

Two Welsh Suffragists at Oxford: Myfanwy and Olwen Rhŷs

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Table of Contents

List of figures	4
Acknowledgements.....	5
Abstract	6
Introduction.....	7
Chapter 1: John and Elspeth Rhÿs.....	14
Chapter 2: Suffragists, Suffragettes and the Rhÿs Family	26
The Rhÿs family and the campaign for women's suffrage	32
Chapter 3 Who were Myfanwy and Olwen?	51
Conclusion	65
Bibliography.....	68
Appendix	73

List of figures

1Figure 1: Diary of Myfanwy Rhÿs, 27 May 1899	53
2: Diary of Olwen Rhys 4 September 1897	54
3 Diary of Myfanwy Rhÿs 12 September 1893.....	73
4 Diary of Myfanwy Rhÿs 9 December 1898	74
5 Jesus College Principal's Lodgings	74

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Abstract

There had been virtually nothing published about Myfanwy and Olwen Rhÿs, forever identified as the brilliant scholar- daughters of Sir John Rhÿs, first Chair of Celtic Studies at Oxford, and Principal of Jesus College, Oxford, until Angela V John devoted a chapter to them in her 2018 book, *Rocking the Boat*. Intrigued by the sisters, I wished to dig deeper into their early years (up until 1915), by examining available diaries and other records, with 3 questions in mind:

- Was there a wider sphere of influence upon them, beyond their parents
- What was the social and political context of the Suffragist cause, and how did the sisters' contribution to it, and that of their parents, fit into it
- What do the diaries reveal about the characters of Myfanwy and Olwen behind their public reputation as brilliant young scholars: their relationships with their parents, their interests and preoccupations, and of course, their relationship with their identity as scholars.

I photographed over 1000 pages of diaries and documents, transcribing the diaries, (often in code), as well as I could. I concluded that Myfanwy and Olwen would have been influenced by the intellectual environment in which they lived, encountering many great and influential people in their daily lives. It was a function of this milieu, as well as their parent's influence, that helped shape their views. The diaries revealed two very different characters, yet with similar interests. Two lively young women who enjoyed physical activity, including dancing, yet who struggled to make meaningful connections with young men. Perhaps most surprising of all, these much-vaunted scholars, living exemplars of their parents' academic and intellectual ambitions, also struggled at times with their studies, sometimes to the detriment of their wellbeing.

Introduction

In her book *Rocking the Boat: Welsh Women who championed Equality*, Angela V. John devotes a chapter to the Rhÿs sisters, Myfanwy and Olwen, daughters of the first Professor of Celtic at Oxford, and later Principal of Jesus College, Sir John Rhÿs.¹ Intelligent and educated, the offspring of parents who were active in promoting the higher education of women and who espoused liberal values, it is hardly surprising that these two sisters became active in the suffragist movement, seeking to further the cause of women's suffrage by constitutional means. They were both members of the Oxford Society for Women's Suffrage, established in 1904, acting as Honorary Secretary and Executive committee members in turn. Their father was President of the Society from its inception until his death in 1915.

There has been no other published work on the two sisters, save for a mention on the Oxford University website celebrating Oxford suffrage women. Sir John Rhÿs also has only so far merited a 'little book', in English and Welsh, for use in schools.² John has outlined Myfanwy and Olwen's lives and careers, highlighting the key events in their lives and drawing attention to the fact that, despite their early much celebrated, academic success, they were nevertheless subject to the limitations of higher education at Oxford and Cambridge, who declined to award degrees to women at this time.³ She argues that 'their life

¹ Angela V John, *Rocking the Boat*, (Cardigan: Parthian :2019), pp.197-246.

² T.H. Parry-Williams, *John Rhÿs 1840-1915*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1954), 67pp. Myfanwy intended to write a book about her father, and sought contributions, but no book ever materialised. See John, *Rocking the Boat*, pp.225-227.

³ Oxford awarded degrees to women for the first time in 1920, and Cambridge in 1948. University Degrees for Women: Oxford and Cambridge, 1895-1897, 1919-1920, 1892 - 1920, GBR/0271/GCPP Davies 14,. Girton College Archive.
https://archivesearch.lib.cam.ac.uk/repositories/19/archival_objects/2104331 Accessed September 29, 2026.

stories,...suggest that they also deserve recognition as two highly intelligent and plucky individuals in their own right.’⁴

They both wrote diaries, intermittently, over the course of their lives, so, adopting a micro-historical approach, and building on John’s work, there are three key areas of interest I wish to examine further: to see if it were possible to get a sense of the wider sphere of influence around them, beyond that of their parents which John has emphasised, and capture their responses to those influences, particularly with regard to the shaping of their political views; to illuminate their participation in the campaign for votes for women, by providing the political, social and familial context, and finally, in contrast to their well- publicised scholarly endeavours and media image, I wish to explore the other facets of these two young women, to see what the diaries and other sources reveal about their individual characters, their relationships with their parents and their attitudes to their studies, and their interests and preoccupations

These diaries date from 1897-8 in Olwen’s case, and 1883, 1884, 1893 and 1898 in Myfanwy’s. I photographed and transcribed 1410 pages of 6 diaries for ease of use. As John has observed, Myfanwy’s diaries represented a particular challenge, as she wrote in code from time to time, sometimes for just short phrases, at other times for several pages at a time.⁵ The predominant code consists merely of a substitution of Greek letters for the Latin script, mostly in English, but occasionally in French and German. In the earlier diary she used a simple transposition of letters, ‘b’ for ‘a’, ‘c’ for ‘b’ and so on but seems to have preferred the Greek code; perhaps she felt it was more secure. On one occasion, when writing about a friend’s moral dilemma, Myfanwy also incorporates Russian characters, enabled by the Russian lessons which she was receiving at the time and clearly enjoyed. The challenge in reading them was also compounded by her handwriting, inconsistent in style and occasionally indecipherable. I will discuss

⁴ John, *Rocking the Boat*, p.236.

⁵ Ibid.p.207.

Myfanwy's and Olwen's different approaches to diary writing later, which may give some clues to their different characters.

In her seminal work on the sisters, John leaves us in no doubt that the influence of their parents cannot be overestimated, and seems to suggest that Myfanwy and Olwen's lives were indelibly imprinted by the extraordinary career trajectories of Sir John and Lady Elspeth, as well as their achievements in education.⁶ Education seems to have been key to social mobility for the Rhys family, who rose from humble lead mining and agricultural families in North Wales,⁷ to entertaining Lloyd George at dinner in the Jesus College lodgings.⁸ Brought up from their earliest years in the somewhat rarified environment of Oxford University, John remarks of the Rhys sisters that "If these privileged daughters had a burden to bear it was that expectations were constantly high...it was more a case of having to measure up to their parents' achievements".⁹

The 'famous Celtic scholar, Professor John Rhys'¹⁰, was not infrequently mentioned in the press, with articles marking his ascent to eminence, and thereafter his various activities and publications. John has alluded to some press notices of the two girls, and it appears that there was a public image of the two girls from a very young age, which gave them a certain celebrity.¹¹ From their

⁶ Oxford University, 'The Women's Suffrage Movement in Oxford', Education Activism Women at Oxford 1878-1920, 2018, <https://firstwomenatoxford.ac.uk/oxford-womens-suffrage-movement>, [accessed 26 May 2026].

⁷ I. Williams, 'Sir John Rhys (1840 – 1915) Celtic scholar', *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*, 1959, from <https://biography.wales/article/s-RHYS-JOH-1840>, [Accessed 20 Jan 2026].

⁸ Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru, (LGC) Aberystwyth, Sir John Rhys, Miscellaneous Family Papers, B3/4 Diaries of Mrs Hughes, 20 June 1908.

⁹ John, *Rocking the Boat*, pp.199-200.

¹⁰ Holywell County School, North Wales Times, 2 April 1898. <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.com/image-viewer?iissue=BL%2F0000923%2F18980402&page=8> [accessed 20 January 2026], p.8. (reporting on the forthcoming opening of the Holywell County School, at which a 'large gathering of educationalists and others' was expected.

¹¹ John, *Rocking the Boat*, p. 203.

earliest years a picture is painted of two earnest learners.¹² Their prowess as scholars, especially as linguists is celebrated in the press and various journals and magazines, not just in local, Oxford-based media, but also in Wales.¹³ For example, The Oxfordshire Weekly News of October 5 1892 reports Olwen's distinctions in French and German in her school exams, and The South Wales Daily News of January 10 1892, in a column headed 'A Welsh Girl's Proud Distinction', noted that 'a daughter of Professor Rhys again wins the gold medal', noting that her elder sister Myfanwy had won the medal two years previously.¹⁴ These entries are typical of the media presentation of the girls, and tend to bear out John's contention that high academic expectations rested on their shoulders. Time and again they are celebrated through the lens of their father's eminence and his own achievements, predestined to follow in his scholarly wake. Even in later years we find Myfanwy's reputation and status presented in the reflected glory of her father's, even from beyond the grave. The London-based Honourable Society of the Cymmrodorion, for which Myfanwy had served as a Council member from 1929 – 33 and then as Vice President from 1936 – 1945, published this obituary of her in their *Transactions*:

two other Vice Presidents died during the year....and in November.
Miss Myfanwy Rhys, a daughter of the late Right Hon. Sir John Rhys
(a past Chairman of our Council). who died on the day the Sir John
Rhys Memorial Lecture was delivered before the British Academy.

And then, almost as an afterthought:

¹² Ibid.201.

¹³ Ibid, p.203.

¹⁴'A Welsh Girl's Proud Distinction', South Wales Daily News, January 10 1893, News <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.com/image-viewer?issue=BL%2F0000919%2F18930110&page=4&article=023&stringtohighlight=olwen+rhys> [Accessed 20 January 2026]. p.4. The paragraph notes that: '*This is the more creditable to Miss Rhys as during the last two terms she has suffered considerably from ill-health*'.

She will be remembered particularly for her 'Ministers' Accounts for West Wales 1277-1306' published as Vol. XIII in the Record Series.'¹⁵

While Sir John Rhŷs was clearly an eminent and respected figure, he was not the only influence on his daughters' lives and careers. Their mother Elspeth née Hughes, described as a 'teacher, hostess and campaigner for women's rights' was an influential figure in her own right, whose activities extended beyond the domestic sphere.¹⁶ Well educated (for the time), and herself a professional educator who was well travelled, she took an active part in the education of her daughters, even employing a French tutor to live with the family, and running a household that hosted many influential people from political and academic spheres.¹⁷

With regard to their involvement with the Suffragist cause, there are no extant diaries for these years, as far as is known, so I have drawn as much information as possible from other available sources, including the annual reports of the Oxford Society for Women's Suffrage and newspaper sources.¹⁸ I also consulted the diaries of Sir John Rhŷs and the Jesus College Visitors Book,¹⁹ and those of Mrs Elizabeth Hughes²⁰, fellow countrywoman and housekeeper in the Jesus College Principal's Lodgings, with sporadic entries dating from 1896 to 1908.

¹⁵ The Honourable Society of the Cymmrodorion, *Transactions Session 1945*, (1946), (p.3) <https://journals.library.wales/view/1386666/1413170/#?m=44&xywh=-2636%2C-513%2C7686%2C4747>, Accessed 10 May 2026.

¹⁶ Ffion Mair Jones, 'ELIZABETH RHŶS, (Elspeth) (1841 - 1911), teacher, hostess and campaigner for women's rights' *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*, 2023, <https://bywgraffiadur.cymru/article/c14-RHYS-ELI-1841.html>, [Accessed 20 January 2026].

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Unfortunately, the minute books and other potentially useful papers located in the Bodleian Library were no longer accessible as they were still to be assessed in accordance with UK General Data Protection Regulations.

¹⁹ Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru(LGC), Aberystwyth, Sir John Rhŷs, Miscellaneous Family Papers, Diaries A42, Jesus Lodging Visitors' Book 1905-15, A4/6.

²⁰ LGC, B3/4, Diaries of Mrs Hughes.

Although largely mundane in content, with details of coal deliveries, numbers of people entertained at dinner, and intermittent bouts of toothache and bad colds, they occasionally mention Miss Myfanwy's or Lady Rhys' women's meetings in the drawing room at Jesus Lodgings, which she sometimes attended. They also show a clear affection for the girls, and a shared interest with them in the theatre. Mrs Hughes' diaries suggest a lively and happy household.

In order to contextualise my findings, and to give a sense of the environment into which Myfanwy and Olwen were born, in Chapter 1 I will give an outline of the John and Elspeth Rhys' biographies. It clearly shows that the couple were deeply committed to the education of women from the outset, and that education was the route to John Rhys' career success and social standing. Drawing as much as possible from diaries and other papers, I also hope to give a sense of the distinguished and influential people with whom the Rhys family socialised, many of whom shared many of their political views, and the girls' observations thereupon.

In Chapter 2 I will briefly describe the development of the Suffragist cause (as distinct from the later *Suffragette* activity, noting John and Elspeth Rhys' early adoption of the cause for women's suffrage, and their continuing support, via both the Oxford Women's Suffrage Society (OWSS), and the Oxford Women's Liberal Association. Drawing on such resources as are available, I will attempt to draw out a sense of the people and events which may have contributed to Myfanwy's political and social awareness particularly, and to trace Myfanwy and Olwen's activities in service of the OWSS.

In chapter 3 I will briefly consider the sisters' individual approaches to diary writing, which, contrary to their usual pairing, give at least an impression of two very different characters. I will also examine some of the key interests and preoccupations of the two sisters, that emerge from their diaries. Their enjoyment of the theatre, dances, gossip and fashion, which illuminates a perhaps more frivolous side to these two scholarly young women. Many of Myfanwy's entries are peppered with sharp criticisms of the people she encounters, but also critical self-reflection. The two are well travelled, and

Myfanwy's diary from 1893 reveals a confident traveller abroad, when she and Olwen journey to Germany in order to improve their German language skills.

