

## OWEN, GERALLT LLOYD (1944-2014), teacher, publisher, poet

**Name:** Gerallt Lloyd Owen  
**Date of birth:** 1944  
**Date of death:** 2014  
**Spouse:** Alwena Owen (née Jones)  
**Child:** Nest Llwyd Owen  
**Child:** Mirain Llwyd Owen  
**Child:** Bedwyr Llwyd Owen  
**Parent:** Jane Ellen Owen  
**Parent:** Henry Lloyd Owen  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** teacher, publisher, poet  
**Area of activity:** Education; Poetry; Printing and Publishing  
**Author:** Elfyn Pritchard

Gerallt Lloyd Owen was born at Tŷ Uchaf, a farm in the parish of Llandderfel, Merionethshire, on 6 November 1944, the second son of Henry Lloyd Owen (1906-1982), farmer and Pest Officer for Merioneth and Gwynedd, and Jane Ellen (Jin, 1905-1989), a teacher who also kept the village shop and post office at her original home, Broncaereini in Sarnau after the family had moved there in 1945 following the appointment of her husband by Merioneth County Council. Gerallt's elder brother Geraint (born 1941) won the National Eisteddfod Crown in 2011 and was invested as Archdruid in 2016. Gerallt was educated in the village school referred to by **Bob Lloyd** (Llwyd o'r Bryn) as 'Hen Goleg Bach y Sarnau' (the little college of Sarnau), then at Bala Grammar School for Boys (Ysgol Tŷ Tan Domen) and Bangor Normal College where he gained a teacher's certificate in 1966.

The family moved to Caernarfon in 1962 because of the father's work, whilst Gerallt was still a sixth form pupil, so he stayed with his aunt in Sarnau to complete his A-level examinations. In spite of his undoubted ability he failed to achieve the necessary qualifications to be admitted to the University College at Aberystwyth, mainly because he had been so taken with reading and composing poetry. He was introduced to cynganedd, a complex alliterative poetic technique found only in Welsh, by **Bob Lloyd** (Llwyd o'r Bryn) who was his first unofficial tutor, and the boy could compose correct englynion (four-line stanzas) by the age of twelve. He moved on to another tutor, Ifan Rowlands y Gistfaen, Llandderfel, a more adept master of cynganedd, but soon the pupil had outstripped his tutors and he taught himself thereafter, going on to hold classes himself in Penllyn and further afield. In his teens, when he should have been studying, he produced numerous poems which became the basis of his first volume *Ugain Oed a'i Ganiadau* (Songs of a twenty-year old) published by Argraffty'r Llyfrfa Caernarfon in 1966. Aberystwyth's loss was Bangor Normal's gain because he partook fully in the social life of the college, particularly the dramatic society where he appeared in many productions under the directorship of two eminent tutors in the drama department - Edwin Williams and Huw Lloyd Edwards.

After leaving college he became a teacher at Trawsfynydd Primary School for two years before being appointed to a post at the new private Welsh Medium School established in Bridgend by the fervent nationalist **Trefor Morgan**. Then after a brief period at Ysgol y Betws, another Welsh Medium School in Bridgend, Gerallt left the education system and established a publishing company, Gwasg Gwynedd, with Alwyn Elis of Nant Peris in 1972. In the same year he married Alwena Jones from Deiniolen and settled in Llandwrog where they had three children, Mirain, Bedwyr and Nest. Gwasg Gwynedd published his two other volumes of poetry, *Cerddi'r Cywilydd* (The poems of shame) in 1972 and *Cilmeri a Cherddi Eraill* (Cilmeri and other poems) in 1991, also his autobiography *Fy Nghawl Fy Hun* (My Own Soup/Mess) in 1999. *Cerddi'r Cywilydd* went to three editions and was republished in 1990, whilst *Cilmeri a Cherddi Eraill* won him the Welsh Book of the Year award in 1992.

