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# William Wotton at Carmarthen

David Stoker

## INTRODUCTION

William Wotton was an important figure in the intellectual debates about the significance of ‘Ancient and Modern learning’ at the turn of the 18th century.<sup>1</sup> He had great knowledge of and respect for the classics, and had written *A History of Rome*, in 1701,<sup>2</sup> but was nevertheless regarded as the champion of modern learning and the emerging natural sciences, as befitted a Fellow of the Royal Society.<sup>3</sup> He was also a noted theologian, interested in the origins of the Christian religion and its roots in Judaism; a linguist, who developed original theories about the origins of language; and an antiquary. He had a distinguished intellectual career in south-east England for twenty-six years, but disappeared between 1714 and 1721. It was later discovered by contemporaries that he had been living in Carmarthen under the assumed name of ‘Dr William Edwards’ during this period. This paper will briefly examine the circumstances that led a middle-aged clergyman and scholar to abandon his life in Buckinghamshire in May 1714 and come to live in west Wales. It will also consider what he did during those years when he was cut off from many of his former friends and his books. Finally, it will relate the circumstances in which he returned to England in October 1721. However, any account of Wotton must begin with his remarkable childhood in East Anglia.

## WOTTON’S CHILDHOOD AND EARLY LIFE

Born in 1666, the son of the rector of Wrentham in Suffolk, Wotton was a child prodigy who could read passages in English, Latin, Greek, and Hebrew from the Bible and other books at the age of five. He was admitted to St Catharine’s College Cambridge aged nine, and in the words of John Evelyn was ‘so universally and solidly learned at 11 years of age, that he was looked on as a miracle’.<sup>4</sup> His parents died of smallpox whilst he was at university (aged 13), and as a teenager he spent some time in the household of Gilbert Burnet (later bishop of Salisbury). Francis Turner, (bishop of Ely) procured him a fellowship of St John’s College Cambridge, followed by ordination and appointment as a curate of Brimpton in Berkshire.<sup>5</sup> In 1690 became vicar of Lacock in Wiltshire,<sup>6</sup> and was soon afterwards recommended as a chaplain to Daniel Finch, Earl of Nottingham. In 1693 Nottingham presented him with the valuable rectory of All Saints, Milton Keynes. Three years later he married Anne, who is buried at Carmarthen: they had one daughter, also named Anne, born in 1700.

Wotton was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1687 (aged 21), and encouraged by his fellow members to write a response to Sir William Temple's essay 'Ancient and modern learning' (1690). Wotton's *Reflections on ancient and modern learning* appeared in 1694 and in enlarged editions in 1697 and 1705. It 'was less a condemnation of Temple or of classical works than it was an impressive demonstration of the scope and power of modern discoveries'.<sup>7</sup> It was the most influential work in the so called 'Battle of the books' but one which excited the ire of Jonathan Swift, who had served as Temple's secretary.<sup>8</sup> Swift unfairly portrays Wotton as a pedant in the *Battle of the books* and *A tale of a tub*, whereas the opposite is true. Wotton's work was always clear, logically argued, well documented, and based on modern evidence rather than the 'frequent Citation of Scraps of Latin, in common Discourse, or upon Arguments that do not require it; and that nauseous Ostentation of Reading, and Scholarship in publick Companies, which formerly was so much in Fashion'.<sup>9</sup>

Soon afterwards Wotton began work on a biography of the scientist and natural philosopher Robert Boyle.<sup>10</sup> Although this project was never completed, surviving fragments show him also to have been an innovative biographer and editor.

In spite of the young man's considerable intellectual gifts and his valuable contacts within the establishment, he also gained an unfortunate reputation as a drunken lecher.<sup>11</sup> Yet he continued to receive support and preferment from the powerful politicians and churchmen. This was partly out of a respect for his undoubted learning, but he was also a most useful writer of sermons and tracts answering religious political controversies. For example, he was chosen by Bishop William Wake to answer the 'Deist' Matthew Tindal's influential work, *The rights of the Christian church asserted*. Wotton's detailed response, in the form of a sermon preached at Wake's Episcopal visitation, was published with notes. It went through several editions and secured him the award of a 'Lambeth' degree of doctor of Divinity in 1707 by Archbishop Thomas Tenison. During the Convocation Controversy, Wotton wrote *The case of the present convocation consider'd*, 1711, answering a newspaper article by Swift, again at the request of Bishop Wake; 'the bishop sent his request for such an answer by one post, and Wotton sent back his text by the next'.<sup>12</sup> He also wrote an influential political pamphlet *Observations upon the state of the nation, in January 1712/3* on behalf of his patron the Earl of Nottingham, which was reprinted several times and elicited several furious responses.<sup>13</sup> A few days before his arrival in Carmarthen Wotton wrote, *A vindication of the Earl of Nottingham from the vile imputations, and malicious slanders, which have been cast upon him in some late pamphlets*.<sup>14</sup>

## MID-LIFE CRISIS AND FLIGHT FROM MILTON KEYNES

Wotton and his wife had a reputation for extravagance and rebuilt the rectory at Milton Keynes into a mansion, confident that he would receive further preferment from his friend Bishop Wake. However, during the summer of 1711 there began to be scandalous reports about Wotton's conduct in his parish, as described by William Cole

The Doctor's morals were as bad as his Parts were excellent: having no regard to common Decency in Respect of Wine and Women, both equally his Passion: it being no unusual Sight for his Parishioners to find him drunk under a Hedge and fallen from his Horse, and to know that he was 2 or 3 nights together at Houses where he could have no other business than to defraud Mrs. Wotton of her due Benevolence.<sup>15</sup>

