

EVANS, ELMIRA (Myra) (1883 - 1972), teacher, author and folklorist

Name: Elmira (Myra) Evans

Date of birth: 1883

Date of death: 1972

Spouse: Evan Jenkin Evans

Child: David Wynne Evans

Child: Aneurin Evans

Child: Nest Evans

Child: Glenys Evans

Child: Mervyn Evans

Child: Iola Evans

Parent: Mary Rees (née Williams)

Parent: Thomas Rees

Gender: Female

Occupation: teacher, author and folklorist

Area of activity: Education; Literature and Writing

Author: Peter Stevenson

Myra Evans was born just before midnight on 1 November 1883 at 4 George St, New Quay, Ceredigion, the daughter of Thomas Rees (1843-1926), a fisherman and ship's captain, and his wife Mary (née Williams, b. 1856). However, her birth date was mistakenly entered as 2 November by the doctor who arrived the following day. Her birth on Calan Gaeaf, when according to traditional belief the veil between this world and the Otherworld was at its thinnest, meant a great deal to Myra. She was named Elmira after the ship owned by her Uncle Dan who died at sea aged 24. She had four siblings, Gertrude, Elwy, Glanmor and Jim. The family later moved to Glasfryn, also in New Quay.

Myra's natural inquisitiveness led to a fascination with her family folklore. She learnt stories from her father, who encouraged her to retell them in her own words, and folk songs came from her mother. She spoke three languages from an early age, Welsh from her parents, English and Spanish from the sailors. Life revolved around the sea and Tabernacl Methodist Chapel. She filled sketchbooks with drawings of local characters alongside their names and a few pithy comments, her personal visual archive which is also a document of the town's social history.

Myra was a pupil teacher at the local Board School before entering Swansea Teacher Training College in September 1903. Two years later she taught at Holton Primary School in Barry before moving to a permanent job teaching Welsh at Palmerston Primary School, also in Barry. She taught through songs and stories, which led her to write and illustrate *Llyfr Darllen i'r Plant Lleiaf* (Gwasg Gymraeg Foyle, 1929), followed by *Plant y Goedwig: Ail Lyfr Darllen* (1930). She also wrote the words for an unpublished operetta for children, 'Tro i wlad y Tylwyth Teg, chwarae gerdd i blant', in 1933.

In 1914, Myra married **Evan Jenkin Evans**. Evan had graduated in physics in 1902 in Aberystwyth and worked as a lecturer with Ernest Rutherford at Victoria University, Manchester. They lived in Whalley Range where they started a family, though David Wynne their firstborn died young. Their second child, Aneurin, was taught his native language and attended a Welsh chapel in Manchester.

When Evan was appointed Professor of Physics at University College Swansea in 1920, the family moved to Fir Dene in Sketty. Myra gave birth to three more children, Nest, Glenys and Mervyn, and started work at the BBC in Cardiff, where she told nature stories in Welsh on the radio every Friday as Anti Myra. **Saunders Lewis** invited her to join the Enquiry into the Teaching of the Welsh Language in Schools as an articulate working mother and teacher, able to stand up to powerful people who believed the language was unnecessary.

In 1930, at the age of 47, she bore another daughter, Iola, and at 53 she had an abortion. By 1939 Evan had fallen ill, so they left Swansea and moved to Gilfachreda near New Quay. After Evan died in 1944, Myra threw herself into writing about folklore and oral history. In 1935 she had published some of her folk tales as *Casgliad o Chwedlau Newydd* (Cambrian News, Aberystwyth) to raise money for the repair of the Tabernacl Chapel roof. Many of her stories are about encounters with the Otherworld, but they have real local settings, such as the one about the unrequited love of a mermaid for a fisherman resulting in the flooding of the church at Llanina. The farmhouse in the story, Tangeulan, features on maps before the Royal Charter storm of 1859.

After the publication of *Atgofion Ceinewydd* by Cymdeithas Lyfrau Ceredigion in 1961, Myra Evans came to be recognised as a tradition bearer of national importance, and was filmed by folk singer Meinir MacDonald who sang 'Suo Gân Gwraig Panteg', from Myra's story of Sigl-di-gwt and the Panteg farmhouse. Minwel Tibbot and Robin Gwyndaf visited from the Welsh Folk Museum to record her thoughts about folk cookery and narrative.

Myra Evans died on 25 August 1972 in Bronglais Hospital, Aberystwyth, and is buried at Cross Inn with Evan and Aneurin. Her memory lives on in her unique legacy of the folklore of her own people.

Author

Peter Stevenson

Sources

Family information from Myra Evans's daughter Iola Billings

Myra Evans, *Gilfachreda*, song book, NLW Facs 7

Myra Evans, *An operetta for children*, NLW MS 9299E

Peter Stevenson, *Boggarts, Trolls and Tylwyth Teg* (Cheltenham 2021)

Peter Stevenson, *Ceredigion folk tales* (Stroud 2014)

Peter Stevenson, *Illustrated Welsh folk tales for young and old*

Further Reading

Myra Evans (née Jane Elmira Rees) (1883-1972), People's Collection Wales

Sound and Film

Peter Stevenson, Ceri Owen-Jones and Elsa Davies, Y Drwm, National Library of Wales, 2014

Meinir MacDonald, 'Alawon Gwerin Cei Newydd', 1960s

Minwel Tibbot and Robin Gwyndaf, St Fagans National Museum archive

Peter Stevenson, Ceri Owen-Jones, Elsa Davies, Myra [sound recording] 2014

Maggie Jones, John Griffiths, Myra Evans, Atgofion cyffredinol. Rhan 1 [sound recording] 1960

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