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Preaching in the Vernacular: The Welsh Sermon, 1689–1901

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This article explores the character of Welsh preaching from 1689-1901. It demonstrates that the sermon remained a formative influence on the history of the people of Wales during this period.

Keywords: Wales, sermons, history

IN his renowned assessment of the state of religion in the diocese of St Davids published in 1721, Erasmus Saunders, prebendary of Brecon and vicar of Blockley, Worcestershire, both lamented the penury of his native diocese and extolled the Christian virtues of its inhabitants. 'We the poor people of this obscure part of this church and nation' (Saunders: 3), he claimed, were afflicted by a raft of misfortune: bad communications, bishops abiding far away from their sees, an unacceptable number of indolent clergy, too many damp and near-derelict church buildings, yet despite everything there was a basic sympathy for the Established Church and a dogged faithfulness to its ministrations and mores. 'There is, I believe, no part of the nation more inclined to be religious and to be delighted with it than the poor inhabitants of these mountains.' Being 'naturally addicted to poetry', as well as composing their own pious verses, the *haslingod* and *carolau*, singing them spontaneously in close harmony, on Sundays the people would walk miles to dilapidated churches, often in the cold and the rain, awaiting the arrival of their clergy. Not only would they walk miles to partake of the liturgy, but 'sometimes as many more to hear a sermon' (Saunders: 32). Even before the advent of the Evangelical Revival, the Welsh, it seems, were addicted to the preaching of the Word.

All four Welsh dioceses were among the nine poorest in the provinces of Canterbury and York. In 1762 Bangor and St Asaph, both of which were in north Wales, were valued at £1,400 per annum, while the immense south Wales diocese of St Davids was worth £900 per annum and Llandaff, also in the south, was valued at as little as £500 a year (Jacob: 83), yet between them they supported hundreds of clergy who ministered to a population of some 400,000. The clergy themselves varied in quality. Owing to the fragmented nature of the Church of England in Wales at the time, there was an imbalance (p. 200) between some comfortably endowed parishes in the comparatively wealthier agrarian regions, invariably in the lowlands and border areas, and the vast patchwork of small and impoverished parishes in the hill country and mountain regions. Far from being sentiment or hyperbole, Erasmus Saunders's reference to 'those shepherdless flocks that stray upon the mountains' (Saunders: 52), described what was really true. Non-residency was a fact, pluralism was often a financial necessity yet despite the difficulty in providing adequate pastoral care for all, the church still functioned and there seems to have been no dearth of candidates for ordination. 'That there are still even in this obscure corner, many honest and good men, who labour under these difficulties, is too well known a truth to be denied' (Saunders: 72). Recent research has confirmed this truth (White; P. Jenkins; Williams). Even if only, or indeed as many as, a third of the Welsh clergy were graduates, many of the others had received a sound education in divinity and the classics in the sturdy network of reputable grammar schools which Wales possessed. The bishops were, for the most part, content to ordain worthy candidates from those schools. Along with being charged with leading worship according to the Book

of Common Prayer and providing their flocks with pastoral care, it was taken for granted that these ordinands would be preachers.

By the end of the eighteenth century most Welsh parishioners could expect to hear a sermon at least once a fortnight. In the better off and more accessible parishes it was every week and even in the remoter areas it was rarely less than once a month (G. H. Jenkins: 12–13). The pattern for Anglican sermons, even in Welsh-speaking Wales, was the sober clarity of John Tillotson. In his diocesan charge of 1726, Richard Smalbroke, Bishop of St Davids, urged his clergy to master not only their content but their style: ‘the best pattern that can be placed before us for completing a preacher, and which indeed includes all the precepts of that art, is that of the incomparable Archbishop Tillotson’ (Smalbroke: 24). A Welsh version of Tillotson's *Persuasivity to Frequent Communion*, translated by George Lewis, a clergyman of the Diocese of St Asaph, as *Anogaeth i gymuno yn fynych* (1704), was popular, and its combination of moralism with an unambiguous sacramental thrust, set forth with unadorned clarity, typified the sermons of many of the clergy at the time. Although Puritanism had never made significant inroads into rural Wales—and post-Restoration Wales was overwhelmingly rural—Puritan convictions concerning the value of preaching and the need for clarity and immediacy had become the common currency of both Anglicanism and Dissent. Sermons were meant to be understood, hence plainness of style and directness of content were aimed at by all. Embellishments were eschewed, literary or classical references were, for the most part, avoided, and preachers were expected to preach the gospel simply, steering clear from abstruse or controversial doctrine. In an apologia for his zealotry in the preacher's task, Griffith Jones (1684–1761), rector of Llanddowror, assured Adam Ottley, Smalbroke's predecessor in the see of St Davids, that he avoided ‘empty speculations, high and lofty or quaint phrases, scholastical or controversial divinity above the reach of ordinary capacities that they can't be the better nor the wiser for it’ (G. H. Jenkins: 17). This was the ideal for all of the Welsh-speaking clergy and not confined to such gifted preachers as Griffith Jones.