In conclusion I hope to have demonstrated that it was perhaps inevitable that Myfanwy and Olwen would follow in the parents' footsteps and join the Suffragist campaign for votes for women, but there is a strong argument they were also significantly influenced by their Oxford environment and the people they encountered. The political and social context of the campaign which I have set out adds further weight to this argument. Finally, drawing on their own voices from the diaries, I also hope to have given a lively sense of their lives and interests, that paint a picture that is very different from their early public image. There are significant entries evidencing both a loving, but also complex relationships with their parents, that support the sense of burden that John posits.

Chapter 1: John and Elspeth Rhÿs

I would argue that one cannot fully appreciate Myfanwy and Olwen's participation in the Suffragist movement, their social and political awareness, and perhaps most particularly, their scholarly lives, without understanding the trajectory of their parents' lives, with education at the centre, and their interest in equality for women. The intellectual ambitions of their parents emerge clearly, harmonised in their support for both women's suffrage and equality of educational opportunities.

The pages of the Jesus College Principal's Lodge visitors' book for the years 1905 to 1915²¹ are peppered with the signatures of the great and the good from the United Kingdom and beyond. They feature not only luminaries of academia as might be expected of the first Chair of Celtic Studies at Oxford, but also prominent figures in British politics, women's suffrage, higher education and Welsh culture, indicative of Sir John and Elspeth Rhÿs' deep seated political and social convictions.

Among the former can be found Kuno Meyer, the German Celtic scholar, Whitley Stokes, the Irish Celtic scholar, lawyer and frequent correspondent to John Rhys, J.G. Mahaffy, Irish Celtic and classical scholar, Israel Gollancz Professor of English and mediaeval studies and Mildred K. Pope, Anglo Norman scholar, lecturer at Somerville College and first female reader appointed at Oxford University. Political figures include a fair sprinkling of Liberal politicians, (to whom the suffragists looked to support the cause for women's suffrage,) the most significant being perhaps David Lloyd George (together with his family), M.P. for Caernarvon Boroughs from 1890 – 1945, and UK Prime Minister 1916-1922. The prominent suffragist, founder of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, and campaigner for higher education for women, Millicent Fawcett, the feminist activist Leonora Philipps (later Lady St Davids) and Irish nationalist historian and politician Alice Stopford Greene all visited Jesus Principal's

²¹LGC, A4/6, Visitors' book for Jesus College Principal's Lodge, 1905 -1915.

Lodgings during this time. As I will argue later, the impact of these people must surely have contributed to the social and political views of the Rhÿs sisters.

T. H. Parry- Williams, writing of his 'old professor' in a little book which was intended for educational purposes claims:

We are all familiar with stories of poor, but ambitious, boys who have become famous through hard work and constant striving in the face of many difficulties and disadvantages. Sir John Rhÿs was just such a boy.²²

In June 1840 Rhÿs was born John Rees, eldest child of Hugh Rees, a farm labourer and chapel deacon and his wife Jane. On this original spelling, John Morris Jones notes, somewhat sharply: '...all the Rhÿses of Wales tamely submitted to this mutilation of this name by English officials'.²³ The Rees family lived near Ponterwyd in Ceredigion, approximately 12 miles from Aberystwyth. The family was poor, but Hugh Rees was concerned that his son should be educated. Early educational opportunities for the young John were minimal: he would have learned to read Welsh at Sunday school, but local schools were situated in domestic settings and open to children and adults, operating during the winter months only.²⁴ At the age of 15 he entered Pen-llwyn, lodging nearby, and was eventually selected to be a pupil teacher. He took and passed the entrance examination to Bangor Normal College (without great distinction). He undertook these studies allegedly with a view to 'keeping school' thereafter, to earn enough eventually to go to university.²⁵ His original intention had been to try for the University of Glasgow but later heard that

²² T.H. Parry-Williams, *John Rhÿs 1840-1915*. (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1954), p.7.

²³ John Morris Jones, Sir, 'Sir John Rhÿs, The John Rhÿs Inaugural Memorial Lecture'. *Proceedings of the British Academy*, (1925), pp.187-195. <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/11p187.pdf> [Accessed 16 May 2026].

²⁴ Parry- Williams, *John Rhÿs*, p.17.

²⁵ Ibid. p.27.

Oxford University ‘offered more advantages than any other seat of learning in the United Kingdom’.²⁶

Concluding his studies at Bangor Normal at the end 1860, and with an unremarkable third class certificate, Rhys was appointed to the British School at Rhos y Bol near Amlwch, in Anglesey, in January 1861. His own studies continued in earnest, mastering Greek, Latin, French German and ‘the Celtic languages’.²⁷ His journal entry for 22 April 1862 notes: ‘Resolved to study Greek in the morning, French at noon, Latin in the evening’.²⁸

It seems that he did well enough as a schoolmaster there, as H.M. Inspector of Schools, Mr White, was reported to have concluded that: ‘This school is in a good state of discipline and has passed a highly creditable examination’.²⁹ However two other significant events occurred during his time there. As noted above, Rhys was born John Rees, and the records of Tŵr-Gwyn Chapel, which housed the Bangor Normal College students in 1860, use this earlier spelling. However, by the time of the Census in 1861, he is listed as ‘John Rhys, teacher, age 20’. The circumflex appeared sometime later.

During this time he met his future wife, Elizabeth (later Elspeth also Eliza) Hughes-Davies, then headmistress of the British School for Girls in Amlwch. She was born on 26 May 1841 at Tyn-yr-Aelgerth farmhouse near Llanberis, in Caernarfonshire. She worked as a pupil teacher, before attending the Borough Road Teacher Training College, and was appointed to the British School for

²⁶ Ibid. p.23.

²⁷ Ibid. p.27.

²⁸ LGC, A4/2, Diaries of John Rhys.

²⁹ ‘Amlwch’, *The North Wales Chronicle*, Saturday 22 July 1865.
<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.com/image-viewer?issue=BL%2F0000094%2F18650722&page=10&article=035&stringtohighlight=rhys>
[Accessed 20 January 2026].

Girls in Amlwch, around 1861, which is probably when Rhys met her. She later became Headmistress of the British School for Girls in Broughton, Flintshire.³⁰

Two brief entries in Rhys' diary for 1863 pull us back to his roots and remind us of the harshness of life in the mid nineteenth century. On 26 April he wrote: 'My sister died aged 17', and on 15 July, 'My mother died aged 51'.³¹ Nevertheless, Rhys' ambition was growing, and his potential was soon to be recognised. In 1864 he was invited to read a paper at the Llandudno National Eisteddfod, on 'Welsh Philology and the Connections of the Welsh Language'. It is possible that this invitation came from Hugh Owen (later Sir Hugh Owen), a noted educationalist and advocate for both Bangor Normal College and the University College of Wales at Aberystwyth.³² According to the report in *The Daily News*, of Saturday August 7 1864, as well as laying out his conclusion on the origins and relationship to other Celtic languages of the Welsh language, he also made a fervent plea for two books: 'a complete manual of the Welsh language' and 'a comprehensive grammar of all the Celtic languages'. This work to be undertaken not by 'some learned foreigner', but a patriotic Welshman, to let them 'do something that would cause it (Welsh) to be more generally studied and effectually satisfy that fervent wish of genuine Welsh nationality 'Oes y byd ir jaith Gymreig' (sic).³³ This paper, which he afterwards translated into Welsh for publication in the Welsh language journal, *Y Dysgedydd*,³⁴ proved to be an extraordinary debut. It conferred a degree of recognition upon him as a scholar, confident in his abilities, especially in view

³⁰ Jones, 'Elizabeth Rhys', in *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*.

³¹ LGC, A4/2, Diaries of John Rhys.

³² Ellis, T. I., (1959). OWEN, Sir HUGH (1804 - 1881), educationist. *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*. Retrieved 7 May 2026, from <https://biography.wales/article/s-OWEN-HUG-1804>

³³ *The Daily News*, London, August 7, 1864, p.2.
<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.com/search.com/search-newspapers/results>, {20 January 2026}.

³⁴ A Welsh Language monthly periodical, intended for Congregationalists. The first editor was Cadwaladr Jones, (1783-1867) a Welsh Independent minister.

of the fact that he was a young schoolmaster from humble origins. This was followed in 1865 by his paper 'The Passive Verbs of the Latin and the Keltic Languages', which was published in the *Transactions of the Philological Society*.³⁵ The Chancellor of Bangor Cathedral, James Williams, of Llanfair-yng-Nghornwy, Anglesey³⁶ is credited with introducing Rhŷs to Dr Charles Williams, Principal of Jesus College, Oxford, in 1865.³⁷ Both men were supporters of Eisteddfodau and interested in all things Welsh. Dr Williams conducted a brief oral examination, after which he immediately offered Rhŷs an exhibition at Jesus College. Jesus College had been founded in 1571 by Dr Hugh Ap Rees (also known as Price), with the assistance of Queen Elizabeth 1, and has had a long association with Wales.³⁸

In January 1866 Rhŷs went up to Jesus to undertake his undergraduate studies. In 1867 he was disappointed with a second class in Classical Moderations.³⁹ By 1869, however, he was able to graduate with a first class in Literae Humaniores, and was elected Fellow of Merton College.⁴⁰ During his undergraduate studies Rhŷs attended lectures on 'Celtic Literature' given by

³⁵ Rhys, (sic) M.J. XVI.- 'The Passive Verbs of the Latin and the Keltic Languages', *Transactions of the Philological Society*, 10: 293-306.1865 <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-968X.1865.tb00473.x>

³⁶ Jenkins, R. T., 'WILLIAMS, JAMES (1790-1872), cleric.' *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*, <https://biography.wales/article/s-WILL-JAM-1790>, [Accessed 12 May 2026]

³⁷ Fraser, J., & Williams, M. (2006, May 25). Rhŷs [formerly Rees], Sir John (1840–1915), Celtic scholar. *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-35734> [Accessed 8 May 2026]

³⁸ By the mid-17th century almost all fellowships and scholarships were only available to Welsh applicants. Bequests from wealthy Welshmen funded even more scholarships and, in the 18th, and 19th centuries, many young Welsh theological students received their training at Jesus, returning home to Wales to become parish priests. Although the Welsh connection has been retained, and celebrated, John Rhŷs is known for opening the College to international students. See: <https://www.jesus.ox.ac.uk/about-jesus-college/history/the-history-of-jesus-college/> Accessed September 2026.

³⁹ T.H. Parry-Williams, John Rhŷs, p.33.

⁴⁰ J. Fraser, & M. Williams, 'Sir John 'Rhŷs (1840–1915), Celtic scholar', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

Matthew Arnold, who firmly believed that a Chair in Celtic Studies should be founded.⁴¹ Having spent some time during his vacations travelling to various European universities in France and Germany, in 1870 he went to Leipzig to study philology.

Rhÿs' journal for 1870 tells of his matriculation at the University of Leipzig, where he attended 'Curtius' first lecture on comparative philology, specially from a "classical" point of view'.⁴² He found it noteworthy that he 'never before saw together such a number of sprachforscher (*linguists or philologists*) in my life'.⁴³ Clearly Rhÿs' German was sufficiently proficient, as he says that he found the lecture easy to understand. Rhÿs' intellectual curiosity runs through his journal entries as a clear driving force. However, still a young man at this point, we see another side to him where his curiosity about his fellow human beings breaks out into critical observations. For example, he mentions a visitation from 'Gorhelyd', together with 'a Mrs Cotton, widow, heavy-laden under such a mass of somebody's hair, which made her extremely hideous- a decided case of fishing for a husband under difficulties'.⁴⁴

It is striking, but perhaps not surprising, that his daughter Myfanwy, was also given to expressing herself strongly, and often in code, about other people and their appearances. The following example is from her diary of late 1893/early 1894 during her trip to Germany with Olwen:

there hove in sight Tillie down very down – and the Hauptman oh ye Gods what a costume. Trousers too disturbing for description a coat never intended for his

⁴¹ S. Collini, 'Arnold, Matthew (1822–1888), poet, writer, and inspector of schools.' *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. <https://www-oxforddnb-com.uwtsd.idm.oclc.org/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-679,2008>, Accessed 14 May 2026].

⁴² Georg Curtius, German philologist, 1820-1885.

⁴³ LGC, A4/2, Diaries of John Rhÿs.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

back, a cross between a frock coat and a Lord knows what, with two inches at least of cuff. But he defied description.⁴⁵

While John Rhŷs was pursuing his studies at Oxford and beyond, Elspeth Hughes Davies was also travelling and studying. Apparently encouraged by him, she took a post teaching English in Boulogne. She also travelled to Paris, Switzerland, Germany and Rome, where she studied with the artist Achille Buzzi.⁴⁶ She studied languages at the University of the Sorbonne in Paris, and during this time exchanged lessons in Welsh for French with Charles de Gaulle, the writer, pioneer of pan Celticism, and posthumous uncle of the famous French General and President. When the Franco-Prussian War broke out in July 1870 Elspeth moved to Vienna for safety.⁴⁷ There can be no doubt about her linguistic prowess or indeed her critical faculties as she penned some well received letters from there to the liberal Welsh Calvinistic Methodist Weekly, *Y Goleuad*. In these letters she not only criticised the views of the British Press about the war, (in Welsh), but she also offered up a translation from the German of an article in the *Neue Freie Presse* about the imprisonment of the left-wing Jewish politician, Johan Jacoby.⁴⁸

It has also been well documented that John Rhŷs was more than fully supportive of Elspeth's linguistic studies, sending her a French German dictionary and Latin lessons by post when she was in Berlin.⁴⁹ He also visited her in Berlin in 1871, shortly before she returned home.⁵⁰ Rhys always intended to return home and find a job. He had noted in his diary in late March 1870:

⁴⁵ Oxford, Bodleian Libraries, (BL) MS.Eng.misc.e.675. Diary of Myfanwy Rhŷs, 1893/1894.

⁴⁶ Jones, 'Elizabeth Rhŷs' in the *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*.

⁴⁷ This took place from 19 July 1870-28 January 1871.

⁴⁸ Jones, 'Elizabeth Rhŷs', in *The Dictionary of Welsh Biography*.

⁴⁹ John, Angela. V. *Rocking the Boat*, p.199.

⁵⁰ Jones, 'Elizabeth Rhŷs', in *The Dictionary of Welsh Biography*.