The scandal came at a bad time as it coincided with the vacancy of the nearby living of Sherington which Wake had half-promised to the Wotton's, but in the circumstance he now felt it would wrong for him to fulfil his promise. This made Wotton's precarious financial situation worse. Wotton apologised profusely and made promises of reform, but in January 1712 he was again found drunk in a London bawdy-house. As a result he lost the friendship and protection of Bishop Wake. Once it became widely known that he had blasted his prospects of additional income, his creditors began to act to take steps to have him imprisoned for debt.<sup>16</sup>

Wotton was acquainted with the Whig pamphleteer, Richard Steele, and had contributed to his short-lived newspaper *The Guardian*. Steele sympathised with his friend's plight and offered help. It was agreed between them that Wotton's family should flee their home in May 1714 and travel to Gloucester and remain living incognito until Steele contacted his relations in South Wales. In June Wotton received word that Richard Steele's wife's uncle, John Scurlock, would accommodate them at a large house that he owned in King Street Carmarthen, which was partially occupied by Joseph Lord, a surveyor and heraldic painter. The Wotton's enjoyed the hospitality and protection of their new patron for four months, and adopted the surname Edwards. However, John Scurlock died suddenly and unexpectedly in the October 1714. Thereafter 'Dr William Edwards' seems to have found employment as a supernumerary preacher at St Peter's church and gradually sought to redeem his former bad behaviour.

## LIFE IN CARMARTHEN

In December 1715, Wotton's old friend William Wake was appointed Archbishop of Canterbury. The exiled preacher decided to use the opportunity to try and effect reconciliation and re-open their correspondence. After writing to Wake to offer his congratulations he added the following paragraph:

Permit me now my most honoured Lord, to say one Word of myself. It is onely this; that since my withdrawing from my Living, which is now full nineteen months, I have given no manner of Cause either to my Friends or Family to lament my Conduct, or of offence to other Men. I have not lived in a Corner, and can produce a cloud of witnesses to prove what I say. And for that reason I propose to stay where I am, till my Affairs will allow me to return into England.<sup>17</sup>

The letter was delivered by a mutual friend. Wake enquired about Wotton's health and asked for further details of his recent conduct. He was answered in a series of letters, providing opportunities of verifying Wotton's story.

I have reason to believe I have done Good since I came to this town which is the Metropolis of South Wales. I have preached very often, & know I have been greedily heard & have shewn myself a dutiful subject, & have been in season & out of season exhorting the people to loyalty & obedience. Soon after I came, at the desire of the Gentlemen of the County I drew up an address to his Majesty upon his Landing, & since the breaking out of the Rebellion at the Instance of the Gentlemen of the County, I drew up an Address to the County, both which were presented. ... I could do much more good, if I were in any tolerable measure easy from the importunity of my creditors. Whether I shall ever see that day, God onely knows.<sup>18</sup>

Wotton's creditors eventually discovered his whereabouts, but they found it difficult to obtain immediate redress: in May 1717 he wrote to another friend Browne Willis:

Writs upon Writs have been sent after me. Yet the Attorneys have sheltered me here, tho' they are as greedy of money (& a good deal has been offerd) as they are in Bucks. It has cost me mony, but comparatively speaking not very much.<sup>19</sup>

Thereafter his true identity became an open secret, particularly among his friends in the town. He was also sheltered to some degree by his former patrons, Wake and Nottingham, who did not seek to sequester his living in Buckinghamshire but employed a curate on his behalf so he could retain some of his income and gradually repay his debts, although it would ultimately take him seven years of frugal living to do so.

During the course of 1716 the friendship between Wotton and Wake was gradually re-established and again they became regular correspondents.<sup>20</sup> Their letters contain information about local and national politics in Wales and England, Wotton's publishing projects and his

domestic affairs,<sup>21</sup> Wake gradually regained some of the affection he had once held for his friend and on occasions the archbishop was able to open his heart in his letters to the poor preacher in Carmarthen.

I think myself bound to own in the best manner I am able the inexpressible satisfaction which I feel in this my Banishment, in that condescending manner by which your Graces opens your own troubles to a man every way so unworthy of so great Freedom. Tho' one thing I may justly affirm, that your Grace shall never suffer by any thing which you shall ever communicate to me.<sup>22</sup>

During his years at Carmarthen, Wotton sought to repair his fortunes more quickly by securing an additional clerical appointment, such as a Canon of St David's Cathedral. In the summer of 1717 Wake offered his support for Wotton's appointment and Wotton secured testimonials from the local clergy and twenty-two of the leading citizens of Carmarthenshire, addressed to Bishop Ottley.

We have hear with great pleasure that Dr Wotton has been recommended to your Lordship for the chantorship of St Davids, & that pleasure would exceedingly increase if your Lordshp would give it him. We know him well. He has lived several years among us; no stranger was ever better beloved than he has been since he came into this country. His learning is known sufficiently. His preaching has exceedingly endeared him to ye Town of Carmarthen. His zeal for the Church is such as becomes his profession and ability's; And his whole conduct & behaviour in so public a place has bin suitable to all the rest. He has learnt our language to that degree of perfection, that he is now preparing an edition of our ancient laws for ye press. We are assured that he proposes to spend the greatest part of his time among us, if your Lordship will do him this honor. We look upon his him as our own, & upon yt score we beg this favour for ourselves as well as for him.<sup>23</sup>

Ottley admired Wotton's intellect but there were other deserving candidates and he was not successful. Similarly, when the Chancellorship of the diocese later became vacant the Bishop preferred to give it to his nephew.

