

RICHARDS, ALUN MORGAN (1929 - 2004), screenwriter, playwright, and author

Name: Alun Morgan Richards
Date of birth: 1929
Date of death: 2004
Spouse: Barbara Helen Richards (née Howden)
Child: Stephen Richards
Child: Michael Richards
Child: Jessica Richards
Child: Daniel Richards
Parent: Edward Morgan Richards
Parent: Megan Richards (née Jeremy)
Gender: Male
Occupation: screenwriter, playwright, and author
Area of activity: Literature and Writing; Performing Arts
Author: Daryl Leeworthy

Alun Richards was born on 27 October 1929 in Caerphilly, the son of Edward Morgan Richards (1891-1976), a commercial traveller, and his wife Megan (née Jeremy, 1905-1977). His parents were married in London in April 1929. Three days after Alun was born, his father abandoned his mother, and Alun grew up in the home of his maternal grandparents, Thomas (c.1870-1939) and Jessie (1877-1955), in the affluent Graigwen district of Pontypridd. His grandfather, Thomas Jeremy, ran a grocery business in Mill Street, Pontypridd, and was a prominent member of the town's commercial community. Although Alun Richards's grandparents were Welsh-speaking chapelgoers, he came to reject both religion and the Welsh language.

An intellectually gifted but rebellious child, Alun Richards famously described his time at Pontypridd Boys' Grammar School as having been one of minimum effort. 'I was 31st when I went into the school and I've kept it up', he observed in his autobiography, *Days of Absence* (1986). His leaving certificate gained in 1946 at the age of sixteen, told a different story. He achieved credits in English language, English literature, French, and Spanish, and passing grades in geography and history. He was an active member of the local amateur operatic society, taking on the role of John Bradshaw, the presiding judge at the trial of Charles I, in a dramatic reproduction of the civil wars. According to press accounts, Richards gave 'a vigorous and convincing portrayal'. From school, Richards attended Monmouthshire Training College for Teachers in Caerleon, before joining the Royal Navy as an instructor in 1949. He left the Royal Navy in 1952 and worked for a short period as a 'Panamanian Flag supernumerary' (that is, in the Merchant Marine), before becoming a probation officer in London. In the mid-1950s, after returning to Wales, he showed symptoms of tuberculosis and spent two, often horrifying, years as an in-patient at the Talgarth Sanatorium in Breconshire.

Released from hospital, he married Barbara Helen Howden (1933-2008), then a probation officer, in London on 8 June 1957, and settled in Cardiff, where he taught English in a secondary school for the next ten years. In the late-1960s, the family relocated to Swansea. Together, Alun and Helen Richards had three sons - Stephen (1958-), Michael (1960-), Daniel (1966-) - and a daughter, Jessica (1961-).

Alun Richards's literary break came in May 1956, when the BBC broadcast his short story 'Knight Mabon' on the *Light Programme*. A second short story, 'Ferb', aired in March 1957. This was followed by success in the short story competitions run by the Phoenix Literary Club in Cardiff. '**Thy People: A Fable**' was then published in the literary magazine, *Wales*, in October 1958. Richards quickly established himself as a near-permanent fixture, delivering short stories, essays, and 'journals', before the magazine's sudden demise in January 1960. By then, Richards had sold several plays to the BBC for broadcast on television and radio, the start of nearly forty years of screenwriting work. His first teleplay, *Going Like A Fox*, a tense drama about a Welsh family and a disgraced local councillor, appeared in the *Saturday Playhouse* series on 13 February 1960.

As a writer, he rejected both the Anglo-Welsh school of writing and Gwyn Thomas's operatic and darkly comedic image of 'Meadow Prospect', preferring instead to speak to modern audiences about a place recognisably 'South Walian' but free of the weight of historical legacy and the detritus of the coalfield. His first novel, *The Elephant You Gave Me* (1963), although featuring a Welsh protagonist, was purposefully set in the Midlands. His second novel, *The Home Patch* (1966), about a troubled screenwriter, Arthur Crighton, finds the protagonist caught between being a 'cosmopolitan in his home town and a provincial in the big city' and fitting in nowhere. Only with his third novel, *A Woman Of Experience* (1969), did Richards settle into writing about south Wales itself, albeit, in a direct challenge to contemporary Welsh writing in English, with a female protagonist. He continued to innovate with his chorus-like masterpiece *Home to an Empty House* (1973). Short story collections, *Dai Country* (1973) and *The Former Miss Merthyr Tydfil* (1976), added to his portrait of contemporary south Wales - as uncompromisingly antagonistic to Welsh nationalism and the Welsh language as it was to nostalgia and mythology. From the outset Richards's world was prosperous and ambitious but full of flawed relationships.

