

MORGAN, ELAINE NEVILLE (1920 - 2013), screenwriter, journalist, and author

Name: Elaine Neville Morgan
Date of birth: 1920
Date of death: 2013
Spouse: Morien Waldo Parry Morgan
Child: John Dylan Morgan
Child: Gareth Morgan
Child: Huw Morgan
Parent: William Floyd
Parent: Olive Irene Floyd (née Neville)
Gender: Female
Occupation: screenwriter, journalist, and author
Area of activity: Literature and Writing
Author: Daryl Leeworthy

Elaine Morgan was born in Hopkinstown, Pontypridd, on 7 November 1920, the only child of William 'Billy' Floyd (1891-1939), a pumpsman at the Great Western Colliery, and his wife Olive (née Neville, 1894-1981). Her childhood was spent at 54 Teitelkebir Road, Hopkinstown, a busy, multi-generational home, which her parents shared with her maternal grandparents, Frederick and Martha. This was a Labour-supporting household and was intertwined with the activities of the South Wales Miners' Federation, of which Billy Floyd was a loyal member. Elaine Morgan was herself an enthusiastic - and prize-winning - member of the *Daily Herald's* youth-oriented Bobby Bear Club.

A clever, bookish and creative child, who published her first short story at the age of eleven, Elaine Morgan excelled at primary school before winning a place at Pontypridd Intermediate School for Girls. Whilst there she showed a talent for acting, for languages (including Welsh), and for science, although chose to concentrate on the humanities and English in the sixth form. In 1939, she won a place to study English at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford, the first pupil from Pontypridd Intermediate School for Girls ever to study at Oxford University. At Oxford, she became heavily involved in student politics, rising to become the chair of the Oxford University Democratic Socialist Club, the largest student political group at the university, and mixed with contemporary and future cabinet ministers and prime ministers including Clement Attlee, Herbert Morrison, Roy Jenkins and Tony Crosland. She developed relationships with a generation of young writers and poets, notably Sidney Keyes (1922-1943), Drummond Allison (1921-1943) and John Heath-Stubbs (1918-2006), and was known to Kingsley Amis (1922-1995) and Philip Larkin (1922-1985).

On graduation from Oxford in 1942, she began working for the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) as a tutor-organizer in Norfolk. During the 1943 summer vacation, she attended a Beds for Stalingrad rally in Pontypridd, where she met Morien Waldo Parry Morgan (1916-1997), a schoolmaster at Pontypridd Boys' Grammar School who had fought with the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War. The two fell in love and were married at Capel Rhondda, Hopkinstown, on 11 April 1945. They began married life in Burnley, Lancashire, where they lived until 1950. In this period, Morien Morgan taught at Burnley Grammar School, whereas Elaine Morgan maintained her career as an adult educator working in the communities of industrial Lancashire for the WEA, the National Council of Labour Colleges, and eventually the Extra Mural Department of Manchester University. She became active in the Burnley branch of the United Nations Association, of which she was a founder member, and was a key figure in the organisation of Burnley's celebration of International Women's Day. She also joined the Communist Party, a fact which, later in life, having rejoined the Labour Party, she kept carefully hidden for professional reasons.

It was whilst living in Burnley that the first of Elaine Morgan's children, John Dylan (1946-2011) was born. A second child, Gareth, followed in 1949. But for the onset of asthma in both children, a reflection of the high levels of industrial pollution in Burnley, this situation would have continued, but in 1950, with Morien Morgan now teaching at Abertillery Boys' Grammar School, Elaine Morgan returned to Pontypridd with her young children. She worked briefly as an English teacher at her former school whilst she wrote a series of scripts and proposals which she sent speculatively to the BBC in Cardiff and in London. She received a warm response. In October 1950, a matter of days before her thirtieth birthday, Elaine Morgan broadcast her first script, a story about her father and his tool shed, on *Woman's Hour*. In 1951, now resident on an isolated farm near Michaelchurch Escley in Herefordshire, and with no opportunities for adult education to provide alternative employment, Elaine Morgan began writing fulltime: radio scripts, short stories, poems, and teleplays. Only a novel eluded her. The family returned to Wales in 1953, settling in Abernant, near Aberdare. By 1960, the year her debut serial, *A Matter of Degree*, was broadcast on BBC TV, she had established herself as the pre-eminent Welsh screenwriter of her generation.

In the 1960s, her fame and renown grew significantly. She wrote for popular drama series such as *Maigret* and *Dr Finlay's Casebook*, she produced scripts for the Sid James-fronted comedy series *Taxi!* as well as *The Onedin Line*, and created *Lil*, a follow up to *A Matter of Degree*, which ran to two seasons in 1965 and 1966. Ahead of the launch of BBC Two in 1964, she was approached by producers to adapt Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* as the new channel's first costume drama, an opportunity she turned down. The 1970s saw a turn to Welsh matters, with high-profile television adaptations of *Possessions* (1974) starring Anthony Hopkins; *How Green Was My Valley* (1975-6) starring (amongst others) Stanley Baker and Sian Phillips; and *Off to Philadelphia in the Morning* (1978). Her masterpiece *The Life and Times of David Lloyd George*, with its compelling performance by Philip Madoc (1934-2012) and haunting theme tune by Ennio Morricone, broadcast in 1981, offered commentary not only on Welsh history but also on the contemporary, fractious situation within the Labour Party - a theme she explored further in 1982's *Fame is the Spur* and in 1985's *The Burston Rebellion* starring Eileen Atkins and Bernard Hill.

