

## Menelaus Williams 1814-1882

Engineer and Victorian Art Collector



Bust of Menelaus Williams

(Thanks to Cardiff Museum for the pictures & information)

He was born on the 10<sup>th</sup> March 1818 in East Lothian Scotland, his father said was a writer to the signet at Edinburgh and his mother's maiden name was Darling. He was an apprentice to a millwright or to a firm of engineers at Haddington. In 1839 he was working at Middlesbrough dock, erection and brick-making machinery for the Messrs' Pease. Afterwards he worked for a company of agricultural machinery and in 1844, he was sent by the company to superintend some work at Hensol castle Mid Glamorgan, to remodel a corn mill for Rowland Fothergill, who persuaded him to stay and eventually managed Fothergill's ironworks at Llwydcoed and Abernant.

Around 1850 he was induced by Sir John Guest offering, it was said, to double his salary to £600 a year to join the Dowlais Iron Company, where, in early 1851, he became the engineer-manager of the mills and forges department after the retirement of John Evans. It was a risky time to join the company. The enterprise had been paralyzed through most of the 1840s by the long failure to agree terms for the renewal of its lease from the Bute estate; and when this was settled in 1848, stagnation continued because of the long illness of Guest, virtually the sole owner. There was some revival under the management by his widow, Lady Charlotte Guest, but a decade's neglect had taken a heavy toll. The real climb back came after Lady Charlotte's remarriage in 1855 when overall control fell to the chief trustee, G. T. Clark "the other trustee was Henry Austin Bruce", also an art collector to whom we shall return, who then appointed Menelaus as

general manager. Menelaus was also a large proprietor in the Tredegar and Treforest ironworks, as well as seven large collieries.

When Mr Bessemer at the British Association meeting Cheltenham in 1856, announced his discovery, Dowlais Ironworks were soon to take it. They made a few experiments over several months, to try the new process without much practical success. Later on, after Mushet had shown how, by the addition of spiegeleisen, the main difficulty in the way of the Bessemer process had been removed and steel making was resumed at Dowlais. Menelaus also established at Dowlais the manufacture of steel by Siemens process, the plant which he erected being amongst the first designed to carry on the open-hearth process on a large scale.

He was the driving force of the first 1857 meeting at the Castle Hotel, Merthyr which led to the foundation of the South Wales Institute of Civil Engineers of which he was the first president. Then in 1866 he took the chair at the meeting which was held at the Queen's Hotel Birmingham, which led to the founding of the Iron and Steel Institute of Great Britain, and was its president from 1875-1877; and in 1881 he was awarded the Bessemer Gold Medal for his services to the iron and steel industry. In his spare time he built up an impressive collection of paintings which "to the disgust of the people of Merthyr" he bequeathed to Cardiff. This bequest is regarded as the foundation of the now world-famous art collection in the National Museum of Wales, where Menelaus's marble bust has an honoured place.

It was a remarkably successful combination: Clark as, in effect, managing director looking after overall strategy, and Menelaus in operational control. He was both a highly efficient manager and an inspired planner. He and Clark based their main decisions on long-run considerations: the spurning of short-run profit maximization in favour of investment for long-run growth. It was Menelaus who went to Spain in October 1871 to negotiate a long-run source of cheaper ores, culminating in the launching of the Orcenorio Iron Ore Company in 1873, jointly owned by Dowlais, Consett, and Krupps. It paid off: From being close to closure in the mid-1850s and in a period when most of the other works even Cyfarthfa failed, or slid into decline, Dowlais's profits between 1863 and 1882 averaged nearly £120,000.

In 1873 Sir William T. Lewis (Lord Merthyr) of Aberdare, acquired the Forest Blast Furnaces from Francis Crawshay, Treforest, and with Edward Williams (of Bolckow, Vaughn and Co.), Mr. G.T. Clark (Trustee of Dowlais Ironworks), Sir Issac Lowthian, William Menelaus (Dowlais General Manager Dowlais Works), and some London bankers, formed the Forest Iron Steel Company Ltd, which worked until 1900's when the works were dismantled. It stated by the old manger Mr Tolfree that Francis Crawshay erected three blast furnaces at Treforest, but owing to an argument with his father William Crawshay of Cyfarthfa, the blast furnaces were never used until 1873.

His success in managing the Dowlais works was his "Golden Rule" which he used, was that he insisted of having daily reports from all the works departments under his care, each report was scrutinized, so that he knew what was happening twenty four hours a day at the works. Menelaus was extremely strict, almost severely so, with those under him he was always short, blunt and decisive in manner and on one dared to disobey his question of his orders.