During his time with Gwasg Gwynedd he was responsible for publishing a series of unique and valuable autobiographies by eminent Welsh people - *Cyfres y Cewri*. He also produced two comics, a direct result of his experiences as a teacher when he came to realise the dearth of suitable material in Welsh for children, and he put his talents as an artist and creative writer to good use in these publications. He was acutely aware too of the importance of creating work in rural areas and of keeping property in the hands of Welsh people, and so with others of similar mind he formed a financial company Arianrhod to invest in property in Gwynedd. He inherited a house in Sarnau and ensured that when the time came to sell, it went to a local Welsh family.

It was his literary skills with cynganedd and his poetry that made him a national figure. He was adjudicator for thirty years in the popular bardic contest Ymryson y Beirdd in the Literature Pavilion of the National Eisteddfod, and was adjudicator from 1979 to 2010 of the popular bardic contest broadcast as an annual series on BBC Radio Cymru, *Talwrn y Beirdd*, and he edited twelve collections of the poems produced in the series. The nation became familiar with his grating voice as well as his unique chuckle, his humour and solemnity, and his gift for reciting poetry as well as his fairness in adjudicating the works of the contesting poets. He maintained his own high standards throughout, and was not loath to criticise when the need arose, but he could also be kind especially to beginners and he inspired many an up and coming poet. A complete master of cynganedd, he could recognise an error merely by hearing a line spoken once. He acted as one of the adjudicators for the Chair at the National Eisteddfod eight times between 1981 and 2013.

Gerallt Lloyd Owen was however first and foremost a poet, and he achieved during his lifetime the ambition that he had set himself as a boy. In 1962 whilst still a sixth form pupil in Bala he won the Chair at the Urdd National Eisteddfod for his poem in strict metres Y Meddyg (The Doctor), a poem that had failed to gain him the Chair at a local Eisteddfod in Llangwm the previous year. He won again in 1965 for a collection of poems entitled Cymru Heddiw (Wales Today) and a third time in 1969 for another collection of poems in the famous Eisteddfod of the investiture year. A few years after he had published his first collection *Ugain Oed a'i Ganiadau* he was loath to acknowledge the volume, and it is true that it contains many weak lines and poems which reflect the fact that he was a poet learning his trade. Nevertheless it also includes a number of poems which bear witness to his true interest in people, especially those in his local community, and memorial verses in which he expresses sincerely the sadness of loss.

It was the poems of 1969 which really brought him national recognition, and the irony of having composed the poem *Fy Ngwlad* (My Country) for the very Eisteddfod in which Charles the Prince of Wales made an appearance. Six years later in 1975 he won the Chair at the National Eisteddfod in Cricieth for his poem *Afon* (River) which describes his boyhood experiences playing on the banks of the river and also depicts the river as a symbol of life. A strange theme for one who lived out his childhood years in Sarnau, a village that cannot boast a river! He was honoured with the white robe of the Gorsedd in Cardigan in 1976 taking the bardic name *Gerallt Llwyd*, and he intended to compete at that Eisteddfod but did not finish his poem with the title 'Gwanwyn' (Spring) before the closing date. Had he done so the Eisteddfod would have received poems from four of the foremost strict metre poets in Wales, namely Alan Llwyd, **Dic Jones**, Donald Evans and Gerallt himself, which would have proved an additional headache to the adjudicators. The completed poem was published in his volume *Cilmeri a Cherddi Eraill*. In Swansea in 1982 he won again for his ode 'Cilmeri', about **Llywelyn ap Gruffudd** the last Prince of Wales in the year commemorating the seven hundredth anniversary of his death. According to the critic Branwen Jarvis the poem expressed more grief than bitterness, grief at the apathy of the Welsh, and it also reflects the sense of loss which the poet had expressed in many of his commemorative poems. 'Llywelyn the man is here as well as Llywelyn the prince and leader, and to me this is the secret of the strength of this unique poem.'

