Professor Chris Williams

(3rd March 1963 - 4th April 2024)

Professor Chris Williams who has died suddenly at the age of sixty-one was the foremost historian of modern Wales from his generation. However, as a cursory glance at his many achievements as an educator, research scholar, administrator and author would show, that accolade was not inevitable for he was widely engaged and accomplished in diverse areas of study. And yet, that his major contribution as an historian was to Welsh scholarship, particularly with regard to the people and politics of South Wales, may indeed be seen as destined to happen by upbringing and aspiration. So much so that many suspected and hoped that his outstanding academic career might end, in the fullness of time, back in his native country. That it did not is a matter of great regret for all his friends and colleagues in the Learned Society of Wales and across the overlapping communities of historians with whom he worked, as well as amongst the student cohorts he taught and inspired. What immense sorrow and grief his untimely death has brought to his wife Sara, and to his sons, can only impel us to offer our profound condolences of sympathy and support to her and to all of Chris' extended family.

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My acquaintance with Chris Williams, one that ripened over the years into warm friendship and mutual collegiality, began in the early spring of 1981 at an Open Day for aspirant students at Cardiff University. I sat, largely in vain, in my office in the History of Wales Department awaiting enquires. Late that afternoon, and as I was about to give the vigil up, there was a knock on the door and in came a tall, well built, flaxen haired boy of seventeen, Christopher Mark Williams from Swindon. Or rather, as I was quickly informed by him, from Newport, his forever town, from which his father's work had uprooted Chris at the age of three.

What struck me, as a Q and A became a conversation and minutes turned into an hour, was his serious intent and maturity of conviction. He talked of his family's roots in the mid-Glamorgan Valleys and his childhood visits to Griffithstown near Pontypool. He wanted to “know”, that was clear, as was his open ambition to go to Oxford after A levels, He was so precociously impressive that I did not expect to see him again, though he said I would, and I wished him luck for the future. I learned that he took up for one year a short service commission as a Second Lieutenant at Sandhurst - he was full of unexpected surprises -before reading Modern History at Balliol from 1982 to 1985, specialising in southeast Asian and Indian history- an abiding interest for him - and gaining First Class Honours. “Undoubtedly”, he later reflected, “Oxford opened doors that might otherwise have remained shut, but ultimately it could not compete with the magnetic pull of a history that I considered, in important ways, to be my own”. So, on graduation he wrote to me to ask if he could now come to Cardiff to start a PH.D. After discussion the chosen topic was to be the (then neglected) history of the Labour Party in interwar Wales. This both narrowed and deepened to become a study of radical Rhondda, both the prize research thesis of 1991 and his subsequent book Democratic Rhondda: Politics and Society 1885-1951 in 1996. Its style, at once crisply authoritative and argumentatively combative, would be the consistent hallmark of all his written work. After part time teaching with the Open University and at Coleg Harlech, Chris was appointed in 1998 to a lectureship in nineteenth century British History at Cardiff University.

When I took up the post of Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Research) at the University of Glamorgan I was able to promote him in 2001, aged thirty-eight, to his first Chair as a Professor of Modern and Contemporary Wales. His entrepreneurial skills in attracting strategic grants were spectacularly rewarded when, as Co-Director of the new Centre for Border Studies at Glamorgan, he had HEFCW to fund ambitiously comparative projects with over £600k in aid. Headhunted within the sector from now on, he became Professor of Welsh History at Swansea University between 2005 and 2013, as well as serving as Director of the Research Institute from 2010, thus demonstrating what would be his key attributes of original scholarship and institutional effectiveness as both teacher and administrator. In 2013 he returned to Cardiff as Professor of History and Head of the School of Archaeology, History and Religion. By this time his track record of eye-catching publications and ever widening cultural enquiry was allied to an international profile, and in 2017 he moved to University College, Cork where he acted as Head of the College of Arts, Celtic Studies, and Social Sciences.

