

J. YOUNG EVANS

“PROFESSOR RHYS AND HIS WORK  
HAS HE FORSAKEN PHILOLOGY?”

(1891)

[4g] We are indebted for the following article to Mr J. Young Evans, one of the most brilliant of the younger school of ‘Varsity’ educated Welshmen:

“Now and then,” says Horace “good Homer takes a nap.” So, too, that apparently omniscient censor of leaders of Welsh thought and opinion, Theodore Dodd, occasionally stands in need of correction. They don’t know everything down in Barry and even the procession of Welsh worthies in the South Wales Star is not an immaculate compendium of biography. Nevertheless, its authority has been sufficiently great to deceive the very elect, for the capital mistake made by Theodore in his open letter to the Jesus Professor of Celtic was copied even by the well-informed university correspondent of one of the Cardiff morning papers. A large number of people must have found themselves the victims of a gross delusion when they read that Professor Rhys had, as a matter of fact, not kept abreast of the progress of philological study in Germany, and that he was forsaking his first love to turn to fresh woods and pastures new. Of course, everyone knows that the senior bursar of Jesus is one of the hardest students of Oxford and hence it might be imagined that his present devotion to history and folk-lore was the result of an excessive energy impatient of the tedious and microscopic study demanded by philology. For my own part, however, I was unable to reconcile the statements referred to with the fact that the professor was a very Socrates in one respect at least—for ever squeezing information out of all manner of human beings on questions affecting his favourite study—and that he intended adding Basque to his linguistic repertory. So one evening last week I repaired to Gwynfn, and was ushered into the sanctum to which the favoured ones are admitted to see the professor himself on Sunday afternoons. Strangely enough, the great man was cutting the leaves of the last great contribution to philology, a work dated 1892, and issued that very day. This was Fritz Bechtel’s *Hauptprobleme de indogermanische Lautlehre seit Schleicher*. Mrs Rhys sat by the study fire revising a manuscript English translation of a recent German work on political economy which one of her friends had submitted for correction, and occasionally interrupted the dialogue between her spouse and your interviewer with comments on the translation. The professor offered no objection to being interviewed. On the contrary, he welcomed an opportunity of undeceiving those who would otherwise be likely to accept as gospel the unfounded criticisms of Theodore Dodd.

“I want to put a leading question,” I said, “Are you forsaking philology?”

“Certainly not.”

“But you are somewhat interested in folk-lore at present, are you not?”

“True; but I am not writing anything now upon folk-lore. I don’t write a scrap for the Folk-lore.”

“Was I correct in stating in the *Goleuad* that you are preparing a book on Welsh folk lore, and that your contemporary at the Merton Common Room, Andrew Lang, had threatened to plagiarize your materials unless you edited them?”

“That is correct, But I have not even begun editing yet, and in the meantime I shall be thankful for any suggestions from Wales. People are not half as ready to give information about local fairy tales as one might expect.”

“Then I understand,” said I, “that you merely intend publishing a collection of all you have already written on Welsh fairy tales? They would include, I presume, the stories contained in the *Cymmrodor*?”

“That is so. They will include the investigations of several years, some of them previous to my professorship. Besides the *Cymmrodor* articles, there will be, for instance, a Welsh folk-lore lecture, my address on ‘Mythology’ before the recent International Folk-lore Congress, and my public lecture on ‘Isle of Man Superstition’ in the Jesus Hall last term. This last lecture occupied thirty pages of the September number of *Folk-lore*.”

“But have you published all your researches in the Isle of Man?” I asked.

“No, but they are off my hands. I gave the remainder of my contributions to Manx folk-lore to Edward Clodd, who read my paper last night before the Folk-lore Society.”

“By the way,” I interposed, “Mr Clodd was your guest last Sunday, was he not?”

“Yes, and a remarkable man he is. He has a mine of anecdotes. He is the author, too, of two capital books, *The Childhood of the World* and *The Childhood of Religion*. And yet he is a man of business—a banker.”

“A counterpart to Sir John Lubbock,” I suggested. “But to return. How often have you been on the Isle of Man?”

“About half a dozen times. I’ll show you my note-book.”

With that the volume was before me. It was a diary extending over different summers. Every day had its record of “something attempted, something done,” in the pile of linguistic and other notes which followed the date.

“Had you any special purpose,” I asked, “in making inquiries about Manx superstition?”

“Of course, the main purpose of my visits was to learn the language. But when I could get no linguistic knowledge from anybody invariably tapped the same subject on folk-lore. I did not want to come away empty-handed.”

“Has Manx any special interest?”

