

In Search of the Celtic Past: A Biography of John Rhys

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Sir John Rhys is best known to modern scholarship as the first philologist to occupy the Chair of Celtic at Oxford – the position famously proposed by Matthew Arnold in his 1867 *On the Study of Celtic Literature*. Rhys' work on the history of Celtic languages constitutes one of the bases upon which modern historical linguistic research into Celtic has proceeded; he not only coined the terms Goidelic and Brythonic to identify the two major branches of the Celtic language family, but also discovered that the Celtic *i* transforms into the Welsh *dd*, a rule known in modern linguistics as Rhys' Law. Rhys was also an active and respected folklorist; a member of the Folklore Society from 1888, he was also appointed vice-president of the society in 1893 and held the position until his death in 1915. Beyond his purely academic interests, Rhys also maintained a lifelong dedication to social progress and in particular the improvement of education [1].

While Rhys' success as a professional linguist somewhat precludes him from inclusion in the Victorian tradition of the gentleman generalist, he nonetheless shared their ease in moving across disciplinary boundaries in pursuit of his own interests. Rhys' career was shaped by curiosity of a deeply interdisciplinary kind, and he was equally comfortable deciphering epigraphic signs on medieval Welsh border stones as he was performing ethnographic analyses of Celtic folk tales. Indeed, while Rhys' work as a linguist was transformative within his field, it was his generalist works across the fields of Celtic history, folklore, and ethnography that have endured, thanks in great part to their initial positive reception among a general readership [2]. Ultimately, it was Rhys' work in Welsh folklore and history that

earned him a commission with the British government in 1893, and he contributed sections on the ethnology, literature, and early Welsh history to the Report of the Royal Commission on Land in Wales and Monmouthshire (1896), which were later republished as chapters of his popular text *The Welsh People* (1900).

The eldest son of High Rees (d. 1886) and Jane Mason (d. 1863), John Rhys, who adopted the traditional spelling of his surname in early adulthood, was born in the small town of Ponterwyd, Cardiganshire on 21 June, 1840. Born into a relatively humble state, Rhys was already working by the age 15, following his father's footsteps into the farming and lead mining professions. Rhys' true talents lay elsewhere, however, and recent governmental initiatives to systematize and expand education in the United Kingdom provided the channels into higher learning that would lead him to a career as one of the nation's leading experts in Celtic language and folklore. After receiving his early education at Bryn-chwyth, Pantyffynnon, and Ponterwyd, Rhys was accepted into the newly-opened British School at Penllwyn (near Aberystwyth). Rhys attended the British School as a pupil teacher, a position reserved for promising but less affluent students who could not afford to attend a Teacher's College. After matriculating, Rhys attended Bangor Normal College from 1860-61 and left with an appointment as headmaster to the British School in Rhos-y-bol, Anglesey, a post he took up in January of 1861. He evidently impressed his colleagues, even at his young age, because in 1865 James Williams, the chancellor of a nearby school in Llanfair-yng-Nghornwy, personally introduced the young headmaster to Dr. Charles Williams, then principal of Jesus College, Oxford. Thanks to this meeting Rhys, then 25 years old, sat a successful examination and entered Jesus College, Oxford in October of 1865.

Rhys did well at Merton, earning a second class in classical moderations in 1867; in 1869 he earned a first class in *literae humaniores* and was also elected a fellow of the college. It was at this point that he decided to expand his horizons, and started spending his summer holidays attending lectures at the Sorbonne and Heidelberg. His European education continued, and from 1870-71 he studied at Leipzig and Göttingen, where he first encountered the linguists Georg Curtius, August Leskien, and Hermann Brockhaus. Rhys also attempted his first serious scholarship during this period of intellectual exploration, and his work on the manuscript of the Luxembourg glosses would eventually be published in the *Revue celtique* in 1872.

After matriculating from Leipzig in 1871, Rhys returned to Wales as a government inspector for schools in Denbigh and Flint, a position that afforded him the opportunity to travel widely through his home country, visiting and recording inscriptions on Celtic monuments. His dedication to advancing epigraphical research in his home country, which he would carry with him throughout his life, formed the foundation upon which he would begin a serious academic career. While carrying on with his duties as a school inspector, Rhys began to publish regularly in *Archaeologia Cambrensis* on the subject of Latin loan-words in Welsh, contributing a slew of articles over the years 1873 -1875. In a remarkably short time, especially given his circumstances, Rhys gained a considerable reputation with the professional

philological crowd for the quality and the insight of his scholarship.

In 1876, Oxford University became the first institution in the England to offer a permanent position for the study of Celtic literature. The establishment of the Jesus Chair of Celtic marked a critical moment in the solidification of vernacular language study as a permanent feature in British academia. That Rhys, who was still working as a school inspector in Wales, was ultimately elected the first occupant of the Chair, is a testament to his profound talent and reputation. His post-university activities in Celtic scholarship, particularly his 1874 Lectures on Welsh Philology at Aberystwyth, had quickly cemented his position as a leading expert in the nascent field. Indeed, as Michael Lapidge notes, the dossier of recommendations submitted with his application for the position is an almost exhaustive list of the international cohort of leading scholars in Celtic philology:

[A]ll the authorities agreed that Rhys was the man to fill it [the Chair at Oxford]; he submitted testimonials from Whitley Stokes, Prince Lucien Bonaparte, Constantino Nigra, D. Silvan Evans, [August] Leskien, [Georg] Curtius, [Hermann] Brockhaus, [Hugo] Schuchardt, Samuel Ferguson, D.R. Thomas, Emil Hübner, U. J. Bourke, Graziadio Ascoli, Robert Jones, [Henri] d'Arbois de Jubainville, and Henri Gaidoz. [3]

Rhys took up the position in 1877 and held it until his death in 1915, serving along the way as a fellow of Jesus College, a bursar for the college (1885-1895), and its principal (1895-1915).