In everything he undertook he was a willing and able collaborator in the work of others, the epitome of a co-operative scholar as contributor in a number of important essay collections or as himself both co-editor and contributing author: for Volumes 4 and 5 of the Gwent County History, and with his friend Noel Thompson in 2011 producing Robert Owen and his Legacy. Earlier, with Deian Hopkin and Duncan Tanner, he co-edited and organised a volume which corralled the advances in labour history for the century examined in The Labour Party in Wales 1900 - 2000. Many of his own attendant articles appeared over the years, along with his 1998 scintillating compilation of documents and commentary Capitalism, Community and Conflict: The South Wales Coalfield 1898 - 1947, in Llafur, the Journal of that vital Society for which he wrote and lectured and worked as Committee member and Officer for over twenty years.

Whether at the podium or on the printed page Chris Williams was a passionate advocate for the efficacious role of historical study in civic life. To this end he was a firm proponent of building and re-building from evidence to analysis within the accumulated knowledge of historiography. Coalfield history was given its due as the most significant factor in the making of modern Wales by being revisited and revised over and again (as with his forays with his Cardiff colleague Bill Jones into the life and writings of that seminal autodidact author, B.L. Coombes). The thorny, conceptual and universal, issues of nationhood, identity, class, ethnicity, post-modernism, governance, and politicisation, borders real and virtual, all came under his scrutiny and were subjected to a Welsh perspective. He enhanced his rock-solid reputation as an historian of the wider labour movement through his pioneering discovery and dissection of the power of political cartoons and caricatures on a worldwide scale. A valuable digital archive was created for scholarship. He relished the cultural illumination which could be illustrated in the history of sport and leisure: delightful vignettes on the Welsh legends David Watkins and JPR Williams - rugby was his favourite spectator sport - and on British alpinists in the Rockies or visiting climbers in Snowdonia - mountaineering was a favoured pursuit - or combining his tastes, and another Welsh hero, as put together in his piece on mountains in the fiction of Raymond Williams from Abergavenny.

Chris was a true Public Intellectual. He did not subscribe to the precious view that what was properly academic should be confined by the academy. On the contrary he relished broadcasting, as a presenter and consultant, on radio and television or via media old or new. His dedication to local history societies or adult education classes, large and small, near and distant, filled his diary whenever he was asked. He served as an advisor to university editorial Boards and to various governmental commissions, and was active as a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society and the Learned Society for Wales to which he was elected in 2016. He was always generous with his time, never begrudging a genuine request and invariably emanating warmth and fellowship with his welcoming, twinkly personality.

In some senses this all came together in a glorious period of his career when he was asked by his then university to edit the diaries of Richard Burton which had been deposited at Swansea. What began fortuitously ended triumphantly. His scholarly tracing of clues and of context was exemplary so that his informative yet unobtrusive footnotes added structure and scaffolding to Burton's huge diary-cum-autobiography. He thereby elevated a disparate text of over one million words into a coherent volume which can be rightly placed in that Pantheon of Journals which prise open a whole culture from the perspective of one self-absorbed life. The Introduction is, in itself, a model of its kind and, not incidentally, a grace note sounded for the significance of that time and place from which Richard Burton sprang onto a world stage. The Richard Burton Diaries (2012) were immediately acclaimed critically, and not least for their editorial presentation. For Yale University Press the volume was a best seller across the globe with one hundred thousand plus copies sold in hardback and paperback sales to follow in a similar vein. Chris enjoyed his thoroughly deserved spot in the limelight as invitations to talk about the Diaries flooded in from New York to Singapore, from Tokyo to Toronto, from Los Angeles to Port Talbot. This was a rare, and most welcome, exposure for an academic historian who was, thereby, fulfilling again one of the international roles which South Wales had, through its culture and its society, merited.

When that moment was over the fame was banked and he resumed thinking and organising for the development of innovative research in teaching and learning. At University College Cork he had found an amenable higher education community in which to be a supportive leader and a supported scholar, whilst his links with Welsh life and Learning continued as strongly as before. Indeed, if he had lived, we would, in time, have relished what would, surely, have been his magnum opus - a social and political history of his beloved city of Newport, Gwent. Sadly, as it is, we must be content now with the occasional forerunners of that study which he gave to us piecemeal and, too, in knowing how the productive life and work of this inordinately gifted Welsh historian, my friend and co-conspirator Chris Williams, has provoked and enlightened all of us.

Dai Smith