Wotton's correspondence with Wake also charts the decline in his health and the frequent recurrence of his gout, which he believed was exacerbated by the damp Carmarthenshire climate.

... in 13 months I had 3 fits, so they not onely have weakened my limbs to that degree that like a blind man I can scarce walk with out being led in the street, but last summer & the winter before I was very long before I recoverd my attention, so as to set any while to studies of any Difficulty. I pleased my self that persons of all Ages, & Sexes, the Temporals, as well as the irregular are here afflicted. At least ten to one to what we have in England. This led me to take a step, which I am afraid many will wonder at. I had heard much of the Anti-Arthritic Tincture sold at the Sign of the Anodyne

Necklace. I resolved to try it; & I think I have found benefit, tho' not in my limbs, yet in my stomach and my Head.<sup>24</sup>

During 1719 and 1720 Wotton suffered two further setbacks. The first of these was the sudden death of his long suffering wife Anne, who had been born into an aristocratic family in Kent but ended her years in poverty in Carmarthen. Wotton was now wracked with guilt over his previous licentious behaviour.

If I can find Pardon in this calamitous juncture, in which those subjects have bin some relief to my wounded soul I desire no more. I desire to live no other ways nor any longer than whilst I can give an Account under God to your Grace of what I do without Blushing. ... But I thank God I have a country here to bear me witness that I eat not the Bread of Idleness. I most humbly beg pardon for troubling Your Grace with my poor Affairs. ... I have but two Blessings left me in this world Your Graces Countenance, and a good prospect for my child. Forgive this my Lord (for out of this abundance of the Heart the mouth will speak where it thinks it may) and you shall not be troubled again in this Nature a great while.<sup>25</sup>

He also composed the elaborate Latin epitaph that is found on his wife's mural monument in the vestry of St Peter's church.<sup>26</sup>

Anne Wotton had somehow managed to retain some of her family money to provide a small dowry for their 19 year old daughter, who was also named Anne. Her father recommended that it should be invested in the South Sea Company, the shares of which seemed to be rapidly increasing in value during the early part of 1720. However, the collapse of the South Sea Fund in the summer suddenly put an end to his daughter's 'good prospect'.

### **WOTTON'S WRITINGS IN CARMARTHEN**

Wotton was only able to take a few boxes of books from Milton Keynes, but he did have the advantage of a photographic memory for what he had already read.

His knowledge (to use an expression of one of his patrons in giving the character of another) was all in ready cash, which he was able to produce at sight upon any question; His great memory made him have little occasion for those resources, which are so necessary to most scholars, whose treasures of learninge often lye by them as a dead stock, which they cannot without some difficulty get off their Hands.<sup>27</sup>

He had however to abandon work on his biography of Boyle, the materials for which fell in to the hands of his creditors. Soon after he arrived he embarked on a series of projects, some of which appeared whilst he was living in the town, and others were published only after his return to England, or indeed some years after his death. The first of these were four surveys of Welsh cathedrals financed by friend Browne Willis.<sup>28</sup>

### *Surveys of the Welsh cathedrals*

Browne Willis was a wealthy antiquary in Buckinghamshire who was then planning to write a history of his county but was also interested in ecclesiastical architecture. When Wotton mentioned to him the decrepit condition of St David's Cathedral, in West Wales, Willis commissioned his friend and his friend's neighbour Joseph Lord to undertake a survey on his behalf. The pair visited St David's Cathedral in July 1715. Wotton compiled a written description of the state of the fabric whilst Lord drafted a plan and made several drawings of the elevations, all of which were sent to Brown Willis. A few weeks later Wotton was allowed to transcribe a 16th century manuscript description of St David's diocese loaned to him by a new antiquarian friend in the town David Havard, Rector of Abergwili, which was also sent.<sup>29</sup> Willis in turn undertook to compile a list of office holders for the diocese. Wotton mentioned the project to bishop Adam Ottley during the latter's annual summer visit to Carmarthen and St David's, and Willis thereafter began a correspondence with him.<sup>30</sup> The whole collection was published as *A survey of the cathedral church of St David's* under Browne Willis's name in September 1716. Wotton's contribution, which represented about 45% of the whole, was in the form of a letter to Willis signed 'M N' (the last letters of his two names) as a means of preserving his anonymity.<sup>31</sup>

Wotton was not pleased when he saw the printed sheets, as he complained to Willis:

The Errata in all are amazing, especially since I had taken such particular care to send ye copy up correct. I writ it twice myself with my own Hand & in Things in wch I apprehended there must be mistakes, I took more yn ordinary care. Unless I had ye Copy, I can't in some places tell whether I mend it right: However I send you ye Errata as follow.

Willis was not an easy collaborator, especially when the two men were so far apart and they had to rely on the vagaries of the postal service, which could at times take two weeks to deliver a package. Wotton later complained to Wake

a very ill state of Health, and the natural Rapidity of his Temper, ... render him not so fit for such enquiry as he is engaged in. In this affair he went too fast for me, and that was the cause of the numerous errata at the end, which I drew up. But he means exceedingly well, and therefore deserves to be loved.

Thomas Hearne in Oxford was scathing about the work, as he noted in his diary.

My friend Mr. Browne Willis's book about St. David's (the first part whereof was done by William Wotton, B.D., who is little better than a madman) is much condemned as a very poor' slight, and very defective and faulty performance.<sup>32</sup>

Willis later collected much more material about the diocese so that he was soon planning a revised and enlarged edition of the work, (which was not subsequently published). By then Wotton had hopes of receiving some preferment so regretted some of his earlier critical comments about the fabric and asked Browne Willis to tone them down.

