

HOWELL DAVIES OF FELINGWM

by Jonathon Riley, from original research by Al Poole

and with thanks to Howell Davies's grandson, the actor and writer Adrian Dannatt, who has written the introduction to the latest edition of Davies's book Congratulate the Devil

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Many devotees of science fiction will be familiar with the name of the author Andrew Marvell. What they may not know, however, was that this was a *nom de plume* – the real Andrew Marvell was in fact Howell Davies, born at Cwrt Farm in the small village of Felingwm Uchaf, between Brechfa and Nantgaredig in the parish of Llanegwad, Carmarthenshire, on 3 September 1896. In 1819, a Daniel Davies, a member of the Welsh Saints, who with his family later helped set up a Welsh Morman community in Utah, married Sarah Thomas, of Cwrt Farm. This began the link between the farm and Davies family, whose family group was spread throughout the local area. The Census of 1901 shows three servants and six children at Cwrt Farm – probably the great-grandson of Daniel Davies and his family, also Daniel Davies, and his wife Dinah – one of whom was our subject, Howell Davies.¹

A major influence on Howell was his elder brother, Tom, born in 1881. By 1911, Tom was a schoolmaster in Newport, Monmouthshire. He was a man who championed education, an active *Cymmroder* and chairman of the Newport Welsh Society.² At the same date, Howell, a scholar, was living in Llandeilo, boarding with a widow named Eliza Jones, attending Llandeilo County School in Rhosmaen Street,³ later renamed Llandeilo Grammar School. He was by this time fluent in both English and Welsh and was awarded Junior School Certificates by the Welsh Central Board in September 1912 – an important detail as without these he would not have been considered later for a Commission in the Army. The school's Great War Memorial is

still extant and records the 129 pupils who served during the war – including Howell – and twenty-nine who lost their lives in the service of their country.⁴

On 4 August 1914, Britain declared war on Germany. Almost exactly one month later, on his eighteenth birthday, Davies enlisted into the Army as 26387 Private Davies. He joined the 17th Battalion of The Royal Welsh Fusiliers, the 2nd North Wales, which was very largely formed of men from Rhyl, Llandudno and Blaenau Ffestiniog.⁵ Fellingwm, in Carmarthenshire, is a long way from this part of North Wales and why Davies went there to enlist, rather than to Carmarthen where he would have joined the 15th Battalion of the Welsh Regiment, remains a mystery. In 17 R.W. Fus, he was a contemporary of Emlyn Davies, author of *Taffy Went to War*⁶ and Llewellyn Wyn Griffith's younger brother, Watcyn. Soon afterwards, in October, his brother Tom also enlisted into the Regiment, joining the 13th Battalion as 16111 Private Davies.

The 17th Battalion was one of the battalions for what was to be Lloyd George's Welsh Army Corps – an ambition that was never realised. Recruiting was slow in North Wales, but the energy of the veteran Brigadier-General Owen Thomas, mobilising the support of trade union leaders and Nonconformist clergy, led quickly to the formation of the North Wales Brigade. This consisted of the 13th (1st North Wales Pals), 16th and 17th (2nd North Wales), which were rapidly raised in Rhyl, Llandudno and Blaenau Ffestiniog. 15 R.W. Fus. was formed in London.⁷ Training for the brigade was centralised at Llandudno under the few available regulars, veterans or Territorials available, where it became 128 North Wales Brigade, later retitled as 113 (Royal Welsh) Brigade, part of the 38th Welsh Division. The Brigade was reviewed at Llandudno on St David's Day 1915 by Lloyd George himself, with 17 R.W. Fus under its first C.O., Henry Lloyd-Mostyn.

In the autumn 1915, the 38th Division moved south and after further training, embarked for France. Howell Davies's medal card shows that he landed with the battalion on 4 December.⁸ Throughout the winter and spring, the Welsh battalions learned their trade in the trenches until they faced their first major test in July 1916: the battle for Mametz Wood. Howell kept to short diaries,⁹ one recording the events of December 1915 and it may be inferred that he was wounded for the first time around the end of December while under instruction by the Guards Division in trenches near Laventie. The battalion's war diary gives no clues.¹⁰

In late 1916, Davies, who by now had risen to the rank of Sergeant, was selected for a commission and was discharged from the ranks on 24 January 1917,¹¹ to be

Second Lieutenant in the Northumberland Fusiliers.¹² He served briefly with the N.F. but returned to the Royal Welsh Fusiliers in October 1917 and was posted first to the training centre for Welsh Service Battalions at Kinmel Camp, near Rhyl, in North Wales. Here, in the spring of 1918, he met Robert Graves, who gives a clue about what had happened to Howell:

At Rhyl [the Colonel] gave me the job of giving 'further instruction' to the sixty or so young officers who had been sent to him from the cadet-battalions. Few officers in the battalion had seen any active service. Among the few was Howell Davies (now literary editor of the Star), who had had a bullet through his head and was in as nervous a condition as myself. We became friends, and discussed the war and poetry late at night in the hut; we used to argue furiously, shouting each other down.¹³

This was obviously Howell's second wound. Soon afterwards he was posted to the 3rd Reserve Garrison Battalion which moved to Cork, Ireland, in November. During this time both he and his brother Tom were reported as being on leave for a time at Felingwm, looking remarkably well.¹⁴ In March 1918 it went to Crosshaven where it remained until disbanded on 16 May 1919.¹⁵ During this time, Howell was promoted to Captain and discharged in 1919 when the 3rd Reserve Garrison Battalion was broken up. He always said that his experiences in the Great War affected him profoundly, which is hardly surprising in a man who was clearly perceptive and sensitive.