“Yes; it preserves, for instance, *qu*, and thus has one more ancient trait than any of the other Goidelic dialects. At present I am preparing a ‘Phonological and Comparative Introduction’ to the oldest Manx text—a prayer-book belonging to a

Welshman (Bishop Phillips, of Sodor and Man). It dates from the early part of the seventeenth century.”

“That means work, I suppose?”

“I should think so. I must wade through 700 pages of Manx text.”

At this your interviewer’s heart failed within him, but not his zeal for the truth. “Then, I gather,” I said, “that there is no ground for saying you have lagged behind the march of German philology?”

“I leave you to judge. Of late there have been several great contributors to the Indo-Germanic philological problem. First comes Schleicher, who was superseded by Brugmann. Brugmann’s researches are still unfinished, but already form three respectable volumes. And, lastly, as you see, here is this new work of Bechtel, correcting and supplementing Bragmann.”

“Has any thing important been of late contributed to Celtic philology?”

“Well, yes; scarcely a month passes by without contributing something substantial to Celtic philology; but there has, perhaps, been nothing which I should call epoch-making since Zimmer’s account of Irish accentuation, published in 1884.”

“Now, then,” said I, “let us make a fresh start. Why are you writing history?”

“It is very kind of people to call ‘Celtic Britain,’ for instance, history. I don’t.”

“What is it, then! At least, Furneaux frequently refers to it in his now *Commentary on the Annals of Tacitus*,” I objected.

“I make a convenience of history. To ask me whether I am forsaking philology for history is like asking a man who leaves pure mathematics in order to study applied. I merely have to find an historical framework for the convenience of philological studies. I only deal with those periods where your professed historians profess to find no facts, periods which they seem to be in no hurry to take up.

“But, surely, you contribute come important facts in Celtic Britain, such as the identification of the Verturiones with Fortrenn?”

“Possibly, but as it was edited last in 1884 my recent ‘Rhind Lectures’ supplement and [4h] correct it. For instance, the Mæatæ, mentioned by Die Cassius. I have since localised at Dunmyat, opposite Stirling, above the Northern Wall. The ‘Rhind Lectures’ are an inquiry into the early ethnology of the British Isles, especially of Scotland, where you find the primitive people of the Picts surviving into historical times, I study ethnology entirely from a linguistic point of view”

“I suppose you will construct a larger work on the subject?”

“I hope so. It will contain also, for example, the substance of my address to the Cambrian Archæological Society at Killarney, last August, It will contain, also, all I know about Celtic epigraphy.”

“Have you inspected many inscriptions?”

“Yes, a good many throughout the British Isles, but especially in South Ireland, Wales, Cornwall, and latterly Scotland. The oldest go back to the fifth or sixth

century. In Ireland they give specimens of the old Goidelic language; they are relatively as old as modern Irish as ancient Roman inscriptions are to old French. For instance, they give us an old genitive case in words like maqui. I might tell you, in passing, that I have been asked to write a paper on these inscriptions for the Antiquaries of Scotland.”

“How far can you re-construct the old Goidelic by means of these inscriptions”

“A good deal may be done. But it is just as if we had to re-construct Latin were there only the Romance languages and a few ancient inscriptions to guide us.”

“Let us come back to Wales, Gwenogfryn Evans and yourself will have the *Liber Landavensis* out shortly, will you not? He is at the index, I think.”

“Yes. It has been very hard work. So many ignorant scribes and dabblers have been corrupting the text. Before the Conquest”—and the professor illustrated his remarks by reading for me the text of the “Privilege of St Teilo”—“you get, *eg*, Lantam for the later mutated Llandaf. The later scribes always altered the older spelling. Then we have had great trouble in identifying places on the boundaries of Llandaff.”

“I suppose Gwenogfryn’s camera is a powerful palæographic auxiliary,” I hinted.

“Yes, and he is very clever at discovering what the first hand wrote. He is a marvellous reader of manuscripts.”

“One question more, professor. You regard the Welsh as a mixed race of Iberian, or Basque, and Celtic origin. So I hear that you intend to go to the Pyrenees in the summer?”

“I should like to go, and, no doubt, must go some day. But Welsh colleges and Welsh meetings, and, of course, the proposed Welsh University, leave me scarcely any spare time.”

This ended the interview, and as the hour was one at which the Alma Mater becomes anxious for such of her younger children as are not yet under lock and key. I said my adieux for the season to the master and mistress of Gwynfn.

J. Young Evans, “Professor Rhys and His Work. Has He Forsaken Philology? An Authoritative Denial. The Professor Interviewed by Mr J. Young Evans.” *Western Mail* 19 December 1891: 4g–h.

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