Two of Richards's great passions - rugby football and the sea - frequently asserted themselves in his fictional writing. One of his earliest radio plays, '*O Captain, My Captain*' broadcast on the Home Service in June 1961 and again on BBC TV in August of that year, was set on board a cargo ship. In 1971, he joined the team of writers for the BBC television series, *The Onedin Line*, penning nine of the ninety one episodes. His first, '*Other Points of the Compass*', was broadcast on 29 October 1971; the last, '*Month of the Albatross*', aired on 27 June 1976. For Penguin he edited *The Penguin Book of Sea Stories* in 1977 and for Michael Joseph he put together *Against The Waves: An Anthology of Sea Stories* in 1978. A second *Book of Sea Stories* for Penguin followed in 1980. These were joined by his Mumbles-set *Ennal's Point* (1977) and his adventure set in South America, *Barque Whisper* (1979). Richards's rugby writing was best known from his sensitive biography of his friend **Carwyn James**, *Carwyn* (1984), and his popular centenary study *A Touch of Glory* (1980) but had been apparent in his television writing in the 1960s. His memorable '*Taff Came to my House*', broadcast on BBC Two in 1967, set in a 'Welsh shrine' (a rugby club) threw light on the refusal of a rugby idol's girlfriend 'to be worn on his famous elbow like a dress'.

Richards's closest literary friendship was with fellow writer, Ron Berry (1920-1997), with whom he shared a more than three-decade correspondence, regular gatherings in pubs, notably the Lamb and Flag in Glynneath, and a no-nonsense attitude towards mythologizing academics and spinners of lies in the world of letters. When editing the *Penguin Book of Welsh Short Stories* (1975), for example, he was deliberate in his effort to move away from the 'teachers and funerals' image of Wales prevalent in much of the short story canon to that point. *The New Penguin Book of Welsh Short Stories*, which appeared in 1993, pushed even further. 'The place is Wales', he wrote, 'and the time is this century' - but it was not a stereotyped view. On 8 May 2004, Alun Richards unveiled a blue plaque to his friend Ron Berry in Blaencwm, Rhondda, on behalf of the Rhys Davies Trust. A few weeks later, he suffered a heart attack and died at Singleton Hospital, Swansea, on 2 June 2004.

Alun Richards never enjoyed the accolades due to him as one of Wales's pre-eminent writers and playwrights of the late twentieth century. Although his short story collection, *Dai Country*, won the Welsh Arts Council's literary prize for 1974, there was no BAFTA or Royal Television Society award, nor lifetime achievement awards. As befitted a man who sought out 'champions of the world, not bloody Machynlleth', it was through international writing fellowships that he gained something of the recognition he deserved, and which almost always eluded him in Wales. In 1980, he was in residence at the Australian Film and Television School in Sydney. In 1984, he won a Japanese Foundation Fellowship and spent much of the year living uncomfortably in Tokyo. On his return in 1985, he was awarded an honorary fellowship by University College Swansea, where he worked for several years as an adult education tutor and helped to develop an archive of Welsh writing in English. In 1985-6, he travelled to Australia once again spending time as writer in residence at the University of Western Australia in Perth, at Griffith University in Brisbane, and at the University of Sydney. As for Wales: 'I am Welsh', he wrote combatively in 1971, 'the rest is propaganda'.

Author

Daryl Leeworthy

Sources

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Alun Richards, *Days of absence: autobiography (1929-55)* (London 1986)

Alun Richards, 'Alun Richards', in Meic Stephens, *Artists in Wales* (Llandysul 1971)

Dai Smith, *In the frame: memory in society 1910-2010* (Cardigan 2010)

Alun Richards's professional papers are held at the Richard Burton Archives, Swansea University

Additional archival material can be found at the National Library of Wales and at the BBC Written Archive Centre, Caversham

Further reading

Wikipedia Article: [Alun Richards](#)

Additional Links

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