

# THE SWEET SINGER OF WALES

William Williams of Pantycelyn

*The Greatest Genius that the Principality has Produced*

THE Rev. William Williams of Pantycelyn sustains much the same relation to the churches of Wales that Watts does to the churches of England.

He was born in Carmarthenshire in 1717. It will therefore be seen that he was a contemporary of Whitefield and Wesley in England, and of Howell Harris and Daniel Rowlands in Wales. There are certain periods in the history of the Church when men of deep piety and extraordinary genius appear simultaneously in different countries, when religious zeal bursts forth in various quarters which apparently have no connexion with one another. Surely this is the finger of God, another indication of the Divine Presence in history. A fire may take place in London, and Glasgow know nothing about it; but when the central fires of the globe begin to rumble, countries wide asunder feel the shock. The small revivals kindled by the zeal of men are confined to one or two localities and soon die out; but when God begins to burn as a purifying fire in the heart of the race, eruptions take place in countries wide apart, and simultaneously in different nations reformers spring up.

## Medicine and Preaching

Mr. Williams was first intended for the medical profession, and he studied for a while with a view to it. These studies are traceable in some of his letters, and in after times were very useful to him. He who was able to heal sicknesses among the people was more likely to be believed in as a sage counsellor in matters pertaining to the soul.

One day as Mr. Williams was returning home from school, his attention was drawn to an eager, anxious crowd gathered together in the churchyard at Talgarth in the neighbourhood of Trevecca, where subsequently the "elect lady," the Countess of Huntingdon, established a college (afterwards removed to Cheshunt) under the able and judicious presidency of a son of Mr. Williams. They were listening to a man of rough, determined visage, of soldier-like bearing, fire flashing in his eyes and divine earnestness ringing in his tones. He was the celebrated Howell Harris, who was blessed under God

to rouse Wales from the spiritual torpor of centuries.

## A "Warrant" from Heaven

The young student was there and then arrested, as he afterwards said, by a "warrant" from Heaven. His conviction was deep and thorough; he looked upon himself as lost and undone for ever. His agony was intense. And it is worthy of remark that in those times the alarm, the despair, the anguish of soul accompanying conviction of sin was much greater than it appears to be in the present day. Especially was this the case in Wales. Strong men trembled in the agony of fear, many would actually faint; and on seeing the way of escape no wonder they shouted and leaped for joy in ecstasy of delight. Many deprecate such irregular manifestations of feeling; they call them "convulsions, not conversions." It is useless to argue. No doubt there are convulsions without conversions, and there are conversions without convulsions; but frequently in those days conversions and convulsions went together.

Soon afterwards Williams resolved to abandon his medical pursuits and enter the ministry of the Church of England. "What things were gain to him, those he counted loss for Christ."

## Remarkable Piety

In due time he was ordained deacon. His piety was remarkable; not less than three times a day did he call his household together to unite in family worship. His holy life and indefatigable labour to save the souls committed to his care stirred the anger and excited the mockery of his neighbours. It is the invariable tendency of the world to crucify goodness.

At this juncture he sent to seek counsel of Whitefield. The answer was—"Go to the highways and hedges and compel them to come in." And to the highways and hedges he went, and never once did he waver in his course.

## A Great Traveller

He travelled like a "burning and a shining lamp" throughout the Principality

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and many rejoiced in his light; nay, more, he kindled other innumerable lamps which in course of time changed the abodes of darkness into a land celebrated for its religious light. In a letter to the Rev. Thomas Charles of Bala, one of the founders of the Bible Society, he says, "I have been preaching for the last forty-three years, and have travelled on an average between forty and fifty miles every week during that period." That is to say, he travelled on foot and on horseback to preach the unsearchable riches of Christ a distance equal to four times the circumference of the globe. I doubt if St. Paul travelled so much.

In personal appearance Mr. Williams was slenderly built and of middle height. He was rather mercurial in his feelings and very subject to atmospheric influences—easily elated and soon cast down. Wales is a land of hills and valleys, and its inhabitants are generally to be found on the top of the one or at the bottom of the other. What distinguished Mr. Williams was the rapidity with which he made the transition. His sermons could never become "discourses." Mr. Williams swung rapidly in his feelings from one extreme to another.

### **Where he Excelled**

His sermons were lively and short; but he had not the princely presence, the irresistible eloquence, and the clarion voice of some of his brethren. But if they shone in addressing large multitudes where strength of lung was required, he excelled in addressing individuals. All great poets are the union of opposites; they are the harmonies of the world; diverse and even antagonistic moods find in them complete conciliation. Even as poets they have committed to them the "ministry of reconciliation."

