

Welsh Revivalists of the Eighteenth Century

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“They show a greater respect than other nations to Churches and ecclesiastical persons.”¹ So wrote Giraldus Cambrensis, 850 years ago, of the people of Wales. Other writers have endorsed this opinion. Perhaps in the very temperament of the Welsh people lies the reason for Wales being called “The Land of Revivals”.

Of far-reaching effect were the religious revivals in Wales during the eighteenth century. A former Bishop of St. Asaph outlines conditions then prevailing in Wales:

“The Commonwealth cut off for a century the fertilizing stream of intellectual and social intercourse which had flowed between England and Wales with such benefit to both countries. This isolation led to an intellectual stagnation greatly to be deplored; but the most painful feature in the Wales of the early eighteenth century is the evident deterioration in the character of the people . . . The ignorance and immorality of the lower classes was due to the prevailing disorder and neglect.”²

There was poverty among the clergy; churches and parsonages were neglected, and some were ruinous. Some bishops proved unworthy of their office, while among the other clergy there was all too frequently a spirit of worldliness and spiritual apathy, services being (only too often) irregular, infrequent and formal. But there were some bishops who were examples to the whole Church generally and likewise some faithful clergy who were (as a Rural Dean in Montgomeryshire reported in 1731) “men of sober and of exemplary lives and conversation, well approved of in their respective parishes for a due discharge of their duties”. Small wonder that among the people there prevailed “an ignorance and an indifference to spiritual things, even an atheism which had run through whole families for several generations, so that the peasantry frequented neither Church nor assembly”.³

Within the limits of a short article some idea of the progress and results of the revivals may best be obtained by outlining the work of the principal Christian leaders of the period.

Foremost among them, and the man who made possible the work which followed later in the century, was GRIFFITH JONES (1684-1761), Rector of Llanddowror, Carmarthenshire. He may more accurately be described as “Preacher and Teacher” rather than as “Revivalist”.

The son of a godly farmer, as a boy he tended the sheep. “One day, as he knelt to pray in the corner of a field, he fell into a trance and saw the Lord Jesus, Who said to him, ‘My boy, I want you to be a witness for Me in the world’. This had a profound influence upon him, and throughout his life he never forgot the experience.”⁴ He was ordained in 1708 and in 1716 became Rector of Llanddowror. From the first it was apparent that he was a man conscious of his Divine commission; he preached the Gospel earnestly and fearlessly. Soon people flocked to his church and his fame spread. Receiving invitations to preach in other places he travelled throughout Wales, often delivering his sermon in the open air in churchyards, as the church could not contain the eager crowds. In this way multitudes were brought under the sound of the Gospel, clearly and uncompromisingly proclaimed, for, as a contemporary wrote: “Christ was all to him, and it was his greatest delight to publish his Redeemer’s unsearchable

riches...He preached Faith and Repentance judiciously; he was a strenuous asserter of the absolute necessity of the New-birth and Gospel holiness both in heart and life; and thus he was 'a burning and shining light'. . . He earnestly inculcated the whole of the Truth in his ministrations, be the Truth never so disagreeable to some, or ever so contrary to the worldly interest or pleasures of others, they were sure to hear it."⁵ Powerful and effective though his ministry was in those dark days, he soon realized that something more than preaching was needed. Between 1699 and 1737 the S.P.C.K. had founded ninety-five charity schools in Wales, and there were twenty-nine other schools privately endowed. Yet the people were, for the most part, quite illiterate. So, although the S.P.C.K. had, during the opening years of the eighteenth century, distributed in Wales either free of charge or very cheaply, thousands of devotional books and tracts both in Welsh and English, and sponsored two editions of the Welsh Bible (totalling 30,000 copies), with the prevailing illiteracy such an evangelistic effort was of little use. Griffith Jones resolved that the people must be taught to read, and if this was to be done schools must be established.

