

## GWYNN, HARRI (1913 - 1985), writer and broadcaster

**Name:** Harri Gwynn  
**Date of birth:** 1913  
**Date of death:** 1985  
**Spouse:** Eirwen Meiriona Gwynn (née St. John Williams)  
**Child:** Iolo ap Gwynn  
**Parent:** Elizabeth Jones (née Williams)  
**Parent:** Hugh Jones  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** writer and broadcaster  
**Area of activity:** Literature and Writing; Performing Arts  
**Author:** T. Robin Chapman

Harri Gwynn was born at 63, Maryland Road, Wood Green, north London, on 14 February 1913, son of Hugh Jones (d. 1916), who worked as a letter-sorter on the mail train between London and Holyhead, and his wife Elizabeth (Beti) (née Williams), both originally from Penrhyndeudraeth.

Following his father's death from a heart condition in December 1916, mother and son moved to Garth Celyn, Penrhyndeudraeth in 1917. After time at the village school, Harri won a scholarship to Barmouth County School in 1924, where he was introduced to fine art and the work of the English Georgian poets by his headteacher, **Edmund D. Jones**, an admirer of John Ruskin, and attended evening classes on poetry in Penrhyndeudraeth under the tutelage of **Robert Williams Parry**.

In 1930, a year early, he sat the examination that gained him a place at the University College of North Wales, Bangor, where he studied for an Honours Degree in History. Despite a serious bout of pneumonia which forced him to spend time in hospital and repeat his first year, he graduated in 1934, and was elected students' union president the following year.

In an autobiographical radio broadcast 40 years later, he looked back at the 1930s, which saw the election of Hitler in Germany, economic depression in Britain and Mussolini's adventures in Abyssinia, as a 'golden' age: 'this was the time of political ferment, social theorising, the belief that the world could be set to rights if there were only an appropriate politics'. Much to the dismay of the College authorities, he organised pacifist marches and became an active member of Plaid Cymru.

By 1938 Harri Gwynn, as he now called himself (although he would not formally and legally drop the 'Jones' until 1944), had completed his MA on the Dolobran Quaker, **John Kelsall**, and was a lecturer with the Workers' Education Association.

In 1936 Harri, 'one of the most talented and debonair Bohemians of his generation', according to **Meic Stephens**, met the science student who would become his wife. **Eirwen Meiriona St John Williams** (1916-2007) had been born in Liverpool and raised in Llangefni. They became friends through shared activities with Plaid Cymru, while Eirwen was completing a PhD in Physics. The vast correspondence between them that has survived in his papers shows how the relationship between them soon blossomed into an intellectual love affair, even though Eirwen's father insisted that they could not marry unless Harri had a good regular income.

One constant shared interest was radical politics. As the minutes show, Eirwen was among the two dozen who came together on 11 November 1936, at the first meeting of the left-leaning ginger group, Mudiad Gwerin, chaired by the future Labour MP **Goronwy Roberts**, with Harri acting as vice-chair and secretary. The movement's aim, as a letter sent by the two to the *Manchester Guardian* in February 1937 has it, was to create 'a synthesis of progressive and nationalist attitudes' which would stand in opposition to the more conservative nationalism of the National Party president **Saunders Lewis**, on the one hand, and the anti-Welsh elements in the Labour Party on the other. The movement could scarcely have chosen a less propitious time, however. In September 1936, 'Cinders' Lewis, as **Goronwy Roberts** had nicknamed him, was due to stand trial for the burning of the RAF training school in Llŷn. Loyalty towards him within his own party and wider public sympathy were both strong, and intensified still further when he was jailed for nine months in January 1937. Harri went on, nonetheless, to put forward a motion at the National Party conference in August 1938 'that aspects of National Party policy are anti-progressive, contrary to the needs of the ordinary people of Wales and impose on them a lower standard of living than they might enjoy through other methods'. At the insistence of **Saunders Lewis**, who had just been released from prison, he was not called to speak.

Eirwen also encouraged Harri's literary interests. As he wrote to her in August 1937, 'It would be splendid if I could earn my living by writing. It would not be easy work, but it would mean freedom.' Other letters to her mention a detective story, a play and the desire to write 'a serious novel filled with philosophy, style and beauty... I am beginning to feel that such a thing is now possible.'

The war put an end to all literary and personal ambitions. Harri Gwynn's application to the Royal Army Medical Corps was rejected on medical grounds (his pneumonia as a student had entailed major surgery), and he spent 1940 and 1941 as a history teacher at schools in Flint and Bangor. On New Year's Day 1942, as he was about to take up a post with the Ministry of Supply (on a salary that his future father-in-law considered acceptable), at the registry office in Bangor, he married Eirwen. She recalled the occasion as 'a fairly sparse wedding ... no grandness at all ... no guests, no presents or photographs, only a day or two's honeymoon'. The couple spent their first year in Warwick, before moving to London in 1943. It would be their home for the rest of the decade, and it was there that their son, Iolo, was born on 18 March 1944. In the same year Harri and Eirwen dropped the surname 'Jones' so that they could register their child as Iolo ap Gwynn. Their first home was a flat in a house in Clapham Common Northside, where they threw themselves into the city's Welsh cultural life, joining the chapel near their home, in Clapham Park Road, and launching a society, Y Ford Gron, and theatre company, Cwmni Drama'r Ddraig Goch. Harri Gwynn also became editor of the city's Welsh-language monthly, *Y Ddinas*.