I am generally persuaded to remain away from Oxford only as little as I can. I was so delighted with Oxford that I felt reluctant to come away and I promised to stay away only 12 months.⁵¹

He applied for posts in schools, unsuccessfully, but in early 1871 he was appointed Inspector of Schools for Flint and Denbigh, allegedly on the recommendation of Mathew Arnold (himself an Inspector of Schools for some 35 years), and settled in Rhyl.⁵² This post, requiring travel around the countryside, enabled him to collect folklore material and view inscriptions on old stones. He continued to study and write articles, such as 'The Welsh Language and the Eisteddfod' in 1871, and 'The Antiquity and Philological Importance of the Literature of the Welsh People' in 1872.⁵³ In 1874 he was invited to give a series of lectures at Aberystwyth University. These later provided the foundation of his first book, *Lectures on Welsh Philology* published in 1877.⁵⁴ These academic endeavours began to cement his reputation as an authority on matters Celtic, especially Welsh.⁵⁵

Having secure employment as an Inspector of Schools meant that John and Elspeth could be married; not for him the 'white choker' i.e. he did not intend to become a clergyman).⁵⁶ In August 1872, John Rhys and Eliza (as she was then known) Hughes Davies were married in the parish church at Llanberis. The young couple's first child, Gwladus was born in Rhyl in May 1873, but sadly died on 10

⁵¹ LGC, A4/2, Diaries of John Rhys.

⁵² J.H. Parry-Williams, *John Rhys*. p.35.

⁵³ John Rhys, 'Y Gymraeg a'r Eisteddfodau, *Y Traethodydd*, (Chwefor 1872).p.154-165 <https://journals.library.wales/view/2889046/2889181/#?m=131&xywh=-2543%2C-498%2C7230%2C4465> And 'Henafiaeth A Phwyrigrwydd Ieithyddol Llenyddiaeth y Cymry', (*Y Traethodydd*, Mawrth 1872), <https://journals.library.wales/view/2889046/2889310/1#?m=132&xywh=-2543%2C-498%2C7230%2C4465> pp.369-380,[Accessed 26 September 2026]

⁵⁴ John Rhys, *Lectures on Welsh Philology*, (London: Trübner and Co.,1877).

⁵⁵ J.H. Parry-Williams, *John Rhys*, p. 37.

⁵⁶ Ibid. p. 35.

June 1874, shortly before the birth of Myfanwy on 1 August 1874. Olwen was born on 4 March 1876. By this time various reforms taking place at Jesus College meant that it was now possible for a Chair of Celtic Studies to be established, and John Rhŷs was determined to apply. In February 1877, supported by Whitley Stokes and Professor Max Müller (Professor of Comparative Philology at Oxford), Rhŷs was elected to the Chair and made an honorary fellow of Jesus College.⁵⁷ Four years later he was made an official fellow, and also bursar, and he was responsible for founding a still growing collection of Celtic printed books at the College in 1888.⁵⁸ He was elected Principal of Jesus College in 1895, in which post he remained until his death in 1915. This appointment was apparently not unanimously welcomed: the Vice- Principal, Rev Thomas Llewellyn Thomas (1840-97), assumed he would be appointed. The competition was characterised as a ‘battle between Thomas (“the church element”) and Rhŷs (“the non-conformist element”)’.⁵⁹ T. Parry-Williams notes that the undergraduates who were waiting the outcome of the appointment in the quadrangle, signalled by the successful candidate being the first to exit the Chapel after the election, ‘received Rhŷs in silence, this appearing to favour the Vice Principal; but the appointment was heartily welcomed by the people of Wales.’⁶⁰ However, according to Sir Vincent E. Evans, the appointment was an

‘Extremely fortunate one for the College. Under his influence and guidance, Jesus flourished exceedingly, and attained a place in the Honours School, to which for a long time it had been a comparative stranger’.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Ibid. p. 41.

⁵⁸David T.R. Lewis, *Past Principals of Jesus College Oxford, 1571- 1984*, Jesus College Oxford, 2025, <https://www.alumniweb.ox.ac.uk/jesus/file/Past-Principals-of-Jesus-College.pdf> .p.87.[accessed May 2026]

⁵⁹ Lewis, *Past Principals of Jesus College Oxford*, p.87.

⁶⁰ Parry-Williams, T.H. *John Rhys*, p.43.

⁶¹ Sir E. Vincent Evans, ‘Sir John Rhys 1840-1915,’ *The Welsh Outlook*, (1916), Vol. 3. No. 1. pp.12-13. <http://hdl.handle.net/10107/1312336> Not only were issues of class at play but also gender: women were excluded. One wonders whether class and also Rhŷs’ support for women’s suffrage

Referring to a triad composed by Henri Gaidoz, Celticist, philologist and founder of the *Révue Celtique*, John Morris-Jones described Rhÿs as ‘the third great Welsh philologist’.⁶² ‘Tri doethion bro Gymru, dysgedig yn yr ieithydd Geltiaidd: Gruffudd ap Robert, Edward Llwyd, ac Ioan Rhys’.⁶³

Speaking of his extensive knowledge of all things Celtic, he asserts that ‘everything had come under his notice: words, idioms, names, tales, beliefs, customs tribes, races, monuments’. However, it was always through the lens of philology, he did not care for the beauty of poetry or literature, but rather ‘with an eye for words and names. ...Welsh and Irish literature ...for him they were quarries where he dug for his philological and mythological material’.⁶⁴ Even in social situations, philological concerns were never far from his mind. In her diary for 1893-94, Myfanwy writes about attending an evening party at the museum:

Pa and Ma got sight of Prof Herkomer in distance with Mr McDonald. Went up to him. O and I followed modestly. He shook hands with us very kindly. Said something about his new baby. Mother said ‘Oh call her by a Welsh name’. He said ‘Wait and let me tell you, there and I’ll write it down how do you pronounce that? ‘Gwendŷd’, said Pa ‘which means star of the morning’.⁶⁵

(and also higher education for women) might also have inflected the undergraduates’ hostility. See Brian Harrison who described the late Victorian political elite as club like in character, and that ‘this male world was accommodated in the suite of male club rooms which opened out from the dining room in Victorian country houses and in Oxford and Cambridge colleges’.(Brian Harrison, *Separate Spheres*, (London: Croom Helm, 1978), pp.1-174, p.103.

⁶² Sir John Morris-Jones, Sir John Rhÿs, British Academy Sir John Rhÿs Inaugural Memorial Lecture, (London, 1925), pp.187-197. <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/473911p187.pdf> [Accessed January 20 2026].

⁶³ Henri Gaidoz, ‘Deux érudits gallois: John Rhys et Llywarch Reynolds,’ In: *Revue Internationale de l’enseignement*, tome 71, 1917. pp. 12-21. education.persee.fr/doc/revin_1775-6014_1917_num_71_1_7236 [Accessed 24 May 2026]. ‘The three wise men of Wales, learned in Celtic Philology: Gruffudd Robert, Edward Lhuyd, and John Rhÿs.’

⁶⁴ Morris-Jones, Sir *John Rhÿs*, p.196.

⁶⁵ Oxford, Bodleian Libraries, MS.Eng.misc.e.675. Diary of Myfanwy Rhys, 1893/1894.

Aside from Rhŷs' prodigious scholarship, he was an influential figure who sat on a number of royal commissions primarily concerned with Welsh culture and education, including Lord Aberdare's commission into education in Wales, an enquiry into Sunday closing in Wales, the University of Wales and its colleges, a commission on ancient monuments in Wales, and university education in Ireland, to name a few. He and Elspeth were enthusiastic and committed supporters of eisteddfodau, both national and regional, frequently speaking and adjudicating. In 1888, in recognition of their contributions, both John and Elspeth were admitted to the Gorsedd, assuming the bardic names 'Rhŷs Blaen Rheidol' and 'Myfanwy Eryri'.⁶⁶

Rhŷs' achievements and abilities were also acknowledged more widely, and he received several honours: he was awarded an LL.D. from Edinburgh in 1893; a D.Litt. from the University of Wales in 1902; he was made a Fellow of the British Academy in 1903, he was knighted in 1907, made a member of the Privy Council in 1911 and received the Cymmrodorion medal in 1912. This last accolade, given by the London-based Honourable Society of the Cymmrodorion, 'provides formal acknowledgement of the contribution of many individuals who have given distinguished service to Wales in many walks of life'.⁶⁷ Rhŷs gave sterling service to the Honourable Society itself, contributing numerous articles to the *Transactions* of the Society and *Y Cymmrodor*, the society's journal, as well as serving on the society's Council from at least 1900, chairing it from 1904 to 1915, the year of his death.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Parry-Williams, T.H *John Rhys*. p. 47.

⁶⁷ The Honourable Society of the Cymmrodorion, Cymmrodorion Medal, <https://www.cymmrodorion.org/the-society/cymmrodorion-medal> accessed 10.05.26.

⁶⁸ His daughters, especially Myfanwy, were to be involved with the Society as well, but the details are beyond the scope of this thesis.

By any measure Rhÿs achievements, (especially coming from humble origins), were extraordinary and one might well expect comparable achievements from the two sisters, who received significant educational input, but who did not ultimately achieve the academic and worldly success enjoyed by their parents.

Both John and Elspeth publicly and wholeheartedly gave support to the cause of women's suffrage and their daughters were active in the suffragist campaigns. Before looking in more detail at the Rhÿs' family's involvement in this cause, and evaluating the influences on the Rhÿs sisters, it is necessary to give a brief outline of the long campaign for women's suffrage, noting the important distinction between *suffragette* and *suffragist*.

Chapter 2: Suffragists, Suffragettes and the Rhys Family

The popular image of campaigners for women's right to vote is often characterised by the civil disobedience and activism of Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughters Christabel and Sylvia, together with their followers in the Women's Social and Political Union, founded in 1903. These women, with their motto 'Deeds not words', chained themselves to railings, smashed windows, committed arson and other acts of violence designed to draw attention to their cause and force arrest. In prison they would go on hunger strike, then be violently force fed, often suffering injury and illness, only to be released until they recovered sufficiently to be rearrested under the cruel Cat and Mouse Act.⁶⁹ The term 'suffragette' was allegedly only coined in 1906, as a belittling term, by a *Daily Mail* journalist. Prior to this, campaigners for women's suffrage were all *suffragists*, but the two terms came to signify widely differing approaches to the means of achieving the same end.

The campaign for votes for women has a long and somewhat convoluted history, with regional and political differences. It is outside the scope of this work to give a detailed history, which has been so meticulously accomplished by others, such as Leslie Parker Hume,⁷⁰ Elizabeth Crawford,⁷¹ and Helen Blackburn.⁷² However, I will attempt to show how the suffragist cause developed, and the importance of the Liberal party to its ambitions up until the outbreak of the first world war. The terms *suffragists* and *suffragettes* are

⁶⁹The Prisoners (Temporary Discharge for Ill-Health) Act 1913, Parliamentary Archives, HL/PO/PU/1/1913/3&4G5c4 popularly dubbed 'The Cat and Mouse Act', evoking the image of a cat playing with its prey. This image was utilised on suffragette posters and postcards e.g. a suffragette held in the jaws of a cat.

⁷⁰ Hume, Leslie Parker, *The National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies 1897-1914*, (Oxon: Routledge, 1982).

⁷¹ Crawford, Elizabeth, *The Women's Suffrage Movement in Britain and Ireland*, (Oxon: Routledge, 2006).

⁷² Blackburn, Helen, *Women's Suffrage*, (London: Williams and Norgate, 1902).

defined by their differing approaches to securing votes for women, as intimated above. Suffragists were focussed on achieving the vote by constitutional means, petitioning and lobbying Parliament, and working with Liberal M.P.s, (who, for many years, seemed to be their most likely allies) to induce them to table motions in the Commons in support of the cause. Conversely, the Suffragettes, who felt that the constitutional approach was not working, sought to advance the cause of votes for women by a more militant campaign, led by the Pankhursts. Later we will see how both John and Elspeth Rhys were involved in suffragist and Liberal activity from early on, and then both Myfanwy and Olwen.

In the mid nineteenth century Parliament was increasingly dominated by two parties, the Whigs and the Tories, who evolved into the more progressive Liberals and Conservatives respectively. The dominance of the Whigs/Liberals in the 1850s helped to create foundations for change, particularly with regard to social, economic and political reform. Prior to the Reform Act of 1832, UK voting rights were based on significant property ownership, so that only a tiny percentage of people would be eligible to vote. In principle a woman could be eligible, but in practice this was rare. The 1832 Act extended voting rights to a much greater base, to include renters (paying £10 p.a. or more), shopkeepers, small landowners and so on. Actual numbers are difficult to gauge, as there are no accurate voter registration records, but as a percentage of the population eligible voters was likely still within single figures. Moreover, it also explicitly excluded women, as a voter now became legally defined as a male person.

From this date until the mid-1860s there appears to have been no specific movement for women's suffrage, for, as Leslie Hume has argued, there were more pressing reforms which would potentially benefit women to attend to: the property laws for married women and increasing opportunities for both work and education for women.⁷³ In this atmosphere of reform, in 1865 in

⁷³ Hume, *The National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies 1897-1914*, p.1.

Manchester, a committee, later to include Lydia Becker,⁷⁴ was formed to collect signatures for the first women's suffrage petition to be presented to Parliament.⁷⁵ This was followed by a similar endeavour in London in 1866, by the Kensington Society. This latter was a discussion group of women, many of whom had already been involved in campaigning on behalf of various women's rights, such as Emily Davies, founder of Girton College, Cambridge, and Helen Taylor, stepdaughter of John Stuart Mill.⁷⁶ John Stuart Mill was already known to be supportive of women's rights, and in 1865 was persuaded to stand as a Liberal candidate. During the three years he was an M.P. he was able to secure a debate on an amendment to Disraeli's Suffrage Bill, with an unsuccessful proposal to change the word 'men' to 'person', and he later presented a petition to the House of Commons seeking an amendment to the law on married women's property.

