleine Gray, *Images of Piety: The Iconography of Traditional Religion in Late Medieval Wales* (Oxford, 2000), 42-3, 46, 48-50, 133.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 71, 108-10; cf. 105, 157. See also Peter Lord, *The Visual Culture of Wales: Medieval Vision* (Cardiff, 2003), 163-5, 202-3, 237.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 1.

Editorial note: the author of this article has adhered to the orthography of Welsh place-names as laid down in the *Rhestr o Enwau Lleoedd* (UWP, 1967).