

## MORGAN, DYFNALLT (1917-1994), poet, literary critic and translator

**Name:** Dyfnallt Morgan

**Date of birth:** 1917

**Date of death:** 1994

**Gender:** Male

**Occupation:** poet, literary critic and translator

**Area of activity:** Eisteddfod; Literature and Writing; Poetry

**Author:** Llion Wigley

Dyfnallt Morgan was born in Penyardren, Merthyr Tydfil on 24 May 1917, the only child of Osborne Morgan (1881-1937) and his wife Frances Jane (née Hawes, 1882-1966). His father's family had moved to Merthyr from Ceredigion during the nineteenth century, and his mother had roots in Llanddewi Brefi. His parents met in Llanddewi after his mother moved to the village from London to live with her aunt. The family lived in Haydn Terrace at the far end of Penyardren, overlooking the mighty steel and iron works of Dowlais. His father was a miner in Fochriw, and later a weigher and timer in the Guest, Keen and Nettlefields company's works in Dowlais. He lost his job in 1930 as a result of the economic slump, and he remained unemployed until his death in 1937.

Morgan went to primary school in Gellifaelog in 1922, before gaining a scholarship to Cyfarthfa Castle Grammar School in 1928. The atmosphere and education at Gellifaelog school was wholly English, but his Welsh was strengthened during this period through visiting his aunts in Llanddewi Brefi every summer holiday. Morgan made many friends in the village, and returning to Merthyr every September was always a painful experience. He was remembered very fondly in the area, and this was reflected in the concert held in his honour in Llanddewi after he won the crown at the 1957 National Eisteddfod.

He witnessed dire poverty in Dowlais during his childhood and his own family experienced hardship after his father lost his job. He remembered wearing clothes which had been shortened after his father and walking three miles to and from Cyfarthfa School every day between 1928 and 1935. A number of his fellow pupils died from tuberculosis. His literary abilities came to the fore in the sixth form under the guidance of his Welsh teacher, Miss Hettie Morris. She introduced him to the works of **T. H. Parry Williams** and **Gwenallt**, two personal heroes whom he came to know as a student at the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth from 1935. He won a scholarship to the college by the sea and travelled there on his bike from Dowlais in September 1935. There were around 600 students at the college in this period, many of whom were from the valleys of South Wales. A lunch club was established by college staff to ensure the poorest students had at least one hot meal a day, and Morgan lived mainly on baked beans in the house he shared with **Merfyn Turner**, **Cledwyn Hughes** and others in South Road. He studied Welsh, English, French and Music, graduating with honours in Welsh in 1938, and English in 1939. He remained at the college for a further year to train as a teacher.

The Second World War interrupted any plans to begin a career in education. As a Christian of strong convictions raised in the Independent chapel in Gwernllwyn, Dowlais, he decided to take a stand and refuse to bear arms. One of his earliest poems, *Y Milwr Gwyn* (The White Soldier), about the war memorial in Llanddewi Brefi, written when he was twenty one, bears eloquent witness to his opposition to militarism. He appeared in front of the South Wales Tribunal sitting in Aberystwyth in 1940 with some of his fellow students, such as **Merfyn Turner**, and his pacifist beliefs were recognised by the judge. After he was registered as a conscientious objector, he decided to join a branch of the Christian Pacifist Forestry and Land Units, (established in Wales by **Gwynfor Evans**). He was a forester near Llandovery in Carmarthenshire for a year, before moving to work as an orderly in the surgical ward at Queen Elizabeth Hospital, Birmingham in 1941. He joined the Friends Ambulance Unit in 1943 - one of a number of Welsh recruits amongst more than one thousand men who worked for the Quaker Unit across Europe, North Africa and Asia between 1939 and 1946 - working with refugees for four years, firstly in Italy and later in Austria. He worked mainly as a welfare officer and a liaison officer between the British military forces and the Soviet army in refugee camps near the border between Austria and Hungary. After his period of national service came to an end in 1946, he decided to commit to two further years with the Unit in China because he did not wish to compete for jobs back in Wales with soldiers who had returned from the war. This was an act which typified his modest and thoughtful personality. Following a decade of fighting between China and Japan, the civil war between Mao Tse Tung's Communist forces and the Nationalist Kuomintang had recently resumed. He sailed to Shanghai in June 1946 and travelled to Chengchow in the Honan province, where around five million refugees had returned after fleeing from Japanese forces. His main task was to help transport food and other essential goods from Shanghai to Chengchow, and later to Hankow, until he had to return to Britain in 1947 following serious illness. His left arm was paralysed after contracting tuberculosis and he spent a year as a patient in Heatherwood Hospital, Ascot, followed by another year recuperating at home.