During this time Lydia Becker had instigated the formation of the National Society for Women's Suffrage and formed a national committee to work with members of the House of Commons. Tireless in her endeavours, she toured widely with lecture tours and public meetings, raising awareness and providing support to local groups. William Woodall, Liberal M.P. for Stoke on Trent, unsuccessfully pushed for the inclusion of Women's Suffrage in the Second Reform Act of 1867, which enfranchised urban, working-class men. Notwithstanding that failure, it is noteworthy that during the 1870s the Commons debated suffrage issues every year except for 1874. In 1881 and 1883 resolutions in favour of women's suffrage were brought to the Commons, and

⁷⁴ L Walker, 'Becker, Lydia Ernestine (1827–1890), suffragist leader.' *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004) from <https://www-oxforddnb-com.uwtsd.idm.oclc.org/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-1899>. [Accessed 28 May. 2026].

⁷⁵ Crawford, Elizabeth, *The Women's Suffrage Movement in Britain and Ireland*, p.1.

⁷⁶ A. Dingsdale, Kensington Society (act. 1865–1868), *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (2007), from <https://www-oxforddnb-com.uwtsd.idm.oclc.org/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-92488> [Accessed 26 May. 2026].

petitions continued to be collected and presented. The Liberal party even held special meetings for women in the run up to the 1883 general Election. ⁷⁷Jane Robinson notes, of the significant numbers of signatures which appear on these petitions, e.g. 186,000 in 1871, and close to 328,000 in 1873, that: ‘the strength of this campaign speaks volumes of the various suffrage societies’ organisational skill, and most of all their persistence’.⁷⁸

In what Leslie Hume describes as ‘the high-water mark of the women’s suffrage movement’, 1884 saw the passing of the Third Reform Act, which enfranchised even more men (approximately 60% of the male population), but still did not include women.⁷⁹ Parliamentary appetite for debate on women’s suffrage seemed to wane as it focussed on ‘problems of the empire’⁸⁰ and the vexed question of home rule for Ireland. The suffrage movement continued to be troubled with differences of opinion and personality clashes, and the death of Lydia Becker in 1890, with her energetic approach and organisational skills, left the movement with a cohesive lack of focus and drive. Many women had been drawn into political groups, such as the Women’s Liberal Association, or the Primrose League, in the hope of achieving suffrage by influencing and working with elected representatives. This caused something of a split between London-based members, who were perforce closer to Parliament, and regional committees. The impending general election in 1895 prompted a more collaborative approach, and under the leadership of Millicent Fawcett, whose political allegiance had long lain with the Liberals, members came to realise that a more united approach, with a national federation of societies, would be

⁷⁷ Oxford, Oxfordshire History Centre, OXFO/324.3/(BRA) (Ref: 305071499), Katherine Bradley, ‘The Suffrage Movement in Oxford 1870-1920’, (unpublished M.A. thesis, /Oxford Polytechnic.1993).

⁷⁸ Robinson, Jane, *Hearts and Minds*, (London: Doubleday, 2018), p.38.

⁷⁹ Hume, L, *The National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies*, p.3.

⁸⁰ Ibid. p.3.

more effective.⁸¹ In 1897, the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) was formed. Regional committees would adhere to certain rules (including that of political neutrality) but would be responsible for the campaigning in their areas for votes for women.

The executive committee of the NUWSS comprised, for the most part, middle aged, middle class, and extremely able women. Many belonged to distinguished families, who supported the cause of women's rights and social reform, including Eleanor Rathbone, Eva Gore-Booth, Priscilla Bright Maclaren and Lady Frances Balfour. Hume notes that many were 'insiders', in that they were related to Liberal politicians, and were also members of women's Liberal organisations.⁸² Fawcett and others believed that women's suffrage was an inevitable outcome of Liberal political philosophy, which the party would bring about in due course.⁸³ The NUWSS was committed to political neutrality, focussing on lobbying parliament, persuading M.P.s to bring private members' bills, and from 1906, with an imminent general election, working in constituencies to persuade parties to put forward candidates with pro suffrage views. Hume notes that:

in 1897, nothing was said about 'law abiding tactics' or 'constitutional methods of agitation'; the new NUWSS simply assumed that these were the only methods which its constituent societies would use to agitate for the vote.⁸⁴

This only became necessary in 1908.⁸⁵

⁸¹ Robinson, *Hearts and Minds* pp.47-52.

⁸² Hume, pp.11-12.

⁸³ Ibid. p.10.

⁸⁴ Ibid. p.6.

⁸⁵ Ibid. p.6.

However, after years of campaigning and lobbying, and when the NUWSS might have expected success for the 1912 Conciliation Bill, proposing that suffrage be extended to women, they were disappointed. The failure of the bill to pass 'exploded the myth of the Liberal Party as the friend of the women's suffrage movement', and they 'looked for comfort in a new quarter: the Labour Party.'⁸⁶

In 1903, Emmeline Pankhurst, widow of the Radical politician and suffragist, Dr Richard Pankhurst, had broken with the NUWSS, and the Liberals, to set up the Women's Social and Political Union in Manchester, as a 'women's parallel to the Independent Labour Party'.⁸⁷ It operated mostly locally, but it was not until 1905 that it set up headquarters in London and began to adopt the militant tactics for which it became famous, borne out of frustration at the failure of constitutional efforts to secure the vote. For a while women could be members of both organisations, but tensions grew as their respective policies clashed: the WSPU held an anti-Liberal policy in the by-elections, while NUWSS were hopeful of the support of Lloyd George. The NUWSS were appalled by the violence of the WSPU militancy and feared that it would destroy support for the suffrage cause. Nevertheless, the NUWSS continued to grow from 17 branches in 1897 to 207 by 1910, forcing a restructuring which resulted in 'federations', comprised of member societies within a geographical area.⁸⁸

When war was declared in 1914, the WSPU suspended their campaign. The NUWSS, with over 100,000 members and 500 societies, urged their members to support the government, and work on behalf of the war effort.⁸⁹ Although

⁸⁶ Ibid. p.141.

⁸⁷ Ibid.p.28.

⁸⁸ Ibid.p.95.

⁸⁹ Oxford Society for Women's Suffrage, 'Report of the Executive committee 1909', *Oxford Society for Women's Suffrage 4th (10th-12th) Annual Report*, (1914). p.11. Members were encouraged to help those suffering from 'economic and industrial dislocation caused by the war', and for 'help to be given in any schemes for maternity and child welfare. Both Myfanwy and Olwen volunteered abroad, in hospitals, canteens and other logistical services.

women had not yet got the vote, the movement had laid strong foundations for the future and established good relations with politicians of all parties; it had also finally dispelled the fear of the militancy and ‘sensationalism’ of WSPU activists.⁹⁰

The Rhÿs family and the campaign for women’s suffrage

I wrote that Myfanwy and Olwen’s contribution to the suffrage movement in Oxford was celebrated on the University’s website in the context of the Rhÿs family involvement, and while this may blur their sense of individuality, it is nevertheless important to understand their parents’ impact, but also the wider sphere of influence.

As John has noted,⁹¹ as early as 1878 John Rhÿs was on the platform at a public meeting at the Oxford Corn Exchange, together with the famous suffragist campaigner, Lydia Becker,⁹² to discuss the question of extending Parliamentary suffrage to women householders. The Oxford Journal reported that ‘Professor Rhys’ moved a resolution to sign a petition to the House of Commons in support of the bill proposing the removal of electoral disabilities of women.⁹³ Elspeth Rhÿs was also public in her support, and presided over a meeting of the Mid Oxon and Oxon Women’s Liberal Association, which had been established in 1888, on Monday 13 June 1892 at Oxford. Introducing the two prospective electoral candidates, she remarked that ‘of late years there had been great

⁹⁰ Hume, *The National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies*, pp.222-223.

⁹¹ John, *Rocking the Boat*, p.213.

⁹² Walker, L. (2024, June 13). Becker, Lydia Ernestine (1827–1890), suffragist leader. *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Retrieved 21 May. 2026, from <https://www-oxforddnb-com.uwtsd.idm.oclc.org/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-1899>.

⁹³ ‘Women’s Suffrage’, *Jackson’s Oxford Journal*, (1878), pp.1-.8, p.8. Retrieved 6 May 2026, from <https://www.findmypast.co.uk/my-research/my-records?page=4>

changes in the world, and not the least of these were the Associations which brought women together as recognised helpers in politics'.⁹⁴

As well as public appearances, Elspeth Rhÿs presided over or attended many meetings of the Liberal Women, and meetings about women's suffrage, many of which were held at the Rhÿs home. (The Suffragists generally saw Liberals as being their most likely allies, as already highlighted.) The diaries of the Housekeeper, Mrs Hughes, written between 1897 and 1909, frequently mention 'Women's Committee meeting here' or 'Women's Liberal Meeting' and 'Suffrage meeting'. Occasionally visitors are mentioned, such as the entry for 14 March 1898, which states: 'Mrs Winifred Phillips (sic) here speaking at a meeting in the dining room'.⁹⁵ Mrs Wynford Philipps (referred to above as Leonora Philipps, Lady St Davids), was a fervent campaigner for women's rights and an erstwhile member of the executive committee of the National Association of Women's Suffrage Societies after its formation in 1897.⁹⁶ She was a significant figure within the Suffragist movement, as well as a campaigner for her husband, the Liberal M.P. for Lanarkshire, and subsequently Pembrokeshire. Her invitation to tea at the Rhÿs household had merited an entry into 19 year old Myfanwy's diary on a day in late 1893.⁹⁷

Into drawing room. Mrs W Phillipps had not arrived. Murrays came. The long looked for one came at length. She sat down, posed and talked, talked as if the Fates had intended her to be one long monologue. My impression of her was that she was lovely and that she recalled Miss Batten very much. She was dressed very stylishly with some strawberry-coloured stuff in her dress front... I could not

⁹⁴ 'Mid Oxon and Oxford Women's Liberal Association', *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, (1892), pp.1-8, p.6. Retrieved 6 May 2026, from <https://www.findmypast.co.uk/my-research/my-records?page=4>

⁹⁵ LGC, B3/4, Diaries of Mrs Hughes.

⁹⁶ Hume, *The National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies 1897-1914*, p.12.

⁹⁷ Unfortunately, Myfanwy's diaries do not consistently give dates.

catch her full face but her profile was perfect. I thought well as to her conversation, she talked as if she knew her own worth but with a decided grace of manner that obliterated to me all that was unpleasing.... ..Father put in words my thought 'What was her little game?' I don't want to be prejudiced but I think Mrs Brynmor may be partly right in her idea that Mrs Wynford is making love to the whole Welsh people- wants her husband to get in as a Welsh member anyway.⁹⁸

In the same entry Myfanwy reports that 'Apparently Mrs W Philipps had not pleased O who thought her stagey etc.' These lines seem to suggest that neither sister was easily impressed, which perhaps is unsurprising given the flow of eminent and influential people passing through their home. However, both young women are very supportive of their mother as a public speaker and President of the Oxon Liberal Women's Association. When it transpired that the 'mid Oxon lot had been all round Oxford trying to find someone to preside, and not finding anyone had to put up with Mother', Myfanwy, Mrs Hughes and Olwen held an 'indignation meeting' all to themselves, and Myfanwy wrote that 'Mother was the most distinguished not to say the most presentable among them.'⁹⁹

We can see that Myfanwy and Olwen were bound to become aware of politics and rights of women – particularly with regard to the vote and also, of course, higher education - given their parents' strong convictions and the milieu in which they lived. As the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) led by the militant Pankhursts was not established until 1903, there was no suggestion of adopting aggressive tactics to achieve their aims or bring greater publicity to the suffrage cause. The Rhys household entertained many elected or prospective Liberal M.P.s, often with Welsh connections. Sir David Brynmor Jones, K.C., historian and Liberal M.P. for Stroud and then Swansea, together with his wife Florence (née

⁹⁸ BL, MS.Eng.misc.e.676. Diary of Myfanwy Rhys, 1893.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

Cohen) were established visitors to the Rhÿs family.¹⁰⁰ Myfanwy writes about them in a familiar way, incorporating some sharp critical observations by Olwen and of her own. She wrote of them:

Mrs Brynmor dressed put on a black satin dress boddice (sic) trimmed with red velvet ribbon. O takes it that she had has a row with her maid and dressed without her. Mrs Hughes likes Mrs Brynmor, she said, Mother muchly, O and I think her and her husband frightfully slow.

Despite these somewhat dismissive comments, however, she also notes: ‘Mr Brynmor discoursed on Parliament, told us how utterly the Labour party failed to get a hearing. This was interesting.’¹⁰¹

It must be remembered of course that the two young women were at this point were only 17 and 19 years old, so there is an assuredness in their judgements that are perhaps, in Myfanwy’s case at least, somewhat tempered later on.

In the summer of 1899 Myfanwy spent some time in London, staying for a while with the family of James Galloway Weir, Liberal politician. She notes that at breakfast with the family, they talk, among other things, of ‘things political’. Invited to visit the Houses of Parliament, she listens to a debate from the Gallery. Although she says she does not fully understand the circumstances, nevertheless, she ‘gathered that he (Mr J G Swift Neil, Irish Nationalist Protestant politician) was protesting in the interests of the public who are so often the victims of monopolies.’¹⁰² Going into the Lobby she at first only recognises a few of the ‘men’ – Herbert Lewis, John Michael Davitt and ‘some of the front bench people’, and then she sees Jasper More and the Rhÿs family friends, the Brynmor Jones on the Terrace. I would argue that this is a significant number of politicians for a young woman of the period to recognise and indicates an interest and a

¹⁰⁰ As well as his legal and parliamentary career Brynmor Jones also co-authored ‘The Welsh People’ with John Rhÿs.

¹⁰¹ BL, MS. Eng. Misc. e.678.late 1893.