Elaine Morgan's television work in the 1970s earned most of her greatest accolades: the Prix Italia for *Joey* (1974), BAFTAs for her 1977 biographical serial *Marie Curie* and her adaptation of Vera Brittain's *A Testament of Youth* in 1979, and a Writer's Guild award for *A Pin To See The Peepshow* in 1973. But it was also the decade in which her feminism - always a feature of her politics and her writing - came to the fore, catapulting the self-declared 'housewife-dramatist' into the forefront of women's liberation. In 1975, the United Nations' International Year of Women, Elaine Morgan was invited to deliver the BBC Wales Annual Radio Lecture - the first woman to do so. She took as her

theme 'women and society' and asked of a Wales which had no women members of parliament, when will we sing 'Hen Wlad Fy Mamau'? This status followed the 1972 bestseller, *Descent of Woman*, which challenged 'Tarzanism' and posed an alternative theory - that of the aquatic ape - alongside an assertion that women, as well as men, had a role to play in the evolution of humankind. If it was the case, she argued, that men lost their body hair running about on the savannah as hunters, why did women lose theirs?

The publication of *Descent of Woman* was a global phenomenon: by the end of the 1970s, the book had been published in nine European languages, in fourteen countries, and on three continents (North America, South America, and Europe). *Descent of Woman* was followed in 1976 by the ecological study, *Falling Apart*, in which she argued that humans should live in smaller, more sustainable communities, rather than in resource-sapping megalopolises. In 1982, Elaine Morgan returned to evolutionary theory with *The Aquatic Ape*, a more deliberate and sustained assessment of, and manifesto for, the ideas she had first set down ten years earlier. From the mid-1980s until just before her death in 2013, evolutionary theory was to dominate her public engagements: she spoke at international conferences and in 2009 became a YouTube sensation with a combative **TED Talk** viewed almost 1.5 million times. A second edition of *Descent of Woman* appeared in 1985, with *The Scars of Evolution* (1990), *The Descent of the Child* (1994), and *The Aquatic Ape Hypothesis* (1997) published through the 1990s.

Retirement from scriptwriting in 1990, Elaine Morgan's seventieth year, came as much by accident as by design - her mode of writing was considered by producers as increasingly old fashioned in an era of satellite television. Further accolades, reflective of a lifetime of writing, were awarded in the 1990s and 2000s: honorary fellowships of Cardiff and Swansea Universities, an honorary doctorate from the University of Glamorgan, and a lifetime achievement award from BAFTA Cymru in 2003. An OBE followed in 2009, the same year the University of Glamorgan (now the University of South Wales) named a building on its Glyntaff Campus after her. A final highlight was being named 'Columnist of the Year' in 2011 for her endearing weekly column 'The Pensioner' in the *Western Mail*. Written between 2003 and 2013, 'The Pensioner' confirmed Elaine Morgan's status as a 'national treasure', affording readers quirky insights into past and present. At times warm, at others politically fierce, it was a last glimpse into her creative mind. After a series of strokes, the first of which occurred in the summer of 2012, Elaine Morgan died peacefully at Prince Charles Hospital, Merthyr Tydfil, on 12 July 2013. She was survived by her sons Gareth and Huw (whom she adopted). Her husband, Morien, died in 1997; her eldest son John Dylan died in 2011.

Elaine Morgan's greatest achievement was not, in the end, her scientific writing, nor her journalism, nor even her championing of causes such as Welsh-medium education or nuclear disarmament, but her pioneering career as a screenwriter for television. Writing in 1960, producer Donald Wilson (1910-2002) remarked that Elaine Morgan was part of that comparatively new breed of creative artist: the television playwright. As a Welsh woman writing for television near the start of its postwar development, she was unique. Through her writing in the 1960s and 1970s, the people of the mining valleys of Glamorgan appeared on television in rounded portraits, their accents, their mores, and their aspirations were given an authentic rendering. Above all, at a time when there were no books on the subject to guide her, and academic research was limited, Elaine Morgan showed that Welsh history written from the perspective of women - even in the form required by television or radio - was not only possible but necessary.

Author

Daryl Leeworthy

Sources

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Erika Lorraine Milam, *Creatures of Cain: The Hunt for Human Nature in Cold War America* (Princeton University Press 2019)

Elaine Morgan, *The Descent of Woman* (London 1972)

Elaine Morgan, *Women and Society* (London 1975)

Elaine Morgan, *Knock 'Em Cold, Kid* (Matador 2012)

Elaine Morgan's professional papers are held at the Richard Burton Archives, Swansea University. Further archival material is held at Columbia University, New York City, and at the BBC Written Archives Centre, Caversham

Further reading

Wikipedia Article: [Elaine Morgan](#)

Additional Links

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