

YSTUMLLYN, JOHN (d. 1786), gardener and land steward

Name: John Ystumllyn
Date of death: 1786
Spouse: Margaret Gruffydd
Child: Ann
Child: Lowri
Child: Richard
Gender: Male
Occupation: gardener and land steward
Area of activity: Nature and Agriculture
Author: Ffion Mair Jones

What is known of John Ystumllyn derives for the most part from the work of **Robert Isaac Jones** (Alltud Eifion), who published an account of his life in 1888, later translated as *John Ystumllyn or 'Jack Black': the history of his life and traditions about him since his capture in the wilds of Africa until his death; his descendants, etc. etc., together with a picture of him in the year 1754*. In the absence of other sources, Alltud Eifion's text is the basis for much of the record presented here, with some of his comments given within quotation marks. Although many of the facts reported can be accepted, there are clear racist overtones to Alltud Eifion's representation. Furthermore, as Yasmin Begum wrote in 2019, the names by which John Ystumllyn was known in his adoptive area (including the nickname Jack Black) were not given him by his parents, and are, rather, a reflection of his appropriation by colonists and by a colonial discourse.

John's story came to the attention of Alltud Eifion through his mother's family: his grandfather worked on the estate of the **Wynn** family of Ystumllyn, Criccieth, at the time John came there to live. It is suggested that it was a member of this family, possibly Ellis Wynn, senior, who brought John home to Ystumllyn, aged eight years (or thirteen according to other reports), having kidnapped him in Africa. This is supported by John's own recollection of being with his mother on the banks of a stream, shaded by trees, when white men accosted them, taking him with them in spite of his mother's protests. Recent commentators lean towards the view that John was an enslaved child brought to Britain from the West Indies, an assessment corroborated by the wording of an englyn by **Dafydd Siôn Siâms**, Penrhyndeudraeth, engraved on John's tombstone. This notes that he was 'born in India' (a possible reference to the West Indies), and baptized and buried in Wales.

After John reached Ystumllyn, he was baptized (either at Criccieth church or that of Ynyscynhaearn in nearby Pentrefelin, wrote Alltud Eifion). Alltud Eifion reports that 'he had no language, only noise like the howling of a dog' when he was caught and that they had 'some difficulty taming him for a long time, and that they would not suffer him to go outside' after he reached Ystumllyn. Eventually, he learnt to speak and write in both English and Welsh, and he was taught gardening in the gardens of the mansion. He was very skilful with his hands, too: he could create wicker baskets, wooden spoons, and small boats, and he was a good florist. John matured into a handsome young man, admired by the young women of the neighbourhood, among them Margaret Gruffydd of Hendre Mur, Trawsfynydd, who was a maid at Ystumllyn. Margaret overcame 'her fear of the black man', and on 9 April 1768, the two were married at Dolgellau, where she had moved to work from Eifionydd. Since both had left the households in which they were employed without permission, they lost their places. An opportunity came to settle and work as land stewards at Ynysgain Fawr near Criccieth, for a time. Eventually, John was offered his old place at Ystumllyn; but by his latter years he was working for a branch of the **Wynn** family at Maesyneuadd, Llanaelhaearn. During this late period of his life, he also moved to a new home Nanhyran ('Y Nhyra Isa' or 'Nhyrau ddu' colloquially), between Cefn-y-Meusydd-Uchaf and Tyddyn-iolyn, Dolbenmaen. Nanhyran was a thatched cottage surrounded by a large garden; it was given to John by Ellis Wynn in recognition of his service to the Ystumllyn family. Margaret and John had seven children, two of whom died in infancy. Of the remainder, a daughter named Ann married James Martin, a musical instrument vendor in Liverpool; another daughter, Lowri, married, first, Robert Jones, a butler from Madryn on the Llŷn Peninsula, and secondly, a man named John Mcnamare; and a son, Richard (1770-1862), served as huntsman at Glynllifon under **Sir Thomas Wynn** (d. 1807), first baron Newborough.

John Ystumllyn died from jaundice on 9 July 1786, and was buried at Ynyscynhaearn churchyard. His tombstone, which includes the englyn mentioned, erroneously gives the year of his death as 1791. The local anecdotes recorded by Robert Isaac Jones portray a man of firm morals, who responded robustly to the preconceptions of his contemporaries about him as the only black person in the neighbourhood, and who adhered to the truth in any case of wrong committed against him or false step of his own. The story which recounts how, when he broke the leg of a sow which had wreaked havoc on his plants in the garden at Ystumllyn, he decided to speak the truth rather than 'sell my soul to the devil' by telling a lie, gives a characteristic portrayal from among those recorded by Robert Isaac Jones of a character that was fiery, proud, and honest.

Author

Ffion Mair Jones

Sources

D. Trevor Roberts, *John Ystumllyn or 'Jack Black': the history of his life and traditions about him since his capture in the wilds of Africa until his death; his descendants, etc. etc., together with a picture of him in the year 1754* (Criccieth 197-?)

Robert Isaac Jones, *Y Gestiana: sef hanes Tre'r Gest, yn cynwys cofnodion hynafiaethol Plwyfi Ynyscynhaiarn a Threflys ac hefyd beddergreiph y ddwy fynwent, hanes*

Dyffryn Madog, etc. (Tremadog 1892)

Robert Isaac Jones, *Y Gestiana: sef hanes Tre'r Gest, yn cynnwys cofnodion hynafiaethol plwyfi Ynyscynhaiarn a Threflys* (Dinbych 1975)

Gravestone with englyn, St Cynhaearn churchyard, Ynyscynhaearn, Pentrefelin near Criccieth

Marriage records, Dolgellau parish records, Gwynedd Archive Service

Burial records, Ynyscynhaearn parish records, Gwynedd Archive Service

Andrew Green, [John Ystumlllyn](#) (d. 1786), ODNB

[Yasmin] Begum, @punkistani93, 17 August 2019

Simon Brooks, *Hanes Cymry: Lleiafrifoedd Ethnig ar Gwareiddiad Cymraeg* (Caerdydd 2021), pp. 231–4, 414

Alan Llwyd, *Cymru Ddu: Hanes Pobl Dduon Cymru / Black Wales: A History of Black Welsh People* (Caerdydd 2005) pp. 26–31

Further reading

Coflein: [Ystumlllyn](#)

British Listed Buildings: [Ystumlllyn](#)

Coflein: [St Cynhaiarn's Church](#)

Wikipedia Article: [John Ystumlllyn](#)

Images

Wikimedia: [John Ystumlllyn](#), oil, 11 May 1754

[John Ystumlllyn](#), woodcut after the original oil, 11 May 1754, in Robert Isaac Jones, *John Ystumlllyn, neu, 'Jack Black': hanes ei fywyd, a thraddodiadau am dano, oâ€™r amser y dygwyd ef yn wyllt o Affrica hyd adeg ei farwolaeth; ei hiliogaeth, &c., &c., ynghyda darlun o hono yn y flwyddyn 1754* (Tremadoc 1888), frontispiece

NLW: [John Ystumlllyn \(neu Jack Black\)](#)

John Ingleby, [Stymlin: seat of Wynne Esq](#)

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