His quick temper was also one of his characteristics. An un-admitted offence or any endeavor to conceal a fault from his keen eyes, met with the severest displeasure if not instant dismissal but a fault readily admitted or acknowledged was passed over, and not noticed again. If there was one offence more unpardonable than any other was anyone employed in the works to give

information outside, of what was going on within. This meant instant dismissal forever; he would trust that person no more. To ask him any information was almost a great crime.



Thanks to Cardiff University

The success derived from innovation as well as organization. Menelaus invented several mechanical handling devices and designed the massive new two-directional Goat mill for iron rolling. He fostered the famous 1860s Bessemer experiments in steel making at Dowlais and quickly adopted the Siemens furnace. By the time of Menelaus's death in 1882 Dowlais had largely made the difficult transition from iron to steel. He used small coal, a waste product, in the furnaces, releasing the large coal for the lucrative steam coal trade; he proved that old worn-out furnaces needlessly destroyed fuel; and in 1870 he was first to use the waste gas from the coking ovens to fuel the furnaces. As a result he became very wealthy. By the 1880s Menelaus's salary was reputed to be £3500 p.a., while he had personally invested in several large coal and iron enterprises.

He was a childless widower, he had married Margaret Janet (brother of Rhys Hopkin Rhys), a daughter of Jenkin Rhys of the Llwydcoed ironworks, in 1852 but she died just ten weeks later in November 1852, quite possible of cholera. Although childless, he brought up two nephews, William Darling, who became a Law Lord and Charles Darling, who became an MP later a Baron. He took little part in local public life. His public activities were mostly related to his professional enthusiasms. He was the driving force behind the foundation of the South Wales Institute of Civil Engineers in 1857, and of the Iron and Steel Institute of Great Britain. He also campaigned for better road and rail links between Merthyr and Cardiff a matter of vital commercial importance to the company.

Despite his wealth, he lived quite simply, and the collecting of art seems to have been almost his only extravagance. He gave part of that collection, thirty-eight works valued at £10,000, to Cardiff Free Library and Museum. William Menelaus suffered a serious illness in November 1879; he was treated by Dr. Creswell, who obtained advice of Dr. Davies of Merthyr, Dr. Edwards of Cardiff and Dr. Andrew Clark, London, in which he recovered. He died after a lengthy illness at Charlton House, High Street, Tenby on the 30<sup>th</sup> March 1882, he his buried with his wife who died thirty years earlier.



Vault of Menelaus Williams St Cynog's Church Penderyn

Amongst the people who attended his funeral was Letelle Darling, Charles Darling, brother-in-law Rhys. H. Rhys of Llwydcoed.

Lord and Lady Aberdare  
Mr and Mrs G.T. Clark  
George Martin Dowlais  
William Jenkins Consett  
Edward Williams, Middlesborough  
Mr W.T. Lewis (Sir) Mardy Aberdare  
DR P.R. Cresswell  
Mr William T. Crawshay

### **Menelaus's art collection**

### **Merthyr Art Exhibition**

An art exhibition was organized in Merthyr Tydfil in 1880, to raise funds to establish an Art School. The art came from far and wide, including South Kensington Museum, the items were offered for display in the Exhibition at Merthyr Drill Hall. A "hanging committee" was selected from the huge amount of art offered.

Below is an extract taken from the South Wales Weekly News (22.05.1880)

"Amongst the contributions of the Science and Art Department from South Kensington, are a series of handsome designs of mediaeval figures for execution in Mosaic work, also there were some splendid photographs, the handiwork of some of the first photographers of the day, among them was the late Mr Robert Crawshay, in that branch of art were in several bits of scenery taken from the neighborhood of Merthyr. The center piece of the collection was a remarkable 'composition photograph' by H.P. Robinson of a picture by Hans Makart, which proved one of greatest attractions of the Paris Exhibition. The subject is 'The Entry of Charles V into Antwerp'".