St Davids is not a ruinous Church, so it cannot without an injury to the present set of Canons be sayd to be so. Besides every thing that you say will be layd upon me, who despair not of being a Canon there before I dy.<sup>33</sup>

Wotton had also heard rumours about the even more precarious state of Llandaff Cathedral, and some plans by the bishop and local chapter to allow it to fall down and move the seat of the diocese to the nearby market town of Cardiff. Willis wanted him to visit together with Lord and report back, but there were many delays before he could undertake such a journey.

I am now laid up with ye Gout. The fitt is the sharpest I have had of 5 or 6 years last past. I am wholly disabled from writing things of any length. Nancy is my Amanuensis & yr very humble servant. As soon as I am up & able to bear so long a journey, Mr Lord & I will go to Landaff but tis impossible for me to set a time because I cannot foresee how long I shall be confined. All I can say is there shall be no time lost.<sup>34</sup>

Their fears proved to be well-founded and so immediately Willis agreed to publish another survey along the same lines as the last. Willis set out their intentions in the prefatory epistle, dated 7 October 1718.

I printed about two Years ago a Survey of the Cathedral Church of St. David's, of which no exact Draughts or Accounts had till then been communicated to the Publick; so I thought my self for the same Reason, besides others peculiar to Llandaff, more strongly engag'd to publish some Account of that Cathedral, which is fall'n into a most deplorable Decay within these few Years: ... it was, that out of a sad Contemplation lest so glorious a Structure as this Church, honour'd by being the ancientest Bishops See in the Kingdom, (as we have evident Authority to shew) rais'd, enrich'd, and beautify'd, by the Piety of so many noble Founders, should be utterly destroy'd, and become a wofull Spectacle of Ruin, that I forthwith (being thereunto excited by the Rumour of a projected Design to remove the See hence to Cardiff) apply'd to the same learned Gentleman that assisted me in drawing up my Survey of ... St. David's, and prevail'd with him to send me a Description of this Church ... also ...<sup>35</sup>

Wotton and Willis also set about circulating a long and detailed open letter to the gentry of South Wales attacking the plans to move the See, whilst also alerting the Archbishop.<sup>36</sup>

Wotton's description spared no details about the precarious state of the cathedral fabric and hinted at the misuse of cathedral finances which might have been used for repairs. This gave rise to a series of letters to Willis disputing Wotton's account, and disparaging comments

about him and Willis, by Richard Smalbroke the cathedral treasurer, in the foreword to the published version of a sermon preached in 1721.<sup>37</sup> However the collapse of the tower in 1722 tended to confirm the opinion of Wotton and Willis and alerted Wake to the urgency of the situation.

Surveys of the two remaining Welsh Cathedrals (St. Asaph and Bangor) followed in 1720 and 1721 respectively.<sup>38</sup> These buildings were not in the same dilapidated state as those in South Wales, and both surveys were undertaken with the full co-operation of the local Cathedral Chapters. Wotton was in no physical condition to make the difficult journey to North Wales and so in both of these cases Joseph Lord visited and made both drawings and detailed notes, the latter of which Wotton subsequently wrote into a narrative. Willis again compiled the list of office holders, and published the work under his own name. In subsequent years Browne Willis made similar Surveys of all the English cathedrals. However, by this time Wotton had move on to other important matters.

### *The historian of Judaeo Christian Relations*

Wotton also published a two volume work entitled *Miscellaneous discourses relating to the traditions and usages of the Scribes & Pharisees*, whilst he was living in Carmarthen. This was intended to give students of divinity a basic understanding of Jewish learning, to show of what authority it was, and what use might be made of it within Christian teaching. This work remains a significant contribution to the study of Judaeo/Christian scholarship, containing the first English translation of the Mishnah, an important work of Rabbinic Judaism.<sup>39</sup> Incongruously, it also has a minor significance to Welsh scholarship in that the introduction contains Wotton's first recognition of the role of Welsh language in Carmarthenshire.

Carmarthen is one of the largest Towns in Wales; English is there commonly spoken, and there are very many Persons of Distinction who live in that Town, all of whom speak English perfectly well, and several of them with little or no Welsh: Yet there are several hundreds of People in that Parish who scarce understand a word of English, and they make up a numerous Congregation who attend the Service of God with a very commendable Assiduity, performed in their own Language every Lord's Day. In all the other Parishes of Carmarthanshire (which is one of the largest Counties in Wales) except in some few by the Sea-Side, if the Service of God should be performed in any other Tongue besides Welsh, scarce one in ten of the People would understand what was said in any tolerable measure. And it is not easie to be believed by an Englishman who has not lived a good while among them, how very tenacious that People still are on their Language, in which they have many Volumes both in Prose and Verse, but chiefly in the latter, both printed and in MS. which are preserved with great care in the Libraries of the curious.<sup>40</sup>

During the same period he began to write a ‘Discourse of the History, Religion, and Laws of the Jews’, but which was apparently never finished. Nevertheless, 9,000 words were published posthumously in 1731 in *The present state of the Republick of Letters*.<sup>41</sup>