(p. 201) Despite Wales being preponderantly Anglican, since 1689 the Dissenting tradition had been consolidated and was showing modest growth. As far as membership was concerned, in 1689 there can only have been some 12,000 Protestant Dissenters out of a population of 400,000, though congregations invariably contained many more adherents or ‘listeners’ than fully baptized communicant and committed members (Watts: 270). Unlike the Established Church, Dissent was only represented in parts of the country, mostly in south and south-west Wales and the north Wales border town of Wrexham. It was a small, select, and fairly middle class affair. Linguistically and culturally it was—like most of Wales’ parish-based Anglicanism of the time—incontrovertibly Welsh. Preaching was of the essence of Dissenting faith. As the heirs of the Puritans, the Dissenting ministers had been emancipated from their liturgical fetters and saw their ministry in terms of prophecy or holding forth the Word of the Lord. Although set apart by their congregations to the ministry of word and sacrament, sacerdotalism was foreign to them and their staunch Calvinism gave absolute priority to the exposition of scripture. All Dissenting sermons aimed at exegetical clarity, doctrinal precision, and practical application. No heed was taken of the church year, with the systematic and cogently argued address based upon the text at hand. Never dominated by the pericope or reading for the day, the Dissenting minister was free to choose his text at will.

In Wales, the history of post-Restoration Dissent is that of its preachers: Enoch Francis, Miles Harry, Morgan Griffith, and Timothy Thomas were most renowned among the Baptists, while Philip Pugh, Edmund Jones, and Lewis Rees had prominence among the Congregationalists (Jenkins and Lloyd). Francis (1688–1740) fulfilled a distinguished ministry in Cardiganshire and the Teifi Valley; Harry (1700–60), the leader of the Monmouthshire Baptists and associate of the Methodist revivalist Howell Harris, ensured that the energies of the Evangelical movement would be channelled into the Older Dissent; Griffith (1699–1748), a zealous evangelist, led the movement in the eastern part of Glamorganshire; while Thomas (1720–68), minister at Aberduar, Carmarthenshire, combined literary gifts with a consummate doctrinal precision.

Following the Toleration Act of 1689, the Welsh Dissenting community knew itself to be both a minority and, with memories of the Great Rebellion still potent, politically suspect. Its exclusiveness was bolstered by church discipline, zealously upheld, and high Calvinist doctrine (D. D. Morgan 1990). For a small religious body, barely tolerated by law and held in fear and contempt by its opponents, the stratum of biblical teaching which emphasized that the elect would be few, the flock to which the kingdom was given was little, had a particular relevance. It made unpopularity, social ostracism, and even persecution bearable: it provided a rationale for the movement's comparative insignificance. Similarly, the theological conviction of irresistible grace guaranteed Dissenting churchmanship with a sense of psychic security which bolstered group solidarity. Welsh Dissenting sermons

between 1689 and 1760 underpinned this exclusivity.

'We see here for whom Christ suffered,' reasoned John Jenkins, pastor of the Rhydwilym Baptist church in Pembrokeshire, in 1721. (p. 202)

It was for his elect, those given to him by the Father in the eternal covenant. He did not suffer for all men, for he says to some, 'You are not of my flock, nor do you recognize my voice'... It was on behalf of the elect that Christ suffered, the elect alone. (NLW 1059A)

Enoch Francis, a much more winsome preacher whose Calvinism was a good deal more moderate than his Rhydwilym colleague, also proclaimed the absolute sovereignty of God in salvation. 'The Lord', he maintained, 'gives grace only to those whom he wills, in the way he wills, when he wills' (NLW 1059A). 'Election', claimed Francis in a treatise of 1733, 'is that part of God's immutable, eternal and all-wise decree that he, of his free grace and immeasurable love, fore-ordained a certain number of men through Christ for eternal salvation' (Francis 1733: 5).

Within the churches there was some tension between High Calvinism, which was in danger of muting the general gospel call in the belief that God, through his absolute decree, would call his own come what may, and a much more open evangelicalism which balanced the divine sovereignty with the need for an unfettered human response. High Calvinism could degenerate into a speculative theory which limited preaching only to those who were thought (or thought themselves) to be the elect. At the Baptist Association meeting in Swansea in 1727, 'there was some debate... about preaching to sinners, and several reasons given for it' (J. Thomas: 43). The logic of the High Calvinist position was that if Christ's death had been sufficient for the redemption of the elect, then only they could justifiably be called upon to accept its saving benefits. Such logic was eschewed, the speculation which would sometimes bedevil the extreme doctrine was largely avoided, and following debate at the next association, in 1728, the principle of 'preaching to sinners' (J. Thomas: 44) became the accepted rule. The truth of the doctrine of election notwithstanding, the gospel was meant for all. High Calvinism gave way to 'moderate' or evangelical Calvinism which would characterize the movement throughout the Evangelical Revival and beyond.

