

## EVANS, GWYNFOR RICHARD (1912-2005), Welsh nationalist and politician

**Name:** Gwynfor Richard Evans  
**Date of birth:** 1912  
**Date of death:** 2005  
**Spouse:** Rhiannon Prys Evans (née Thomas)  
**Child:** Dafydd Prys Evans  
**Child:** Alcwyn Deiniol Evans  
**Child:** Meleri Mair Evans  
**Child:** Guto Prys  
**Child:** Meinir Ceridwen Ffransis (née Evans)  
**Child:** Branwen Eluned Evans  
**Child:** Rhys Dyrfal Evans  
**Parent:** Catherine Mary Evans (née Richard)  
**Parent:** Daniel James Evans  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** Welsh nationalist and politician  
**Area of activity:** Patriots; Politics, Government and Political Movements  
**Author:** Cynog Dafis

Gwynfor Evans was born on 1 September 1912 at Y Goedwig, 24 Somerset Road, Barry, the eldest of the three children of Daniel James ('Dan') Evans (1883-1972), an industrious and highly successful shopkeeper, and Catherine Mary (née Richard) (1879-1969), herself a shopkeeper from a chapel-going London Welsh background, originally from Cydweli. Gwynfor Evans was above all the product of Welsh nonconformist Christianity. His grandfather, Ben Evans (1854-1918), was an Independent minister, whose removal from Llanelli to Barry led to Gwynfor's being born in that commercial, cosmopolitan town. Ben was in turn the nephew of a minister and the brother of two others, and Idris, Dan's brother, also entered the ministry. Gwynfor was steeped, through the religious and social activities of his grandfather's chapel, where his father was a deacon, in the liberal-radical, internationalist version of the nonconformist tradition. He adhered to that tradition's values throughout his life and relied heavily on ministerial friends at times of crisis and in making decisions. This inheritance is probably what accounts for the moral seriousness, missionary zeal and self-sacrificing commitment which typified him in his political career, which he regarded, he said, as 'a kind of ministry'.

Making the connection between the nonconformist ethic of his upbringing and Welsh patriotism, and then nationalism, was a somewhat gradual process. English was the main language of Dan and Catherine Evans's household, and certainly the first language of Gwynfor, his sister Ceridwen and his brother Alcwyn. His interest in Welsh literature and history was aroused under the influence of some inspirational teachers while a pupil at Barry grammar school. However, when he entered the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, to study law in 1931 it was the Student Christian Movement and the activities of the International Relations Club that attracted him. He then came under the influence of certain young members of Plaid Cymru, and reading *The Economics of Welsh Self-Government* by D. J. Davies convinced him that a self-governing Wales was feasible.

He joined Plaid in the summer of 1934 before embarking on a two-year course at Oxford where his commitment to nationalism was consolidated. When he returned to Wales, to a post as a trainee solicitor in Cardiff, he threw himself into voluntary political activism, in favour of self-government for Wales, but just as much, particularly influenced by George M. Ll. Davies and Dr Gwenan Jones, in favour of social Christianity and the peace movement. In 1939 he was appointed secretary of Heddychwyr Cymru, the Welsh branch of the Peace Pledge Union, a movement advocating uncompromising pacifism. Gwynfor's aspiration to merge pacifism with Welsh nationalism was realised when a resolution was passed at the 1938 Plaid Cymru Conference in Swansea, contrary to the wishes of Saunders Lewis, to eschew entirely the use of violence in the struggle for self-government. Gwynfor's pacifism, together with the Party's parallel decision to pursue Welsh freedom primarily by constitutional, electoral means, was to become a continuing bone of contention with Saunders Lewis over the following decades, a source of tension in Gwynfor's own attitudes and a cause of dissension within the 'national movement' generally.

Gwynfor's decision to terminate his legal career and to move to Llangadog, first to farm and then to run a market gardening business, was a crucial turning point. It signified his return to his family and cultural roots, while also establishing a measure of financial independence which would enable him to dedicate himself to his mission for Wales. This too was the beginning of the political relationship with Carmarthenshire which would take him to the County Council (1949-73) and to Westminster where he would represent the constituency twice (1966-70, 1974-79). On St David's Day 1941 he married Rhiannon Prys Thomas (1919-2006) whose unconditional support for her husband and to the national cause would be key throughout the tireless labours and upheavals of his political career, and who took disproportionate responsibility for bringing up their seven children.