His mature literary output grew out of his political activity, his relationship with Eirwen and the new career opportunities now open to him. As the tripartite structure of his first volume of verse, *Barddoniaeth Harri Gwynn* (1955), shows, the topics in 'Cerddi Bangor: 1930-40' were conventional lyrics: nostalgia, nature and love. 'Cerddi

Llundain: 1940-50' is different. The metrics are more irregular, the tone more wry and the topics more raw. In a sense, the work in 'Cerddi Llundain' reflects his disillusionment with his younger self as much as his exasperation with the present. Harri had become a modernist in the style of **Eirian Davies**, T. Glynne Davies and Rhyswen Williams.

By 1950, motivated by a desire, as Eirwen put it, 'to escape the endless roofscapes, to return to the countryside and to Wales in particular', Harri threw up a comfortable job and a salary of nearly one thousand pounds a year and bought a 34-acre smallholding, Tyddyn Cwcallt, near Rhoslan in Eifionydd. A close neighbour **Bob Owen**, Croesor, opined that they were 'mad'. This was the first experience either of them had had of farming, even though Harri's childhood home, Garth Celyn, was a smallholding with room to keep a cow, chickens and a substantial fruit and vegetable garden. From week to week between 1952 and 1959, he recorded the challenges, mishaps and successes in a column for the Welsh-language newspaper *Y Cymro*, 'Rhwng Godro a Gwely', brought out as a book in 1994, and in the humorous essays in *Y Fwch a'i Chynffon* (1954), where Harri christened every animal and machine with a suitable name (having learned their quirks). He continued his contributions until 1969. To supplement the farm's income, Harri also wrote book reviews, lectured and broadcast on radio, including the feature programmes '*Llafar*' and '*Byd Natur*'. As the third section of *Barddoniaeth Harri Gwynn*, 'Cerddi Eifionydd', shows, the change of circumstances heralded a change in style. Poems like 'Cyfarch yr Hwch' and 'Ceffyl Gwedd', for instance, are the products of observation and attempts to ascribe a voice to nature.

The most infamous incident in Harri Gwynn's literary career occurred at the National Eisteddfod in 1952 with one of his six unsuccessful entries in the Crown competition from 1948 onwards. Under the pseudonym Efnisien, Harri interpreted that year's pryddest topic 'Y Creadur' (The Creature) as a soliloquy in which a murderer convicted of killing his girlfriend addresses a beetle in his cell. The mention of the girl's sexual allure and the murderer's attempt to justify his actions proved too much for one adjudicator, the Rev. David Jones from Blaenplwyf, who refused to crown the work. It was criticised more harshly still by **W. J. Gruffydd**, who maintained that 'the thoughts of a murderer more likely to be sent to Broadmoor than to the gallows' were not relevant to the set topic. It emerged shortly afterwards that Gruffydd had been under the impression that Bobi Jones was the author and that he had been motivated by personal animus. The pryddest, none the less, became a succès de scandale. Copies sold well on the Eisteddfod field, Harri and Gruffydd were invited to discuss the matter on radio and television, Harri's portrait appeared in the *Picture Post*, and a postcard was dispatched from Westminster by his old college friend **Goronwy Roberts** (by now a Labour MP): 'A thousand congratulations on stirring up the stagnant pond of Welsh poetry a little (or a lot).'

Harri Gwynn did not compete again after 1954. As Gwynn ap Gwilym wrote on his connection with the Eisteddfod, 'He perhaps demonstrates better than anyone the huge weakness and unfairness of the Welsh competitive system and its unhealthy emphasis on "winning".' The poetry continued, however, with pioneering work on the radio sonnet and the publication of *Yng Nghoedwigoedd y Sêr* in 1975.

In 1953, Harri was persuaded to act as General Secretary (i.e. organiser) of the Pwllheli National Eisteddfod held in 1955. Because the salary was small, the contract stated that the Eisteddfod would pay him a proportion of any profit made, as a bonus. Since the eisteddfod had been running at a loss for many years, the officers accepted the condition. When the festival did indeed make a profit, Harri was forced to threaten legal action before they would pay what was due to him - and he was not invited to membership of the Eisteddfod Gorsedd, as was routinely the case with former General Secretaries. (Hywel Teifi Edwards brought this story to light years later.) Harri had to wait for decades before Gorsedd membership was eventually agreed.

Harri's career took another turn in 1961, when he was made producer and main presenter of the television programme *Heddiw*, launched by **Nan Davies**. The work involved travelling to the BBC studios in Manchester, several times a week in the early days. The family settled in Bangor in 1962, at Isgaer, Upper Garth Road, where he became a neighbour of **Dyfnallt Morgan** and others. Another move followed in 1970 - to Tyddyn Rhuddallt, Llanrug - where Harri continued to work for the BBC until 1979.

Eirwen described Harri Gwynn's final years as 'a deep chasm'. Parkinson's Disease made it impossible for him to walk without a stick, and he later developed prostate cancer. He took comfort, however, in numerous visitors, including lolo, his wife Ellen, and their three children. He died on 24 April 1985, and was buried near Llanrug.

## Author

**T. Robin Chapman**

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