In a rousing sermon on Ephesians 5:14, 'Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead', Enoch Francis's stress on man's inability to rise of himself is never used as an excuse for unbelief. The fact of spiritual death is squarely faced: 'The man who is dead in his sin... is like a corpse, he knows nothing of his state.' He must be touched by God: 'When the Lord... in his glorious salvation says, as he did to Lazarus, "Come forth", so he who is spiritually dead must first hear the call of Christ before he is made alive.' It was the sinner's duty to obey the call. 'Let us make sure that we are awake and not asleep' (NLW 1059A). In a sermon on Hebrews 10:22, the pastor of Pen-y-fai church in Glamorgan, Jacob Rees, issued a similar appeal. 'What prevents a man from turning to God?' he asked. 'A fear of losing the respect and friendship of carnal friends when starting out on the road to religion?' This, he claimed, was a small price to pay for eternal salvation. 'Remember', he said, 'that the ministers of the gospel are ready to do all they can to assist you; remember that the Spirit of God is yet at work!' (NLW Cwrt Mawr 68A). It was the Holy Spirit, active through the preaching of the gospel, which applied the benefits of Christ's death to the elect. 'The promise of salvation is for all who believe in the Son and (p. 203) who walk in his ways,' Enoch Francis insisted. 'There is no discrimination: God's revealed will is man's only rule' (Francis 1733: 29).

The basis of this promise and the evangelical Calvinists' rationale for calling all people to repentance was the all-embracing sufficiency of Christ's atonement. 'Christ's death', it was claimed, 'is sufficient to save all of mankind, though it is only effective for the elect; and the reason that it is only effective for them is due to the particular work of God's Spirit within' (Francis 1733: 77–8). The discrepancy between God's general desire for repentance and the melancholy fact that many reject the gospel (a rejection which, according to the logic of Calvinism, must also be rooted in God's design), was explained in terms of God's twofold will. God's revealed will was that all should repent and be saved. That some would seem not to be saved was due to God's *secret* design. It was the individual's duty not to pry. 'Who the elect are and who the reprobate are is part of God's secret counsel,' it was argued. 'And as his revealed will and not his secret will has been given to us as a rule of life, the door of hope is still held open for all people who, as sinners, come to Christ' (Francis 1733: 31). It was no part of the preacher's duty to anticipate God's secret will. The inscrutability was counterbalanced by an open offer of the gospel: 'It is not for us to look towards the decree of God as a rule of life but the word of the gospel' (Francis 1733: 27).

Unlike High Calvinism, which believed that humankind had inherited a natural inability to repent due to Adam's fall,

the evangelical Calvinism of Welsh Dissent held to freedom of choice. The unregenerate were indeed free to turn to God. They simply refused to use that freedom. God had provided all men—and women—with every encouragement: conscience, commandments, the gospel itself. But people chose not to obey. Their problem was moral disobedience, not natural inability. Individuals were responsible for refusing the gospel offer. 'It is the sinner's duty to come to Christ when he hears his call,' emphasized Francis. 'But as Christ says, "No one can come unto me except that the Father, who sent me", attracts him. The comfort for those who admit their inability is that the virtue and grace of God's Spirit is sufficient to assist them' (Francis 1733: 109). Francis could implore his many hearers in south-west Wales to secure their own salvation: 'The man who rejects Christ', he said in a sermon preached in 1722, 'is the most pitiful of men.' It was man who rejected Christ, not Christ who has rejected man. 'Return to him for you have forsaken the best place of all' (Francis 1722: 19).

Just as this pertains to the Welsh Baptists of the Older Dissent, virtually the same is true of the Independents (R. T. Jones 2004A: 79–109): Philip Pugh (1679–1760) who did so much to preserve the doctrinal rectitude of Cardiganshire Independency in the face of the encroachment of Arianism and who became the virtual mentor of Daniel Rowland, the revivalist; Edmund Jones (1702–93), the so-called *Yr Hen Broffwyd* ('Old Prophet'), Miles Harry's nemesis in Monmouthshire and virtually an archbishop among the Congregationalists; and Lewis Rees (1710–1800), a native of the Neath Valley in Glamorgan who pastored the notable congregation at Llanbryn-mair, Montgomeryshire, before returning to oversee the significant growth of the Independent cause in the environs of Swansea. For the Older Dissent ecclesiastical purity, doctrinal precision, and evangelical zeal went hand in hand. An openness to the missionary task and a yearning (p. 204) for a fresh outpouring of the Spirit meant that the Evangelical Revival was afforded a cautious welcome during the 1740s and '50s, and would wholly transform Welsh Protestant Dissent from the 1780s onward.

