

## American University Professor becomes a Bard: Putting ‘Mormons’ on the Welsh cultural map

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On Friday 10<sup>th</sup> August 2018, Emeritus Professor Ronald D. Dennis of Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, USA was inducted into the “Bardic Circle” at the National Eisteddfod in Cardiff. Becoming a member of the Gorsedd of Bards is an honour awarded to those who have made a significant contribution to the Welsh language, literature, and culture. Dr Dennis’ academic specialisation was Portuguese, so the link is not obvious, it is of a personal nature rather than a professional one.

While working on his family history many years ago Dr Dennis came across a pamphlet written by his great great-grandfather Captain Dan Jones in support of the ‘Mormon’ faith – the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. Dan Jones had been born near Halkyn in North Wales. He emigrated to America and there became converted to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints in 1843, while working as a steamboat captain on the Mississippi. He returned to his native Wales in 1845 and became a renowned missionary and prolific writer in defence of the faith. When he returned to America in 1849 he took with him more than 300 Welsh converts, and left behind a church membership of over 1000<sup>1</sup> in Wales. The first ‘Mormon’ missionaries had only arrived in Wales in 1840, so this was significant growth. He experienced similar success on returning to Wales as a missionary in 1852<sup>2</sup> It is estimated that between five and eight thousand Latter-Day Saint (LDS) converts would leave Wales during the nineteenth century, with many communities in modern day Utah and Idaho bearing witness through the Welsh surnames which still survive there.

Dr Dennis learnt Welsh in order to translate the pamphlet written by Dan Jones and further pursue his research. Over the last four decades this has led to the publication of 14 books, and a website <http://welshmormon.byu.edu> which houses information on those early converts, their personal stories and writings, furnished by their descendants. His work includes translations of nineteenth century Welsh LDS publications, including several volumes of *Udgorn Seion [Zion’s Trumpet]*, a weekly publication established by Dan Jones and published in Merthyr Tydfil and Swansea. Dr

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<sup>1</sup>The Latter-Day Saints’ Millennial Star Volume 11, No. 18 September 1849, “Extracts from Conference Minutes” <https://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/digital/collection/MStar/id/1691/rec/11>

<sup>2</sup><https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2012/10/small-and-simple-things/dan-jones-1810-62?lang=eng>

Dennis is undeniably the foremost historian of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Welsh Latter Day Saints, and has opened up access to the world of early LDS Church history to scholars and family historians alike. He was made a Bard in recognition of his contribution to Welsh culture by preserving this important aspect of nineteenth century Welsh history.