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## Reviews

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## REVIEWS

**Gwyneth Tyson Roberts, *Jane Williams (Ysgafell) Writers of Wales Series* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2020). Pp. 152. £16.99.**

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Jane Williams, otherwise known by her bardic name Ysgafell, is a figure many may be unfamiliar with today. Unlike contemporaries Louisa Stuart Costello and Anna Jameson, who rubbed shoulders with the likes of Maria Edgeworth, Elizabeth Gaskell and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Williams had no literary sorority to help her cultivate her reputation. Instead, she benefitted from a nexus of influential nineteenth-century female figures based in rural Wales who supported her work. Initial patronage from that illustrious supporter of Welsh culture, Lady Llanover (Augusta Hall), as well as a three-figure yearly income courtesy of Isabella Hughes, facilitated Williams's career and propelled her on to a diverse range of projects. Now largely neglected, Williams has needed a similarly sympathetic champion to write her out of the margins today and Gwyneth Tyson Roberts does just that. This stylishly written critical biography draws attention to an eminently talented writer whose diverse portfolio stands as an important contribution to the Welsh canon and culture. From her ghost writing of Betsi Cadwaladr's vibrant memoirs and her biography of Carnhuanawc (bardic name of the Reverend Thomas Price (1787–1848), an historian and prominent literary figure), to a range of poetry and fiction, Williams shapes and sharpens the image of Welsh cultural history too often blurred in the existing canon.

*Jane Williams: Ysgafell* is a welcome addition to the well-known University of Wales Press's Writers of Wales Series which provides critical introductions to the life and work of writers from Wales. The study valuably contributes to and expands on the work of Brinley Rees and Jane Aaron, to explore a woman writer who is too often forgotten by the nineteenth-century canon. Tyson Roberts's work highlights the discontented voice of a key polemicist and rewardingly offers a detailed view of a writer who, though born in England, spent much of her life in Wales and devoted a great deal of her career to Wales and Welsh culture. The book demonstrates the value of bringing back to prominence key

women writers in the nineteenth century and ultimately seeks to give a voice to this impressive figure.

Exceptionally readable and concise, this addition to the Writers of Wales series examines Williams's journey to becoming 'Ysgafell' – an accomplished writer and innovative historian – across five eloquent chapters. Though born in London, Williams's understanding of Welsh people and their communities is evident in her impassioned response to the 1847 Blue Books. *Artegall: or Remarks on the Reports of the Commissioners of Inquiry into the State of Education in Wales* (1848), backed by a confident Lady Llanover, demonstrates Williams's commitment to arguing against the political motives of the report in Wales. Williams's purposeful response to this stinging attack on the Welsh language, morality, and on Nonconformity in Wales, speaks to the methodical and thorough approach that would continue to characterise her work.

As we move through Williams's life, we encounter a writer eager to finish her passion project (an encyclopaedia of women writers in England) but delayed in this by her involvement with *The Autobiography of Elizabeth Davis a Balaclava Nurse* (1857). As Tyson Roberts explains, 'it is one of the ironies of Jane Williams's literary afterlife that her best-known writing today is the book least typical of her work as a whole' and the one she seems most resentful of. Williams's slightly embittered preface highlights her frustrations in penning the life story of Elizabeth Davis, better known as Betsi Cadwaladr. Such irritations were no doubt due to a combination of her desire to complete her own writing which she felt would bring great success, and the tricky task of deciphering the somewhat unclear tales of Davis. Though the seeming inaccuracies and vagaries of Cadwaladr's life exasperated Williams, the action-packed life of a woman who was at one point a nurse with Florence Nightingale has certainly stood the test of time, thanks at least in part to Williams's skilful renderings in ink.

Once able to move away from this life writing, Williams finally completed and published the project that excited her most: *The Literary Women of England* (1861). But for all the hopes Williams had for it, the text falls short in many regards, as detailed by Tyson Roberts. Though it purports to be a comprehensive list of women poets between 1700 and 1850, it is instead best understood as a selection of 'lively comments and literary judgements', which misses out several key figures and focuses disproportionately on Felicia Hemans. Her history of women

writers is disappointingly uninterested in a Welsh tradition, given that it originates from the same pen that wrote *Artegall*.

Wisely, it seems, Williams abandoned her push to reach an Anglo-centric audience and reverted to concentrating on Wales. *Celtic Fables* (1862), published immediately after *Literary Women*, reflects her love of poetry over prose, and returns her work to the country and culture that had brought her so much success with the likes of *Cambrian Tales* (1849–50), her biography of Carnhuanawc (1855) and *The Paper People* (1856). This revisit of Celtic culture continues until Williams's final venture, the ambitious *A History of Wales derived from Authentic Sources*, published in 1869. The text has its weaknesses, perhaps unsurprisingly given that 'Welsh' and 'English' are used interchangeably by Williams in *Literary Women*, but flaws notwithstanding, the text remained the leading publication on Welsh history until Sir John Edward Lloyd's work some forty years later.

Whether national, financial, cultural, or social, Williams's position across various boundaries affords her a liminal space of potential in which to resist classification. Tyson Roberts's detailed and extensive study is compelling and she sheds light on a figure whose writing on varied subjects, relating to both Wales and England, marks Williams as a writer to be remembered and celebrated. By acknowledging and promoting the importance of Jane Williams, Ysgafell, the book enriches, develops, and complicates our understanding of women's writing in the nineteenth century, while leaving scope for future discussion of this talented but neglected writer.

Lucy Thompson,  
Aberystwyth University

*Dr Gwyneth Tyson Roberts (1943–2022)*

It was with great sadness that those of us who had known Gwyneth Tyson Roberts over many years heard that she had passed away, after a long battle with cancer, in September 2022. Born in Surrey (though her father was Welsh), the earlier years of her career were spent outside the UK. After a degree in English, she taught English first of all in the University of Baghdad and then, in the 1970s, at the British Institute in Lisbon.

Returning to Britain, she taught at the University of East London and it was here that she began her research on the relations between Wales and England in the nineteenth century, including the work for which she was to become best known: on the 1847 ‘Blue Books’, the report of the Parliamentary Commissioners on the state of Education in Wales (*Brad y Llyfrau Gleision*, the Treachery of the Blue Books). That research came to fruition in 1998, with the publication of *The Language of the Blue Books: The Perfect Instrument of Empire*, the book by which many of us first came to know her. This original and carefully-argued examination of the social, political and administrative background of the Blue Books and of the English government of Wales was a landmark in the study of Wales in a colonial and postcolonial context.

By this time Gwyneth had taken early retirement and had moved to Aberystwyth to continue her research on Welsh topics. Her study of *Jane Williams, Ysgafell* (2020), the subject of her doctoral thesis at Aberystwyth (2015), was another major contribution to the study of Welsh culture in the Victorian age. Like her subject, Gwyneth made a significant contribution to women’s rights in Wales, not just through her writing, but also through her work for a range of organisations, including the Honno Press and the Welsh Women’s Archive. I recall her as a regular attender over many years at the Association for Welsh Writing in English conferences at Gregynog, a warm, shrewd and engaging companion. We will miss her.

Tony Brown