



John Sylvanus Davis: 'Master Welsh Printer'

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Born 7 June 1822 in Carmarthen to James Silvanus Davis and Ann (nee Walter), John S. Davis began his career as a printer with an apprenticeship at age 13. On completion in 1842 he worked for a number of different printers including John Jones, Llangollen, a Congregational Minister. While working at type-setting and proof-reading in Jones' printshop in Rhydybont near Llanybydder in 1845, Davis first encountered publications from the 'Mormon' church – the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. The Rev. Jones was publishing pamphlets written by his brother Daniel, who had converted to this 'new' faith in America and returned to Wales as a missionary. Davis became so interested in and convinced by the principles taught through these pamphlets that he converted to 'Mormonism' himself in 1846.

Dan Jones was a zealous missionary and soon became the subject of criticism and verbal abuse in several Welsh language publications – none of which would however publish his rebuttals. The only solution was to produce his own Welsh language publication – *Prophwyd y Jubili*, succeeded in 1849 by *Udgorn Seion* [*Zion's Trumpet*]. When Jones returned to America at the end of his missionary service in 1849, John S. Davis was assigned to take over the editorship and printing of *Udgorn*. The first two numbers were printed in Carmarthen as Davis had his own press there and had printed the final numbers of *Prophwyd y Jubili*. But by March 1849 Davis had moved the press to Merthyr Tydfil, then the seat of Latter Day Saint leadership in Wales. He and his wife Elizabeth are listed in the 1851 census living in Georgetown, John's occupation given as *Printer, employing one man*. A note from *Udgorn* shows they were living in Nantygwenith Street:

☞ Send all correspondence, and letters to the First Council, to "John Davis, Printer, Nantygwenith, Georgetown, Merthyr Tydfil;" and we wish to have a stamp from everyone who requests an answer.

The printing process would make significant technological advances in the coming years, with the introduction of steam presses and those involved becoming specialists in a particular aspect or function. But in Davis' day, a fully qualified printer would be involved in the whole of the production process: writing, editing, proofreading, typesetting, through to the finished printed page. During the five years of his editorship Davis produced issues of *Udgorn Seion* of increasing size and frequency. In 1849 each monthly issue was twenty pages long with a four-page

printed wrapper. The following year it increased to twenty-eight pages, and by 1853 it was appearing weekly, although no longer including a wrapper. Content throughout included defense of the LDS Church's doctrines, reports on missionary progress across Wales, and instructions to Church members - all enlivened with poetry, proverbs and humour.

However during this time Davis also compiled and published two Welsh language hymnals, wrote numerous pamphlets and poems (in English and Welsh), and translated the *Doctrine and Covenants*, the *Book of Mormon*, and the *Pearl of Great Price* into Welsh. These last are all part of the Latter Day Saint canon of scripture, and *Llyfr Mormon* alone runs to almost 500 pages of dense text. Yet all three were translated over a period of eighteen months. Welsh was the first 'foreign language' translation of the *Doctrine and Covenants* and only the second language into which the *Book of Mormon* was translated (it appeared in Danish the year before Davis' 1852 translation). Welsh LDS history expert Ron Dennis notes the truly phenomenal nature of Davis' accomplishment, and the elegance and sophistication of the language used in the translations. Sadly, he also notes that Davis' achievement has largely gone unremarked, even by LDS historians, because of the language. Thousands of monoglot Welsh converts emigrated to Utah Territory, their conversion facilitated by access to the teachings of the LDS church through Davis' translations and publications. However, necessity dictated that their descendants learn to speak English, and use of Welsh in Utah gradually died out.

During his time in Merthyr Tydfil John Davis was also actively engaged in preaching and local leadership of the LDS church. He and Elizabeth then emigrated with their young daughter Julia Elizabeth in February 1854, by which time Dan Jones had returned to Wales and resumed editorship of *Udgorn*. The Davis family arrived in Salt Lake City in September 1854 and John again became involved in the printing business, working for the *Deseret News* and other publications. In 1859 he was elected Public Printer for Utah Territory's Legislative Assembly, and also served in the presidency of the Deseret Typographical Association (later the Deseret Press Association). He was forced to retire due to ill health by 1861, and died in Salt Lake City in 1882; Elizabeth would survive him by more than 20 years.

John Sylvanus Davis experienced many changes in his life, both professionally and personally. He was directly involved in the printing business for less than half of his sixty years. But many of his contemporaries in both Wales and Utah had good reason to be grateful that he lived up to the descriptions given of him by Dan Jones: *faithful man* and *master Welsh printer*.