The Evangelical movement began within the confines of the Established Church. In 1735, independently of each other, the Anglican layman, Howell Harris (1714–73) of Trevecca, Breconshire, and Daniel Rowland (1730–90), curate of the parish of Llangeitho, Cardiganshire, both in the diocese of St Davids, experienced evangelical conversion and began preaching (or in Harris's case 'exhorting') with startling effects. As a layman, Harris was never comfortable with the appellation of preacher as he believed that the preaching office should be fulfilled by the ordained clergy. 'I could never call myself a preacher', he said in 1763, 'but an exhorter, my gifts being so' (Nuttall: 14). Yet it was he who helped spearhead the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist movement's evangelistic drive which had spectacular results first in his native south Wales and latterly in the north (E. Evans 1974). 'When alone I was taken up wholly in reading, praying, or writing', he reminisced of the beginning of his ministry, 'and also continued to go on exhorting the poor people and they flocked to hear me every Sunday evening' (La Trobe: 21). An example of the 'awakening' nature of his exhorting has been preserved by John Thomas, a convert who later became an Independent minister. Addressing a congregation in Llanddeusant, Carmarthenshire, in 1746, he said:

You may have turned the pages of your Bible for forty years or more, yet you know no more of God than a dog or a sow. You may have been on your knees praying many times thinking yourself to be a fine practitioner of your religion though you have never prayed from the heart once. If God does not own your heart, he will have the devils tearing at you body and soul at the hour of death and in the Day of Judgement. I know that my shafts are sharp, but may God drive his words like bullets to pierce your heart. (I. Thomas: 29)

By challenging formal religiosity the Methodists both enraged the religious establishment and scored massive success in evangelism, and by the 1760s had created a powerful body, still nominally attached to the Established Church but organized in two associations, one in south Wales and the other in the north, with their scores of 'societies' or local fellowship meetings functioning as gathered congregations administering discipline and choosing their own officers and leaders.

As a beneficed clergyman (though he was still in fact curate to his father in the parishes of Nantcwnlle and Llangeitho in Cardiganshire, and later to his brother and even to his own son), Rowland was more wedded to the parochial system, and though he travelled extensively addressing fellowship meetings and building up the societies, the scene of his most impressive labours was the parish church at Llangeitho. This became a mecca for the Methodists of south-west Wales, even attracting large crowds from north Wales who would cross Cardigan Bay by boat for the monthly 'sacrament Sunday', just as the parish church at Llan-gan in the Vale of Glamorgan, south-east Wales, would draw immense crowds during the ministry of David Jones (1736–1810), Welsh Calvinistic

Methodism's last clerical leader before the final rift with the Established Church in 1811. (p. 205) If Harris's genius was for exhortation and the organization of the Methodist body, preaching of a more formal kind was Rowland's forte. Whereas he, too, would challenge conventional religiosity, telling the people that they needed to be 'born again', his sermons were accomplished works carefully crafted according to the Puritan style. As well as individual sermons published in 1739 and 1762, his *Tair Pregeth a bregethwyd yn yr Eglwys Newydd gerllaw Llangeitho* ('Three Sermons Preached in the New Church near Llangeitho') (1772), his *Pum Pregeth* ('Five Sermons') of the same year, and *Tair Pregeth... a bregethwyd yn ddiweddar* ('Three Sermons... Preached Recently') (1775) are a distillation of the thousands that he delivered during his lifetime. A careful exposition of the text is followed by divisions, subdivisions and applications, all in the Puritan mode, though clarity, simplicity and directness are maintained throughout. Though it is difficult to square the dramatic descriptions of joyful exuberance and revivalistic paroxysms which were said regularly to accompany Rowland's preaching (E. Evans 1985: 69–80, 117–28) with the reasoned, polished style apparent on the printed page, there is no doubt that verve, order, and extraordinary spiritual power went hand in hand: 'The ecstasy and rejoicing which are contained in these sermons are eloquently controlled within a framework of reasoned doctrine' (D. L. Morgan: 500). It was Rowland's orations even more than Harris's organizational ability which became the benchmark for the view, prevalent throughout the nineteenth century, that Wales was the home of 'preaching second to no other under the sun' (Griffith 2001). 'Mark my words', wrote the Baptist Christmas Evans in 1838,

The talent of periwigs (*dawn y perwigau*) [Evans's phrase for the formalistic preaching of the Older Dissent] is in danger of returning to Wales. That talent was dry and stilted, it made all the listeners fall asleep. Many of the old Presbyterians and the Baptists were able preachers but their style was so cold and lifeless that it froze everything that it touched. But when Rowland of Llangeitho... and others began preaching as though fired from heaven, the old periwigs were forced to pack their goods and dismantle their stalls for there was no-one left to listen to them in neither fair nor market from Holyhead to Cardiff. (Rowland: 180)