“The Entry of Charles V into Antwerp”

“A cursory glance at the wealth of paintings which adorned the walls of the Drill-hall, discloses two grand master pieces of Titan, Guido, fully illustrative of the genius of the painters. A large number of Royal Academy pictures, representing some of the great masters in the modern school of painting, such as Millais, Gainsborough, Cooper, Goodall and Stansfield, and others, by artists scarcely less famous, were sent by Mr. W.T. Lewis, of Mardy; Mr G.T. Clark, Mr William Menelaus; Mr F.W. Harris of Treharris, and others interested in the Exhibition. It would, indeed, require more than a single visit to form a due appreciation of these works alone. Water colour paintings are also in good force, and some exquisite etchings by Turner will well repay a close inspection. It should not be forgotten in connection with the pictures a fine series of portraits of the great ironmasters of Cyfarthfa, contributed by Mr William Crawshay.

Various studies of eminent sculptors, including busts of

Henry Richard M.P.  
Thomas Stephens  
Sir John Guest  
G.T. Clark  
'Gohebydd'

There were also busts of William Davies and David Davies, as Merthyr men, being particularly calculated to arouse the interest of local visitors.

“Pre-eminent in the miscellaneous collection is the case of the ivory carvings lent by the Premier, Mr Gladstone; to which may be added a fine example of Swiss wood-carving by hand, lent by G.T. Clark, Messrs.' Elkington's show of silver-plate, one of the most attractive samples of which is the enameled dessert service, made for the notorious King Theebau, of Burma; also a splendid suite of amour from the South Kensington authorities”.

“Japanese curiosities from Mrs H. Martin, of Newcastle, and Mr Newcombe of Brecon, must gain more than passing notice, as these cases make an attractive show, but three are two items among the curiosities to which attention should be directed, as they are not conspicuous and may chance to be overlooked. We refer to a pair of old Roman shoes, and a shovel of the same period, which are exhibited by W.T. Lewis, as having been found embedded in the mines at Llantrisant, which would indicate, were once worked by the Romans”.

A week later under the heading “A Private View” which shows that art that Menelaus Williams exhibited on 29.05.1880;

- Life size painting of St. Francis clinging to the cross, by Stirzzi; (To whom presented it was presented by the great gun manufacturer Herr Krupp).
- The Misty Mountain, by Peter Graham, Menelaus, secured it for a £1,000.
- Joan of Arc, by Millais, the kneeling figure of the heroine, clad in armour, and in the act of supplicating Divine grace to carry on her mission.
- The Cock Fight, by Hodgson.
- A Winter Retreat of Soldiers, by Benassit
- The Convent Raven. H.S. Marks R.A.
- Statuette of a warrior, by J.H. Foley, R.A. 164

#### Merthyr's Reaction to Mr Menelaus's Munificence to Cardiff 1882

The news of Mr Menelaus' proposed gift of valuable paintings to the town of Cardiff predictably caused consternation in Merthyr Tydfil. A strong and balanced editorial appeared in the Merthyr Express for January 7<sup>th</sup> 1882; this contains some eternal truths and is given in full.

"It will be no exaggeration to say that the brief announcement which appeared in the newspapers on Monday morning that Mr Menelaus had signified his intention to present pictures of the value of £10,000 to the town of Cardiff, took away the breath of very person in Merthyr and Dowlais who read it. Here was another example of these unfortunate towns being passed over in favour of another place, with which, unquestionably, it would puzzle the most astute to discover anything approaching to an identity of interest between the munificent donor and the community to be benefited by his splendid gift. We have no right to question the motives by which Mr Menelaus had been actuated in this matter".

"Doubtless the reasons which decided him in favour of Cardiff were satisfactory enough, for all that we cannot restrain the flood of regret, which is being poured forth on all sides, that this noble collection of paintings, seen and admired by thousands during the Merthyr Art Exhibition, is desired to adorn another town than their own."

"It may be alleged, with a truth which none can deny, that the town of Merthyr does not possess a proper place for the suitable exhibition and preservation of such valuable treasures of art; and on the other hand it is a fact that the town of Cardiff is expending many thousands of pounds upon a magnificent building intended to be the home of a Free Library, School of Art and Design, and a Museum of Art".

**"Cardiff set about to provide for contingencies which were, to all appearances, only remotely probable."**

"The spacious room to be devoted to pictures was resolved upon before the owners had a single painting to hang upon its walls. The Hon. Member for the Borough gave the first picture, Mr Menelaus has now followed with many pictures, and these examples will influence other owners of similar works of art. It illustrates with striking effect the experience of our daily lives that no provision for any good and useful purpose will ever be made, with being properly utilised".

"If the people of Merthyr had the SPIRIT OF THE TIMES working within them, and courageously availed themselves of their powers to build a Free Library, not only would there have been no opposition from the great rate-payers, but it may be taken for granted that Merthyr, and not Cardiff, would have benefited by this great gift".

