

EVANS, GEORGE EWART (1909-1988), writer and oral historian

Name: George Ewart Evans
Date of birth: 1909
Date of death: 1988
Gender: Male
Occupation: writer and oral historian
Area of activity: History and Culture; Literature and Writing
Author: Gareth W. Williams

Born 1 April 1909 in Abercynon, third son of William Evans (died 1942) of Pentyrch, shopkeeper, and first son of his second wife Janet, née Hitchings, of Llangynwyd. He came of a radical family and was named after William Ewart Gladstone; his own radicalism, fired by the suffering of the Welsh miners during the inter-war depression, took him further to the left and into the Communist Party. He was one of eleven children in a predominantly Welsh speaking family, all of whom attended Calfarfa, the Welsh Baptist chapel which adjoined the family grocer's store in Abercynon, and where William Evans was chapel deacon and superintendent of the Sunday school. George Ewart Evans reconstructs the warm atmosphere of his bustling, crowded boyhood in his semi-autobiographical novel *The Voices of the Children*, extracts of which first appeared in the *Welsh Review* in 1945, prior to its publication by Gwyn Jones ' Penmark Press in 1947; it was reprinted by the *Library of Wales* in 2008. He attended the local primary school, Abertâf Elementary, and went on to Mountain Ash County School where he was moderately successful academically and shone on the sports field. The pattern repeated itself when he entered University College Cardiff in 1927 to read Classics, emerging in 1930 with a second class honours degree and the distinction of having captained the College Rugby XV. A wing three-quarter for the then first-class Mountain Ash club side, tall (for a valleys Welshman) and good looking, he always retained the upright stance, slightly arthritic gait and high shoulders of the former athlete.

The inter-war years were difficult ones at home, where money was tight and the family shop felt the impact of the widespread unemployment in the mining village of Abercynon, so while his elder brothers went out to work he helped finance his university career by athletics coaching and running professionally at the Welsh Powderhall meetings in Pontypridd and other race venues in the valleys. He took a teaching certificate in 1931 but there were no posts available where he could use it. In 1934 he eventually found employment as a physical education teacher at Sawston Village College in Cambridgeshire where he met Ellen Florence Knappett (born 11 July 1907 in Clapton, London), a Quaker and fellow teacher whom he married in 1938 and who saw that their four children (three girls and a boy) were educated at Quaker schools.

He had aspirations to become a writer, and as the published author, from 1937, of poems and especially short stories, mostly with a Welsh mining background, he contributed to the renaissance of Welsh writing in English that grew apace in that decade. He also won first prize at the Denbigh National Eisteddfod in 1939 for a radio play, in English, about a mining disaster. His wartime experience as an RAF radio technician was an unhappy one (blue was 'a colour I was never partial to') and the onset of a hearing impairment made his brief post-war return to teaching increasingly difficult. *The Voices of the Children* received an indifferent reception, and living with his wife's family in the Home Counties he became seriously depressed. But his life took a decisive turn when in 1948 his wife Ellen took up the post of schoolmistress in the remote East Anglian village of Blaxhall. While she ran the school he brought up their family and devoted himself to writing. Hitherto this had been influenced by his Welsh background but in walking his young children around the village he discovered a new theme as he realised that his elderly neighbours, Suffolk farm workers, with their unconsciously often Shakespearean vocabulary, were 'flesh and blood archives' containing a wealth of oral information about rapidly vanishing rural customs and work habits whose origins, he came to believe, stretched back to medieval times, in some cases much further. He developed the notion that this 'prior culture', which, he thought had in certain respects existed in England since pre-Roman times, was in danger of obliteration by the arrival of heavy machinery in the fields. The knowledge embedded in this prior culture would die along with the pre-1914 generation who still carried it, and by virtue of his sensitively recorded and faithfully transcribed interviews he became a pioneer oral historian before either the term or the activity became fashionable.

This became his life's work, resulting in a sheaf of books that began with the classic *Ask the Fellows who Cut the Hay* (1956), followed by *The Horse in the Furrow* (1960) - his interest in horse lore is a constant feature of his work and was first aroused by his study of the Mari Lwyd, which was very much alive in the districts his parents came from - *The Pattern under the Plough* (1966) *Where Beards Wag All* (1970), *The Days that We have Seen* (1975) and *Horse Power and Magic* (1979). While these established him as the foremost interpreter of England's 'gwerin', in *From Mouths of Men* (1976) he returned to south Wales to record the experiences of the anthracite drift miners of the Dulais valley in west Glamorgan. Though he often pondered a permanent return to Wales he remained in East Anglia, living successively in Blaxhall (1948-56), Needham Market (1956-62), Helmingham, near Ipswich (1962-8) and finally the village of Brooke on the border of Norfolk and Suffolk. A frequent broadcaster and lecturer, he received honorary doctorates from the universities of Essex (D.U., 1982) and Keele (D.Litt., 1983) though not from any Welsh institution. Nevertheless, he never lost his keen sense of Welsh nationality nor his Welsh accent. He strove to improve his written Welsh in the course of his enduring friendship with like-minded scholars like **Iorwerth Peate** and **Ffransis Payne**, and his writings contain frequent reference to Welsh literature; his epigraph to *Where Beards Wag All* is **Iolo Goch's** fourteenth century cywydd 'Y Llafurwr' in the original, with Evans ' own translation alongside it as 'The Farmworker'.

He had first realised that people's memories constituted valuable historical evidence when talking in the 1930s to elderly and unemployed miners on the hills above Abercynon, and he always carried with him an assumption of equality in conversation with ordinary people. A communist sympathiser from that time - he was Cambridge CP branch secretary in the late thirties - he was an unlikely figure to engage the sympathy of the reserved and apolitical peasantry of East Anglia, but his gentle manner and unobtrusive questioning won their confidence as few have managed, though his writing on rural England was never sentimental or romantic. He wrote stories and poetry into the 1950s, edited a volume of *Welsh Short Stories* in 1959, and published two volumes of his own stories in *Acky* (1974), set in East Anglia, and *Let Dogs Delight* (1975), whose background is the Welsh valleys which played such a formative role in making him the kind of remarkable social historian he was.

He died on 11 January 1988 at Brooke, and was cremated in Norwich; his ashes were scattered on the hills above Abercynon. His wife died at Brooke 19 September 1999. His son Matthew (Lord Evans of Temple Guiting, born 1941), became managing director then chairman of George Ewart Evans ' publishers Faber and Faber, and his son-in-law, the water colourist and illustrator David Gentleman (born 1930), edited and illustrated an anthology of Evans ' writings on oral history, *The Crooked Scythe*, in 1993.

Author

Professor Gareth W. Williams

Sources

George Ewart Evans Papers, National Library of Wales

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'*George Ewart Evans* (Oxford 2004)', Oxford *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 2004 (Alun Howkins)

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VIAF: 48003398

Wikidata: Q5539058

Published date: 2008-07-31

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Williams, G. W., (2008). EVANS, GEORGE EWART (1909-1988), writer and oral historian. *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*. Retrieved 9 Nov 2024, from <https://biography.wales/article/s6-EVAN-EWA-1909>

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