¹⁰² BL, MS.Eng.misc.e.680, Diary of Myfanwy Rhÿs, 1899.

degree of knowledge of politics, which must surely have arisen out of her parents' involvement in Liberal politics and the aims of furthering the suffragist cause. Notwithstanding her understanding of political issues, Myfanwy enjoys making gossipy observations about the politicians, their wives and families, usually in code, in her diary. Writing of a Mrs Ellis Griffith, she notes:

At the 80 Club was Mrs Brynmor and her husband. He was very strange. Pressed them to come and have tea on the terrace on Friday. His poor wife was making desperate signs to him to come home. Mrs E G says she likes her much better. Got to know her one summer at Llandrindod. She is a disappointed woman. When they met Brynmor on Saturday at a big garden party given for the party by a rich Liberal member near London ... he was quite different, did not ever allude to the Terrace..... this show a rare thing- the Liberals never entertain.

As might be expected, the Rhÿs family were interested in current affairs and issues of what we might broadly think of as social justice. As John has observed, 'Myfanwy, like the rest of the family, was caught up in the revelations about the Dreyfus case in France.'¹⁰³ The scandal was all consuming: not just the Rhÿs family, but Myfanwy records several others voicing their opinions, including family friends like F.C Conybeare, Professor of Theology at Oxford, who even felt compelled to write a book on the Dreyfus affair.¹⁰⁴ Myfanwy herself devoted some 27 pages of her diary to a transcription of the diary of the Dreyfus trial taken from the Times newspaper. She is clearly deeply affected and feels for Captain Dreyfus, who was unjustly convicted of treason, noting that she had spent a wakeful night, 'wondering what Dreyfus was feeling. Oh the poor wife!' At one critical point in the trial she notes that her mother and sister, who were away, must be 'suffering agonies' at the news. Despite the scale of antipathy towards the French, she

¹⁰³ John, *Rocking the Boat*, p.209.

¹⁰⁴ F.C. Conybeare, *The Dreyfus Case*, (George Allen, 1899).

keeps a sense of proportion about the response to the scandal, writing that 'The Americans in one place looked on with delight at the burning of the French flag. Some have dismissed French workmen which is mean and wrong.'

However, despite Myfanwy's emotional response, one must wonder whether mother and daughters were equally consumed, when on August 29th Myfanwy writes 'I was awakened early by Mother as Father was still away and had an early tea with her at 6 o'clock pm. (sic). She read the Times etc, her whole being is wrapped up in the Affair Dreyfus. She is more interested in him than in her daughters'. I will further explore what clues the diaries reveal about the sisters' relationships with their parents, and with each other in the next chapter.

On Wednesday June 21st 1899 the Rhÿs family were present at an event that has continued to prove divisive to the present day. Cecil Rhodes, the founder of the De Beers diamond mining company and sometime Prime Minister of Cape Colony was awarded an honorary degree by Oriel College Oxford at a ceremony called an encaenia. Even in his lifetime, Rhodes' views on race and empire, as they might be summarily described, as well as his employment practices, were controversial.¹⁰⁵ More recently the statue of Rhodes at the college became the focus of protest in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement, with calls for it to be removed, and Oriel College was forced to confront the legacy of its former student and generous benefactor.¹⁰⁶

As an eyewitness to an historic event, Myfanwy is acutely aware of the controversy surrounding the decision to award the honorary degree. She notes that Mr Morfill, who gives her Russian language lessons, 'much objects to the

¹⁰⁵ S.Marks and S. Trapido, 'Rhodes, Cecil John (1853–1902), imperialist, colonial politician, and mining entrepreneur. *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.(2013) , from <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-35731>, [Accessed 9 September 2026].

¹⁰⁶ Oriel College, University of Oxford, The Rhodes Legacy, Context and History, 2026. <https://www.oriel.ox.ac.uk/about/the-rhodes-legacy> . Accessed 8 September 2026.

university giving Rhodes a degree. Such a disgrace before the rest of Europe for us to seem to set our seal of approval on him'.¹⁰⁷ However, her father had declined to sign a petition against the decision, much to Mr Morfill's chagrin, and Professor Conybeare, mentioned above, is similarly inclined. Even at a dinner party a few days before the event, Myfanwy writes: 'The conversation turned on Rhodes. Mr Allsebrooke was very much for him. Apparently, all the divinity professors at the house had signed against him. Except the Dean and Canon Ince.' There is a possibility that the Proctors veto the award'.

Myfanwy conveys the enormous interest in the occasion: tickets are seemingly hard to come by and anxiously sought after. She notes that a certain

'Mrs Wallace came here last night hearing from Lillian that we were doing our best to get her a ticket. She was almost violent. She was peculiar emphatically. On mother saying she would make an effort to get one from Mr Hazel. 'Where is he can I see him?' she exclaimed wildly 'he is at his dinner, you can't see him now'. With difficulty was she calmed and went away. 'You won't get me one I know you won't 'she exclaimed

The family get dressed and make their way to the encaenia. The Duke of York (later King George) and his wife Princess Mary are the guests of honour. In her usual style Myfanwy notes that: 'She is to my mind very good looking' and adds in code 'our party all agreed that she had a huge bust'. Myfanwy is seated on a balcony and becomes concerned about the crush of undergraduates massing below. At one point one of them has to be removed from the balcony onto which he has climbed. They are shouting or perhaps chanting Rhodes' name, apparently giving scant attention to the 'hero of Omdurman' (Lord Kitchener, who is also due to receive an honour).

¹⁰⁷ William Richard Morfill, Professor of Russian and Slavonic Languages at the University of Oxford.

The controversy is still uppermost in Myfanwy's mind: 'The Proctors took their seats it was with mute excitement that one listened to the proposal of the new DCLS. Would something happen, would they interpose their veto as was thought more than like. Would something ---no nothing happened.'

However, she notes that the Senior Proctor is 'white with rage' during the entire proceedings. Cecil Rhodes seems 'nervous' and 'embarrassed' at the outset but then becomes seemingly more confident. The 'S. African Cresus' (sic) strikes Myfanwy as 'short and rather waddling in his gait'. She does not seem particularly impressed and is clearly aware of his reputation and the shakiness of the ostensible criteria for his award when she observes that: 'Both the public orator and Professor of poetry or one of them hung on to the railway across Africa as the saving grace for his degree'.

Clearly, in her diary entries, Myfanwy is revelling in the excitement and potential drama of the situation. She builds the tension and keeps the threat of jeopardy at the forefront of her depiction, and the question will remain whether she ever intended her words for the eyes of others, or just as a lively memoir for herself. John has observed that she 'always enjoyed a sense of drama', particularly when recounting the details of the so-called 'Bangor dispute'.¹⁰⁸

Despite the emotion and sensationalism that Myfanwy clearly enjoyed in these two examples of her encounters with social justice, I would argue that she had well developed social and political views. When we consider the milieu in which both Myfanwy and Olwen lived, and their parents' enduring political views, it is perhaps not surprising. As a woman who had been denied being awarded a

¹⁰⁸ Angela, *Rocking the Boat*, p.207.

The 'Bangor Dispute' arose when Myfanwy was a student at Bangor Normal College, and resident in Halls. She visited her friend Violet Osborn who lived out, which was strictly against the rules. Rumours had circulated about Violet's conduct and her relationship with a male tutor. The head of Halls, Frances Hughes, spoke with Elspeth, and Myfanwy was removed. In the event Violet was exonerated of improper conduct by the University Senate, and Hughes was asked to resign from the Halls' management committee. She refused, which led to the University withdrawing recognition from the Halls. Elspeth Rhŷs was upset by the scandal and even some 3 or 4 years later, Myfanwy wrote: 'Mother I am sorry was much upset at this imaginary slight, really Bangor row has made her singularly dependent on whims of others.'

degree by the University of Cambridge, she must have felt particularly galled by remarks made at a dinner party given by the Hughes for Sir Joseph Trutch (former Governor of British Columbia). She wrote:

We had a pleasant but not thrilling evening. Sir Josphe did not believe in Women's right or Archaeological societies. Mr Hughes (the brother-in-law) was also wrong-headed on the women question. A lady offered him hospitality, on the assumption that he would be going up to Cambridge to vote for the women's degree. He thanked her, said if he had been going he should have had much pleasure in voting – against the degree.¹⁰⁹

Myfanwy does not record whether she argued her position, and it is likely that she did not. She may have just reasoned that there would be little point in wasting her breath on two comfortably self-satisfied men. Whatever her reasons, she is clear that the men are in the wrong regarding their views. As John has noted, Myfanwy had to travel to Dublin to receive her degree in 1905 under the auspices of a special temporary scheme for those who had been denied by their own institutions, due to their sex, one of the so-called 'Steamboat ladies'.¹¹⁰

According to Crawford, there was no 'formal suffrage movement' in Oxford during the 1890s and indeed there had been something of a lull in suffrage activity until 1904.¹¹¹ As far as can be gleaned from the available diaries, and

¹⁰⁹ In May 1897 a proposal to allow women to receive degrees and become full members of the University (despite there being two women's colleges) was overwhelmingly rejected. It was not until 1921 that degrees were awarded, and 1948 before they became full members of the University.

¹¹⁰ S Parkes, 'Steamboat ladies (act. 1904–1907)'. *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. (2007) <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-61643>. A[ccessed 12 September 2026].

¹¹¹ Elizabeth Crawford, *The Women's Suffrage Movement in Britain and Ireland*, p.98.

unsurprisingly therefore, neither Myfanwy or Olwen were particularly active in the suffragist cause at this time. However they will have met the various Liberal men and women constantly passing through the Lodgings when they were at home, and even attended the occasional public meeting. The Boer War (1899-1902) had been engrossing, and there had been no debates in the House of Commons between 1897 -1903 on the issue of women's suffrage. They were however a couple of notable events that Myfanwy attended, where she was listening to and mixing with feminists and supporters of women's suffrage.

At the end of June and beginning of July 1899 an International Congress of Women was held in London, alongside the quinquennial meeting of the International Council of Women, at various locations around Westminster. Myfanwy attended the evening public meeting, chaired by Lady Aberdeen, on Tuesday 27th June, at the Queen's Hall with her friends Ritza and Alice. The topic was 'arbitration', and the resolution was that 'the International Council of Women do take steps in every country to further and advance, by every means in their power, the movement towards International Arbitration'. It was perhaps not the most enthralling meeting, as Myfanwy wrote of it:

The meeting was comic and depressing. There was a wonderful American, the Archbishop of S Paul's who well understood the downward deflection - his arm went up and down with regularity his rhetorical questions were not quite so flat as the answers, what is war it's killing men (downward deflections galore) etc etc. Lord Aberdeen smirked all he could as at the speaking, so at the singing, with which entertainment was variegated. The Handelian lee -nes Hoo - - - - my le - - - - ves (sic) etc were not too state to provoke an optimistic cachinnation. Lady Aberdeen was remarkable for her little bag and her weak syntax.¹¹²

¹¹² BL, MS.Eng.misc.e.681.Diary of Myfanwy Rhys, 27 June 1899.

According to the Congress Handbook delegates were invited by the Bedford College Students' Association to a Garden Party at the Botanical Gardens, to which Myfanwy and her friends went, mixing with women and others with progressive views..¹¹³ Around this time she also attended a ceremony at Bedford College, where she heard speeches, mostly about the origin of the college and its incorporation into the new London University.¹¹⁴ Speakers included Mrs Fawcett, 'the blooming genial matron in a short mellow speech', Dean Kitchin (the first Chancellor of the University of Durham), who gave 'one of the most agreeable speeches' and according to whom 'the University of Durham is very liberal to women', and Mrs Mary Scharlieb, a pioneering surgeon and gynaecologist, had also spoken on women working as hospital doctors at the Congress.¹¹⁵ Despite Myfanwy's diary entries suggesting that she was frequently unimpressed by the various worthies she encountered, she was nevertheless hearing the ideas and values she had received at home and in her local milieu being reinforced.

In 1903 the National Association of Women's Suffrage Societies formulated a plan whereby localised groups would interrogate prospective Parliamentary candidates for the 1906 election and pledge their support to those who were supportive of the cause. Given that there existed an active Women's Liberal Association in Oxford this may have helped to trigger the inauguration of the Oxford Women's Suffrage Society in October 1904, at a meeting held at the house of Professor and Mrs Margoliouth.¹¹⁶ Mrs Margoliouth became the first Chair and Myfanwy

¹¹³ International Council of Women, *Handbook of the International Congress*, <http://www.archive.org/details/cu31924031301132>, [accessed September 10, 2026].

¹¹⁴ Bedford College London was founded in 1849 by Elizabeth Jesser Reid, to provide a non-sectarian, liberal higher education institution for women. It became a constituent college of The University of London in 1900 and merged with Royal Holloway in 1985. https://lostbritain.org.uk/place/Bedford_College/. [Accessed 12 September 2026].

¹¹⁵ International Council of Women, *Handbook of the International Congress*, (London, 1899). p.48.

¹¹⁶ Jessie Payne Margoliouth was a Syriac scholar and was married to David Samuel Margoliouth, Professor of Arabic at Oxford. Taylor, D. (2020, November 12). Margoliouth [née

the first Secretary of the Society. The meetings normally continued to be held at the Margoliouth house until September 1911, with the first public meeting being held on 5 February 1905 at Somerville College. At this meeting the speakers were Mrs Pember Reeves, feminist and member of the Fabian Society, Florence Davenport Hill member of the Oxford Women's Liberal Association and committee member of the NUWSS, Walter McLaren, erstwhile Liberal MP and E.N. Bennet, academic and prospective Liberal candidate for Woodstock, Oxford.

Mrs Hughes' diary for 14 February 1905 has this entry: 'Myfanwy gone to London for the House of Commons'.¹¹⁷ She had gone, according to the Annual Report of the Executive Committee of the Central Society for Women's Suffrage, to a conference held at the House of commons, with 49 MPs and 40 representatives of the NUWSS. The MPs 'constituted themselves a Parliamentary Committee for Women's Suffrage'.¹¹⁸ As well as the meetings at the Margoliouth house and occasional public meetings Crawford notes that various 'drawing room' meetings would be held in members' homes, including Jesus Lodgings. Mrs Hughes variously notes; 'Suffrage meeting. A lady staying here, speaking at the meeting' (4 April 1906) 'Myfanwy's women's suffrage meeting in dining room' (6 May 1907), 'Suffrage meeting, Stanger MP here for the meeting. I went to the meeting', (3 April 1908).¹¹⁹

On 13 June 1908, Mrs Hughes writes: 'Myfanwy gone to London with the Procession'. This procession, demonstration or pageant as it was

Smith], Jessie Payne (1856–1933), Syriac scholar. *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. , from <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-58372>, [Retrieved 12 Sep. 2026].