As might be expected, he set up the first school in his own parish of Llanddowror in 1730, and within nine years seventy-one schools had been established by him in North and South Wales. The language used was Welsh. The schools were definitely Church of England, using as their only text-books the Bible and the Church Catechism, and imparting a religious education based on these "text-books", embracing the fundamental doctrines of the Christian Faith simply explained. The schools were free to all, even the books being provided free of charge. The immense cost of maintaining these schools was met by the generous gifts of sympathizers, chief among whom were Sir John Phillips of Picton Castle, Pembrokeshire, whose sister, Margaret, Griffith Jones had married in 1720, and a wealthy lady, Madam Bridget Bevan of Laugharne, Carmarthenshire. As the movement became better known, collections were made in many parish churches to help defray the cost. The teachers were all churchmen, trained by Griffith Jones at Llanddowror. The school remained three, four or even five months in a parish, and then moved to another parish, hence the title "circulating schools". Between 1737 and 1761 (when Griffith Jones died) no fewer than 3,495 classes were held and 158,237 pupils passed through them—and this number does not include the unregistered adults who attended at nights. According to Griffith Jones's estimate these latter numbered twice or three times as many as the day pupils.⁶

Not only was Griffith Jones a pioneer of modern education in Wales, but he did much to make the people a Bible-reading nation and prepared the way for later evangelists and revivalists and the development of their work. It frequently happened that when the circulating school in a parish was discontinued, the pupils assembled in church for a "Sunday School". Their principal text-books being the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer it seemed more natural to study these sacred books on a Sunday than on a weekday. Here is the beginning of the "Sunday School Movement" in Wales.

Inseparable from the "revival" under Griffith Jones, and yet quite distinct from it, was the "Methodist Revival". "Welsh Methodism is frequently regarded as an offshoot of the English Methodist movement. This is an error, for it is of native origin, and appeared almost simultaneously in Talgarth, Brecknockshire, and in Llangeitho, Cardiganshire, in the summer of 1735, four years before any contact was made with the English Methodist leaders."⁷ But from about 1739 George Whitefield was the presiding genius of the whole movement in Wales. The leaders in this revival were Daniel Rowlands, Howell Harris, William Williams, Peter Williams and Howell Davies, the first three named being the most important.

DANIEL ROWLANDS (1713-1790), son of the Vicar of Llangeitho, Cardiganshire, “was one of the spiritual giants of the eighteenth century . . . and no man of that time seems to have preached with such unmistakable power of the Holy Ghost accompanying him as Rowlands”.⁸ When only three years of age, he, like John Wesley, had a remarkable escape from sudden death, when a large stone fell down the chimney upon the very spot where he had just been sitting. In due course he became curate to his elder brother John, who had succeeded his father as vicar of Llangeitho. As yet he knew nothing in personal experience of the Gospel of Christ. In 1735 he was converted when hearing Griffith Jones preach. He was completely changed, and became a powerful preacher; multitudes from all parts of Wales made their way to Llangeitho to hear him preach, and many received a blessing. People travelled fifty or sixty miles to hear him and on Sacrament Sundays it appears to have been no uncommon thing for the communicants to number 1,500, 2,000, or even 2,500. The charge of “emotionalism” cannot explain away the effects of Rowlands’ ministry, for his influence over many of his hearers was one which extended over a period of forty-eight years.

On one occasion Rowlands was approached by a woman who while visiting relatives at Llangeitho had heard him preach. “If what you say is true, sir,” said she, “then many of my friends and relatives at home are in a sad plight; won’t you come and tell them so?” “I will,” replied Rowlands, “if you ask leave of your parish clergyman”. Permission was obtained, and this resulted in his first preaching engagement outside his own parish. He travelled to the lonely parish of Ystradffin, Carmarthenshire, and preached the Gospel. It is stated that thirty persons were converted on that occasion, including the Squire of the parish, who had decided that very Sunday morning, when returning from his Sunday hunt, to hear and molest the “cracked and crazy preacher of Llangeitho”. From now on, although rarely away from Llangeitho on Sundays, Rowlands would preach wherever he was invited; if possible in parish churches, but if permission for this was refused, in a room, a barn or in the open air. These “revival meetings” were carefully followed up with the help of supporters, both clerical and lay. Thus, over the greater part of Wales was established a regular system of “societies” (after Wesley’s pattern) which were all connected with one great Association. It is interesting to note that from this system of grouping the converts together into “societies” may be traced the formation and development of the Calvinistic Methodist body in Wales.