Such a one certainly was Mr. Williams. He possessed that secret charm which magnetises men; he had in his poetic nature affinities which insensibly drew all men to him. His conversation was so entertaining, his address so fascinating, that it is said the sick whom he visited would for the time forget their ailments, get out of bed, and dress. His words were medicine and food. He read human nature by a kind of lightning glance and found easy access to every heart.

And much opportunity was given Mr. Williams for the development and exercise of his intuitive faculty. Religious societies were often held in the country; that is to say, the new converts met at least once a week to converse on spiritual subjects and

to instruct each other diligently in the divine life. In all these Mr. Williams was without a rival. His spiritual organism was so delicate that it quivered in gentle sympathy with all phases of experience. Every fear, every hope, every joy found instant response in his sensitive heart.

### **An Instrument of a Thousand Strings**

Whereas others were instruments of only one or two strings, and could emit only one or two notes, he was an instrument of a thousand strings incessantly pouring forth cataracts of the sweetest and most mystic symphonies, the delicious echoes of which still tremble on the breezes of Wales. Do you doubt it?

Some years ago I well remember seeing a large group of men and women gathered together on the gentle slope of a beautiful hill in sight of the church where the poet first preached; ere long the voice of song and praise began to skim the air, and quaver among the trees, and linger around the lowly rustic church. What was it? The young men and maidens of Wales spending their holiday evening to sing the beautiful hymns which flowed out of the soul of a former curate of that church, hymns which cheered four or five generations of Welshmen, and made them forswear the world and its gaudy pleasures and go in search of a "better country; that is, a heavenly." A memorable scene!

### **"Thou art the Poet"**

Not only the converts, but the ministers also found it necessary, at stated periods, to meet and advise together as to the best means of promoting the welfare, temporal and spiritual, of the new churches that were springing up all over the country. Among other topics discussed was the marked deficiency of good evangelical hymns. How to supply the deficiency? The few good people assembled together agreed in primitive fashion that they should all attempt a little rhyming, and that at their next meeting they should read their compositions and thus discover who was endowed with the valuable gift of poesy. This they did. After reading their respective productions, Mr. Harris, under whose preaching Mr. Williams was converted, exclaimed, without a moment's hesitation, "William, thou art the poet, thou excellest. May God bless thy gift."

### **A Welsh Triad**

Thus Williams discovered his avocation—he was to be the leader of praise in the

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service of his countrymen. There is a Welsh triad respecting the requisites of a poet as follows: An eye to see Nature, a heart to feel Nature, and a boldness that dares follow Nature. Perception, emotion, daring. The triad found ample fulfilment in Mr. Williams; and more, he had an eye to see the Gospel, a heart to feel the Gospel, and a boldness that dared follow the Gospel. The first made him a poet; the second made him a Christian poet. He never wrote what he did not feel.

As already stated, Mr. Williams was a man of very varied moods. He was a great hypochondriac; and it is remarkable that men of poetic temperament are generally "men of sorrow and acquainted with grief." In his lonely hours his soul would often sink within him in sad despondency; but the reaction would come and he would leap at one bound to the other extreme.

### **Sadness of Welsh Hymns**

The comet that plunges farthest into darkness also swings nearest the sun. This explains the great variety of his hymns; like life, they are thickly chequered with shine and shadow. But I find that, on the whole, sad, plaintive hymns are more numerous in Welsh than in English hymn-books; there is a wailing and a lamentation in the sentiments and the language which are more or less lacking in English experience. The same thing precisely is observable in the music. English congregations sing faster than the Welsh and prefer lively inspiring tunes; but if you attend a Welsh service you cannot help observing their natural preference for minor tunes. There is a sad undertone of melancholy in the nation.

### **Saturated with the Great Verities**

His hymns are in spirit, doctrine, and often diction, thoroughly scriptural. His spirit was steeped in the truths of revelation. He was so saturated with the great verities of the Gospel that there is a wholesome tone to all his writings. He nicely adjusts the objective and subjective; he never allows theology to override experience, and he never lets experience adulterate theology. In his hymns we are brought continually into contact with the "unadulterated Word of God"; sound evangelical truth is stamped on every line. But it is not truth as dogma, not truth in the abstract—no, it is the truth entering the human heart and again reappearing in flesh and blood.