### *Wotton’s Linguistic Researches*

Wotton’s ideas on the origin of languages had been developing throughout the early years of the eighteenth century, especially after he had compiled a conspectus to George Hickes’s *Linguarum vett. septentrionalium thesaurus grammatico-criticus et archæologicus*, (Oxford 1705).<sup>42</sup> A few months before his departure from Milton Keynes, Wotton had been discussing his theories of language development with the Dutch scholar Adriaan Reland, and Simon Ockley, the Professor of Arabic at Cambridge.<sup>43</sup> He also wrote an essay relating to the confusion of languages at Babel in the form of a letter to John Chamberlayne, the translator and literary editor who was also a member of the Royal Society. After Wotton’s disappearance from Buckinghamshire, Chamberlayne published Wotton’s essay, without his knowledge and badly translated into Latin, as an appendix to his edition of the Lord’s Prayer in many different languages, in 1715.<sup>44</sup> However Wotton continued to develop his theories during his years at Carmarthen, particularly after he learnt Welsh. At some time between 1715 and his death he wrote *A Discourse concerning the confusion of languages at Babel*, which was eventually published in 1730, after his death, edited by his publisher William Bowyer. This work contributed to current ideas about language families by relating Icelandic, the Romance languages and Greek, thereby pre-dating Sir William Jones’ famous lecture comparing Sanskrit with the Classical languages, by more than seventy years. He also suggested the technique of glottochronology (calculating the rate of change of language by comparing ancient texts of known date, with modern forms).

### *Wotton the divine*

There were also two small religious works written by Wotton during his years at Carmarthen. The first of these was: *The omniscience of the son of God, an undoubted argument of his divinity*, (1719). This was a discourse on Mark XIII verse 32 which he wrote in the immediate aftermath of the death of his wife. As he explained to Wake:

after a little recoverd my self from the stunning stroke with which it has pleased God lately to cast me down. I was tempted to divert myself with Meditations of another Nature, than commenting on the Laws of Howel. ... If I can find Pardon in this calamitous juncture, in which those subjects have bin some relief to my wounded soul I desire no more.<sup>45</sup>

The second work was a narrative bibliography, *Some thoughts concerning a proper method of studying divinity*, which was originally written in the form of an extended letter to a young acquaintance Henry Gally, sometime between 1714 and 1727. Gally went on to become a prebendary of Gloucester and Norwich. He published Wotton's work posthumously in 1734, and it proved to be the latter's most enduringly popular work, and was reprinted on several occasions over the next century.<sup>46</sup> Wotton had gained his enormous knowledge of early Christian biography and bibliography whilst translating into English the thirteen folio volumes of Louis Du Pin's *New history of ecclesiastical writers* between 1693 and 1699.

### *Cyfraith Hywel*

It is as the collector and translator of the Ancient Laws of Wales that Wotton undertook his most difficult intellectual task and for which he is best remembered in Wales. When he began his work in 1716 no Welshman could understand the vocabulary used in the mediaeval manuscripts of laws believed to have been codified by Prince Hywel the Good) in the tenth century. The publication of *Leges Wallicae /Cyfreathieu Hywel Dda* seven years later would provide a 'Rosetta stone' to recover a lost mediaeval Welsh vocabulary and enable the detailed study of the development of the language. The text was edited and translated into Latin primarily by Wotton, but after 1721 with the assistance of Moses Williams, and printed by William Bowyer in 1730. The preliminary and subsidiary matter was compiled after Wotton's death by William Clarke and Moses Williams.<sup>47</sup>

The suggestion that Wotton should translate the ancient laws of Wales came in October 1716 from William Wake, after Wotton sought reconciliation with him. Wotton undertook the task as he wanted to prove that he was a reformed character. It was partly a penance for his former misconduct and a way of keeping him out of further trouble, but Wake was also anxious to have this work done as one of a number of preparatory studies for his own proposed revision of Henry Spelman's great work on the ecclesiastical laws, known as the *Concilia*. By January 1717 Wotton had found a Welsh teacher, and a year later, despite several bouts of ill health, he had obtained sufficient proficiency in the written and spoken language to conduct services.

Yesterday sevensnight I resolved to read Welsh Prayers in Carmarthen Church where it is read every Sunday before [the] English service begins. I went privately that I might not be throng'd at first, by impertinent Interlopers out of the English Congregation. The People whom I read to, some with shooes, and some with none, were all Judges of what I did. This obliged me to use the greatest care as well as Pains to make myself clearly understood.<sup>48</sup>

During 1717 Wotton began to borrow about a dozen original manuscripts or transcripts of the laws and he rapidly began to realise that his task would be far more complex than either he or Wake had realised. As he reported to the Archbishop in a letter

The Jesus [College] manuscript is not so legible to a stranger as the Merton, and therefore is left to the last, because of the number of obsolete words, in which otherwise there might be great Mistakes. But alas! neither of these manuscripts answers to one another. Nor, as I am informed, do any other manuscripts now extant. .... there is no mending one Copy by another, as we may in Virgil and Cicero. I believe these manuscripts might be joined so as to make it one Body. They must therefore be transcribed severally, and then compared and set together.<sup>49</sup>

There were also great problems in identifying the meaning of much of the technical and legal terminology used, which was frequently left un-translated in the few surviving Latin versions of the laws.

When he realized the scale of the task Wake offered to release his friend from his obligation, but Wotton had now got the bit between his teeth, and expressed his determination to continue, particularly after he was contacted by one of the foremost Welsh antiquarians,

I have unexpectedly received a noble Collection of MSS. Transcribed from the originals by one Mr Moses Williams, This transcript made for his own use some years ago, he left for my use in this town, where I found it at my return out of Pembroke-shire.<sup>50</sup>

Thereafter he received considerable assistance from Moses Williams, especially with respect to the glossary of terms appended to the volume and other ancillary materials, but by far the greater part of the translation was his own work. Wotton had made sufficient progress with this work by October 1721, when he left Carmarthen, to be able to draw proposals for its publication.<sup>51</sup>

## **RETURN TO ENGLAND & DEATH**

By March 1721 Wotton had made sufficient settlement with his creditors to be able to look forward to the prospect of returning to England in safety. He then realised that he would be unlikely to receive preferment in St David's diocese, and indeed that he probably did not have many years to live. Wake assisted by providing his friend with a sinecure to enhance his income and Wotton began to use his own name openly once again. He was anxious to leave Wales before the winter set in, so that he could begin publishing *Leges Wallicae*, and also for health reasons. At last, and in October 1721 Wotton and his daughter set out for Bath, where

he intended to spend the winter. A week later he wrote to the archbishop to announce his arrival and the imminent completion of the text.

