

# A HISTORY OF HUMANISM IN WALES

The word 'humanist' describes a non-religious person who believes it is possible to lead a good and happy life without religion. We have only been calling these people 'humanists' for around 100 years, but there have been people thinking and acting in ways we would today describe as humanist for thousands of years.



These people looked to what they could see and experience to make sense of the world. They thought about ways to live well together with other people, and about how to be happy. They focused on what could be done while they were alive on earth, rather than believing in another life after they died. Many humanists today see them as part of the humanist tradition.

## WALES BEFORE CHRISTIANITY

Before the coming of Christianity during the 1st century CE, Wales was home to lots of different religious beliefs. We can see the evidence of these today, for example in stone structures and circles, whose meanings we can only make theories about.



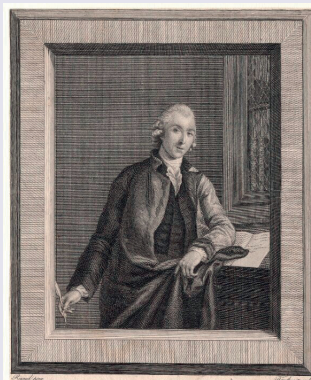
When the Romans invaded Britain in 43 CE, they combined their own gods with native British ones. But by the end of the 4th century, Christianity had become the official religion of the Roman Empire. When the Roman Empire fell, the so-called 'dark ages' came.

For many hundreds of years, in what is known as the 'middle' or 'dark' ages, it was very dangerous to express humanist ideas, because criticising the Church or saying you didn't believe in God was against the law. Because of this, although people may have believed in humanist ideas – and lived humanist lives – we don't have much evidence for it.

Bryn Cader Faner, Gwynedd by Anne Roberts

### DAVID WILLIAMS (1738–1816)

David Williams, who was born near Caerphilly, was a philosopher and school teacher. He was a deist: someone who believes that a god may have created the world, but rejects the claims in religious texts that such a god has any



further impact or influence on our lives. This was also known as the 'religion of nature', because it focused on what could be seen or experienced in the natural world. David Williams believed that what was right for people to do could be decided using reason and human goodness, and that everyone should be free to decide for themselves what they believe.

These ideas were influenced by the Enlightenment: a period of history which put reason and human potential at the heart of things.

## THE AGE OF REASON

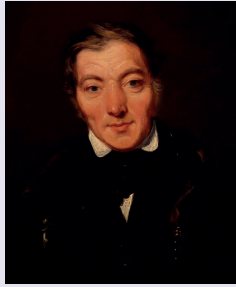
**The Age of Enlightenment** (sometimes called the Age of Reason), focused on using human reason to gain knowledge, and improve society. The ideas of Welsh-born thinkers like Dr Richard Price and David Williams spread far and wide, and were important in opening people's minds to questioning how society should be organised, and what they should believe.

### ROBERT OWEN

(1771–1858)

Born in Newtown, Robert Owen was a mill-owner. He came to believe that people were not born 'good' or 'bad', but were shaped by the opportunities they had and the things that happened to them. This led him to propose new ways of organising society, based on education, cooperation, and community. He said this was designed to create 'the least misery and the most happiness'. His philosophy focused on practical ways to increase the wellbeing and happiness of everyone.

Robert Owen's ideas were especially popular in the 1830s and 1840s, and influenced thousands of other people all around the world.



## THE 19TH CENTURY

Then came the nineteenth century: a time of enormous change and major discovery. In Wales, movements such as chartism and Owenism saw working people campaigning for more rights and a better quality of life. Chartists, like Zephaniah Williams from Monmouthshire, wanted all men – not just those who owned property – to have the right to vote. Owenites wanted society to be reorganised to make it more equal for everyone. Many people involved in these movements were freethinkers. A freethinker is someone who thinks for themselves instead of just accepting what they are told, especially when it comes to religious teachings. Today, many of the ideas held by freethinkers are ones we would call humanist.