¹¹⁷ LGC, B3/4, Diaries of Mrs Hughes, 13 June 1908.

¹¹⁸ The Women's Library, LSE, London, *Annual reports of the Central Society for Women's Suffrage 1901-1906*. 1906. pp.1-38, p.5.

¹¹⁹ Henry Yorke Stanger, Liberal MP and supporter of women's suffrage.

variously called, was organised by the National Society of Women's Suffrage Societies. The procession formed up on the Embankment and in neighbouring streets, and marched, 6 abreast, to the Royal Albert Hall in South Kensington. According to a report in *The Oxford Chronicle* of 19 June 1908, written by 'One who marched', Oxford was well represented.¹²⁰ 83 women with 'a few men sympathisers', caught a special train that had been organised in conjunction with the Birmingham Society. University women wore 'scarlet, blue and yellow gowns of doctors of law, medicine and philosophy'. The procession was led by Mrs Fawcett, Lady Frances Balfour, Dr Sophie Bryant, and Miss Emily Davis, who had presented the very first petition for women's suffrage to John Stuart Mill, 42 years previously. The writer noted that the majority of women were educated or well to do, and whose appearance seemingly deterred onlookers from vulgar comments. She adds that 'On all sides it was agreed that the procession was remarkably well organised and showed no sign of feminine helplessness.' The Oxford Society's banner was 'made of dark blue linen and represented a woman making her way through impeding briars, symbolising her struggle for political freedom.' The procession, estimated to comprise 10,000 women, was 2 miles in length, and 'took three quarters of an hour to pass any given point'. With 100 or so banners fluttering over the women marchers it must have been a truly impressive sight, of a kind not seen before. When they arrived at the Royal Albert Hall, tributes were paid to Mrs Fawcett, and as John has noted, Myfanwy presented her with a bouquet of dark blue irises, tied with a dark blue ribbon (perhaps representing Oxford blue?), with the words in white letters: 'Honour to a Pioneer, Oxford W.S. Society, 1908'.¹²¹ The following Saturday Mrs Hughes notes: 'the Lloyd Georges here: small

¹²⁰ By One who Marched, *Suffrage Saturday, Oxford Chronicle and Reading Gazette*, Friday 19 June 1908, pp.1-12. p.7. <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.com/image-viewer?issue=BL%2F0000989%2F19080619&page=7> Accessed 10 September 2026.

¹²¹ John, A. *Rocking the Boat*, p.215.

dinner party'. Lloyd George was not only a Liberal MP, later to become Prime Minister, but also, he and his family were close friends with the Rhÿs.

The Oxford Society seems to have been very active, and numbers grew, from 85 in its first year to 512 by the outbreak of war in 1914. Myfanwy was Honorary Secretary from the Society's inception until 1909, a year in which over 50 meetings and 25 Executive Committee meetings were held. John Rhÿs 'kindly consented to act as President, and his name and unfailing interest and sympathy have been of great help to the Society'.¹²² Rhÿs' diaries between 1910 and 1915 include occasional entries mention 'Women's Suffrage 8 pm', 'Suffrage at 4 – Somerville' and so on. The Annual Report also notes that:

Miss Rhys (sic) carried on her energetic work as Secretary until May, when she was obliged to relinquish the post...We cannot too gratefully acknowledge the invaluable services of Miss Rhys since the formation of the Society in 1904, and we are thankful that she can continue to give us her help and advice as a member of the Committee.¹²³

Elsbeth Rhÿs and Olwen were also, of course, members, and each member of the family paid subscriptions and made donations into various fighting funds. The amounts varied: anything from 5 shillings (25 pence) to £10 (John Rhÿs).

In 1911 Myfanwy found herself too busy to attend committee meetings, but the Society expressed their hope that they would have 'the benefit of

¹²² Oxford Society for Women's Suffrage, 'Report of the Executive committee 1909', *Oxford Society for Women's Suffrage* 4th (10th-12th) Annual Report, (1909), p.5.

¹²³ Ibid.

her valuable help in other ways.’¹²⁴ That same year, after several episodes of ill-health, ¹²⁵but nevertheless unexpectedly, Elspeth Rhÿs died on 29th April.¹²⁶ A brief, forlorn entry in John Rhÿs’ diary records: ‘Rushed home but too late’.¹²⁷ The Society’s Annual Report recorded ‘The Society has to chronicle, with deep regret, the death of (three) specially valued and beloved members: Lady Rhys (sic) wife of our President, and like him, showing constant interest in, and readiness to help our cause’.¹²⁸ In November of that year Olwen was elected to the Executive Committee.

As John has noted, Olwen was active on behalf of the Society, attending committee meetings whenever she could, and in response to a plea from Mrs Fawcett and her colleagues, penned a message intended for 2 London newspapers—one Liberal and one Conservative—expressing her ‘desire for the extension of the Parliamentary franchise’ and asserting that the removal of ‘the sense of injustice felt by thoughtful women is...essential for the best development of the nation’.¹²⁹ The OWSS Annual Report for 1914 records that Olwen was part of a deputation of Liberal voters on 28th February, representing the OWSS, to meet Mr Herbert Higgins, prospective Liberal candidate of the Mid Oxon division, at the President’s House.¹³⁰

John Rhÿs died suddenly on 17 December 1915. Olwen had written in her diary a few days prior ‘JR not very well’, but nothing to suggest any seriousness. On the 18 December, she wrote ‘My father died last night

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Myfanwy refers to ‘Mother’s rheumatism’ in her diaries.

¹²⁶ Jones, ‘Elizabeth Rhÿs’, in the *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*.

¹²⁷ Diaries of Sir John Rhÿs, 1911, Ref.A4/2, Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru.

¹²⁸ Oxford Society for Women’s Suffrage, Annual Report of the Executive Committee, 1911, p.7.

¹²⁹ John. *A Rocking the Boat*, p.215.

¹³⁰ Oxford Society for Women’s Suffrage, 4th (10th-12th) Annual Report, 1914 p.7.

about 11 o'clock while I was thinking of other things'.¹³¹ Her diary of this time catalogues a seemingly endless round of 'chores', knitting (presumably for the British forces, who were desperately in need of warm clothing), selling the Common Cause in town,¹³² attending meetings of the Belgian Refugees Committee¹³³ and working in the Bodleian. Interspersed with details of her very busy days are snippets of the mostly depressing war news, and brief details of Myfanwy's whereabouts. Obviously, it was a very grim time, even before Rhys' death, with the war affecting every facet of life. The general impression is of a heavy sense of dutifulness, with occasional entries speaking of 'a pleasant evening' with friends. On March 4th Olwen wrote: 'I am forty today and feel very old.' She spent the morning in shopping and various chores, pausing only to have a 'birthday treat' with Mrs Hughes at the Café, before sorting the linen.

Later that month the two sisters attended to the task of sorting through their father's belongings, papers, books and so on, and bringing practical closure to that chapter of their lives. On March 23 she took 'poor dear Mrs Hughes to Bletchley en route for Stafford. She was wonderfully plucky poor old lady, and quite on the spot'.¹³⁴

John wrote that 'the sisters' lives had followed in the grooves laid down by their parents, but their subsequent experiences took them into new territory, prompted in part by the exigencies of war'.¹³⁵ We can never know what lives the Rhys parents had envisaged for their daughters, but

¹³¹ BL, Oxford, MSS.Eng.e.698, Diary of Olwen Rhys, (1876-1953), entry for 18 March 1915.

¹³² The Common Cause was a newspaper supporting the N.U.W.S.S., published from April 1909 until January 1920.

¹³³ Approximately 200 Belgian refugees from the 1914-18 war were accommodated in Oxford.

¹³⁴ BL, MS.Eng.misc.e.698, Diary of Olwen Rhys, (1876-1953), entry for 23 March 1915.

¹³⁵ John, *Rocking the Boat*, p.218.

we have seen that there was a strong focus on education and intellectual pursuits, seeking to make change by argument rather than physical action. Now it seems that both Myfanwy and Olwen were determined to roll up their sleeves and engage in gruelling, physical war work in Serbia and France. Despite the hiatus in campaigning for women's suffrage occasioned by the outbreak of war, Olwen had still been an active member of the OWSS. until she left Oxford in the summer of 1916.

Just before she left, Olwen had received a letter from Blanche, Mrs Hughes' daughter, advising her that Mrs Hughes had had a stroke and was unconscious. A wire soon followed saying that Mrs Hughes had died on 8th May. Olwen is clearly upset and reproaches herself for not having written to her since she was at Oxford and while she was abroad. Despite writing that she thought Blanche could have got a letter to her sooner, she felt that that did 'not absolve me of carelessness and neglect.'¹³⁶ Olwen and Myfanwy travelled to Stone for her funeral, a very simple affair attended only by Blanche, two other people, and the two sisters.

The progress of Myfanwy and Olwen beyond this point, now nearly 42 and 40 respectively, is beyond the scope of this work, but John has traced this in 'Rocking the Boat'. She has argued that 'their parents provided considerable support and the parental legacy remained long after their deaths'¹³⁷ and that 'expectations were constantly high...for Myfanwy and Olwen it was more a case of having to measure up to their parent's achievements, reputation and popularity.'¹³⁸ I would however argue that it was not just the parental influence that shaped their lives, although of

¹³⁶ BL, MS.Eng.misc.e.698. Diary of Olwen Rhÿs, (1876-1953), entry for 8 May 1915.

¹³⁷ John, *Rocking the Boat*, p.197.

¹³⁸ Ibid. pp.299-200.

course it was John Rhys' ambition that led him to Oxford, but that it was also the intellectual environment of Oxford itself.

The sisters' privileged position in an Oxford college meant that they were constantly encountering political and social views, sometimes radical, occasionally contrasting, (such as those espoused by the Anti-Suffrage league, formed in 1908), with 'most members connected to the university rather than the city',¹³⁹ but always articulately and intelligently expressed. This even extends to internal affairs, and Myfanwy even devotes several passages in her 1899 diary recounting the internal, feverish politics surrounding the appointments of the next University Proctors, and with which her father was involved. On the formation of the Oxford Women's Suffrage Society, *The Women's Suffrage Record* wrote that 'it has been decided to form not only a committee but a society in Oxford. A large number of influential persons have joined the committee.'¹⁴⁰ Despite the Society's work at factory gates and with the trades unions¹⁴¹, it was, as Bradley observed, 'middle class in character' and subject to 'domination by university men and women'.¹⁴² We have seen that Myfanwy and Olwen were fully committed, and each played active roles in the Society, perhaps confident, but perhaps unquestioning, of their intellectual and social foundations, already familiar to them.

In the next chapter I intend to consider their early diaries with a view to teasing out aspects of the individual characters of the sisters, and how they

¹³⁹ Elizabeth Crawford, *The Women's Suffrage Movement in Britain and Ireland*, p.101.

¹⁴⁰ *Women's Suffrage Record*, 1 October 1904, pp.1-8. p.4.
<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.com/image-viewer?issue=BL%2F0002239%2F19041001&page=4&article=008&stringtohighlight=> [Accessed 20 September 2026].

¹⁴¹ Oxford Society for Women's Suffrage, 4th (10th-12th) Annual Report 1913. p.10.

¹⁴² Katherine Bradley, *The Suffrage Movement in Oxford 1870-1920*, (unpublished M.A. thesis, /Oxford Polytechnic.1993). Oxfordshire History Centre Archive.

align with the public view of two outstanding scholars, ‘part of the Rhys phenomenon...proud products of an educated Liberal and intellectual environment’.¹⁴³

¹⁴³ John, *Rocking the Boat*, p.200.

Chapter 3 Who were Myfanwy and Olwen?

I have tried to illuminate some aspects Myfanwy and Olwen's formative influences above, from their parents to the great and good of the University of Oxford, all of which, I have argued, helped to shape their social and political outlooks. These views led in turn to their dedication to the cause of women's suffrage, and thence to the war work they undertook after John Rhys' death.

As previously indicated, these two sisters had a reputation from an early age as talented scholars and linguists, with brilliant careers predicted for them. However, at times and especially in the years since their deaths, they have been either identified by their relationship to their parents, or even as a virtually indistinguishable pair.¹⁴⁴ I feel it is characteristic of such attention that Myfanwy and Olwen do receive is that it has been, and continues to be, mediated through their family relationships. Even on the Oxford University website celebrating suffrage women, they are designated as part of the Rhys family or presented as a pair- Myfanwy and Olwen Rhys. In her thesis Katherine Bradley mistakenly lists Olwyn Rhys(sic) as the first Secretary of the Oxford Society for Women's Suffrage in 1904, rather than Myfanwy.¹⁴⁵

I wished to see if the diary entries might shed some light on their individual characters that lay behind their activities. In this chapter I will consider the physical diaries themselves and attempt also to draw out some of the themes and preoccupations that help to build a sense of who they were, beyond the women of the newspaper and the Suffrage Society reports. I must start by asking two questions which can never definitively answered, namely, why did they write the diaries and who were they for? Lauri Hyers notes that in the 1800s

¹⁴⁴ See Footnote 10 in Chapter 1: the gold medal awarded to Olwen cannot be mentioned without reference to her sister.

¹⁴⁵ Bradley, *The Suffrage Movement in Oxford 1870-1920*, p.79.

children were encouraged to keep diaries to acquire habits of ‘order and regularity’.¹⁴⁶ She also says, ‘there developed an association of diary keeping with personal dedication, prudence, and a well-planned life that has stuck with the journal ever since’. As we will see, some of the entries for both sisters indicate a sense of moral failure when they have not kept up with diary writing. It is also important to bear in mind that the selection of events and thoughts they record, as well as the ones they do not, may give the reader a particular view which is not the whole story.

