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The Welsh Tradition of Bryn Mawr

Bryn Mawr College

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THE WELSH TRADITION OF BRYN MAWR

Bryn Mawr College's Welsh "tradition" results from its location in the town of Bryn Mawr, a suburb eleven miles west of Philadelphia. Originally named Humphreysville for its founder, the town changed its name to Bryn Mawr (high hill in Welsh) when the towns along the main line of the Philadelphia railroad became posh residential and resort areas. These towns are still today referred to collectively as the Philadelphia Main Line.

Bryn Mawr College's first building, Taylor Hall, was named for the College's founder and designed by Addison Hutton in 1884. Its second, also by Hutton, was named Merion to capture some of the Welsh flavor. There is also a town called Merion on the Main Line.

Radnor Hall, the College's third building and second dorm was designed by Walter Cope and John Stewardson; it opened in 1887. Radnor introduced to the United States the popular architectural style known as Collegiate Gothic. (Princeton, Washington University, Duke, and other schools modeled their architectural style on Bryn Mawr College's.) Cope and Stewardson adapted the Cambridge and Oxford's styles at the request of Bryn Mawr's second president M. Carey Thomas. Radnor, like Merion, is a town on the Main Line.

Denbigh Hall, another Cope and Stewardson design, opened in 1891. It was given a Welsh name in keeping with Merion and Radnor. How the name Denbigh was chosen is no longer known. In 1893, however, the science building was named for the English scientist Dalton for reasons since forgotten.

Pembroke Hall, 1896, continued the Welsh tradition. At one time the College considered adopting as its seal a representation of Lady Pembroke, but finally chose owls.

Like Pembroke, Rockefeller Hall was designed by Cope and Stewardson. It opened in 1904. Unlike Pembroke, it was named for the donor, a custom which became more popular as money became harder to raise.

Thomas Library is named for the College's second president, M. Carey Thomas. Happily Thomas is a good Welsh name.

The College's next major building was named for the donor--Goodhart (1928). Rhoads Hall, constructed in 1937-39, was named for Bryn Mawr's first president, James Rhoads. Its furniture, much of it still in use, was designed by Marcel Breuer.

Park Hall, the new science building is not in the Collegiate Gothic style, reflecting a post-war emphasis on economy. It was named for the College's third president, Marion Park.

Perhaps Park Hall broke the pattern of building in the Collegiate Gothic style, for none of the next group of buildings boasts that lavish and expensive design.

Erdman Hall, designed by Louis Kahn, was named for the donor or a relative of the donor, as were the Mariam Coffin Canaday Library, the Clarissa Donnelly Haffner Hall, and the Bern Schwartz Gymnasium. The Centennial Campus Center is so named because it was funded by an alumna too modest to wish her name blazed forth.

Other College buildings were named in the Welsh tradition. The first president's house, now the College's business offices, is Cartref. A faculty residence is called Bettws Y Coed. The president's house is Pen Y Groes, which can, perhaps too aptly, be translated as "top of the cross." It was thought to mean, by a well meaning amateur linguist, "in the grove."

Brecon, a residential hall, was given a researched Welsh name. It is the name of the county in Wales where the town of Bryn Mawr can be found. The building, formerly and prosaically known as Graduate Student Housing, was renamed and dedicated by Lady Brecon in 1981 when the building became an undergraduate dorm.

Helfarian, which can be loosely translated as "place where the gold is chased," is a combination of two Welsh words. The name was selected because the building houses the College's development office. It also is a pun on the donor's name.