

# SAMPLE

## THE TREDEGAR DIARIES OF JOHN DAVIES (“BRYCHAN”)

1784-1864

### INTRODUCTION

In 1805, early days in the growth of Tredegar which, prior to the planned establishment of iron works and habitations, had been part of the land of Cwm Rhos and Pen Rhos farms in the challenging rural uplands of Bedwellty parish, a John Davies arrived in the town on 16<sup>th</sup> of November. He was twenty-one years of age and was to become prominent in Tredegar social life for some decades, particularly as a promoter of sobriety and thrift. He was a member of the famous Gwent group led by Lady Llanofer – *Cymreigyddion y Fenni* – which promoted the Abergavenny Eisteddfodau that drew to them the famous from Britain and Europe and was himself a noted bard and Eisteddfod judge. His full bardic name was ‘Brychan Brycheiniog’, and in 1818 he had been ‘ordained’ a bard by no less a celebrity of the time than Iolo Morgannwg (Edward Williams), a now widely recognised absolute genius yet one with a penchant for some expert literary forging.

John Davies or ‘Brychan’ as he will be referred to from here-on, had been born on 24 October 1784 in Llanwrthwl parish, north Breconshire, into a poor family, his father scraping a living as a labourer. Little is known of his early life save that he received very little schooling and at some time he left his isolated rural area for Swansea. From Swansea he went to sea for several years, during which

time he learned to read and write, self-educating himself in English, Welsh, a wide range of knowledge, and in book-keeping skills that were to give him plenty of employment later in Tredegar. His father had died during his time at sea and in the meantime, his mother and brothers had moved to Tredegar. He was an inveterate diary keeper and some of his diaries have survived. They are written almost wholly in Welsh and can be read in the Cardiff Central Library. Unfortunately, the surviving diaries do not cover the first twenty-five years of his life in the town. Nor are the four volumes which do exist continuous as there are gaps for some years, but they do span from 1831, by which time he was already into middle age, to the January prior to the June of 1864 when he died. Nevertheless, they amount to over two hundred pages of handwritten entries from a time when Tredegar was very much growing and prospering. By the beginning of the available diary period Brychan had married on 26 April 1826 a Margaret Morgan (died 24 June 1844), and was a bookseller and publisher in the town. He was also a promoter of friendly societies – the Oddfellows in particular – and an office holder in some of them, either as secretary or treasurer. The diaries reveal that he kept the books for savings clubs and several businesses in the town and earned small amounts by various writing tasks for others. This was a time when most of the population were illiterate, yet would have relatives in other parts of Wales that they needed to keep in contact with, and in particular there were the significant number of the town's sons and families who had emigrated to America having learned their industrial skills in Tredegar, and wanting letters from home.

The Welsh National Biography entry on 'Brychan' indicates that when he came to Tredegar first of all he was employed underground and worked his way up to foreman. Clearly by the time of these extant diaries his self-education at sea had enabled him to work his way to established self-employment in the town and to a position among the Welsh literati of Gwent and more widely. Mair Elevelt Thomas the author of the definitive work on the Abergavenny Eisteddfodau (*'Afaith Yng Ngwent, Hanes Cymdeithas Cymreigyddion y Fenni 1833-1854'*, 1978, Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru), states that he developed into *'one of the leading poets in Wales, and was sought after as an Eisteddfod judge'*. It is frustrating therefore that we have no real information in his surviving diaries about his education and the time at sea that was so clearly influential to his later achievements. In two different diary entries made towards the end of his life, he indicates that his period at sea was one of much adventure, trials, and tribulations for him, and that he would one day in the future write an account of it so that one of his sons in particular must read it (the surviving diary entries indicating, by the way, that he had two sons and a daughter; but there may have been others). Whatever it was that had held him back from writing about this key period in his life, he gives no indication of it, and in the diaries that survive he had not got around to it before he died.

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