I am come hither to try if the use of the waters will do me any good. My Health grew gradually so very bad, that ... a few years longer stay in that country would have made me utterly incapable of being any farther useful in my generation... The Clergy of Carmarthen accompany'd me one Day's journey in my Journey thro their Country, at their own expence. Which was a mark of regard never pay'd in our time to any man; and we scarce parted from any body with dry eyes. My translation is in good forwardness. The text is ready. The proposals are sent to the press. And your Grace will see them with a specimen of Welsh & Latin in a few weeks.<sup>52</sup>

The *London Journal* announced his return out of Wales, but in common with modern newspapers did not get all of the details correct.

The Reverend Mr. William Wotton having during a Residence in Wales for Ten Years last, obtained so great a Perfection in the Welch Tongue as to write it, as is said; better than any Native of the Principality now living, has undertaken lately to compile a New History of Wales in Welch and Latin on alternate Pages, having met with several Records and Manuscripts of great Value and Antiquity relating to their affairs, the Contents whereof have never been published in any former History of the People.<sup>53</sup>

After seven months recuperating at Bath, whilst still working on his text, Wotton eventually returned to London in the summer of 1722. One of his first actions was to call upon his old friend at Lambeth Palace, whom he had not seen for more than a decade. He then set to work, with Moses Williams, to see his edition of the ancient laws through the press.<sup>54</sup> He was also invited to preach the St David's day Sermon, in Welsh, to the Society of Antient Britons in London in 1723. This was subsequently published as a bilingual edition, and the author used the opportunity to congratulate the Welsh on their language.

It argued a true Love for Your Country to preserve such a Record for so long entire. France has no Monuments of its primitive Language before Julius Caesar's Time; the French must apply themselves to You, if they would know what Tongue the old Gauls conversed in. Spain has little or nothing of their original Tongue to boast of. The poor Remains of old Cantabric Language are by no means comparable to Your ancient Stores. And yet though Our Island was brought under the same Yoke with the populous and mighty Nations, and your Forefathers submitted to the Romans for near four hundred Years, You continued a distinct People all that Time.<sup>55</sup>

Soon afterwards he returned to Milton Keynes. His health was now rapidly declining and although it appeared that the future of his work was secure, and he had repaid most of his debts, he had not been able to make provision for his daughter's future.

Wake came to the rescue by offering him a valuable living at Buxted in Sussex. Wotton knew that he would not be well enough to fulfil any of the duties and was unlikely to enjoy the

benefit of the additional income for long. He therefore persuaded Wake to present the living to his young assistant on condition that he married Anne. The marriage agreement was signed on one day in April 1723 and Wake presented William Clarke with the Buxted rectory on the next.<sup>56</sup> Wotton was now so ill that he could no longer remain at Milton Keynes and so joined his daughter and son-in-law. He died at Buxted 13 February 1727.

According to an effusive obituary writer in the *Daily Post*, William Wotton

... was perhaps, one of the greatest Genius's this or any other Age has produced, and a remarkable Instance of the Principle he maintained, That the Capacities of the Moderns are not in the least inferiour to those of the Ancients.<sup>57</sup>

Thomas Hearne was a little less generous

... was a man of great natural parts, and might have proved a great man, had he stuck to any particular sort of Learning. But being a rambling genius, he dealt in many things, and in his latter time applied himself to the British Language, and got a great deal of knowledge on it.<sup>58</sup>

There is no monograph biography of William Wotton. His name still regularly features in the footnotes of many different disciplines, but he is now principally, and rather unfairly, remembered as the hapless target for Jonathan Swift's satire. In fact, despite the flaws in his character, he ultimately made far greater intellectual contributions to society than any of his critics. Perhaps his greatest contribution was to the study of the Welsh language, and as such his seven year stay in Carmarthen warrants a paragraph in the history of the town.

## NOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> See David Stoker, 'Wotton, William (1666-1727)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/30005>], and 'William Wotton's exile and redemption', a study of the origins and publication of the 'Leges Wallicae', *Y Llyfr yng nghymru/Welsh book studies*, 7 (2006), 7-106.
- <sup>2</sup> *History of Rome from the death of Antoninus Pius*, (London, 1701), dedicated to Gilbert Burnet. This work was later used by Gibbon as an important source for his *Decline and fall of the Roman Empire*.
- <sup>3</sup> See Joseph M. Levine, *The battle of the books*, (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1991).
- <sup>4</sup> John Evelyn, *The diary of John Evelyn* (London: Everyman's Library: 1907), ii p. 135. For a detailed account of Wotton's early life see Stoker, 'William Wotton's exile'.
- <sup>5</sup> See *Clergy of the Church of England Database*, [<http://www.theclergydatabase.org.uk>]
- <sup>6</sup> *Clergy of the Church of England Database*. He also held the sinecure rectory of Llandrillo-yn-Rhyos, in Denbighshire, 1692-1727.
- <sup>7</sup> Robert J. Connors, 'The rhetoric of citation systems, part I: the development of annotation structures from the Renaissance to 1900', *Rhetoric Review*, 17, (Autumn, 1998), pp. 6-48, p.27.
- <sup>8</sup> See Levine, *The battle of the books*, and A. Rupert Hall, 'William Wotton and the history of science', *Archives internationales d'histoire des sciences*, 9 (1949), pp. 1047-1062. For a more detailed account of Wotton's contribution to the European 'quarrel between ancient and modern learning' see Marie-Luise Spieckermann, *William Wottons 'Reflection upon Ancient and Modern Learning' im Kontext der englischen 'Querelle des anciens et modernes'* (Frankfurt: Lang, 1981).
- <sup>9</sup> William Wotton, *Reflections upon ancient and modern learning*, (1694), Chapter XXIX. 'Reflections upon the Reasons of the Decay of Modern Learning, assigned by Sir William Temple'.
- <sup>10</sup> Michael Hunter, *Robert Boyle by himself and his friends with a fragment of William Wotton's lost Life of Boyle* (London: W. Pickering, 1994).
- <sup>11</sup> See Stoker, 'William Wotton's exile' for several other contemporary comments about his scandalous behaviour..
- <sup>12</sup> William Wotton, *The case of the present Convocation consider'd; in answer to the Examiner's unfair representation of it, and unjust reflections upon it*, (London, J. Churchill, 1711). The tract answers Swift's comments in *The Examiner*, 28 December 1710.
- <sup>13</sup> *Observations upon the state of the nation, in January 1712/3*, (London: printed for John Morphew, [1713]. This work is often ascribed to Daniel Finch, Earl of Nottingham, but a letter from William Wotton to William Wake mentions his authorship of this and other political tracts. Christchurch Library Oxford, Wake Letters 45-7, 14 Oct 1718.
- <sup>14</sup> *A vindication of the Earl of Nottingham from the vile imputations, and malicious slanders, which have been cast upon him in some late pamphlets*. (London: John Morphew, 1714). The preface is dated June 3 1714.
- <sup>15</sup> British Library, Add. MS. 5841, ff. 18-19.
- <sup>16</sup> For a more detailed account of Wotton's scandalous behaviour in his parish and the circumstances of his leaving see Stoker. 'William Wotton's exile and redemption'.
- <sup>17</sup> 'Wake Letters' 20, f. 7, Wotton to Wake, Innocents Day [28 December] 1715. The 'Dr Pinfold' referred to was Charles Pinfold LL.D, Commissary of Westminster.
- <sup>18</sup> 'Wake Letters' 20, ff.10-11, William Wotton to William Wake, Carmarthen 12 Jan 1715/6.
- <sup>19</sup> Bodleian Library, Willis Ms.38 f.353-6.
- <sup>20</sup> There are nearly 100 surviving letters written by Wotton to Wake during his years at Carmarthen in the volumes of Archbishop Wake's papers in Christchurch Library Oxford, which represent the principal source of information for this period in his life (users should note that some of them are catalogued as being from 'Dr Edwards'). A smaller number of letters from Wotton and his neighbour Joseph Lord are among the Browne Willis Manuscripts in the Bodleian Library.

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- <sup>21</sup> The content of many of these letters is discussed in more detail in Stoker, ‘William Wotton’s exile and redemption’.
- <sup>22</sup> Wake Letters’ 20, f.519, William Wotton to William Wake 5 Apr 1718.
- <sup>23</sup> Wake Letters’ 20, f.454-7. A transcript of the original testimonial was included with a letter from Wotton to Wake, 12 September 1717. A similarly worded document signed by Richard Prichard, minister of Carmarthen and four other local clergy was also drawn up 23 November 1717 apparently intended for the Cathedral chapter.
- <sup>24</sup> Wake Letters’ 21, f.183, William Wotton to William Wake, 16 Nov 1719.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>26</sup> This inscription was reproduced in *The present state of the Republick of Letters*, (1731), where it states that it was composed by Wotton. It is not clear however whether the monument was erected at the time of his wife’s death, when the family were still financially embarrassed, or perhaps some years later by her daughter and son-in-law.
- <sup>27</sup> British Library, Add 4224 f.148 –167v, an account of Wotton written by Thomas Birch.
- <sup>28</sup> For more details of the publication of the four surveys see David Stoker, ‘Surveying decrepit Welsh cathedrals, the publication of Browne Willis’s accounts of St David’s and Llandaff’, *Y Llyfr yng nghymru/Welsh book studies*, 3, (2000), 7-32.
- <sup>29</sup> This manuscript had possibly been compiled for inclusion in an early edition of Camden’s *Britannia*.
- <sup>30</sup> National Library of Wales, Ottley Ms. 1745, Browne Willis to Adam Ottley, 10 Dec 1716, ‘I am the more emboldened to apply to yr Ldshipp by reason of Dr Edwards alias W Wotton B. D. wrote mee that yr Grace enquired often after mee & another Gentleman or 2 Intimated to mee as if I might expect some materials from yr Lordshipp by way of correcting what I have done of St Davids.’
- <sup>31</sup> The same device was also used by the antiquary William Camden.
- <sup>32</sup> J.G. Jenkins, *The dragon of Whaddon: being an account of the life and work of Browne Willis (1682-1760)* (High Wycombe: Bucks Free Press, 1953), p.119.
- <sup>33</sup> Bodleian Library, MS. Willis 42 ‘Notes on St Asaph’ f. 81, William Wotton to Browne Willis, 19 June 1717.
- <sup>34</sup> Bodleian Library, Ms. Willis 38 fo.345-348, William Wotton to Browne Willis.
- <sup>35</sup> Browne Willis, *A survey of the cathedral-church of Landaff*, (London, 1719), Prefatory epistle.
- <sup>36</sup> See George Grant Francis, ‘On the proposed removal of the see of Llandaff, in 1717-18, *Archeologia Cambrensis*, I. (1846), 269-273. There remains a largely untold story concerning the salvation of Llandaff Cathedral by the three Englishmen: William Wotton, William Wake and Browne Willis between 1718 and 1730. The materials for this are to be found in two large volumes of correspondence surveys and proposals, at the Bodleian Library (Willis Ms 37-8, 42) and Christchurch Library Oxford (Wake Letters 9).
- <sup>37</sup> Richard Smalbroke. *The reverence due to the house of God. A sermon preach’d in the cathedral-church of Landaff, July 2d, 1721*, (London, 1722).
- <sup>38</sup> .Browne Willis, *Survey of the Cathedral church of St Asaph*, (London, 1720), *Survey of the Cathedral-church of Bangor* (London, 1721). Extensive manuscript materials relating to the compilation and publication of these surveys are to be found in Bodleian Library (Willis Ms. 36-42).
- <sup>39</sup> See David B. Ruderman *Connecting the Covenants: Judaism and the Search for Christian Identity in Eighteenth-century England*, (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), see Chapter 6, ‘On the proper education of an English divine, William Wotton and his learned friends, and Appendix 2 ‘Constructing a genealogy of Christian scholarly discipline: William Wotton’s History of Christian writers on the legal writers of the Jews’.
- <sup>40</sup> William Wotton. *Miscellaneous discourses relating to the traditions and usages of the scribes and pharisees in our blessed saviour Jesus Christ’s time*, 2 vols. (London, 1718). xxi.
- <sup>41</sup> *The present state of the Republick of Letters*, iv. (1731), 6-25, and 124-133.
- <sup>42</sup> William Wotton., *Linguarum vet. septentrionalium thesauri grammatico-critici, & archæologici, auctore Georgio Hiccesio, conspectus brevis per Gul. Wottonum, S.T.B. ... cum appendice ad notas*. (Londini, 1708).

