

EVANS, MEREDYDD ('MERÊD') (1919 - 2015), campaigner, musician, philosopher and television producer

Name: Meredydd Evans

Date of birth: 1919

Date of death: 2015

Spouse: Phyllis Evans (née Kinney)

Child: Eluned Evans

Parent: Richard Evans

Parent: Charlotte Evans (née Pugh)

Gender: Male

Occupation: campaigner, musician, philosopher and television producer

Area of activity: Music; Scholarship and Languages; Politics, Government and Political Movements; Performing Arts

Author: R. Arwel Jones

Merêd was born at Top Pentre, Llanegryn, Meirionnydd, on 9 December 1919, the youngest child born to Charlotte Evans (née Pugh, 1881-1965) and her husband Richard Evans (1867-1936), engineer. Of the eleven children born to them only five others survived infancy: Elizabeth (1900-1990), John (Jac, 1904-1975), Francis (Frank, 1906-1977), William (Wil, 1910-1984) and David (Dei, 1913-1996).

Soon after Merêd was born his father and eldest brother Jac moved to work at the Foel granite quarry, and a month before the little boy's first birthday he moved with the rest of the family to live with them in Bryn Mair, Tanygrisiau.

It was an impoverished community, but it was also rich in many ways. The quarry was an arduous place to work. His father was increasingly unwell for the last three years and died of silicosis when his youngest son was sixteen. However, the home was warm and cultured. His mother enjoyed reading widely and encouraged her children to do the same, a practice reinforced by his influential brother Jac, who would lend him books. It was his mother who first taught him folk songs and inspired his love for the tradition that would play a central role in his life.

His father and his brother Jac were principled men and socialists (his father was a member of the ILP). When his father's health deteriorated, he experienced first-hand the support of his community and his colleagues who would carry him to the quarry and do his work on his behalf so that he could earn a wage. Merêd insisted that this was a welfare state before the Welfare State existed. This home-life and the cultured Christian community of the village was the upbringing that nurtured in Merêd the basic principles to which he was true throughout his life.

He failed to gain a scholarship to grammar school and in 1930 started at the Central School, Blaenau Ffestiniog. There he was taught by the author **John Ellis Williams**, who greatly influenced him. But by 1934, when he was only 14, his father's health deteriorated, and he had to leave school to start working at the local branch of the Co-operative. This was a formative period during which his desire to learn did not dwindle. Merêd and a group of friends regularly borrowed, read and discussed books on a range of substantial subjects.

By 1938 he had begun the process of being accepted into the ministry and was preaching locally. During the same period, he registered as a conscientious objector. Pacifism and adherence to non-violent campaigning would be another underlying principle of his life.

In September 1940 he left the Co-op and enrolled at Clwyd College, Rhyl, to undertake a preparatory course for the ministry. A year later he enrolled to continue his training at Bangor University. He was a bright, diligent, and mischievous student. However, in September 1943, after a great deal of agonising, he decided not to continue with his course, and pursue a degree in philosophy which he completed with first class honours in the summer of 1945. He went on to gain an MA and to be President of the Student Council in 1946-7. Despite abandoning the ministry, he never abandoned his faith and continued to profess and practice his Christianity.

It was during his time at Bangor, with the BBC studios on the doorstep, that **Sam Jones**, a talented producer, enticed him into appearing on his popular radio program *Noson Lawen*. As one of Triawd y Coleg (with Robin Williams and Cledwyn Jones), he was soon central to the success of the program, often composing the lyrics and tunes to their catchy songs. The program was extremely popular, and at one point it was estimated that 20% of the population listened to it. This made 'Merêd' a household name in Wales while he was still a relatively young man.

It was here, at Bryn Meirion, Bangor, in March 1947, that he met Phyllis Kinney, an opera singer from Pontiac, Michigan. They were married the following spring on 10 April 1948 and had one daughter, Eluned (b. 1949). This was a long and happy marriage on the whole and Phyllis was a constant supporter of her busy husband for nearly 67 years.

Shortly after meeting Phyllis, Merêd was appointed as a philosophy and politics tutor at Harlech College and remained there until 1950 when he joined Hughes and Son's editorial staff in Oswestry and began contributing to *Y Cymro*. It was there that he began a lifelong friendship with the influential editor John Roberts Williams.

However, two years later he returned to academia and left Wales to undertake a PhD in philosophy in Princeton, New Jersey. He graduated in the summer of 1955 and accepted a post as a lecturer at Boston University.