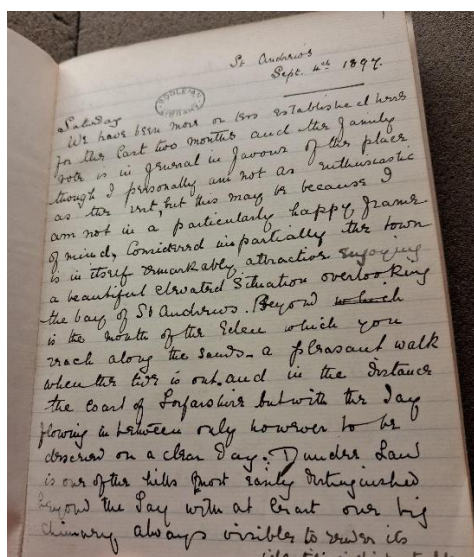
The physical diaries comprised blank pages to be filled at will, and the diaries for the late 1890s show that the two young women have very different styles.

Myfanwy’s writing appears more immediate, almost impulsive, as she appears to write things down as they occur to her, trying to get her recollections down in an outpouring before she forgets. Her writing is very variable, and occasionally has crossings out, or lines written in between. As noted above, she utilises code, usually Greek letters. See fig. 1.

The entries are dated infrequently, with often just a day being given. Conjunctions and other words are occasionally omitted. When she records her feelings her expressions feel vehement. Dressing for an important dinner party, she writes: ‘Olwen looked charming. I got into my temper because my hair was badly done.’¹⁴⁷ On another occasion she received a note from her Father, ‘reviling’ her for not sending her mother some required newspapers while away. She had ‘managed to become confused over the addresses’, with the result that she ‘could not sleep

¹⁴⁶ Lauri Hyers, *Diary Methods: Understanding Qualitative Research*. New York, 2018; online edn, Oxford Academic, Chapter 1, pp. 1–26. <https://doi-org.uwtsd.idm.oclc.org/10.1093/oso/9780190256692.003.0001>, [accessed 01 Sept. 2026].

¹⁴⁷ BL, MS.Eng.misc.e.676, Diary of Myfanwy Rhys, (1874–1945), undated entry for late 1893.



2: Diary of Olwen Rhys 4 September 1897

In these relatively early years, she writes about the people she meets, describing herself as ‘being interested in humanity and clothes’,¹⁵⁰ she also seems interested in describing the scenery. This is particularly noticeable in her account of her sojourn in Geneva, where she was undertaking some courses at the University. Describing a walk with friends, she writes:

we then set off and walked to La Croisette right along the Salève. The view all round during the whole time was beautiful- it was certainly misty and it was a very long time before we caught a glimpse of the lake but the mists gave a beauty of its own to the scene. It looked like the sea and when one caught a glimpse of a landscape through it it seemed like a bit of a submarine world.¹⁵¹

The passages are generally well formed and considered, almost as if she writes with a reader in mind, or perhaps it is just the enjoyment of the writing itself. She is noticeably more matter of fact than Myfanwy when expressing her mood. For example, on the family’s sojourn in St Andrews, she writes ‘the family vote is in

¹⁵⁰ BL. MS.Eng.e.697. Diary of Olwen Rhys, September 1897.

¹⁵¹ Ibid. Saturday 6 November 1897.

general in favour of this place though I personally am not as enthusiastic as the rest, but this may be because I am not in a particularly happy frame of mind', with no clue as to why.¹⁵²

Both Myfanwy and Olwen seem to regard diary writing as akin to a moral obligation. Each one berates herself from time to time for failing to keep up her diary entries. For example, Olwen writes 'Tuesday October the 12th. I have not written my diary for three days and that from sheer laziness' and 'Friday 22nd of October I am getting slacker and slacker. I must turn over a new leaf and write my diary every day otherwise I might as well not keep one'.

Myfanwy notes, somewhat dramatically, when updating entries from the end of October to the following January 20 of 1900:

This diary has been abruptly discontinued. Alas for the weakness of the flesh. That events so 'thrilling' as those which make up the life of this writer should be much omitted is in sooth a sad thing. The writer feels this is a failing a diary will endeavour to present a truthful record though general and non-circumstantial of the events of the past period of time.¹⁵³

As John has emphasised, Myfanwy and Olwen, born just nineteen months apart, were extremely close throughout all their lives, seemingly almost to the exclusion of others.¹⁵⁴ The diaries bear witness to this closeness; even when they are apart on visits, or studying elsewhere, they rely on letters, and express concern about how the other is faring. They usually refer to each other as 'O' (occasionally Olwen) and 'Myv'. When Myfanwy goes away in January 1898, Olwen writes: 'She leaves a horrid blank poor little kid.'¹⁵⁵

¹⁵² Ibid. 4 September 1897.

¹⁵³ BL, MS.Eng.misc.e.681, Diary of Myfanwy Rhys, (1874-1945), 20 January 1900.

¹⁵⁴ John, *Rocking the Boat*, p.231.

¹⁵⁵ BL, MS.Eng.misc. e.697.14th January 1898.

Despite the fact that Myfanwy is the elder of the two, she values Olwen's opinions, and at times her diaries convey a sense that Olwen is more adept in social situations and looks after her sister. For example, in Myfanwy's diary for late 1893 (undated), she recalls a lunch party, at which she is seated next to Evan Lorimer, whose conversation she dislikes. Having asked him a 'silly question', which invoked a patronising response, she recalls that 'O came to my rescue from other side of table with the feminine 'how crushing' brought forth with great effect.' On another occasion at a ball, Myfanwy writes: 'I had such a slow time and felt so mad that I selfishly declared my intention of going home. O who was not having such a bad time of it insisted on coming with me'.¹⁵⁶

The sisters clearly have a loving relationship with their parents, as John has already alluded to, although they, particularly Elspeth, are clearly ambitious for their academic careers, which I will discuss later in this chapter. Myfanwy refers to her parents variously as 'Ma' and 'Pa/Fa' or 'Mother' and 'Father', while Olwen usually uses 'Mother' and 'Father' and occasionally, bizarrely, '*the* Mother' and '*the* Father'. Elspeth Rhÿs clearly has a strong personality, and many people look to her for advice and guidance, including Mr Arnold, who was a protagonist in the 'Bangor Row'.¹⁵⁷ As Myfanwy notes when referring to some workmen at the College: 'They would like to hear what Mrs Rhÿs had to say about it. Everybody at Jesus always said they would like to hear what Mrs Rhÿs said about everything.'¹⁵⁸

In one incident in 1893, the sisters seek their father's help to avoid getting into trouble with their mother. In an almost farcical turn of events, Myfanwy was assisting her mother with some letters when she managed to put the wrong letter in an envelope. This letter to a friend, accidentally sent to Mrs Hughes, the housekeeper, contained some remarks about Mrs Hughes: 'nothing derogatory to Mrs H, but observations that might hurt the poor woman terribly'. Myfanwy is

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ See Footnote 108.

¹⁵⁸ BL, MS.Eng.e.681. Myfanwy Rhÿs undated diary entry, 1899.

berated by her mother when she discovers the mistake: ‘Why do you do these things how harum scarum you are. And more in the same strain.’ Poor Myfanwy was made to feel as if ‘the world was at a standstill it is one of those terrible accidents that befall most people once in their lifetime.’ In due course a letter came from Mrs Hughes; Myfanwy and Olwen got hold of them and gave them to their father to hide. Eventually, in a state of high anxiety Myfanwy and Olwen ‘sallied forth’ in their nightgowns and read the letter. It seems that there was no mention of the worrying observations, but they were still upset. The next morning John Rhÿs reassured them that their Mother had seen the letter and suspected nothing. Notwithstanding both sisters’ anxiety about making their mother cross, Olwen makes an observation in her diary of 30 September 1897, which shows a different view of her. Elspeth Rhÿs had accompanied Olwen to Geneva, where she to stay for a while and take courses at the University. Once Olwen is settled in, she sees Elspeth off at the station, remarking: ‘In the evening I went to see the Mother off – dear little Mother I don’t think she ought to be left without either of us.’¹⁵⁹

The diaries also reveal other preoccupations and interests of the two young women. John has quite rightly highlighted their love of the theatre, including Olwen’s participation in productions as a member of the Oxford Home Students Dramatic Society.¹⁶⁰ Even when the two sisters visit Germany in late 1898, to improve their German language skills, they attend theatrical and operatic productions, watching with their usual critical gaze.¹⁶¹ Myfanwy even records a happy afternoon at the fairground, where she and her friend Violet ‘go on about 11 rides’.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁹ BL, MS. Eng. e.697.Olwen Rhÿs, 30 September 1897.

¹⁶⁰ John, *Rocking the Boat*, p.207. An entry in the minute book for the Oxford Society for Home Students where Olwen taught, in 1915, also notes an entertainment, where Olwen had arranged to give a recitation.

¹⁶¹ BL, MS.Eng.misc.e.678.Myfanwy Rhÿs, *passim*.

¹⁶² BL, MS.Eng.misc.e.676. Myfanwy Rhÿs, September 1893.

They are also an active pair: John has noted Myfanwy's callisthenics, and their bicycling.¹⁶³ This latter, fashionable activity was clearly shared with friends as well as family, as Myfanwy writes of cycling out with the Conybeares, Miss Molyneux, Miss Bel and Miss Worrall. The sisters also seemingly spend a lot of time going for walks: with each other, with parents, Mrs Hughes and friends; sometimes twice or more in a day. On an undated Monday in 1893, Myfanwy 'Went on nice walk with O. down to University Courts. Lunch. Went short walk with Mrs Hughes.'¹⁶⁴ Not only were the walks functional: for exercise, going to class, delivering notes and homework, going shopping and so on, they also provided an opportunity for gossip with friends and acquaintances, and the possibility of chance encounters. At the beginning of her diary for late 1893, Myfanwy writes:

.. rushed after Mrs Hughes and Olwen, Went on walk outside Parks that way. Coming back met the Arthur Johnsons on our way back. Also, Robert Holland Mrs Hughes made us laugh before we came up to meet by commenting on the fullness of his trousers.¹⁶⁵

Olwen also enjoys fencing; she obtains a 'fencing skirt' and mentions fencing lessons 10 times in her diary from late 1897 onwards. However, in an entry for May 8, 1898, she writes: 'I travelled down very comfortably and then had only time to change my clothes and get down to my fencing lesson. I was not brilliant at it as maybe imagined.'¹⁶⁶ During her stay in Geneva, she took some riding lessons, which she greatly enjoyed. In early November, she wrote of a 'glorious ride':

We trotted a good deal and I got very tired and had great works with my toque holding it on part of the time. I'm afraid I must buy a hat. I am horribly

¹⁶³ John, *Rocking the Boat*, p.207.

¹⁶⁴ BL, MS.Eng.misc.e.676. Myfanwy Rhys, undated diary entry 1893.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ BL. MS.Eng.misc.e.697. Diary of Olwen Rhys, November 1897.

stiff today but if I were 10 times as stiff it would not matter, I had a glorious time.¹⁶⁷

Myfanwy and Olwen seek out swimming lessons when they are in Germany but are thwarted by the fact there are no teachers in winter, and there did not 'seem to be enough room in shallow part for a cat let alone two large women.' Much later on Myfanwy decides to take swimming lessons for one shilling a time at The Rhea.¹⁶⁸ On the 1 August 1899 she notes that on the first day of her 25th year she began her swimming. Her progress is slow, but eventually she manages 'to swim' from the tree to the ladder a good many times without much sustenance from the fishing rod.'¹⁶⁹

In a letter to Myfanwy dated 11 September 1923 from George H Williams, Rector at Remenham, the writer harks back to earlier days when he was an undergraduate at Jesus College and provides a charming vignette of the two sisters conjuring up a picture of Myfanwy and Olwen as free and joyful.¹⁷⁰ He writes 'Alas! She (his wife) knows not of the memories of my undergraduate days at Oxford when I was desperately in love with two adorable, but somewhat youthful ladies, who subsequently rejected my addresses... I thought amidst my Sunday meditations of the gay Bacchantes in the thrill of their hectic afternoon.'¹⁷¹

As might be expected of two young women in the late 1890s Oxford, they went on boating parties from time to time, took dancing lessons and looked forward to

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ A dedicated swimming space for women on the River Cherwell in Oxford. See: [Oxford's historic bathing places - Dive In! A History of River Swimming in Oxford - Museum of Oxford Digital Exhibitions](#), [Accessed 15 September 2026].

¹⁶⁹ BL, MS. Eng. misc. e.691. Diary of Myfanwy Rhys, 29 August 1899.

¹⁷⁰ Findagrave, George H Williams [226845771_e9e7a0fc-6d74-4df4-856f-88fda719b86f.jpeg \(2249x3167\)](#) accessed 15 September 2026. Given their respective ages, it is likely that Williams' memories are of very small girls.

¹⁷¹ LGC, B2/2/1. Letter from George H Williams, Rector of Remenham in Berkshire. 11 September 1923.

balls, all places where they might enjoy the company of young men. Living at the Jesus lodgings, the sisters would encounter undergraduates and other young men who visited. However, they did not always have positive experiences outside the home and sometimes seemed at a loss as to how to navigate the situation. In one very unfortunate episode Olwen receives some unwelcome attention from her music teacher when she is at Geneva, but stoically remarks:

He was very amiable too amiable- an Englishwoman is not accustomed to a master who puts his arm round you and tells you it does not matter how you look for the university so long as you look nice for your music lesson.¹⁷²

Clearly, from some of their diary entries, they were not immune to a flirtation, and occasionally the sisters each express pleasure in the company of a young man, or particular interest in someone. On 19 May 1898 Olwen mentions that she has had a 'mild flirtation with a Mr Lightwood', and in October 1899 Myfanwy writes of a Penmorlan Maine:

Penmorlan's lady makes very good Butterbrod. On me siding to a weakness for this dainty he proceeded to give us a general invitation to tea. I hope he won't forget (and in code): he interesteth me much.

She takes interest in his academic results, and a bit later she says: 'Of course I had to endure Mrs Murray when I was pining to talk to Penmorlan that of course is the proper drawing room agony'.¹⁷³

Olwen attracts the interest of a Mr Bennet, with whom she goes to tea (accompanied by her mother), has a 'long talk' with him and is invited to a Greek play by him.¹⁷⁴ Myfanwy observes that he is 'very attentive to O'.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷² BL. MS.Eng.misc.e.697. Diary of Olwen Rhÿs, 23 October 1897.

