

## LEWIS, JOHN SAUNDERS (1893-1985), politician, critic and dramatist

**Name:** John Saunders Lewis  
**Date of birth:** 1893  
**Date of death:** 1985  
**Spouse:** Margaret Lewis (née Gilcriest)  
**Child:** Mair G. Jones (née Lewis)  
**Parent:** Mary Margaret Lewis (née Thomas)  
**Parent:** Lodwig Lewis  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** politician, critic and dramatist  
**Area of activity:** Literature and Writing; Politics, Government and Political Movements  
**Author:** T. Robin Chapman

Saunders Lewis was born at 61 Falkland Road, Poulton-cum-Seacombe, Wallasey, Cheshire, on 15 October 1893, the second of three sons of Lodwig Lewis (1859-1933), a Calvinistic Methodist minister, and his wife Mary Margaret (née Thomas, 1862-1900). He was educated at Liscard High School for Boys from the age of six, and went on to study English at Liverpool University in 1911.

His academic career was interrupted by the Great War. Lewis enlisted voluntarily in the King's Liverpool Regiment in September 1914. In April 1915 he applied for a commission with the 12th Battalion of the South Wales Borderers, and became a full lieutenant in February of the following year. He was sent to France that summer. After being wounded defending a strip of land near Gonnellieu in April 1917, he was brought back to Britain but later rejoined his regiment and served until early 1919.

In France he read [Thomas Gwynn Jones's](#) biography of [Emrys ap Iwan](#) and the work of Maurice Barrès. [Emrys ap Iwan](#) taught him the art of writing provocatively; in Barrès's trilogy of novels *Les Déracinés* he found the principles which formed the basis of his vision as an author and politician for the rest of his life: the individual's need for geographical, historical, religious and cultural roots, respect for authority and contempt for Romanticism.

Lewis completed his BA degree in 1920. By the time he gained his MA two years later, for a study of the influence of English poets of the eighteenth century on their Welsh-language contemporaries (the substance of which was published in *A School of Welsh Augustans* in 1924), he had published the 'Anglo-Welsh' play *The Eve of St John* (1921), and had taken his first job, as organiser of a scheme to develop rural libraries in Glamorganshire. In 1922 he was appointed to a lectureship in the Department of Welsh at University College Swansea, a post which he held until 1936. He married Margaret Gilcriest (1891-1984) in the Catholic church of Our Lady and St Michael in Workington, Cumberland, on 31 July 1924, and they had one daughter, Mair, born in 1926.

In Swansea he began his literary and critical work in earnest. As well as his first Welsh-language play, *Gwaed yr Uchelwyr* (1922), he wrote the pamphlet *An Introduction to Contemporary Welsh Literature* (1926) and the pioneering Freudian study *Williams Pantycelyn* (1927), in which he argued that Wales's foremost hymn-writer could properly be regarded as Europe's first Romantic. In *Braslun o Hanes Llenyddiaeth Gymraeg Hyd 1536* (1932) he maintained that Henry VIII's Acts of Union and the Protestant Reformation had cut Wales off from its European tradition. He also contributed essays to [W. J. Gruffydd's](#) journal *Y Llenor*, including 'Dafydd Nanmor' (1923), which dealt with the concept of perchentyaeth (literally 'householdership') which Lewis regarded as fundamental to the Welsh praise tradition, and 'Llythyr Ynghylch Catholigiaeth' attacking Protestant liberalism for its unwillingness to acknowledge the place of sin in its theology or in its literature. Lewis gave sin a central role in his novel *Monica* (1930), which became a succès de scandale because of its references to prostitution and venereal diseases. After the death of his father in 1933, Lewis followed his wife by being formally received into the Catholic Church.

Of all Lewis's activities in Swansea, however, the one which had the most lasting significance was the founding of Plaid Genedlaethol Cymru, the National Party of Wales, in 1925. When he took on the presidency of the party in 1926 he delivered a lecture outlining its policy, *Egwyddorion Cenedlaetholdeb* ('The Principles of Nationalism'). He was not in favour of following the example of Irish nationalism, but argued rather for freedom for Wales under the monarchy. At the same time, as editor from 1926 onwards of the party's journal, *Y Ddraig Goch*, he set out from month to month his vision of Wales as a self-sufficient, cooperative agricultural country. A number of these essays were collected in the volume *Canlyn Arthur* (1938). He stood as his party's candidate for the University of Wales seat in the General Election of 1931, gaining 914 votes.