The handsome and brilliant lecturer proved popular with his students and was chosen as lecturer of the year in 1959. One of the students commented on his lectures: 'It's like going to a play - there's an air of expectancy. You never know what extraordinary point he's going to make - or what ordinary point in an extraordinary way.'

During this time this entertainer was seen keeping equally entertaining company. He greeted Einstein on his way to work, had discussions with Arthur Miller (and Marilyn Monroe), celebrated **Augustus John's** birthday and partied with **Richard Burton** and Hugh Griffith. But while he was comfortable with the brightest and most famous, what was most special about him was that he was equally comfortable with ordinary people, and everyone felt at ease in his company. In 1954 an improvised recording with a Smithsonian curator named Moe Asch led to an LP entitled *Welsh Folk Songs*, which was selected as one of the best LPs of the year by the *New York Times*.

But Wales was pulling at his heartstrings and they left Phyllis's homeland in 1960 when he was appointed to succeed **Cynan** in the Department of Extramural Studies at Bangor. He would soon change direction again, however, and take up the post of Head of Light Entertainment at BBC Wales in 1963. He spent an exceptionally successful decade setting up a new service, identifying talents such as Meic Stevens, Ryan Davies and Margaret Williams, demanding the best for the Welsh-language service and commissioning series such as *Hob y Deri Dando*, *Fo a Fe*, *Disc a Dawn*, and *Ryan a Ronnie*; series that are considered classics, and talents that to this day are amongst the brightest Wales has seen. He applied for the post of Head of Programs in 1969 but without success and perhaps not without an element of relief. In the same year he abandoned the culture of heavy drinking that had characterized his social life and never touched alcohol thereafter.

Shortly after he began an extraordinarily productive period that would last to the very end of his life, nearly half a century later. In 1970 he established *Y Dinesydd*, Cardiff's Welsh-language newspaper, the forerunner if not the first of the many papurau bro that would appear throughout Wales in due course. He became a prominent supporter of The Welsh Language Society's early campaigns and by 1973 he felt uncomfortable within the confines of an Anglicised establishment like the BBC. He returned to academia and joined the Department of Extramural Studies at Cardiff, where he was responsible for Welsh-language provision until his retirement in 1985. He ran and organised numerous classes on literature, folk music, philosophy, and teaching Welsh to adults.

Following the death of the philosopher **J. R. Jones** in 1970, Merêd inherited the role of moral advocate of the national movement, constantly arguing the case for the rights of the language and the right of the Welsh to commit non-violent direct action in order to assert those rights. And he was not an armchair campaigner. He became increasingly prominent as an activist breaking the law on several occasions, including turning off the Pencarreg mast in 1979 with Ned Thomas and **Pennar Davies** in the campaign for a Welsh-language television channel. He drew the wrath of the cultural and political establishment when he used his speech as one of the daily Presidents at the 1986 National Eisteddfod to attack the government of the day bluntly for ignoring the overwhelming influx of English speakers to rural Wales. In 1993 he broke into Carmarthen Crown Court with several other prominent Welshmen and women and destroyed the judge's chair in the campaign for a New Welsh Language Act. From 1996 he was the fully committed President of Cylch yr Iaith, a campaign group that worked tirelessly to protect the Welshness of S4C and Radio Cymru. He was prepared to face imprisonment in his old age, but the fine was paid on his behalf by friends who were concerned about his health. From 1998 he was central to the campaign to establish the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol, until the battle was won in 2011. He subsequently committed himself to supporting the College by establishing the William Salesbury Trust and the Friends of the College.

Shortly before his retirement in 1985 he and Phyllis had moved permanently to Afallon, Cwmystwyth in Ceredigion, a house which they purchased in 1972 with a view to responding to Adfer's call to repossess the Welsh-speaking heartlands. Over thirty years they would both make a tremendous contribution to the area supporting, restoring, establishing and maintaining the local cultural society, the chapel, the papur bro, the eisteddfod and teaching Welsh to a host of their non-Welsh-speaking neighbours. Although Cwmystwyth is relatively remote their home grew to become a magnet for people of all ages, from all over Wales and the world who would flock there to enjoy their company and to benefit from the couple's intellectual generosity.