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He also maintained a correspondence with the Simon Ockley, professor of Arabic at Cambridge who was himself imprisoned for debt.

<sup>43</sup> Letter from William Wotton to Simon Ockley, 13 October 1713, Cambridge University Library.

<sup>44</sup> *Oratio Dominica in diversas omnium fere gentium linguas versa, et propriis cujusque linguæ characteribus expressa, una cum dissertationibus nonnullis de linguarum origine, variisque ipsarum permutatinibus. Editore I. Chamberlaynio.* (Amstelædami, 1715).

<sup>45</sup> Wake Letters 20, William Wotton to William Wake, 16 Nov 1719, and. William Wotton, *The omniscience of the Son of God*, (London: T. Goodwin, 1719).

<sup>46</sup> William Wotton, *Thoughts concerning a proper method of studying divinity* (London: J. Roberts, 1734). Also published as a part of Arthur St. George, *The archdeacon's examination of candidates for holy orders, according to the history, canons, and articles of religion of the Church of England and Ireland. By Arthur St. George, D.D. To which are added, Some thoughts concerning a proper method of studying divinity. By the late William Wotton, D.D.* (London: J. and J. Rivington, 1751).

<sup>47</sup> See Stoker, 'William Wotton's exile and redemption' for a detailed account of the compilation and publication of this work.

<sup>48</sup> 'Wake correspondence' 20, ff.502-3 William Wotton to William Wake, 24 February 1717/8.

<sup>49</sup> 'Wake correspondence' 20, ff. 390-1 William Wotton to William Wake, 29 May 1717.

<sup>50</sup> 'Wake correspondence' 20, f. 555 Wotton to Wake 18 June 1718. The transcripts referred to are now National Library of Wales (NLW) Llanstephan MS. 71.

<sup>51</sup> *Proposals for printing by Subscription a Book entituled, Cyfreithieu Hywel Dda*, (dated 20 October 1721), Bodleian Library fol.□ 663 (39). (39). [Pages 1-2 were reprinted in John Nichols, *Literary anecdotes of the eighteenth century*, 13 vols. (London: J. Nichols, 1812-15), I, 488.]. Printing began in London in March 1722 and was largely complete by May 1723, but came to a halt pending the completion of the glossary. Wotton's rapidly declining health and death in February 1727 meant that he never saw the completion. The unfinished work was completed by Moses Williams and William Clarke and published in 1730 (see Stoker, 'William Wotton's exile and redemption').

<sup>52</sup> 'Wake correspondence 23, f. 76 Wotton to Wake 1 November 1721.

<sup>53</sup> *London Journal* 13 January 1722 issue CXXIX.

<sup>54</sup> The gradual progress of this work through the press is recorded on an inserted page in the ledgers of the printer William Bowyer, see *The Bowyer Ledgers*, ed. Keith Maslen and John Lancaster (London: Bibliographical Society, 1991). For a detailed commentary on the publication see Stoker, 'William Wotton's exile and redemption', 57-69.

<sup>55</sup> William Wotton, *A sermon preached in Welsh before the British Society ... upon St. David's day, 1722.* (London, 1723), foreword.

<sup>56</sup> The couple went on to have a long, prosperous and apparently very happy marriage.

<sup>57</sup> *Daily Post* 28 February 1727 issue 2319.

<sup>58</sup> *Remarks and collections of Thomas Hearne* Vol. IX. Oxford Historical Society, 286. March 14. 1726/7.