To mention Christmas Evans (1766–1838) is to link the preaching of Older Dissent with popular evangelicalism and the exuberance of eighteenth century revivalism with the advent, by the early nineteenth century, of 'Nonconformist Wales' (D. D. Morgan 2008). By 1790 both the Baptist movement and Welsh Independency were being revitalized, their high and corporate Dissenting ecclesiology being progressively weakened by the individualism of the Evangelical movement even as their effectiveness and popularity was being maximized to an unprecedented degree. The Welsh Baptists' 35 churches of 1790 had become 81 in 1815 and over 300 by mid-century while the Independents' 100 or so churches in 1790 had increased to 257 by 1815 and over 500 three decades later (D. D. Morgan 1988; R. T. Jones 2004b: 149). Equally significant was the fact that 1811 witnessed the secession of the Methodist movement from the Established Church to create the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist Connexion, now a Presbyterian body with a character and constitution of its own (Roberts: 281–376). By 1811 a significant portion of the Welsh people had become Nonconformists while the 1851 religious census showed that 80 per cent of the nation's worshippers or some 400,000 people, in a much expanded population, practised their religion, namely evangelical Protestantism, outside the pale of the Established Church (I. G. Jones). According to its principal apologists, it was by preaching that this 'nonconformist nation' perpetuated itself (T. Rees: 24–9). 'There can hardly have been a time in the history of Wales', noted R. Tudur Jones, 'when so many people were exposed to so much public speaking of which the sermon was the most common form' (R. T. Jones 2000: 240). Consequently, within Nonconformist Wales the preacher reigned supreme.

If there were poor preachers, the charlatans and mountebanks that the Anglican satirist David Owen, 'Brutus' (1795–1866), delighted in lampooning, not least in his rollicking 'novel' *Wil Brydydd y Coed* ('Will the Poet of the Woods') which appeared month by month in the Church publication *Yr Haul* ('The Sun') between 1863 and 1866 (Owen), there were also those who brought huge distinction to the Welsh pulpit. The three whose names are invariably mentioned as exemplifying the best in pulpit oratory at the beginning of the nineteenth century are Christmas Evans, a Baptist, John Elias (1774–1841), a Calvinistic Methodist, and William Williams of Wern, near Wrexham (1781–1840), an Independent.

Evans began life in poor circumstances in Cardiganshire and his religious upbringing, such as it was, had been among the Arminian Presbyterians of the Teifi Valley who were even then veering towards rationalist Unitarianism. Converted during a local revival, he came to espouse the Baptist faith, was ordained into that denomination's ministry and held pastorates on the Llyn peninsula and in Anglesey (1789–1826), and in the south, Caerphilly and

Cardiff (1826–32), returning north once more, to the town of Caernarfon, for the last six years of his life. ‘He was a natural orator, fluent and brilliant of speech, a master of metaphor, wit and sarcasm’ (L. I. Evans: 319). Although he published many of his sermons during his lifetime, it was only at the end of the century that his whole oeuvre was brought together in three bulky volumes (Davies). The pattern of each sermon was uniform: the exposition of a text with an introduction, three points or headings leading to an oratorical climax. The many divisions and subdivisions that had characterized the Nonconformist pulpit during the previous century had yielded to a simpler form better adapted to the capacities of the multitudes which thronged to listen to the peripatetic preachers in the associations, gatherings and vast assemblies that had multiplied since the 1790s. ‘Perhaps there has never been such a nation as the Welsh who have been won over more widely to the hearing of the gospel’, Evans wrote in 1812. ‘Meeting houses have been erected in each corner of the land and the majority of the common people, nearly all of them, crowd in to listen. There is virtually no other nation whose members have, in such numbers, professed the gospel so widely’ (C. Evans: 13). The doctrinal scheme which underpinned his message was the evangelical Calvinism that had become the shared orthodoxy of the Welsh Nonconformist pulpit during the nineteenth century, though Evans had been tainted at different times by Sandemanism—a dry High Calvinism which balked at overt experientialism—and a concept of the atonement which evenly balanced the depth of Christ’s (p. 207) passion with the amount of human sin as though it were a commercial transaction. His genius, however, was in his luxuriant parabolic imagination.

The sermons of Christmas Evans are considered in Wales of unrivalled excellence, especially in regards the ingenuity and splendour of their imagery and the appropriateness and force of their application. The author displays extraordinary knowledge of human nature and great power of imagination in drawing pictures from scenes of real life for practical purposes, so that when he preaches his applications shock the congregation like electricity. (Davis: 3)

Uniquely for a Welsh language preacher of the time, he gained wide recognition in both England and America through the publication of more than one English translation of his memoirs along with selections from his sermons (Davis; Phillips; Stephen; Cross; D. M. Evans). The ‘allegory of the graveyard’ from a sermon on Romans 5:15 in which Mercy and Justice are personified, with Christ, the Seed of the Woman, providing surety for the lost posterity of Adam by dying in their place, illustrated the baroque and picaresque cast of his mind. Similarly a famous sermon on Luke 8:26–39, the story of the Gadarenian swine, transfers the biblical scene to the hills of Wales replete with a dialogue between the swineherds Morgan and Tom, who have to explain to their master why his prize pigs had rushed over a cliff into Cardigan Bay! This use of wit and humour, which would be perfected by the Calvinistic Methodist Edward Matthews in mid-century, was wedded to a seriousness of purpose which secured Christmas Evans’s standing as the most inventive of Welsh preachers during the first part of the nineteenth century.