His winning odes reflect clearly his development as a poet during the period between the two, his development as the voice and conscience of Wales, one who expressed its woe and its anguish in memorable verse. His was the poet's voice in the campaigns in support of the language following **Saunders Lewis**'s radio talk '*Tynged yr Iaith*' (The Fate of the Language) in 1962, but he never took part in the protests of *Cymdeithas yr Iaith* (The Welsh Language Society). 'Wylf y llwfrgi'n fy llyfrgell' (I am the coward in my library) is a line in his poem in praise of Angharad Tomos, one of the stalwarts of *Cymdeithas yr Iaith*. But the servile attitude of his fellow Welshmen infuriated him, their negligence of the Welsh language and their readiness to sell Wales to strangers field by field and house by house. His poetry reflects his pride in his lineage (which he claimed could be traced back to **Llywarch Hen!**), his consciousness of what made him what he was and of the society he was brought up in, but there is in it also much of the bitterness of one who was disappointed in his compatriots and their compliant Britishness. Branwen Jarvis characterized him as a poet of great seriousness, one who was always seeking the heart and truth of the matter, 'bardd y gaeaf' (the poet of winter) like **R. Williams Parry**, a poet for whom he had great admiration.

Many honours from public bodies were conferred on him during his lifetime including three by the colleges of the University of Wales as they were known then: M.A. degrees by Aberystwyth and Swansea and an Honorary Fellowship by Bangor.

Gerallt Lloyd Owen was a complex character, a strange mixture of lightheartedness and deep seriousness. He was for many years a sociable and convivial person who took an interest in everybody, especially the community of his immediate locality, and throughout his life he was troubled by the constant influx of strangers to Wales - 'house by house not wave by wave' - as he memorably put it in one of his poems, an influx that was destroying the Welsh way of life. During this social period in his life he was one of the founder members of 'y Gymdeithas Gerdd Dafod' (the Welsh poetry society) in 1976 and co editor of its magazine *Barddas* until 1983, and he was a regular contributor to radio and television programmes, including the series *Shotolau* on S4C, in which he demonstrated his prowess with a gun. But gradually over the years he withdrew from society. He was divorced in 2001, and lived for a time in Caernarfon before moving in with his partner Iola Gregory at Llandwrog where he lived a semi-reclusive existence. He never attended the National Eisteddfod in later life and kept away from most social and public events. A distinctive feature of his appearance was his red hair, and later on his beard, and by the end of his life with his hair and beard white and his body frail he looked much older than he actually was. He suffered much ill-health from childhood, having being struck down with meningitis at the age of nine, and he had a weak chest. In spite of this he was a heavy smoker, and his over-reliance on alcohol later on in life also had an adverse affect on his health.

Gerallt Lloyd Owen will be remembered partly for his voice and for his personality, but above all for his poetry. His volumes are national treasures, including *Y Gân Olaf* (The Last Song) published in 2015 after his death. The late Professor Bedwyr Lewis Jones remarked once after listening to him reciting some of his poems that he was on a par with **Dafydd ap Gwilym** and other leading Welsh poets, and then added - 'no, better.' He was not just a poet but a consummate master of the bardic art, and as long as the Welsh language survives he will be counted amongst the greatest of its exponents.

He died in Ysbyty Gwynedd on 15 July 2014 at the age of 69, and a public funeral service was held at Bangor Crematorium on Friday the 25th. His ashes were interred at Llandwrog Cemetery on 12 August.

## Author

**Elfyn Pritchard**

## Sources

Gerallt Lloyd Owen, *Fy Nghawl Fy Hun* (1999)

Branwen Jarvis, 'Golwg ar Ganu Gerallt Lloyd Owen', in *Trafod Cerdd Dafod y Dydd* (1984), ed. Alan Llwyd

*Barddas*, 325, memorial issue, 2014

*The Daily Telegraph*, 7 August 2014

*The Independent*, 11 August 2014

Personal knowledge

## Further Reading

Wikipedia Article: [Gerallt Lloyd Owen](#)

## Images

Geoff Charles, *National Eisteddfod of Wales 1952*, Aberystwyth

Geoff Charles, *Merioneth Federation of Young Farmers' Clubs Eisteddfod, 1957*

Geoff Charles, *The Sêr y Siroedd Competition at Dolgellau, 1959*

Geoff Charles, *Eisteddfod Genedlaethol yr Urdd, Rhuthun 1962*

Geoff Charles, *Eisteddfod Genedlaethol yr Urdd, Porthmadog 1964*

Geoff Charles, *Urdd National Eisteddfod, Aberystwyth, 1969*

## Sound and Film

YouTube: [Gerallt Lloyd Owen: Cilmeri](#)

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