The living of Llangeitho became vacant in 1760 when John Rowlands was accidentally drowned, and was then given to Daniel Rowlands’ son, John, the Bishop of St. David’s refusing to consider Daniel Rowlands for the incumbency on account of his irregularities in preaching in other parishes without the incumbents’ permission. Thus we have the unusual situation of a curate who had served the parish faithfully for twenty-seven years being now curate to his son—a young man only twenty-seven years of age! There were difficulties to come. Here there are conflicting accounts. According to one report, a mandate from the Bishop revoking his licence was served upon Daniel Rowlands in 1763 just as he was entering the pulpit one Sunday morning. As a result of this, his friends and supporters left the Church in a body and erected a large chapel at Llangeitho for their use. One Church historian claims that this account of his ejection is unsupported by any evidence.⁹ According to another report Daniel Rowlands and his supporters had already three years earlier erected a chapel for their own use at Llangeitho. It is impossible to reconcile these two accounts, but whether he was ejected or went out of his Church voluntarily the fact remains that many in the Established Church were not receiving too kindly the message and methods of the Revivalists, and, on the other hand, a storm of hatred and opposition was being aroused against the Established Church. Meanwhile Daniel Rowlands continued his ministry at “The New Church”, Llangeitho, for another twenty-seven years, until his death in 1790, the revival

continuing (with ebbs and flows) through the years. George Whitefield visited Llangeitho and wrote of the amazing scenes which he witnessed there.

HOWELL HARRIS (1714-1773) has been called “The Apostle of Wales and the Founder of Welsh Methodism”. A layman and schoolmaster at Talgarth, he was converted in 1735. He was refused ordination on the grounds of “lack of age and learning”—and, possibly, because of his connection with the revival. In 1738 he came under the influence and personal direction of Whitefield. As an evangelist he travelled widely, preaching twice, or even more frequently, daily, sometimes at midnight or in the early morning, and in lonely places to avoid being molested. He sought to remain faithful to the Established Church, upholding episcopacy and refusing to hold meetings during the hours of church services. There were many converts, and these, like Rowlands, he began to group into “private societies”. As early as 1739 nearly thirty of these societies had been established in South Wales. Although neither Harris nor Rowlands had any intention of abandoning the Church of England the seeds of separation had already been sown and a new organization was being established. In later years, apparently through ill-health, Harris withdrew from public life and spent all his time in and around Trevecca, Brecknockshire, where, in 1752, he founded a religious settlement, known as the “Trevecca Settlement or Family”. Here were men and women who having received a blessing through Harris’s ministry were invited or desired to live with him. Soon there were over 120 members of this community, dwelling on 765 acres of land which Harris had acquired. The members forfeited all their worldly goods and shared the profits; “they had all things common”. They became a self-supporting community, dividing their time between practising their various arts and crafts and devotional exercises. There were three services daily, and four on Sundays. Henry Venn visited the settlement and wrote: “Of all the people I have ever seen, this society seems to be most advanced in grace. . . . My heart received a blessing which will abide with me.”

A saintly leader was WILLIAM WILLIAMS (1717-1791), frequently known as “Williams Pantycelyn”. The son of Nonconformists, he was converted when hearing Howell Harris preaching in the churchyard at Talgarth in 1738, and ordained deacon two years later. He came under the influence of Whitefield and the Methodists. He was not ordained priest, apparently on account of his irregularities in assisting the Methodists, and in 1743 resigned his curacy and became an itinerant evangelist. Later he appears to have regretted his impetuosity in leaving the Church and refusing to be bound by her rules. Like the other revivalists, he was a preacher “of wonderful power”. But his fame rests rather upon his gifts as a hymn-writer; he was the poet of the Evangelical Revival in Wales, earning for himself the title of “The Sweet Singer of Wales”. He was the author of 916 hymns, verses full of theology and containing a clear exposition of Scriptural and evangelical truth. English translations of two of his hymns are *Guide me, O Thou great Redeemer* and *O’er these gloomy hills of darkness*. A mighty impetus was given to the revival through his hymns, and thousands of people who would have been otherwise untouched were brought under the spell and power of Gospel truths.

Two other leaders of note were PETER WILLIAMS (1722-1796) and HOWELL DAVIES (1717-1770). Peter Williams, who was converted through the preaching of Whitefield at Carmarthen in 1743, was ordained in 1744 and joined the Methodists in 1746. An eloquent preacher, he travelled throughout Wales preaching the Gospel. He was the revival’s Biblical Commentator, publishing in 1770 a Bible with notes and devotional comments in Welsh. In 1791 he was expelled by the Methodists because of his heretical views on the Holy Trinity. Howell Davies, who had been converted under Griffith Jones, was ordained deacon and priest

in 1740. Like his contemporaries he found himself unable to be bound by the rules of the Church and so became an itinerant evangelist. Because of his successful labours in West Wales he has been called “The Apostle of Pembrokeshire”.