Humour is not a trait one associates with John Elias. If Evans’s background was in the Older Dissent of south Wales, Elias was brought up in the Established Church in north Wales as it was being increasingly influenced by the evangelicalism of the Methodist movement. The son of a Caernarfonshire weaver and like Christmas Evans of humble circumstances, he was drawn towards Methodism and joined his local ‘society’ as a lad of fifteen. He began preaching five years later, in 1794, and soon won a reputation for gospel preaching of immense gravity, passion and effectiveness. According to Owen Thomas, the historian of Welsh preaching—whose biography of John Jones, Tal-sarn, is a classic of Welsh prose—, Elias’s outstanding trait was ‘a deep and solemn conviction of the divine nature of the gospel and of the immense importance of its content for a lost world’ (O. Thomas: 857). Following marriage in 1799, he moved to Anglesey where he became a neighbour to Christmas Evans, and from then until the end of his life the island would remain his home.

It was as a peripatetic orator, however, via the ever growing network of Calvinistic Methodist associations and preaching assemblies, that he made his name. ‘He became’, according to Owen Thomas,

the most popular preacher... who ever arose in Wales. He was so from the beginning, and he was so to the end. He was so at home, and elsewhere: in Anglesey as well as Gwent, in Llangefni as in Llangeitho or Carmarthen. He was so in the towns and in the countryside, amongst the rich, the noble and the learned, as with the poor, the uneducated and the ordinary folk. (O. Thomas: 854)

(p. 208) Of immense strength of personality, his authority over the north Wales Methodists steadily increased and following the death of Thomas Charles of Bala (1755–1814), the clergyman who had presided over the ordination

which created the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist Connexion in 1811, and even more so after the demise of the movement's premier theologian, Thomas Jones of Denbigh (1756–1820), his rule became absolute. Yet it was as an evangelist, preacher and the means of conversion of thousands, that this authority was sustained. In a single sermon, during a harvest fair in Rhuddlan, Flintshire, on a Sabbath afternoon in 1802, not only was the fair terminated, but the whole institution of hiring fairs on Sundays was thereafter discontinued (E. Morgan: 86–90).

It is... a matter of wonder that one preacher, facing a mob bent on pleasure and more than a little drunk, could destroy the institution of the Sunday fair in the whole county with one sermon. It is a remarkable proof of the power of the preached word in 1802—and of the stature of the preacher. (R. T. Jones 1975: 11)

A selection of Elias's sermons was published in two volumes in 1849, eight years after his death (Hughes). They are sternly doctrinal but give little insight into the power with which they were accompanied. Like Owen Thomas, as a young man the Welsh-American biblical scholar Llewelyn Ioan Evans heard him many times:

His powers to give reality to all that he said was extraordinary... The action of his index-finger alone was a study and a marvel... Add to this the sweep, the rush, the thrust, the blow of the sinewy arm, the authoritative stamp of the foot—add a plain style of marvellous fitness for popular effect, homely, plain, at the same time pure, strong, nervous Welsh from the granite rock-bed of the language—add a wonderful gift in fitting such words together, so that they would strike home—add the perfect preaching temperament with its instinctive perception of the tone, the temper, the atmosphere of the congregation, and the exact point at which to get the mastery of it—add a holy audacity which shrank from no lawful expedient to arouse and hold the people—over and above all add a burning passion for souls, an awful intense earnestness which had in it all the solemnities of the eternities, and you may faintly conceive the power of the man. (L. I. Evans: 330–1)

In all, John Elias was the most powerful preacher that Wales produced during the nineteenth century.