Rhys maintained a steady rate of publication throughout his career, contributing scholarship across the fields of Celtic history, language, literature, folklore, and ethnography. Rhys also contributed to the growing body of critical editions of medieval texts, and collaborated with the Welsh paleographer J. Gwenogvryn Evans to produce a series of critical editions of early Welsh manuscripts, including material from the *Red Book of Hergest* and the *Gwysaney manuscript* [4].

Rhys' sense of the scientific function of philology changed steadily throughout his career; as his interests shifted towards the general examination of Welsh history, so too did his academic focus, and he never returned to the strict philological specialization of his early career. His earliest work, particularly his contributions to journals like *Archaeologia Cambrensis*, are wholly focused on the descriptive delineation of the Celtic language, but even in early work like his *Lectures on Welsh Philology* (1877) and *On the Origin and Growth of Religion as Illustrated by Celtic Heathendom* (1888) it is already possible to see his deeper interests surfacing. Rhys, while he never entirely abandoned his linguistic work (and maintained his epigraphical studies throughout his career), was ultimately most interested in the holistic study of Celtic - as a language, a people, and a history.

According to Richard Dorson, Sir John Rhys (1840-1915), was the “most eminent spokesman” for “the cause of Welsh folklore” of his time [5], an accolade even more striking given that Juliette Wood has suggested that “Dorson rather underplays the importance of John Rhys.” [6] Glyn Daniel cites Rhys' work on the history of the Celtic language as an “excellent

example” of late nineteenth-century investigations into prehistory [7], and in the eyes of his fellow folklore scholars, he was not only “one of the foremost philologists of his day”, but also “an authority whose reputation was everywhere recognized as of the highest rank.” [8] John Fraser, in his entry on Rhys for *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, highlights in particular his “substantial contribution to the history of the Celts in Britain”, and notes that Rhys was, in his own time, regarded as “foremost among the scholars” of philology, Celtic language and culture [9]. Indeed, beyond the immensely favorable reception that met both his linguistic and more generalist work, his appointment to the Chair of Celtic at Oxford, to the Presidency of the Myth, Ritual and Magic Section at the International Folklore Congress of London in 1891, and to the Presidency of the Anthropological Section of the British Association in 1900 speak to his standing and reputation within the wider scholarly community and public readership. That he both received a knighthood in 1907 and an appointment to the Privy Council in 1911 further cements his position in late nineteenth-century discourse as an authority on the British racial and linguistic past.

Résumé :

John Rhys (1840-1915) est né en 1840 au pays de Galles dans le Ceredigion. En 1877, il devient le premier professeur titulaire de la chaire de celtique à Oxford. En 1895, il est nommé directeur du Jesus College. Éminent philologue, il soutient les Gallois dans leurs luttes sociales et politiques. Sa connaissance du pays de Galles, de son peuple et de son histoire, lui permet d’en collecter les traditions et de les interpréter, en les comparant avec la littérature ancienne, où elles trouveraient leur ancrage. Ses recherches dans ce domaine lui permettent de publier *Celtic Folk-lore*, en 1901, qui peut être considéré, selon Sidney Hartland, comme sa principale contribution à la science du folklore. Ses travaux en philologie, archéologie et histoire contribuent également à sa renommée.

Rhys devient membre de la Folk-Lore Society avant 1890 et, de 1893 à sa mort, il en est le vice-président. Lors du Congrès international de folklore de Londres en 1891, il préside la section « Myth, Ritual, and Magic ». En 1900, il devient président de l’Anthropological section of the British Association. Il est adoubé en 1907 et est nommé membre du Privy Council en 1911, en reconnaissance des nombreux services qu’il a rendus à l’État.

Il meurt en 1915.

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[1] A partial list of the committees on which Rhys served includes: Lord Aberdare’s Committee on Education in Wales (1881), Secretary of the Commission to Enquire into the Tithe Troubles in Wales (1887), Secretary of the Commission to Enquire into Sunday Closing in Wales (1889), Member of the Commission on Land in Wales (1893), Member of the Commission on University Education in Ireland (1901), Member of the Commission on the University of Wales and its Constituent Colleges (1907), Member of the Commission on a National University for Ireland (1908), and was at his death in 1915 Chairman of the Commission on Ancient Monuments in Wales.

[2] Texts like, for example, *The Early Ethnology of the British Isles* (1891), *Celtic Britain* (1884), *Celtic Folklore: Welsh and Manx* (1901), and *The Welsh People* (1900), which he co-authored with Welsh politician and barrister David Brynmor-Jones.

[3] Michael Lapidge, *Interpreters of Early Medieval Britain*, Oxford: OUP for the British Academy, 2002, p. 53.

[4] John Rhys and Gwenogvryn Evans, eds., *The Text of the Mabinogion* (Oxford: J. G. Evans, 1887) and *The Text of the Bruts* (Oxford: J. G. Evans, 1890).

[5] Richard Dorson, *The British Folklorists*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Limited, 1968, p. 419.

[6] Juliette Wood, “Perceptions of the Past in Welsh Folklore Studies”, *Folklore*, 108 (1997), p. 94.

[7] Glyn Daniel, *150 Years of Archaeology*, London: Duckworth, 1975, p. 184.

[8] Edwin Sidney Hartland, “Rt. Hon. Sir John Rhys”, *Folklore*, 27 (1916), p. 110.

[9] John Fraser, “Sir John Rhys”, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/35734> (accessed September 27, 2009).

