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Maria Jane Williams **Pioneer Collector of Welsh Folk Songs**

by Lewis Jones¹

As British folk song enters the Third Millennium it is timely to distinguish what is central to our tradition from what is peripheral. The songs harvested by the collectors of the first revival, as published, for example, in the early editions of the Journal of the Folk Song Society, are widely regarded as canonical. But what of songs published before the Society was established?

On most of the early collectors of Celtic songs our great mentor and ex-President Lucy Broadwood has delivered an authoritative and magisterial condemnation. The Scottish editors, she wrote, including Thomson, Ramsay, Burns, Motherwell "and a host of others ...grievously mutilated and faked" the music "to suit the genteel taste of the day." Irish songs fared no better. From about 1800 to 1850 "Holden, Bunting, Moore, Petrie, and many more" were "pruning and `correcting' the traditional material, alas!" As for Wales, "during the same period a mass of `traditional' and so-called `Druidical' songs was published which does not bear critical investigation."

From this general denunciation Lucy Broadwood excluded only two people. One "honourable exception" was M Donald in Scotland. His "Highland Vocal Airs, noted before 1761 and published in 1781, proves him more than a century in advance of his time."² In Wales Lucy Broadwood commended Maria Jane Williams (1795-1873), whose Ancient National Airs of Gwent and Morganwg, first published in 1844, has recently been re-issued by the Welsh Folk-Song Society.³

For this re-issue, a facsimile copy of the original book is sandwiched between a modern Introduction and notes, both written by Daniel Huws.⁴ In the original Introduction Maria Jane Williams (known as Jane) tells us that the collection won a prize at the Aberganvenny Eisteddfod of 1838. There are 43 songs, with Welsh words and accompaniments for the harp or piano. Jane Williams also provides notes on the songs, and a "list of persons for whom copies of this work have been printed." This consists of 310 names, and includes dukes, earls, countesses, bishops and numerous other worthies. On this evidence Welsh folksong was far better patronised then than any British folksong is now.

Daniel Huws's Introduction contains background information, for example on other relevant folk song collectors, on Jane Williams's singers, and on how the words and music were published and edited. Individual and family history (even your own) can be dull, but in the case of Jane Williams it is enlivened by sexual hanky-panky. Near the beginning of the book Daniel Huws reproduces a painting of Jane, aged about 20 to 25, which indicates that she was far from unattractive. Then, in his Introduction, he establishes that Jane's maidservant, Fanny Baker, was almost certainly her illegitimate daughter. But who was the father? Was it the Earl of Dunraven,

"witty, refined and shy," or John Randall, "the handsome gardener" from Ireland? One contemporary witness testifies that the Earl was the culprit, and that the scene of crime was "a so-called shooting box," built by the Earl for amatory purposes, where the couple "used to meet for their blisses."

Lucy Broadwood's endorsement of this collection may have been influenced by Jane Williams's assertion in her 1844 Introduction:

The songs are given as ...obtained, ...in their wild and original state; no embellishments of the melody have been attempted, and the accompanying words are those sung to the airs.

This may have been true of the majority of these tunes (29 out of 43), which, apart from "a few ...accidentals," are basically Ionian (that is, in a major key). As for the rest, however, Daniel Huws provides "strong evidence that the minor scale was at this time not yet generally acceptable to Welsh ears." Thus, if you wish to perform the songs as they were originally sung, you would probably do well to remove any sharpened sevenths from the Aeolian and, in particular, from the Dorian melodies. (To assist you there is an Index on the last page which lists the songs, and indicates their ranges and modes.)

Daniel Huws's Introduction and notes are printed in both Welsh and English. The notes on the individual songs are extensive and, like the Introduction, excellently researched and referenced. A problem, however, is that, apart from 5 versifications in the notes provided by Jane Williams, the lyrics are not translated into English. This means that most readers are able to appreciate the beauty of the melodies but can neither understand nor sing the songs. Even worse, there are, I am told, some very old fashioned expressions that are unintelligible not only to Welsh ignoramuses such as myself but to many who speak the language.

In view of this, please excuse any inaccuracies in my attempted versification of *Holl brydyddion glân* (see accompanying musical example).⁵ The song, as Daniel Huws points out, has "a fine Dorian tune but wrongly barred." He gives a corrected version in his notes, whereas I have stuck to Jane Williams's original. Singers please make your own adjustments as you see fit. I have substituted guitar chords (for which I am indebted to Margaret Crosland) for the original harp or piano accompaniment.

This publication by the Welsh Folk-Song Society shames the efforts, or lack of them, of the English Folk Dance and Song Society in England. Our Folk Music Journal usually contains very few folk songs (as opposed to people writing about them), and we also seem to have abandoned publication of folk songs in book and pamphlet form. It is now nearly a quarter of a century since the appearance of The Foggy Dew, the fourth and final volume of Frank Purslow's collection of songs from the Hammond and Gardiner MSS. More than 20 years have passed since The Ploughboy's Glory, Michael Dawney's edition of folk songs collected by George Butterworth. Never, to my knowledge, have we published a book of folk songs, or of dances either for that matter, with a scholarly apparatus anything like as extensive, as thorough and as professional as that provided here by Daniel Huws. This is a top quality publication at a moderate price. The EFDSS would do well to emulate it.

On this evidence the Welsh Folk Song Society ought to be more widely acknowledged, rather than omitted, as it currently is, from the addresses sections of our Folk Directory. These superb songs, and the fame of the great pioneer who collected them, deserve to be better known across Offa's dyke and beyond the Irish sea. Yet for more than ten years after its re-publication this volume went unmentioned in the Folk Music Journal and in ED&S, and was unavailable in the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library. That you are reading about it now is an indication of the progressive role of the recently formed Traditional Song Forum as a platform for the exchange of ideas and information.⁶

¹ This article first appeared in English Dance and Song in June 1999.

² L.E. Broadwood, "In Memoriam: Cecil James Sharp," Folk-Lore, 35, no. 3 (September 1924): 284-7.

³ Maria Jane Williams, Ancient National Airs of Gwent and Morganwg (A Facsimile of the 1844 Edition with Introduction and Notes on the Songs by Daniel Huws), The Welsh Folk Song Society, 1988, reprinted 1994, ISBN 0-907158-30-7. It should be possible to order from bookshops. In case of difficulty, send a cheque for £10.50, payable to the Welsh Folk Song Society (£8.50 plus £2 postage), to:

Dr. Rhidian Griffiths, Coed y Berllan, Bryn-y-môr Road,
Aberystwyth, Ceredigion SY23 2HX.

Dr. Griffiths will supply details of other publications of the Welsh Folk Song Society on request.

⁴ Dr. Griffiths tells me that Daniel Huws was, until his retirement in 1992, the Keeper of Manuscripts and Records at the National Library of Wales.

⁵ The guitar chords in the accompanying sheet music are modern, and are not derived from Jane Williams's arrangement. They have been added since this article was published in English Dance and Song. The sheet music is in .pdf (portable document file) format, and can be opened, read and printed off with Adobe's Acrobat Reader, available free from <http://www.adobe.com/products/acrobat/readstep2.html>

⁶ Read the regular reports of our meetings in ED&S, visit our web-site at <http://www.tradsong.freeserve.co.uk/> and, if you feel the urge, become a member for a small annual subscription. I am indebted to Forum member Mick Tems who, in answer to a query at our meeting in Ripponden in January 1999, told me about this re-publication of Jane Williams's book.