No account of the period would be complete without some mention of THOMAS CHARLES (1755-1814)—“Charles of Bala” as he has been called. Converted through the ministry of Daniel Rowlands in 1773, and ordained in 1778, he joined the Methodists at Bala in 1784. He preached with power, revived the system of circulating schools in 1785, organized Sunday Schools, published various books of a devotional and spiritual character (including a Bible Dictionary) and joined with others in founding the British and Foreign Bible Society in 1804. But the nineteenth century lies outside the scope of the present article.

It will be seen that during the eighteenth century there were really two revivals taking place simultaneously *within the Established Church in Wales*, the circulating schools movement led by Griffith Jones, and the Methodist Revival led by Daniel Rowlands and Howell Harris—for the Welsh Methodists were not branded as Nonconformists until 1784, and the final separation did not take place until 1811. These two “revivals” were complementary parts of the one great movement.

What conclusions can be reached regarding these revivalists and their work? Errors and hasty judgments there certainly were, and the seeds of schism were (unfortunately) sown. Neither can it be denied that among some of the revivalists there was zeal without wisdom. Likewise the movement was not devoid of emotionalism, unsound profession, hypocrisy and excesses, and on occasion there were wild outbursts of “religious frenzy”. A contemporary of the movement, John Gambold, describes how at Llangeitho the people would leap and jump for joy, clap their hands and cry repeatedly (in Welsh) “Hallelujah” and “Glory”. This would sometimes continue for hours after the sermon, and some would fall to the ground exhausted. It was such scenes which won for the Methodists the name “Jumpers”, brought the movement into disrepute in some quarters, and gave opponents an opportunity to ridicule and denounce the preaching of the Gospel. But no revival movement has been free from these or kindred evils. The leaders were men who had personally known a vital spiritual experience, were conscious of a Divine mission, were eager to proclaim the Gospel in an age when sin, ignorance and apathy prevailed, and were willing, for Christ’s sake, to endure any personal insult, loss or physical injury. On one occasion, Peter Williams was imprisoned by Sir Watkin Williams Wynn in his dog-kennels at Wynnstay, Denbighshire, while others were molested and sometimes wounded. It appears that magistrates, and even clergymen, on some occasions consorted with the mob to attack and injure these itinerant evangelists. But, in spite of all opposition, the work continued.

The results of the revival were permanent and far-reaching. A tremendous impetus was given, principally through Griffith Jones and his circulating schools, to educational work throughout the Principality. Through “the Christian educational movement” which was a part of the revival, countless thousands were taught to read. Who can estimate the subsequent effect upon Welsh literature and life? To the revival can also be traced the beginning of the Sunday School movement in Wales. And thus was created the demand for Bibles which led to the founding of the British and Foreign Bible Society at the beginning of the next century. Who can assess the spiritual blessings which resulted from the reading and study of the Scriptures? Supreme over all remains the tremendous fact that through the labours of these men—whether in preaching or teaching or both—multitudes were won for the Saviour. These revivalists were faithful, each in his own sphere and particular vocation, to our Lord’s

commands—“Go ye and teach” (St. Matthew xxviii. 19) and “Go ye and preach” (St. Mark xvi. 15). Some were teachers; some were evangelists. It pleased God to crown their labours with abundant success.

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Endnotes:

- 1) Giraldus Cambrensis, *Description of Wales*, Bk. I, ch. xviii.
- 2) A. G. Edwards, *Landmarks in the History of the Welsh Church*, pp. 174-5.
- 3) J. W. James, *A Church History of Wales* (1945), pp.139-140.
- 4) Lambert Rees, *Llanddowror Church and Griffith Jones*, p. 4.
- 5) *A Sketch of the Life and Character of the Reverend and Pious Mr. Griffith Jones* (1762) (Author anonymous), pp. 9, 10, 13.
- 6) David Williams, *A History of Modern Wales* (1950), p. 147.
- 7) J. W. James, *A Church History of Wales*, p. 152.
- 8) Ryle, *The Christian Leaders of the Last Century* (1885 edn.), p. 181.
- 9) A. G. Edwards, *Landmarks in the History of the Welsh Church*, p. 195.