One of the advantages of Cwmystwyth was that it was within easy reach of the National Library to which they Merêd and Phyllis were regular visitors. They had immersed themselves in the history of folksongs and tunes, and their research appeared regularly in *Canu Gwerin* (the journal of the Welsh Folk Song Society). Several collections of songs based on their research were published as well as collections of essays tracing the history of different elements of the tradition. His last collection entitled *Serch a'i Helyntion*, was published by Y Lolfa in 2019, four years after his death. They both carried out research, and usually published as a team, but each was able to address different audiences, Phyllis an English one and Merêd a Welsh one. 2007 saw the publication *Cynhelliad y Gân / Bearers of Song* a volume of essays in tribute to the couple. A composer since the days of Triawd y Coleg, he composed the tune to accompany **Harri Webb's** poem 'Colli Iaith'. Although he had an operation on his throat he continued to sing in his old age. He was last recorded in his home village of Tanygrisiau in 2012 on Bethel, a CD by Gai Toms (Gareth Tomos), in his studio which was Merêd's childhood chapel. He would compose poetry on special occasions and for the annual Cwrdd Bach (Literary Meeting), in Cwmystwyth.

He did not abandon his original vocation and devoted himself over the years to philosophy through the medium of Welsh. He published a Welsh-language volume on David Hume in 1984 and translated some of the most complex modern texts into vibrant Welsh. He was active in the philosophy branch of the University of Wales Guild of Graduates, and was elected President in 2007 and Honorary President in 2012.

Following a massive stroke, he died on 21 February 2015 at Bronlais Hospital, Aberystwyth and is buried in the cemetery at Siloam Chapel, Cwmystwyth.

Merêd was a handsome man, a charming character and an entertaining companion who could make people of all backgrounds feel comfortable and special. He was passionate about Wales and the Welsh language, and his passion meant that at times he could lose his temper, but he would never hold a grudge. He was awarded an honorary DLitt by the University of Wales in 1998 and honorary fellowships from the Universities of Bangor, Aberystwyth, Trinity Saint Davids and the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol. Shortly after his death in 2015 he was awarded the Good Tradition Award by the Radio 2 Folk Awards, and in 2019, to mark the centenary of Merêd's birth, he and Phyllis were presented with the Welsh Music Prize Inspiration Award.

Author

R. Arwel Jones

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Y Faner Newydd, No. 72, 2015

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Further reading

Meredydd Evans and Phyllis Kinney's index cards on traditional Welsh music: **Boxes 1 - 4** : Caneuon Gwerin; **Boxes 5-6** : Alawon carolau; **Box 7** : Geiriau Carolau (M); **Box 8** : Geiriau Carolau; **Box 9** : Hwiangerddi; **Boxes 10-11** : Alawon fy Ngwlad **Nicholas Bennett**; **Box 12** : Mari Lwyd; **Box 13** : Welsh Folk Song JLLW; **Box 14** : Y Cylchgrawn JLLW

Sally Harper and Wyn Thomas (eds.), *Bearers of song: essays in honour of Phyllis Kinney and Meredydd Evans* (Caerdydd 2007)

Huw Walters, Part III: Bibliographies in Sally Harper and Wyn Thomas (eds.) *Bearers of song: essays in honour of Phyllis Kinney and Meredydd Evans* (Caerdydd 2007), pp.296-323 (A. Bibliography of Works by Meredydd Evans, 300-15; B. Bibliography of Works by Phyllis Kinney, 316-21; C. Bibliography of Works by Meredydd Evans and Phyllis Kinney, 322-3)

Huw Walters, 'Llyfryddiaeth Dr Meredydd Evans', in Ann Ffrancon and Geraint H. Jenkins (eds.), *Merêd: detholiad o ysgrifau Dr. Meredydd Evans* (Llandysul 1994), pp.381-97

Rhidian Griffiths, Ann Ffrancon, Geraint Jenkins and Pwyll ap Sion, 'Evans, Meredydd (1919-2015)', *Cydymaith i Gerddoriaeth Cymru* (Talybont 2018), pp.171-173

Wikipedia Article: [Meredydd Evans](#)

Images

Geoff Charles, *Eisteddfod Genedlaethol Cymru 1979*, Caernarfon

Sound and Film

Smithsonian Folkways: Meredydd Evans: Welsh Folk Songs

Smithsonian Folkways: Meredydd Evans: The Power of the Welsh Language and Cultural Identity

Gwerin Welsh Folk: Cân y Dewis - Gai Toms / Meredydd Evans

Sianel62: Meredydd Evans: Heddychwr

Sianel62: Anufudd-dod Sifil - Meredydd Evans

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