

## THOMAS, IFOR OWEN (1892 - 1956), operatic tenor, photographer and artist

**Name:** Ifor Owen Thomas  
**Date of birth:** 1892  
**Date of death:** 1956  
**Spouse:** Mildred Thomas (née Unfried)  
**Spouse:** Ceridwen Thomas (née Evans)  
**Parent:** Isabella Thomas (née Morris)  
**Parent:** Owen Thomas  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** operatic tenor, photographer and artist  
**Area of activity:** Art and Architecture; Music; Performing Arts  
**Author:** Eryl Wyn Rowlands

Born Bay View, Red Wharf Bay, Anglesey, April 10, 1892, third child and only son of Owen Thomas and Isabella (née Morris), a celebrated singer from Dyffryn Nantlle. The family moved to Pandy, Pentraeth, where he was educated in the village board school before being apprenticed to a carpenter. He began singing under the tuition of his mother and E.D. Lloyd of Bangor (1868 - 1922), winning a scholarship in 1914 to the Royal College of Music out of a field of 400. He left London in 1917 to study with Jean de Reszke in Paris and Benjamino Gigli in Milan.

The major concert halls of Britain had already welcomed the 'Welsh tenor' before he opened in La Scala Milan in 1925, moving to Monte Carlo and Nice before becoming chief tenor in the Paris Opera in 1927. In that year he was admitted as an honorary bard to the Gorsedd of Bards as 'Ifor o Fôn ', before sailing to the United States.

Although he appeared with the Philadelphia Opera Company in 1928 he left the world of opera for the concert platform, broadcasting and recording for H.M.V. and Sanders. He became a great favourite with the American Welsh who dubbed him 'the second Evan Williams with a hint of Caruso '. He also sang with leading quartets before forming one himself - The Four Aces - with three other New York Welshmen. On the operatic stage he sang with Caruso (as his deputy), Chaliapin and McCormach in Milan and with Frances Alda and Kathryn Meisle.

His career as a solo artist was tragically brought to an end in 1929 by asthma, an old complaint which had prevented his going to Llangefni Grammar School as a boy. Complete recovery proved elusive, in spite of spending 1931 in Italy, and although he sang occasionally in 1932 he eventually accepted a post as photographer for *Colliers Magazine* in 1933. Here he made a name for himself, especially for his portraits of F.D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill, as well as a host of film stars. After retiring in 1948 he turned to painting in oils and watercolour, exhibiting in Britain and the United States.

He was a fervent Welshman - he Cymricised his middle name to Owain - and over the years he was host to scores of fellow Welshmen in his house in New York. He was considered one of the mainstays of Welsh culture in the city and in the Welsh Presbyterian Church, and conducted the Côr Merched Cymru in New York from 1944 onwards.

He died after a long illness, on his birthday, 1956, having returned from Wales the previous year. He was buried in Forest Lawn Cemetery, Delwanna, N.J. He married twice (1) Ceridwen Evans in 1920; a child from the marriage died in 1922. The marriage was annulled and he married (2) Mildred Unfried, a professional pianist from New York, who survived him.

### Author

Eryl Wyn Rowlands

### Sources

*Y Drych*, 1927-56

*Y Cloriantydd*, 1893-1956

*The New York Times*, 11 April 1956

Anglesey Archive Services, Llangefni

personal knowledge

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