After a period of research at Edinburgh University, Morgan returned to Wales in 1951 to take a post in the Education department at the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth. He compiled a detailed study of bilingualism in primary schools through visiting schools in mid and west Wales. During this period he met and married Eleri, daughter of the poet and minister **T. Eirug Davies**, and they had one son, Tomos. He worked for the BBC in Swansea and Bangor for a decade between 1954 and 1964 as a radio producer, and also presented a number of shows. The range of his interests and knowledge was shown in the wide variety of programmes which he produced on science, literature, agriculture and nature. He had a particularly rich and melodious voice which suited the radio perfectly - in the opinion of his friend Islwyn Ffowc Elis 'the most melodious Welsh voice I ever heard' - and he made an important contribution to broadcasting through helping to develop the vocabulary used and the range of subjects covered on the radio in the Welsh language. From 1964 until his retirement in 1984 he worked as a lecturer for the Extra Mural Department at University College, Bangor, travelling around the towns and villages of north Wales to give night classes on Welsh literature with his customary good humour and kindness.

Morgan came close to claiming the crown at the Rhyll National Eisteddfod in 1953 with his poem 'Y Llen'. **Saunders Lewis**, one of the three judges that year, would have awarded him the crown as he felt that the portrayal of social and cultural change in a declining industrial town given in the poem was the most powerful one in the competition. The poem, written in the Welsh dialect spoken in Glamorgan, tells the story of a middle-aged man returning to Dowlais for an old friend's funeral. He notices the empty seats and lacklustre singing in his old chapel, and the poem is arguably one of the most striking creative responses to the process of secularization and Anglicization which was experienced in the South Wales valleys in the first half of the twentieth century. The verse drama *Rhwng Dau*, which won him the crown at the National Eisteddfod in Anglesey in 1957, has a similar theme, namely the border between two ways of life and two cultures, and the need to take a practical, conscious decision to protect the older way of life from being swallowed whole by the new. His best creative works were gathered together in his only volume of poetry, *Y Llen a Myfyrdodau Eraill* (1967).

Morgan's most important works as a literary critic were published in the early 1970s: an erudite analysis of **Gwenallt**'s poetry in the *Writers of Wales* series (1972), which helped introduce his work to a new audience; an important and pioneering study of **T. H. Parry Williams**'s early works, *Rhyw Hanner Ieuencid* (1971); and a particularly well-informed lecture on the major themes in the poetry of **Waldo Williams**, which penetrates under the surface of his poems to the Christian and humanitarian beliefs which lie at their heart (1975). The variety and eclecticism of sources referenced is an obvious feature of all these critical works, which derived from his wide-ranging knowledge and reading, and from his mastery of several languages, including French, Italian and German. He succeeded in conveying the breadth and depth of his knowledge in a fluid, colloquial style, richly flavoured with the rhythms and phrases of Ceredigion he heard as a child. Morgan was also a skilful editor who compiled interesting collections on **Ann Griffiths**, *Y Ferch o Ddolwar Fach* (1976), and **Merfyn Turner**, *Cyfaill Carcharorion* (1991), as well as two volumes of radio talks on Welsh literature, and he contributed numerous articles and reviews to the Welsh press. He made further use of his talents as a linguist to translate an abundance of literary and musical works into Welsh. He presented important theatrical works by Pirandello (with his wife, Eleri) and the Czech playwright, Vaclav Cibula, to a Welsh audience, and he translated over 250 musical works from German, French and Italian at the request of the National Eisteddfod's Music Committee.

As well as his unique literary abilities, Morgan was a particularly gentlemanly and thoughtful person, remembered for the warmth and generosity of his personality. His independent spirit was reflected in his decision that the tribute which is customary within the Nonconformist tradition should not be included at his funeral. He wrote a letter during his final period of illness to be read out at the funeral instead which bore powerful witness to his love for his family and his deep convictions as a Christian and pacifist. He died in Gwynedd Hospital, Bangor on 6 October 1994 and the funeral service was held at Pendref chapel and the crematorium in Bangor.

### Author

Llion Wigley

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