In July 1940 Gwynfor was granted unconditional exemption from military service on religious grounds. Over the following years he gained increasing public prominence through campaigning for the peace movement and also for the New Wales Union which was established to counteract the threats to Welsh life, particularly the Welsh language, arising from the war. He also thought hard about how Plaid Cymru should prepare itself for peace, for example in economic and industrial policy, fields where in his view there were major gaps. When J. E. Daniel resigned the party presidency in 1943, many, including Saunders Lewis, saw Gwynfor as the obvious successor but personal and family reasons delayed this somewhat inevitable development until August 1945, a general election year when Plaid stood in seven constituencies, with Gwynfor getting 10% of the vote in Merionethshire.

Over the subsequent decade he threw himself with unremitting zeal into his campaigning work, gradually building up the party's membership and organization. Step by

step, with dogged persistence, in endless public meetings, in publications and correspondence, he set about popularising his core message: that Wales was a nation with an inspiring past and a rich culture; that its subordinate position within the British state was the root of its multifarious problems, cultural and economic; and that self-government was not only a moral right but also a precondition of the prosperity of which there was every reason to believe it was capable. Through such spadework, it was Gwynfor more than anyone else who managed to embed this narrative in the minds of increasing numbers of his compatriots, in particular the rising generation of Welsh-speakers.

At the same time he was involved in seeking to influence the direction of policy through his membership of the University of Wales Court, where he called for the establishment of a Welsh-medium College, and of the BBC's Consultative Committee. In 1954 the high respect in which he was held among the younger generation of nonconformist Wales found expression when he was elected as chair of the Congregational Union (121,000 members it was claimed), when he was given the platform for an extended oration on 'Christianity and Welsh Society'.

His efforts to advance the cause of the Welsh language in the County Council attracted the opposition of the Labour group in a highly damaging conflict which lasted in various forms for the next three decades. On the other hand he showed that he was in the business of advancing the national cause through inter-party collaboration by persuading the Plaid National Executive in 1949 to set up the Campaign for a Parliament for Wales in Five Years. The campaign got off to a shaky start but managed to attract **Megan Lloyd George** as chair and eventually **Huw T. Edwards** and a number of Labour MPs to come out in support. Major rallies and packed meetings were held and by the time **S. O. Davies** presented his Parliament for Wales Bill to parliament in March 1955 (drafted by one of Gwynfor's greatest supporters, Dewi Watkin Powell), the petition was attracting signatories by the thousands, including in the valleys of the south.

By 1955 Gwynfor had good reason to believe that his dual strategy of running campaigns and fighting elections was beginning to bear fruit. He could present the decision of Churchill's Conservative Government to appoint a Minister of Welsh Affairs in 1951 and devolve some limited powers to Wales as recognition of the nation's particular constitutional status and a response to nationalist pressure. At the same time, electoral support for Plaid was increasing. In the 1955 parliamentary election Gwynfor's vote in Merioneth doubled to 22% and there were a number of promising results throughout Wales.

In the late 1950s Liverpool Corporation's plan to create a reservoir by drowning the Tryweryn valley cut across this painstaking building process. Over the years since the war Plaid, and Gwynfor himself, had been prepared to countenance direct action in particular cases, for instance against the War Office in Trawsfynydd. In the case of Tryweryn this tension, together with the divisions within Plaid surged to the surface in a dramatic manner. On one hand there was the faction that wished to restore the heroic tradition of Penyborth, with the party leadership making use of direct action as a catalyst to ignite a national awakening. The other faction feared such action would shatter the attempt to establish Plaid as a popular political force and undermine its electoral strategy.

There is every reason to believe that Gwynfor himself was torn between these two tendencies. Nobody did more than him to mobilise the opposition to Liverpool's scheme but the attempt to dissuade that city from proceeding failed. The advocates of electoralism and compromise within the party won the day and their hope was that they would reap the reward in the election of Gwynfor as Merioneth's MP in the 1959 general election. These hopes came to nothing and thus was opened a five-year chapter of bitter wrangling in the history of Plaid and its President.

Gwynfor was challenged from two directions. The advocates of illegal action regarded his failure to take direct action as at best a historic opportunity lost and at worst as treachery. This faction's attempt at the Llangollen Conference in 1961 to get the party to commit to direct action in Tryweryn failed. Seven months later however, in February 1962, **Saunders Lewis** issued a direct challenge to the whole ethos and strategy of Plaid in his radio lecture, *Tynged yr Iaith* ('The Fate of the Language'), with its call for an organised campaign of direct action in favour of official status for Welsh. The message was misunderstood by some young people, but not by Gwynfor and the Plaid leadership, and the result was the establishment of *Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg* (the Welsh Language Society) in the Pontarddulais Conference fringe in August 1962. At the same conference Gwynfor managed to stave off **Wynne Samuel's** bid for the Presidency by a clear but not overwhelming majority.