New scientific understanding (like Charles Darwin's theory of evolution) helped to give explanations for the world based on science and evidence. A Welshman, Alfred Russel Wallace (1823–1913), developed a theory of evolution at the same time as Charles Darwin, and their writings were first published together. These ideas changed the way people understood the origins of human beings, and led lots of people to question their religious beliefs.



Alfred Russel Wallace c. 1899

### MILLICENT MACKENZIE

(1863–1942)

Millicent Mackenzie was born in Bristol, but it was in Wales that she especially made her mark. She became Wales' first female professor (a professor of education at what is now Cardiff University),



and was also the first woman to stand for election to Parliament in Wales. Millicent believed that women should have the same rights as men, and that they should use these rights to help everyone. She did this in her own life through her work in education and politics, and by her involvement in the Union of Ethical Societies (now Humanists UK). She became a Vice President of the Union, which stood for the humanist belief that people can be good without the need for religion or supernatural ideas.

# MODERN HUMANISM

Towards the end of the 19th century, groups called ethical societies began to form in the UK. Many would later rename themselves as humanist organisations. They were influenced by an American social reformer called Felix Adler, who had started a society in New York with the motto 'deed not creed', meaning you did not have to be religious to do good in the world. He hoped to join people of all beliefs together in living good lives, and working for change. There were a number of ethical societies (and later humanist groups) in Wales.

Since the early 1900s, people in Wales have been growing less religious. Major reforms have helped to make the country more secular: meaning that the church has less involvement in how the country is run and all religions and beliefs are treated equally. These have included the disestablishment of the Church in 1920, and the creation of the National Assembly of Wales in 1999. The Senedd was the first UK nation's government created on secular ideals.

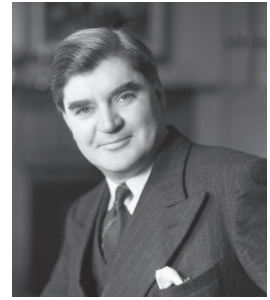


Many Welsh humanists in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have worked to change the world for the better – as artists, writers,

educators, politicians, and more. Aneurin Bevan, for example, was born in Tredegar, the son of a coal miner. He went on to help establish the National Health Service (NHS), making medical care accessible to millions of people throughout the UK.

## ANEURIN 'NYE' BEVAN (1897–1960)

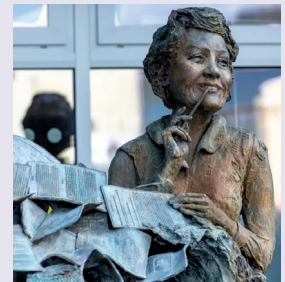
Nye Bevan was born into a working class mining family. He felt a duty to help improve the lives of others, especially working people, and as Minister of Health he helped to create the National Health Service: providing free healthcare to everyone who needed it. His wife, Jennie Lee, said 'Nye was a great humanist whose religion lay in loving his fellow men and trying to serve them'.



Aneurin Bevan by Howard Coster, 1943 © National Portrait Gallery, London CC BY-NC-ND 3.0

## ELAINE MORGAN (1920–2013)

Elaine Morgan was a writer and humanist, who inspired people all over the world with her stories, and her ideas about the history of human beings. Born in Pontypridd, Elaine won a scholarship to Oxford University, and went on to become a famous writer of books, and for television. She was known as a great storyteller, who both entertained and inspired. Elaine lived most of her life in Mountain Ash, and in 2022 a statue of her was placed there to show her importance in Wales – which she loved – and around the world.



Elaine Morgan © Monumental Welsh Women



## DID YOU KNOW...

- That the first humanist public funeral in the UK (a ceremony honouring someone of national importance) was held for Rhodri Morgan in 2017? Rhodri Morgan had been Wales' First Minister.
- During the 1960s and 1970s, humanist groups formed around Wales - bringing people together to discuss ideas, build community, and work to improve the world.
- Today, around half of the people in Wales say they have 'no religion', and Wales Humanists (part of Humanists UK) works to represent them.