It is said that he generally composed his hymns with great rapidity. Many of the most popular Welsh hymns were written in a few minutes. Do not let this mislead you. Though rapid, it was not easy work. The strain upon his system was tremendous, and gradually but surely undermined his health. Talent elaborates; therefore it requires time. Genius creates; it speaks, and the thing is done. But to create is incomparably harder than to elaborate, and demands greater power; hence it is more destructive to the vital forces. Genius does its noblest, divinest work with one stroke of the pen or one sweep of the brush; but it levies a terrible tax on the nature. Five minutes of inspiration makes a greater demand on the life-forces than five hours of hard, plodding work.

### **"Thundering Hard Work"**

Lady Morgan once stepped into the room whilst Rossini was engaged on one of his compositions; she listened in silent wonder to his magnificent playing. When he finished she said, "Ah, I have found you in a moment of inspiration." "You have," answered he, with the perspiration running down his face, "but it is thundering hard work."

So the prophets of old found it; when the Holy Ghost came upon them, the strain upon their spiritual and bodily nature was so intense that they often fell down as dead. These sacred moments of glowing inspiration came upon Mr. Williams. "Never write a hymn but when you feel the Holy Ghost upon you," said he. A power from above seemed at times to move him mightily. Often in the watches of the night he would begin to muse in the things of God, and as he mused the fire was kindled; he would jump out of bed in a blaze of excitement, crying, "Bring me light, my vessel is running over"; and in this moment of high inspiration he would pour forth one of his rich hymns, which are now the common heritage of the churches of Wales.

### **Hymn of Fire**

And they have not lost their warmth even unto this day. Often have congregations forgotten the world and its sordid cares in singing his hymns, doubling and trebling certain verses, and at last bursting out into a wild conflagration of praise—every heart on fire. "He will baptise you with the Holy Ghost and with fire." One critic said that reading Williams's hymns



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would keep him warm the coldest day in winter. Never are they below blood-heat ; often they rise to boiling-point.

But no less striking than their life and warmth is their richness of natural imagery. Though Mr. Williams was a respectable scholar and a profound student, yet his soul poured forth her emotions in dictions so simple and appropriate, and in imagery so natural and beautiful, that many of his hymns needed only to be heard once or twice to be remembered forever. He was always dignified and often elegant in his figures. These greatly helped the toiling masses to apprehend spiritual truth. The very highest poetry perhaps dispenses with images — it presents truth bare and naked. Such is the "Samson Agonistes" by Milton ; it is truth pure, bright, dazzling, the effulgent sun without

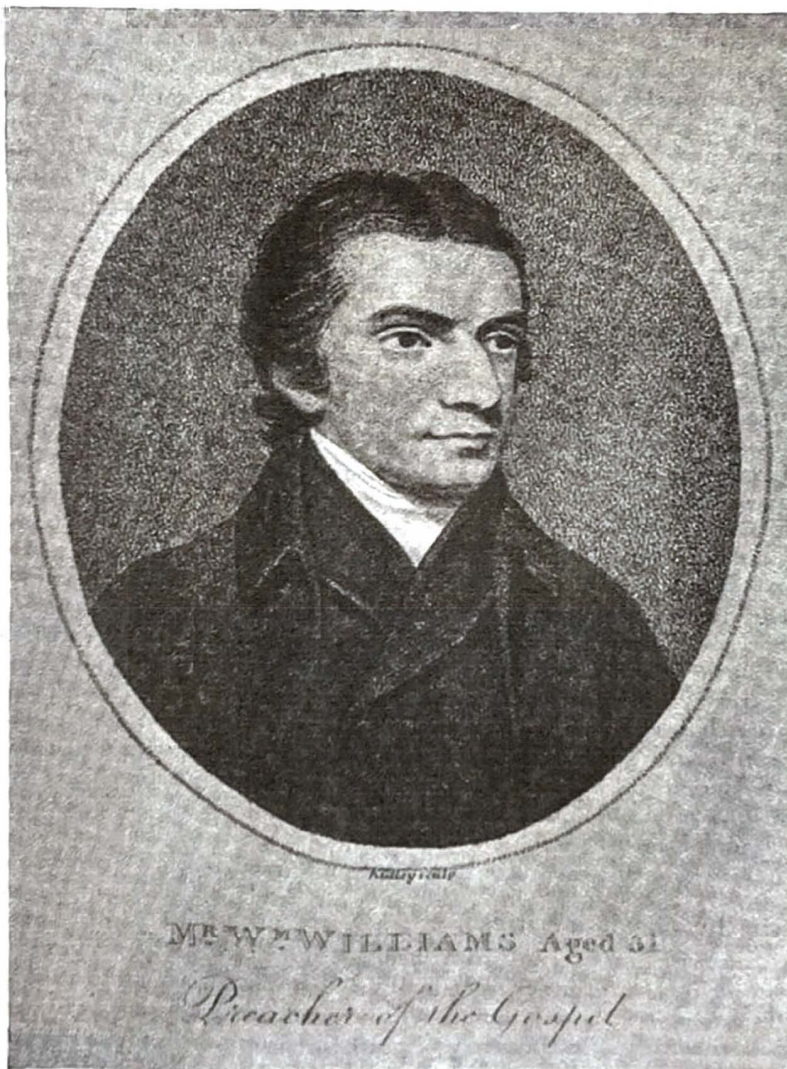
even an angel in it. But the majority of men cannot bear the sight of it—it is dark with excess of light. The people require to be spoken to in parables ; and Mr. Williams understood and supplied their need. His hymns laid a powerful hold upon their inmost being ; they have pervaded and dyed into their own colour the religious nature of Welshmen. This accounts for the fact that little use is made by