¹⁷³ BL, MS.Eng.e.681. Diary of Myfanwy Rhÿs, October 1899.

¹⁷⁴ BL, MS.Eng.misc.e.697, Diary of Olwen Rhÿs, 20 February 1898.

¹⁷⁵ BL, MS.Eng.e.681. Diary of Myfanwy Rhÿs, June 1899.

However things turn sour: writing about a ball they had been looking forward to, Myfanwy reports that Olwen had been anxious about Bennet monopolising her dances. Then, upon him asking her why she wore her hair in a certain way, she tells him he is ‘impertinent’ at which he loses his temper and:

he told her she knew absolutely nothing about men, she might have been brought up in a little Welsh valley. He had always tried to be polite to her and her sister, had made a point of asking us out etc. Olwen was politely scornful.¹⁷⁶

The promise of the ball does not materialise for Myfanwy: she says that the ball is ‘loathly’, as ‘Several men I knew kept out of my way till it was too late’ (i.e. to fill up her dance card).¹⁷⁷ She also records elsewhere that she missed some dances as her partners simply failed to turn up. Although their diaries frequently refer to the engagements and affairs of their friends and acquaintances, one could speculate that these two bright and often critical sisters did not know how to play the flirting games as well as some of their peers.

After this upsetting episode, the sisters talk long about Mr Bennet at home, and lament: ‘We both felt we would have given much for the advice of a woman of the world. It is no use speaking to Mother. She will say have nothing to do with the thex (sic). That’s one way but no use in that when you have to live among them.’¹⁷⁸

The diaries of both sisters give an overall impression of busy social lives, intense interest in other people, often accompanied by critical observations, and many absorbing pastimes, from swimming and fencing to the theatre and dancing. As noted above, they clearly fear parental disapproval, which tends to upset them greatly, and it is possible this anxiety fed into their scholarly lives.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

As I have earlier indicated, the sisters were associated with an image of scholastic brilliance and achievement, as befitted the daughters of John and Elspeth Rhŷs. However the diaries indicate no little stress and anxiety accompanying their efforts. Of course, it is normal for students to feel under stress at times, but some of the diary entries seem at odds with the sisters' public image of effortless achievement. In Myfanwy's case, her 1893 diary (written when she was preparing to go to Newnham College, Cambridge), contains many references to her studies. She is constantly 'grubbing', at Livy, Sophocles and mathematics and so on. She appears to be in a perpetual hurry; twice she nearly misses a music lesson, and has to turn up not having done any preparation, resulting in a 'fiasco in the musical line.'¹⁷⁹ Her parents decide that she will not do the Collections (comparable to end of term exam papers), but focus on mathematics instead, and write a letter to this effect to her tutor Miss Rogers.¹⁸⁰ She prepares for this exam, although, she is worried: she notes that she is 'very afraid of my not passing'.¹⁸¹ She goes to London to take her algebra exam, noting that she 'Missed out a lot of things I ought to have done I suppose.'¹⁸² For her Euclid exam, she crams relentlessly, and on the day of the exam, 'Tried to cram some ivth book before breakfast did not find time to do as much as I wished. Exam. Not nice, hope I didn't make a great mull anywhere.'¹⁸³

When Myfanwy and Olwen visit Germany in 1899, she remarks, in her characteristic dramatic style, 'I walked in the Herrenhausen direction with O and grumbled that my youth has been passed in the shelter of academic

¹⁷⁹ BL. MS.Eng.misc.e.676. Diary of Myfanwy Rhŷs, 1893.

¹⁸⁰ J. Howarth, (2004, September 23). 'Rogers, Annie Mary Anne Henley (1856–1937)', promoter of women's higher education. *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. from <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-35810>. [Accessed 28 September 2026].

¹⁸¹ BL. MS.Eng.misc.e.676. Diary of Myfanwy Rhŷs, undated entry, 1893

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

bowers. My efforts to see life are unavailing and my youth is slipping away'.¹⁸⁴

Later that year, while the Dreyfus affair is raging, Myfanwy is working on an essay on Logos, for a competition.¹⁸⁵ She is less than keen and hoped that her mother's illness might let her off the hook. This was not to be:

Mother came back on Monday evening with father. A little riled to find me still in bed. Garrod is going to treat her with drugs, no travelling to health resorts so my little plans for dropping the Logos were knocked flat.¹⁸⁶

Nevertheless she still hopes to be able to drop it: 'My Logos hung around my neck heavy as lead. I neglected it systematically always putting social gatherings first etc this on principle as I never meant to finish it.' She was having Russian lessons, which she enjoyed, although the Logos was, apparently, meant to prevent her doing this. Her work 'trickled on' and she eventually finished it, winning the prize.

Olwen's diary reveals little of her feelings about her studies. Her visit to Geneva provided her with lectures in various subjects which were by turns, boring, amusing, interesting and dull. However the diary is crammed with descriptions of people and places and her other activities.¹⁸⁷ At home in Oxford, her tutors' reports for 1899 note that although she has 'considerable ability', her essays were variable in quality, with several missed, and inequality 'due to overpressure. Notably they observed that, her work had been interrupted by (unspecified) health issues.¹⁸⁸ Perhaps Myfanwy was right when she wrote: 'Had talk with Pa,

¹⁸⁴ BL, MS. Eng. misc. e.681. Diary of Myfanwy Rhys, undated entry.

¹⁸⁵ John, *Rocking the Boat*, p.210.

¹⁸⁶ BL, MS. Eng. misc. e.681. Diary of Myfanwy Rhys, undated entry.

¹⁸⁷ BL, MS. Eng. misc. e.697. Diary of Olwen Rhys, *passim*.

¹⁸⁸ St Anne's College, Oxford Archive, ANN/AEW/1, Annual Reports of the Association for the Education of Women 1879-1920.

both he and I think that if O were to idle for a few months she would get straight like N Thomas did'.¹⁸⁹

Perhaps Myfanwy, with her dramatic nature, was more drawn to Russian, than ancient languages, but was compelled to follow her parents' wishes. The sisters were very able and clever young women, who particularly enjoyed and excelled at languages. However at times the diaries convey the sense that they felt under too much pressure to perform to their parents' satisfaction.

¹⁸⁹ BL, MS.Eng.misc.e.678. Diary of Myfanwy Rhŷs, undated entry, 1899.

Conclusion

In this thesis I wished to build on the work of Angela V John's chapter on the Rhÿs' sisters, focussing on their lives up until the death of their father in 1915, including their participation in the Suffragist cause, as well as their other interests and preoccupations. John argued that the sisters 'followed in the family footsteps' and additionally carried the burden of high academic expectations, based on the achievements of their parents.

By examining the diaries and other records of the time, I wished to demonstrate that the influences on the two sisters extended beyond their parents, taking into account the intellectual environment of Oxford and the people they encountered there. The sisters' early lives have also to be understood in the context of their parents' overwhelming convictions about education and votes for women. I therefore considered it necessary not only to provide some biographical background information about the family, including the parents' early adoption of the campaign for votes for women, but also to understand the prevailing political situation, and the fundamental significance of the suffrage campaign's alliances with Liberal politicians, which contributed to their political and social outlook.

In my research I discovered that, although Oxfordshire was largely anti women's suffrage, the OWSS was 'predominantly middle class', with a significant membership drawn from university members and their families, many of whom would already have been family friends, known to Myfanwy and Olwen. Additionally, John Rhÿs position as Chair of Celtic Studies and later Principal of Jesus College, also meant that there was a constant flow of eminent visitors, including Liberal politicians and others who were sympathisers to the cause or activists. The sisters would also have been exposed to discourse around women's rights and the campaign for Parliamentary suffrage at lunches, dinners and parties, and visits to homes where politics and issues of the day were discussed.

I conclude therefore that, although there was undoubtedly parental influence, this was not the only factor that helped to shape Myfanwy and Olwen's political views, one must also consider their privileged position in the wider university community.

I also wished to interrogate the image of the sisters as an almost interchangeable pair of scholars, firmly dedicated to their studies. Firstly, the diaries reveal two very different personalities: from the impulsive and often untidily written outpourings of Myfanwy compared to the neater and carefully crafted entries of Olwen. Myfanwy (at least in these early years) seems at times to be the 'harum scarum' prone to making silly mistakes and running late for lessons, while Olwen appears more organised. There is no doubt that they achieved great things in their studies, but there are times when Myfanwy seems disinclined to study, and often ill-prepared. There is also a suggestion, briefly mentioned, that Olwen may have been overdoing things, and needs some time 'idle' to recuperate. The direction of their lives is however, firmly in the control of their parents, even into their early twenties. Myfanwy would seemingly far rather have continued with her Russian lessons than slogged at her prizewinning essay on Logos. The 'burden of expectations', observed by John, is very keenly felt by the sisters, who, despite their sometimes-negative reactions, were both dutiful and loving. I have also tried to draw out the sense that perhaps the parental emphasis on study was at the cost of other aspects of their lives as young women, noting their difficulties in navigating social intercourse with men, and their feelings of being unsupported in these issues by their mother.

Notwithstanding the scholastic burden and social awkwardness, the sisters exhibit a lively interest in their fellow human beings, with retelling of current gossip in their diaries. They enjoy a range of activities, beyond the theatre and callisthenics as John has noted, including swimming, riding, dancing, fencing and walking for pleasure. Perhaps these all helped to mitigate the expectations which they must have felt lay heavy on them at times. Their capacity for self-reflection is at times touching and highlights a strong moral code and an awareness of their perceived individual shortcomings. This was a glimpse into

the lives of two young women, both extraordinary in their circumstance, but ordinary in their youthful hopes and fears.

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Appendix

Myfanwy Rhŷs' diary transcription. Fig 1. p.44.

Entry in code is italicised.

May the 27th Saturday

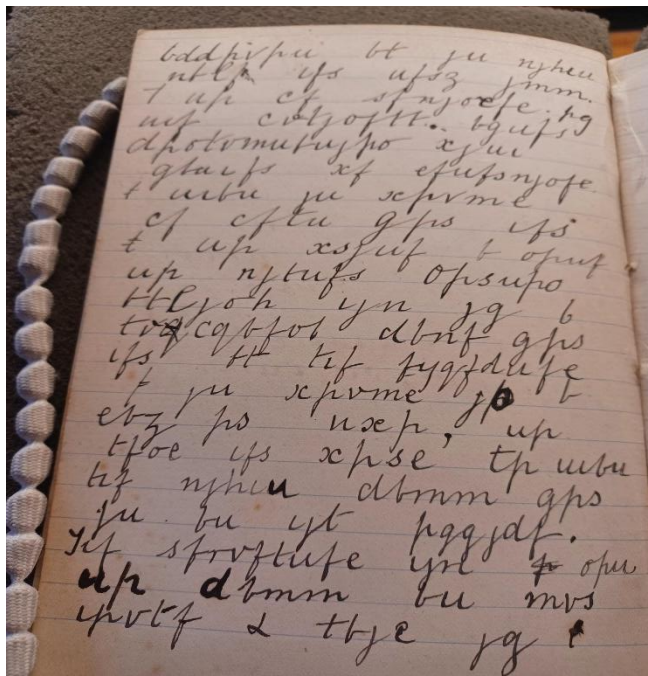
Heard from Connie she went back to tea with miss Roberts on her way. A *letter from Mrs Ellis she writes as if much cut up. She was sorry to miss mother when she called but she went out when she felt inclined, she got so little sleep. She must be brave; he would have wished it. She felt only the more attached to mother. Ours was the last house in which she stayed with him*

I bought stockings gloves etc with mother.

At lunch a note from Mr HH Williams of Hartford which amused us somewhat. In Eights week he promised me tickets for the Queen's concert in case we should want more. On day of concert, I am being under delusion that Olwen would not want to go

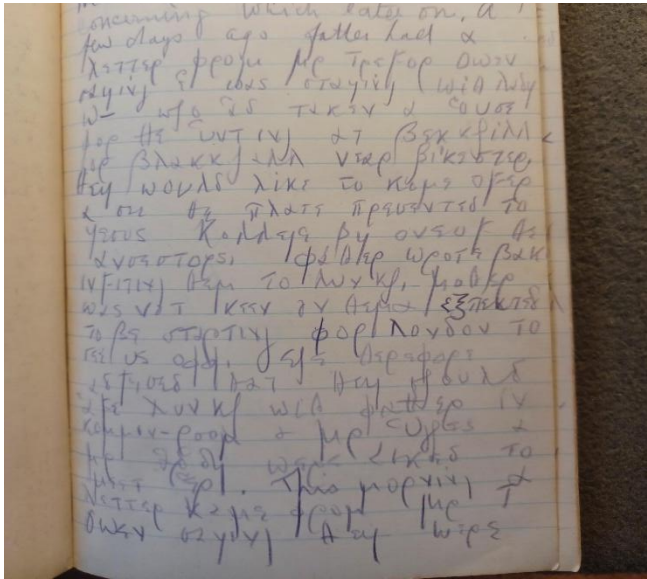
3 Diary of Myfanwy Rhŷs 12 September 1893

Examples of Myfanwy's writing:



Transcription

account as it might make her very ill. I to be reminded of the business after consultation with father we determined that it would be best for her to write a note to mister Norton asking him if a subpoena came for her as she expected it would in a day or two, to send her word so that she might call for it at his office. She requested him not to call at l house and said if....



Transcription

Friday Dec 9th, 1898

We had a strange experience today concerning which later on. A few days ago, father had a letter from Mr Trevor Owen saying he was staying with Lady W who had taken a house for the hunting at Blackhall near Bicester. They would like to come over and see the plate presented to Jesus College by one of their ancestors. Father wrote back inviting them to

lunch. Mother was not keen on them and expected to be starting for London to see us off. She therefore advised That they should have lunch with father in common room and Mr Hughes and Mr Hardy Were asked to meet her. This morning a letter came from Mr T Owen saying they were...



5 Jesus College Principal's Lodgings

L.Easterbrook 2026.