“Had the disposition to provide means of culture been made apparent beyond a doubt, even if the accommodation had not been in existence, it is most probable that the offer would have been made here (Merthyr) first; and the mere expression of a conditional intention to bestow such treasures, would have been sufficient to have stimulated the townspeople into the effort necessary for making proper provision for them”.

“But this much is beyond the pale of disputation if a community will not rise to an occasion and prove their desire to be helped, and their worthiness to receive help, no help will be forthcoming”.

### **The Menelaus Bequest to Cardiff**

William Menelaus was an avid collector of quality paintings, prior to his death in 1882; he arranged to donate thirty-eight paintings to the town of Cardiff. Menelaus left the painting to Lord Bute, Mr G.T. Clark (Dowlais), Mr R.O. Jones and Mr W.T. Lewis, in trust for the benefit of the town of Cardiff. The value of the paintings in 1882 was £10,000.

An annual report of the Cardiff Free Library, Museum and Science and Arts Schools Committee, mentioned that the late William Menelaus of Dowlais, had generously offered to present a number of works of art to be placed in the Fine Art Gallery in connection with the new building. The committee recorded the valuable services rendered by Mr W.T. Lewis. Aberdare, in obtaining the Menelaus Collection, and thanked Mr Lewis for the marble bust, sculpted by Sir Thomas Brock, presented to him in memory of Mr Menelaus.

Note: Cardiff Museum

Menelaus began collecting paintings around 1870. He often bought through the dealers Thomas Agnew and Sons, founded in Manchester in 1826, and with a London branch from 1870. Agnew's then specialized in mainly in British contemporary artists, and catered primarily for newly wealthy self-made northern and midland industrialists. The firm acted for him at Christie's auctions, and he bought from their stock. Agnew's records begin with the purchase of the Talisman by the South Wales painter John Haynes-Williams. Menelaus made 15 purchases from Agnew's over a decade spending £9,000 so the £10,000 valuation on the whole collection was conservative.

Paintings that he donated (at National Museum Cardiff)

- Talisman by the South Wales painter John Haynes Williams (1836-1908)
- The Parting of 1872 James Tissot.
- Will He Come? John Haynes Williams (1836-1908)
- The Reverie or the Special Correspondent John Robert Dicksee (1807-1905)
- Day Dreams, painted in 1871 Charles Liddersdale (1831-1895)
- The Misty Mountain Top, by the now-forgotten Scottish Royal Academician Peter Graham.
- The Pheasant's Home by Charles Burt (1823-1902)
- The Border Keep Scottish artist, Waller Hugh Paton (1828-1895)
- Welsh landscape by James Surtees

Menelaus's collection some of the other specialisms adopted by Victorian painters, such as social realism.

- A London Fog Charles Ludovici (1820-1894)
- Youth and Age a woman artist Alice Mary Havers (1850-1890)
- The Challenge Refused John Evan Hodgson (1831-1895)
- She Never Told Her Love by Alfred Woolmer (1805-1892),
- Two paintings by Anglo-Dutch artist Alma-Tadema, Poetry and Prose,

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of it is the presence of half-a-dozen European, mostly French works. Three of these came from Agnew's, including:

- Le Fletu or The *Beech Tree* by Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot (1796-1875).
- The Retreat, by Louis-Eugène Benassit (1833-1904).
- Refreshment by the Way German Heinrich Breling (1849-1914)

Otherwise, it is much the sort of collection one would expect a Victorian industrialist to put together, dominated by the work of by now largely forgotten genre painters.

- The Domestic Chaplain, of 1869, by Charles West Cope RA (1811-1890)



Menelaus South Stain glass St Cynog Church Penderyn

There is a beautiful glass on the south side of the church near the chancel, of two figures St David and St Andrew. This is memorial window to William Menelaus "Scotland", St David "is adopted country" who was once an engineer at the Dowlais Iron Works, he married a lady from Ysgubor Fawr hence the connection to the parish "Rhys Hopkin Rhys's Sister". The window was place there by his cousins, C.J. and W.L. Darling, one of whom was the famous Justice Darling, who one time figured prominently in important cases.



GRASP THE  
WILLIAM MENCLA'S  
OF THE  
AND DAUGHTER OF MENCLA'S OF  
WHO DIED ON THE 11th NOVEMBER 1862  
AGED 32 YEARS  
ERECTED BY THE MEMORY OF  
FAMILY