Welsh congregations of hymn-books. They seem to know all the hymns.

### **Could Govern a Kingdom**

It was the Countess of Huntingdon that once said that Williams and Rowlands could easily govern a kingdom between them—Mr. Williams to read and win the hearts of men, Mr. Rowlands to

guide and rule the wills of men. Mr. Rowlands possessed a commanding presence, was a consummate orator, had a voice strong and clear as a trumpet, and was generally inspired by intense emotion. Once in prayer, contemplating Christ on the Cross, he was wrought up to such a pitch that he exclaimed, "Oh, empty veins ! Oh, wan countenance !" and then fainted away. When such a man stood up to preach to the eager thousands that crowded to hear him,



THE REV. WILLIAM WILLIAMS OF PANTYCELVN  
*From an old print in the Rischgitz Collection*

one can imagine better than depict the mighty influences that followed. But the great preacher is gone, his sermons are powerless ; but Williams's hymns live to this day, quickening the hearts of the callous, and comforting the afflicted, and fortifying the saints in grace.

It appears to me that these beautiful hymns are Wales's greatest bulwark against heresy in life and doctrine. For be it marked

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that he was an able defender of the Evangelical faith. Perhaps Wales had not a more lucid and zealous expounder of Christian doctrine. Owing to the natural vivacity of his mind, his profound study of the Puritans and well-known Episcopalian writers, and his brilliant powers of conversation, he was very useful in directing the movement he and his coadjutors had brought about.

### **An Arguing Match**

There was a manifest tendency in many of the nominal adherents of the new movement to some forms of false doctrines. These tenets were held and advocated by a man of considerable ability and more influence of the name of Popkins; and in one of the associations the question cropped up. Mr. Williams in the impetuosity of his zeal jumped on his feet, pulled out his watch, laid it on the table, and said, "Popkins, I will try you to-day in the strength of my God, and all here present shall see who has truth on his side. We will argue according to time and to the point, in the presence of all this people, the leaders of our various societies and the preachers; each shall have five minutes at a time to dispute, but must not depart from the subject."

Thus in primitive simplicity the debate began, and so cogent was his reasoning that he slew the error on the spot and completely rid the churches of it. And

even to the day of his death he was exceedingly grieved at any departure from purity of doctrine. Especially was he jealous of any infringement on the divinity and offices and sacrificial death of our Saviour. Indeed, his muse always soared around the Cross, and derived its noblest impulses therefrom.

### **"Guide me, O thou great Jehovah"**

At the urgent request of the Countess of Huntingdon he composed a few hymns in English, some of which have become deservedly popular. I allude to such hymns as "Guide me, O thou great Jehovah," and "O'er the gloomy hills of darkness." But evidently he felt the restraints of the English tongue—he had to make hymns instead of breathing them. We miss the glow of feeling and the play of the imagination. The fundamental truths of Christianity he could set forth in fluent, graceful, and musical English; but the finer feelings, the delicate tints of truth, the soft shadings of experience which always are so bewitching in poetry, baffled him. You can depict the feminine traits only in the mother-tongue. At length the time of his departure arrived; in uninterrupted communion with Heaven he fell asleep in the seventy-fourth year of his age. Thus lived and thus died the greatest genius undoubtedly that Wales has hitherto produced.