Tom, too, had had a most successful military career. He had risen through the ranks until by the end of 1917 he was acting Regimental Sergeant Major. On 1 January 1918, the *London Gazette* recorded that he had been awarded the Military Cross for bravery – this was a decoration usually reserved for officers, but which could be awarded to Warrant Officers; he had also been Mentioned in Despatches.¹⁶ Tom left the Army in 1919 but wrote the wartime history of the 13th Battalion, seen through the eyes of his own company, and was a leading light in the Comrades Association, reading excerpts from the battalion history at two of the reunion dinners at the Wynnstay Arms Hotel in Wrexham.¹⁷ Howell's grandson, who was later named after Tom, continued the literary tradition of the family, becoming war correspondent for *The Times* in the Balkans.¹⁸

After his discharge, Howell was able to further his education at the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, at Oxford, and the Sorbonne. His ability to get to

Aberystwyth and to Oxford was made possible by the government-funded Scheme for the Higher Education of Ex-Service Students, which provided grants to nearly 28,000 students between 1918 and 1923,¹⁹ using grant-making regulations provided by the Fisher Education Act. Under this scheme, 439 grants were awarded at Aberystwyth and 1,519 at Oxford.²⁰ He must have had a good command of French, however, since courses at the Sorbonne were conducted only in that language. Having lost so many students during the war, the Sorbonne made great efforts to increase its numbers after the war and especially reaching out to women and overseas students – the latter making up one-third of the student body and whose residence was made easier by the opening of the *Cité Internationale Universitaire de Paris* student residence in the *14ème Arrondissement* of the city.

After completing his studies around 1923 he worked as a theatre critic for the *Manchester Evening News* and as literary editor of the *Star* and *News Chronicle*. He also appears to have written scripts for B.B.C. radio.²¹ In 1929, he was offered the editorship of the *South America Handbook*, an almanac of information for companies engaged in trade between South America and Britain – which at that time was extensive. He had never been to Latin America but one of his qualifications was that – or so it appears – he could speak Spanish as well as French. He was also asked by the publishers to edit a new publication called *The Traveller's Guide to Great Britain & Ireland* and, as a result, was able to secure a salary of £600 per year which in those days was a gentleman's income.²² The publishers expected much from their new publication, for which there English and Spanish versions. As a Welshman, Davies wrote in the introduction to the Spanish edition: '*Gales es un país aparte de Inglaterra, con lengua propia y distinta característica nacional y de rica y variada hermosura. El interior es magnífico e inspirador.*' [Wales is a country apart from England, with its own language and distinct national characteristics, and a rich and varied beauty. The interior is magnificent and inspiring].²³

While at Aberystwyth, Davies had met his wife, Enid Margaret Becket (Becky); they were married at Shiplake in Oxfordshire on 23 September 1922. The two lived at 2 Pond Square, Highgate, just north of Highgate Cemetery where their daughter Joan was born in 1925, and their son Peter the following year.²⁴ Hampstead and became a close friend of the novelist John Wyndham and his future wife, Grace.¹

¹ John Wyndham Parkes Lucas Beynon Harris (10 July 1903 – 11 March 1969) is best known for his works published under the pen name John Wyndham, although he also used other combinations of his names, such as John Beynon and Lucas Parkes. His best-known works include *The Day of the Triffids* (1951), and *The Midwich Cuckoos* (1957).

Wyndham sometimes stayed with the Davies's during the Blitz, to escape the much-bombed Bloomsbury Penn Club, where he had lived for many years. Grace, a schoolteacher, was evacuated with her school to Wales.²⁵ Davies appears to have met Wyndham in 1936 through an introduction from Annie Leslie Sargent, a geography teacher at Bedales School whom Becky had known at Aberystwyth.

Just before and then after the Second World War, Davies began writing science fiction under the pen name of Andrew Marvell – the English metaphysical poet of the Seventeenth Century had lived just a few doors away from his Hampstead home. From these works, his influence on Wyndham when he, too, began to write science fiction, is clearly visible in the style, wit and authority of his three books: the controlling character Zellaby in Wyndham's *Midwich Cuckoos*, published in 1957, for example, echoes the character of Jellaby in Davies's first book, *Minimum Man: Or, Time to Be Gone*, published in 1938. This book combines the elements of science fiction and a thriller in its depiction of a 1950 fascist coup in the UK, and of its overthrow by a new race of tiny but very powerful telepathic super-beings whose parthenogenetic births were enabled by poison gas and who will succeed *Homo sapiens* as the dominant species on planet Earth. *Three Men Make a World* (1939) is a post-apocalyptic story, though the depopulation of London, the ruralisation of Britain and the absence of any reference to the Second World War are all difficult to recognise. *Congratulate the Devil* (1939), in which a happiness drug is found to be intolerable to society at large, describes the process by which its disseminators are hounded to death.²⁶

Davies remained editor of *The South America Handbook* until his retirement in 1972. After the war, he became intimate with the Welsh poet and doctor, Daniel Abse.² He had also known from his days at the B.B.C. two other poets: his fellow soldier Alun Lewis, who was killed in Burma in 1944;³ and after the war, the dissolute genius Dylan Thomas.²⁷ Always excellent company, he was, especially with Thomas, an *habitué* of many drinking dens in Fitzrovia and Soho. He died in 1985 having contracted pneumonia after venturing out by night into a snowstorm in Pond Square. As he put it with typical bravado, 'like ancient King Lear'!

2 Daniel Abse CBE FRSL (22 September 1923 – 28 September 2014) was a Welsh poet and physician whose poetry won him many awards. As a medic, he worked in a chest clinic for over 30 years.

3 Alun Lewis (1 July 1915 – 5 March 1944) was one of the best-known English language poets of the Second World War. He was a native of Cwmaman, near Aberdare, and was killed while serving with the South Wales Borderers.

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