

OWEN, WILLIAM RICHARD (1906-1982), pioneer of Welsh broadcasting

Name: William Richard Owen
Date of birth: 1906
Date of death: 1982
Gender: Male
Occupation: pioneer of Welsh broadcasting
Area of activity: Performing Arts
Author: Morfudd Nia Jones

W. R. Owen was born in Holyhead on the 22nd of July 1906, the son of Captain Richard Griffith Owen (1878-1973) of Llanwnda, Caernarfonshire and his wife Margaret Ann Lewis (1883-1980) of Holyhead. The father ran away to the army at 15, and joined the Royal Welch Fusiliers. He was a Lieutenant in the British Army that invaded the Legation Quarter at Beijing/Peking during the Boxer Rebellion in 1900. He left the army to work as a guard on the Irish Mail, the train from Holyhead to Euston Station after meeting Margaret Ann Lewis. They were married at Holyhead in 1905, and had 3 children, William Richard, Ellen Mary (Elma) (1910-1999) and Mona (1923-2005). The family moved to Birkenhead about 1915 when W. R. was about 9 years old, before moving back to Bangor when he was about 18. He was educated at Holyhead primary school, and at Birkenhead. He was a very good artist, but took a job at Bangor University Library rather than taking up a scholarship to study art, and he persuaded by **Thomas Shankland** to train as a Librarian. He met Nellie Roberts (1909-1995) a local girl from Bangor who worked as an assistant to the owner of the County Theatre at Bangor about 1931. They were married at Bangor on the 11th of December 1933, and had two daughters, Rhiannon and Dwynwen.

W. R. Owen was Bangor City Librarian from 1937 to 1941. He was an active member of many local committees, and was the Billeting Officer when the evacuees from Liverpool and Birkenhead came to north Wales during the Second World War. Due to eyesight problems he was refused entry to the armed forces, but served as a Lieutenant in the Home Guard. Broadcasting was developing at a fast pace during the war, with an increasing demand for current news and entertainment, and W. R. Owen took the risk of leaving a safe and permanent job at the Library to embark on a new career in broadcasting by joining the BBC at Cardiff in 1942 as a producer in charge of recording radio programmes. W. R. Owen was instrumental in establishing the Recorded Programmes and Overseas Departments, setting a solid foundation for the development of modern broadcasting in Wales. He had an interest in broadcasting and current affairs, and was pioneered recording and broadcasting the main events in Wales in a mobile recording unit. He also travelled extensively through Europe and the Far East during this period, and began a radio programme of *'Forces favourites'* that linked soldiers in the Far East with their families back home in Wales.

His friendly personality and his love of socialising helped him make friends, and nothing gave him more pleasure than travelling around Wales looking for material for his radio programmes. It is said that he travelled more than 10,000 miles in his mobile recording unit in the year 1946, attending meetings and open air events, interviewing people all over Wales in all weather for his monthly programme *'Radio Record'*. Due to his experience of overseas travel, he was active and enthusiastic in assisting the founding of the first international eisteddfod in Llangollen in 1947. W. R. Owen was responsible for recording the winning performance by the Obernkirchen Children's Choir from East Germany singing the song 'Der Fröhliche Wanderer' or 'Happy Wanderer' in the Llangollen International Eisteddfod of 1953, making the choir an international phenomenon that reached the top of the charts, and sang all around the world after the broadcast. He was chosen to be the President at the 1969 Eisteddfod in honour of his work. W. R. Owen was also responsible for producing the programmes *'Tocyn Wythnos'* and *'Pigion y Dydd'* from the National Eisteddfod of Wales, as well as playing a part in almost all important events in Wales, including the Investiture of the Prince of Wales at Caernarfon in 1969, one of his last roles for the BBC, when he was responsible for the logistics of the broadcast.

In 1950 he was appointed a Special Officer for the Festival of Britain in 1951, to collect information about events that were being arranged in Wales during the festival, with a view to their suitability for broadcasting.

The Overseas Department broadcasted radio programmes on current affairs and Welsh issues in a programme called *'Welsh Magazine'*, which initiated W. R. Owen's interest in Patagonia. He spent some time there in 1955 researching, recording and producing the first Welsh programmes from Patagonia. He came into contact with leaders of the Welsh communities and influential figures of the province, and three programmes were broadcast, including *Cymanfa Ganu* from the Gaiman and interviews full of stories and memories by the inhabitants of Chubut and Cwm Hyfryd. These programmes re-kindled interest and contact between both countries, and committees were established to organise the centenary celebrations of the migration. W. R. Owen was one of the first to welcome the small party of visitors from Patagonia who came to Wales in 1965 to celebrate the centenary of the migration, and he was the principal organiser of the trip for a group of prominent Welsh people to travel to Patagonia for the centenary celebrations in the same year. A set of W. R. Owen's Welsh language recordings of interviews with many of the residents of Patagonia were presented to the Argentinian Ambassador in London in 1965. He was keen to welcome home all Welshmen from anywhere in the world during visits to their homeland, and his interest in the Welsh communities around the world continued after he left his job and moved to be BBC's west Wales representative in charge of the Swansea office. After a period of 6 years in Swansea, W. R. Owen returned to Bangor in December 1963 to take charge of the BBC offices as a successor to **Sam Jones**. He retired in 1971 following a successful career.

He has been described by many as an energetic and dynamic person, full of infectious enthusiasm, who was always ready to praise, although some have described his managerial style as 'dictatorial'. His urge to travel and meet people continued after his retirement, and he diligently organized and led many trips to the continent. He was also fond of playing bowls, and he was an enthusiastic follower of the Welsh Rugby team. He took an avid interest in local societies, including Bangor Rotary Club, Bangor Lunch Club, and the Probus Club, and was a unflagging and successful missionary for founding Welsh Language Lunch Clubs in north and south Wales, and he was to have been the honorary guest at the united lunch clubs meeting in Swansea National Eisteddfod in 1982, but he was not able to attend due to ill health. He died at Bangor after a period of ill health on the 31st of August 1982. His funeral service was held at St David's Church, Bangor, and he was cremated at Bangor Crematorium.

His daughter, Dwynwen Belsey donated his collection of photographs, slides, a film, recordings and manuscripts about Patagonia to the National Library.

Author

Morfudd Nia Jones

Sources

Information from his daughters Rhiannon Owen and Dwynwen Belsey

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