The third member of this triumvirate, the Independent William Williams of Wern, is the one who became least familiar to succeeding generations. A Methodist by background and conversion, the fact that he sought membership in a Congregational church, a branch of the Old Chapel in Llanuwchllyn, near Bala, in 1796, signified the way in which the Evangelical Revival was permeating the Older Dissent. Although he undertook training in the Dissenting academy at Wrexham, according to the cerebral discipline of his adopted tradition, his ordination in 1803 before the end of his course showed how evangelistic pragmatism was gaining the upper hand over academic finesse. 'There was in his sermons', related Llewelyn Ioan Evans, (p. 209)

a remarkable combination of clear and vigorous thought, with lucid and felicitous illustration. So perfect were his illustrations that it seemed as though they had an existence in the order of things, on purpose to set forth the truths with which they stood associated. Reflection made his hearers feel that it was the truth which glorified the emblem, and not the reverse. (L. I. Evans: 328)

According to R. Tudur Jones, Williams could

wed the philosophical and theological interests of the Nonconformist sermon to the liveliness, intensity and warmth of Methodist preaching. He could reason exceptionally clearly and there were none better at explaining a complex doctrinal topic. For his hearers, his strength lay in his simple and memorable expositions. But he, too, would bring pressure to bear on the consciences of his congregation, 'he pursued them from every direction, he followed them to every refuge, he disarmed them of every counter-argument' and all... to bring them to the crisis of decision. The effect of his preaching can be measured... from the assessment of his contribution by William Williams (Caledfryn): 'His arising was a means to put new life into the Independent cause in North Wales'. (R. T. Jones 2004a: 120)

Although an early biography was published in 1842 (W. Rees), it was not until 1894 that a hefty commemorative volume including a diplomatic edition of his best sermons appeared (D. S. Jones).

With the death of Williams of Wern in 1840, it was apparent that preaching had become the single most powerful aspect of life in Nonconformist Wales. Those who followed on—the Calvinistic Methodists Thomas Richard (1783–1856), Ebenezer Morris (1790–1867), Morgan Howell (1794–1852), John Jones of Tal-sarn (1796–1857) and

supremely Henry Rees (1789–1869); Baptists like Ellis Evans (1786–1864) and Independents like William Rees (1802–83), better known by his bardic name of 'Gwilym Hiraethog' (Jenkins and Lloyd)—maintained both the style, content, and effectiveness of their immediate predecessors. Of these Henry Rees was the most exquisite. According to Owen Thomas:

In Henry Rees, the pulpit reached, in our judgement, the highest perfection it has ever attained in our country, and we know of no-one in any country or in any age, whose sermons, considered as compositions, we should be willing to acknowledge as being superior to his. (quoted in L. I. Evans: 334)

The three highly accomplished volumes, published between 1872 and 1881, give ample substance to this view (R. Edwards).

Under this constellation of sanctified talent, the whole nation, it seemed, had been transfixed by the preaching of the Word. 'Taking everything into consideration', noted Edward Matthews in a seminal essay on Welsh preaching published in 1863, 'Wales can take pride in the fact that although she is bereft of many things, she is the home to the best preaching in the world, and the strongest yearning among the people to listen to such preaching' (Matthews: xvi). According to his contemporary, the Swansea Independent Thomas Rees: 'While it appears that the bulk of the working classes of England never attend the means of grace, and that a large proportion of them are avowed (p. 210) infidels, fully ninety per cent of the corresponding classes in Wales regularly attend public worship, except in the large towns and the most Anglicized districts' (T. Rees: 24). The country was certainly changing: its population was expanding, industrialization had become more widespread and intense, not least in the south Wales coalfields which were opening up and the north Wales quarrying districts, while partial Anglicization was beginning to occur, but zealous and activist biblical religion was a constant. 'The working classes of Wales', claimed Rees, 'have been evangelized by a faithful preaching of the gospel, the whole gospel and nothing but the gospel' (T. Rees: 25). Whatever we make of the hyperbole, they prided themselves that their preachers were in a category of their own: 'It is Wales that has reared... the most original, talented and powerful preachers of any country in the world' (Matthews: xxxii).

The gospel preachers who retained prominence during the third quarter of the century were no less gifted: Lewis Edwards (1809–89), John Phillips (1810–67), Roger Edwards (1811–86), Owen Thomas (1812–91), Edwards Matthews (1813–92) and David Saunders (1831–92) among the Calvinistic Methodists; Robert Ellis 'Cynddelw' (1810–75), William Roberts 'Nefydd' (1821–78), John Jones 'Mathetes' (1821–78) among the Baptists; Thomas Rees (1815–85) and John Thomas (1821–92) among the Independents, and many more, were in continuity with those who had gone before, but there were signs by then that the civilization which had been moulded by gospel preaching would be challenged by ideals and philosophies which would call many of the old truths into question. The generation of preachers who were called to hold the field until the end of the century and beyond had to contend with a changing world and shifting expectations.