The second challenge came from New Nation, a group of young radicals, including **Phil Williams** and **Emrys Roberts**, who regarded Gwynfor's identification with Welsh chapel life as an obstacle to the party's growth in an increasingly secular industrial Wales. In their magazine *Cilmeri* they attacked the 'mottled band of sycophants' (the 'Llangadog Court') on whom Gwynfor depended for counsel and who were utterly out of touch with 'current thinking in Wales'. As well as an ideological shift, they called for a far-reaching revamp of the party organisation.

Following the disappointment of the 1964 election many, even among Gwynfor's main supporters, were dubious about the emphasis on parliamentary elections. **Elystan Morgan's** departure for the Labour Party was a personal blow to Gwynfor and an apparent indication of the failure of his strategy.

Then the utterly unpredictable happened. That strategy, along with Gwynfor's tireless missionary efforts over the years, were vindicated in his brilliant victory in the Carmarthen by-election, July 1966. Gwynfor was magnanimous and forward-looking in his hour of success. He charged his supporters to welcome the thousands of new members, very different in background and culture, who would now flow into the party's ranks. New Nation's organisational reforms were brought in and members of that group played a prominent role, specifically in extending the party's influence in the industrial south-east. The upsurge in support for the party was impressive as it came close to seizing the Rhondda (1967) and Caerphilly (1968) in by-elections. Gwynfor made his mark as a new member of parliament in the face of fierce attacks.

Notwithstanding that Plaid had embraced constitutional politics, the direct action tradition was not long before coming back to bite it, creating painful personal and political dilemmas for Gwynfor. In 1969 he decided, in acknowledgement of the protestors' position, not to attend the Investiture of the Prince of Wales in Caernarfon, but agreed to welcome the Prince to Carmarthen in his role as MP. While seeking to establish distance between his constitutionalist party and the Welsh Language Society's increasingly challenging campaigns, he expressed admiration for the activists' heroism. He could easily deny any link with the violent underground movements which were spasmodically active for some twenty years, but this was impossible in the case of *Cymdeithas yr Iaith*, in which members of his own family played a prominent role. It was this no doubt that enabled Labour to taint Plaid's image with extremism and put a brake on its growth. Plaid lost Carmarthen in 1970.

Throughout the 1970s Gwynfor found himself trying to steer Wales towards a measure of self-government amidst tempestuous crosscurrents. Following the 1974 elections, when he managed to regain Carmarthen, and with two new parliamentary colleagues, **Dafydd Wigley** and **Dafydd Elis Thomas**, the aim was to utilize their position to push Labour into committing to establish a national assembly for Wales. Whatever the reason however, from the mid-70s the wind in Plaid Cymru's sails was flagging and opponents of devolution among Labour MPs gradually gained the initiative. Some party members argued that Plaid should wash its hands of any responsibility for the 1968 Government of Wales Act and Gwynfor himself was in two minds. The collective decision of the parliamentary group, however, was that there was no choice but to support the Yes Campaign in the 1979 referendum. The result, with only 12% of the electorate voting in favour of an assembly, was a catastrophe for the cause of self-government and no less than an existential crisis for Plaid Cymru. For Gwynfor the hopes of single-minded campaigning over 35 years and more had been trampled underfoot. To cap it all, he was displaced by the Carmarthenshire electors for the second time on 3 May.

His public vow a year later to fast unto death had to do with much more than its explicit purpose, the establishment of a Welsh-language television channel. Gwynfor was convinced that his party, and more importantly than that, his nation, faced oblivion. Only a symbolic heroic act would suffice to save them. If the television channel battle were won, victory would arouse that party from its lethargy. If he died, the cause of Wales would be endowed with a new urgency which could transform its prospects. Faced with some of his colleagues' profoundest doubts and attempts to make him change his mind, on moral as well as strategic grounds, Gwynfor stuck to his intention and in September 1980 came the announcement that there would be a Welsh television channel. Plaid Cymru had been regorganised by the decision of the pilot of its constitutional development to return to the heroic direct-action tradition of its early years, and was simultaneously inspired to move ahead to the next stage in its development.

Ironically enough, that stage involved embracing socialism. At first Gwynfor opposed the move, describing it as 'shadow-boxing, illusionist wrestling, ballyhoo'. Nevertheless, at the Carmarthen Conference in 1981, being about to retire as president, he voted in favour of including socialism in the party's aims. Protecting party unity was part of his motivation, but an element of self-critical confession as well as strategic realism are detectable in his words during the miners' strike: 'We must rid ourselves of the image, which I was inadvertently responsible for creating, of a rural, nonconformist nationalism, with all its emphasis on the language'.

