

A CERTAINE SCHOOLE MASTER - A PORTRAIT OF IOLO DAVIES
A biography by Richard Lewis

PROLOGUE

Iolo Davies was a gentle giant of a being whose true greatness lay in making the world a more fascinating and better place for all those who came within his orbit. As a boarding master at Cowbridge Grammar School he became a father-figure for the dispossessed boys packed off from home. As a teacher he communicated with pupils at every level on the intelligence scale. And as a man he was loved for the unconditional hand of support he extended to every boy, however insignificant or unpromising a dot on the school horizon that boy might be. He was not Prince Hamlet, as he once said, quoting Eliot, nor was meant to be. Not for him the vainglory of headship, even though he did, by a twist of fate, become head of Cowbridge Grammar School for a short time at the uncomfortable end of the school's life. No, Iolo offered an alternative society, a parallel school world, where greater values applied than the stereotypical ones of a headmaster with lesser intellect, lesser humanity. He was happy to be second or third in command. But his influence, perhaps without his ever realizing it, was the greater for all that.

His heyday, there is almost a temptation to say the prime of Iolo Davies, must surely have been his time at Cowbridge Grammar School, from the fifties to the beginning of the seventies. He was at his full intellectual power during this period, at full transcendence over the frailties of general existence. How many former pupils, now in their sixties or seventies, living in all parts of the world, have taken stock since his death in April 2009 and realized how much of their own development was due to him, how much of their own thoughts and views on the world? Perhaps only Iolo himself could have answered that question if he were still alive today. He kept in touch with so many of them, writing them notes on topics that might interest them, sending them copies of his school magazine, dropping a line with one of his interesting reflections on life, always sending a Christmas card. This was what he liked to call his 'after-sales service'. Except that no-one could ever have known that this service would last a lifetime.

So where did this 'certaine schoole master' come from? He rarely talked about his past, or any part of his life outside school, except occasionally to talk about Oxford, or some war-time incident. When the holidays came he sometimes said he would be going to stay with his mother in a far-sounding place called Iver. But this was a shadow-land. For the boys his true existence was contained within the parameters of school. Nonetheless, we all start out from somewhere and now, since our end is in our beginning, to quote Eliot once more, we must shine a torch into those shadows, just as he himself shone his torch in the shadows of 'Top Dorm' of a Sunday evening on to his book to 'spin' the younger boys a story.