Thomas Charles Edwards (1837–1900), son of Lewis Edwards, principal of the Calvinistic Methodists' Bala College and scion of a family which included the denomination's founding father, Thomas Charles, was both an intellectual leader and a preacher of huge renown. A New Testament scholar of note and the first principal of the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, '[t]he one central fact about him', remarked his student and another gifted pulpit orator, J. Puleston Jones (1862–1925), 'was that he was a great preacher' (J. P. Jones: 356). Yet it was he who analyzed most acutely the social and philosophical changes which would, by the twentieth century, undercut the effectiveness of the evangelical pulpit in Wales. 'In our fathers' days', he told the General Assembly of the Welsh Calvinistic Methodists, meeting in 1888, 'it could be taken for granted that theology was the abiding concern of a huge swath of the Welsh lay folk, but can that be said of today? Now it is politics or scientific theory, and is it not a fact that our young men not only have no theology but have no appetite for it at all?' (T. C. Edwards 1888a: 282). 'In the present condition of things in Wales', he informed the Pan-Presbyterian Council in London in that same year, 'you have a people actually weary of contending systems, keenly alive at the same time to the fascination of new ideas, political and scientific, and, for this reason, in danger of drifting away from theological truth altogether' (T. C. Edwards, 1888b: 110). It was not that the gospel was failing to be preached. The basic soundness of the evangelical pulpit could not be faulted. What was new was that the listeners, still active in their chapels, were becoming more and more sceptical as to the reality of divine truth. 'In our age agnosticism has come to the front as a conscious phase of (p. 211) the human intellect and teaches our young men not that this or that solution to the problem is fallacious... but that the problem itself need not be solved either way' (T. C. Edwards 1888b: 111). If the

Dissenting divines and the Methodist Fathers had debated passionately and at length about the extent of the atonement, the present generation hardly believed in any sort of atonement and thought that it was all a waste of time: 'The greatest danger that besets religion in Wales today is plain. The sense of sin is not keen' (T. C. Edwards 1888b: 109). What, therefore, was to be done? To preach Christ, certainly, but not Christ as the linchpin of a sacrificial theory, but Christ in the glory of his incarnate person, come into the world to share the joys and sufferings of an increasingly inquisitive and sceptical generation: 'Theology will come afterwards, and it will come with a greater force... [Then] comes the preacher's golden opportunity to proclaim the infinite atonement through the infinite sacrifice of the God-Man' (T. C. Edwards 1888b: 11). Edwards's sermons, published posthumously in 1900 (T. C. Edwards 1900), show the way in which the emphasis, even in Welsh language discourse, was changing. They were sacramentalist in tone and underpinned by a philosophical idealism that saw Christ as fulfilling all that was best in human life. 'By the turn of the century', wrote R. Tudur Jones, 'it was apparent that the focus of Welsh preaching was shifting from the atonement to the incarnation, to Bethlehem rather than Calvary' (R. T. Jones 2004b: 143). His exercise in kenotic theology, *The God-Man*, published in 1895 along with the Welsh version, *Y Duw-Ddyn*, two years later, shows how the tenor of Welsh theology was shifting, with immanence rather than the divine transcendence coming well to the fore (D. D. Morgan 2009).

Just as Edwards epitomized the doctrinally informed pulpit of the late Victorian and Edwardian eras, the preacher who best characterized the transformation which was occurring between an older religiosity and the more hesitant mood of the new century was the Congregationalist Howell Elvet Lewis (1860–1953). The sermons exemplified by those published in his enormously popular volume *Plannu Coed a phregethau eraill* ('Planting Trees and other sermons') (1898), a reference to the grove planted by Abraham at Beersheba in Genesis 21:33, established a new mode of discourse: lyrical, understated, non-dogmatic though still incontrovertibly evangelical. There was, alas, a feeling abroad that the age of the great preacher was drawing to a close. Despite the renewal in the Welsh Anglican Church (Knight; D. D. Morgan 2011: 23–37, 78–93), Nonconformity remained central to the Welsh experience (D. D. Morgan 2011: 9–23, 107–72) and as such the pulpit took preference over the altar. Whether the pulpit would be able to retain its hold on the nation was being questioned. The fact that prayer and praise rather than powerful preaching characterized the great religious revival of 1904–5 underscored that point (R. T. Jones 2004b: 283–369). There was a wistfulness abroad that a great tradition was coming to an end.

In summarizing the character of Welsh preaching during these years, R. Tudur Jones remarked:

What we see in the period between 1890 and 1914 is that the preaching tradition that did so much to shape modern Wales was beginning to disintegrate. There was much excellent preaching of course, but it was no longer a formative influence on thought, (p. 212) culture and morality of the nation. Doctrinal preaching maintained its pre-eminence but it was beginning to lose its vigour, either because it was turning into a weary repetition of worn-out theological truths or because it embraced opinions that dulled its spiritual force. In consequence there developed a reaction against doctrine and the undisciplined allegorization of fancy and poetic preaching began to undermine the pulpit's gravitas. Generally speaking the pulpit reneged on its responsibility to keep daily before Welsh eyes the gravity of sin and contented itself with mentioning general principles now and then. In all, there were definite signs of a crisis in the pulpit. (R. T. Jones 2004b: 160)

It was in the twentieth century that this crisis would register most fully (D. D. Morgan, 2011). For the most part between 1689 and 1901 the vernacular sermon retained its character as a formative influence on the history of the people of Wales.

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