His decision to try to recapture Carmarthen in the 1983 election was no doubt a mistake. Labour retained the seat and Gwynfor was relegated to third place after the Tories. His political career was ended but not his passionate active commitment to the cause. He responded creatively to his fellow-nationalists' anxiety at the effect of immigration on the language - anxiety which he himself felt just as much - by establishing the movement **PONT** (Bridge), intended to encourage newcomers to identify with their adopted country. He became Plaid's Honorary President and he continued to be unsparing in his advice and support. Over the years of his retirement many a pilgrim made their way to his and **Rhiannon's** home to seek advice and share ideas. One such who came to pay his respects and enjoy hospitality was **Ron Davies** MP, architect of the Government of Wales Act for which the Welsh electorate voted in the 1997 Referendum, when the level of support in Carmarthenshire was crucial to the result. Following the remarkable success of Plaid Cymru in the first National Assembly election, the **Plaid Assembly Members' group** also made their pilgrimage to **Pencarreg**.

Gwynfor died at his home, **Talar Wen, Pencarreg**, on April 21 2005, and his funeral, which was televised, was held at **Seion chapel, Aberystwyth**. His remains were cremated at **Aberystwyth crematorium** and his ashes scattered on the **Garn Goch hillfort** near **Llangadog**, where he had regularly sought solace and inspiration, and where a memorial now stands to him. His widow **Rhiannon** died eight months later.

Gwynfor's unique contribution to the national cause would have been impossible were it not for his relatively privileged family background. He was able to establish a business which afforded him financial independence for a time, but drew too upon the financial generosity of his closest relatives. He was also supported by other admirers who saw his contribution to the national cause as essential. However, it was Gwynfor's own exceptional character which more than anything was responsible for the unique, utterly formative contribution he made to the growth of Welsh nationalism and the establishment of the incipient Welsh state which exists today. Through his incredibly single-minded persistence, his tireless campaigning and his political acumen he did more than anyone to convince his compatriots that they could indeed be a political nation. He was also a remarkably prolific author who produced a constant flow of articles and pamphlets as well as several books such as *Rhagom i Ryddid* ('Onward to Freedom') in 1964 and *Aros Mae* (1971, later translated as *Land of my Fathers*), his popular, pioneering and influential history of Wales.

## Author

**Cynog Dafis**

## Sources

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Rhys Evans, *Gwynfor Evans: Portrait of a Patriot* (2008)  
Peter Hughes Griffiths (ed.), *Bro a Bywyd, Gwynfor Evans* (2008)  
Personal knowledge

## Further Reading

NLW Archives: [Mr. Gwynfor Evans. At Etholwyr Meirion](#)  
NLW Archives: [Llythyr at y Milwyr o Feirion](#)  
NLW Archives: [Gofynnir eich cefnogaeth garedig i Mr. Gwynfor Evans, Ymgeisydd Plaid Cymru](#)  
NLW Archives: [Sefwch dros Gymru... Gwynfor Evans](#)  
NLW Archives: [Mr. Gwynfor Evans. At Etholwyr Meirion](#)  
NLW Archives: [Gwynfor Evans invites you to consider these facts...](#)  
NLW Archives: [Vote for Fair Play for Plaid Cymru... Gwynfor Evans](#)  
NLW Archives: [Aberdare By-Election, October 28th, 1954. Gwynfor Evans](#)  
NLW Archives: [Plaid Cymru - Presenting Gwynfor Evans, Prospective Candidate Carmarthen Constituency](#)  
NLW Archives: [Gwynfor Evans, Un Ohonom Ni](#)  
NLW Archives: [Vote for... Gwynfor Evans](#)  
NLW Archives: [Plaid Cymru... Gwynfor Evans](#)  
NLW Archives: [Dyma'r Dyn i Arwain Cenedl. Gwynfor Evans, Llywydd Plaid Cymru](#)  
NLW Archives: [Consider Your Future. A Gwynfor Evans Campaign Leaflet](#)  
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NLW Archives: [Plaid Cymru. Chi a Gwynfor Evans and You](#)  
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NLW Archives: [Farmers... Support... Gwynfor Evans](#)  
NLW Archives: [Support Gwynfor Evans to get a fair deal for Carmarthenshire farmers](#)  
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NLW Archives: [His Aim is a Better Living for Farmers... Gwynfor Evans](#)  
NLW Archives: [A Strong Voice for Carmarthen Constituency](#)  
NLW Archives: [Welsh Devolution Referendum, 1979](#)  
NLW Archives: [Welsh Devolution Referendum, 1997](#)  
Wikipedia Article: [Gwynfor Evans](#)

## Sound and Film

Archif ITV Cymru/Wales Archive: [Gwynfor yn ennill Caerfyrddin 14/7/1966](#)

## Additional Links

NLW Archives: [Papurau Gwynfor Evans/Gwynfor Evans Papers](#)  
VIAF: [94634033](#)  
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