His commitment to the nationalist cause led to the major turning point of his life. In 1935 the Air Ministry announced plans

to build an RAF training camp on a strip of land on the Llyn peninsula. Lewis led a campaign to halt the development. After petitions and public meetings proved unsuccessful, on 8 September 1936 Lewis and two fellow members of the National Party, [David John Williams](#) and [Lewis Edward Valentine](#), went to Penrhos and set fire to workers' huts on the site of the proposed 'Bombing School'. They then went to the police station in Pwllheli to present a letter admitting their responsibility for the action. The 'fire in Llyn' or 'Penyberth' (the name of the house demolished to make room for the camp) became part of the mythology of Welsh nationalism. At Caernarfon Assizes the following month the three were accused of destroying crown property, but the jury failed to agree on a verdict and they were released. Even before the second hearing, at the Old Bailey in London in January 1937, Lewis heard that he had been dismissed from his lectureship. At the second hearing the three were found guilty and sentenced to nine months each in Wormwood Scrubs.

Shortly before the second hearing Lewis composed *Buchedd Garmon* (1937). The ostensible subject of the play is theological disputes in the Early Church, but it is hard not to read it at the same time as a statement about Lewis's conservative Christian nationalism. A speech by [Emrys](#) contains probably the most famous lines he ever wrote. Wales is likened to a vineyard passed on as an inheritance from generation to generation but which is now threatened by a herd of swine. [Emrys](#) calls on his fellow Welshmen to withstand them: 'Sefwch gyda mi yn y bwlch, / Fel y cadwer i'r oesoedd a ddêl y glendid a fu' ('Stand with me in the breach, so that the splendour of the past may be preserved for the ages to come'). Lewis and his two fellow prisoners were given special permission by the prison governor to listen to the play when it was first broadcast on the radio.

After being released from prison in autumn 1937, Lewis moved to Llanfarian on the outskirts of Aberystwyth, and spent the following fifteen years earning an uncertain living between teaching, farming and journalism. In 1939 he resigned from the presidency of the National Party. 1941 saw the publication of the slim volume of poetry, *Byd a Betws*, in which the opening poem, 'Y Dilyw 1939' ('The Deluge 1939'), refers to unemployed miners of the industrial south as 'y demos dimai' ('the halfpenny demos') and to Wall Street financiers '[a]u ffoenau Hebreig yn ystadegau'r chwarter' ('with their Hebrew nostrils in the quarter's statistics'). It was repeatedly quoted from then on by left-wing critics attacking his snobbery and his anti-semitism. His column 'Cwrs y Byd' ('The Course of the World') in *Y Faner* was more substantial. Between 1939 and 1951 he contributed more than 560 weekly articles on life in Wales, Europe and the world as it faced the inevitability of war, the conflict itself, and the new world which emerged from the subsequent peace. These columns show Lewis at his best and his worst. Prophecying doom and convinced that no good would come of victory for either side, he said that Wales should remain above the fray. His column was withheld more than once and often cut by the censor's blue pencil.

It was his view on the war which drew him back into the public arena in 1942, when he stood as the National Party's candidate in the University of Wales by-election. For weeks he was the only candidate in the field, but eventually the Liberal Party managed to persuade [W. J. Gruffydd](#) to stand as an independent candidate. The election turned into a bitter contest between the supporters of the two candidates. Lewis was accused by [Gwilym Davies](#) in the journal *Y Traethodydd* of representing 'the fascist Party in Wales' and of being intent on creating a totalitarian and Papist Wales. Lewis's supporters boycotted *Y Llenor*, leading ultimately to the demise of that journal in 1951. [Gruffydd](#) was elected in January 1943, putting an effective end to Lewis's political activity for the remainder of his life.

By the end of the Second World War Lewis was disillusioned by the 'communal socialist' and pacifist tendency of Plaid Cymru (as it was called by then), by its lack of emphasis on the language, and later by what he regarded as the half-hearted stance of its president, [Gwynfor Evans](#), on plans by Liverpool Corporation to drown the village of Cwm Celyn in order to create the Tryweryn reservoir. He took refuge in two ways. He was appointed a lecturer at University College Cardiff in 1952, and although he produced little academic work, he continued until 1955 to edit the journal which he had established in 1946, *Efrydiau Catholig*, in which he returned to literary criticism, with a particular interest in the seventeenth century. He also returned to the theatre. *Blodeuwedd* was completed in 1948, after a gap of almost a quarter of a century since the first two acts were written. This is the period of the light comedies which he composed specifically for Garthwin Theatre, *Eisteddfod Bodran* (1952) and *Gan Bwyll* (1952), as well as his more substantial and better-known plays: *Siwan* (1956), *Gymerwch chi Sigarét?* (1956), *Brad* (1958) and *Esther* (1960). All of these share the central theme of the existentialist choice which the main character must face.

Lewis retired from his post as senior lecturer in Cardiff in 1957, and continued to live in Penarth for the rest of his life. In 1962, nearing the age of seventy, he ventured one of his last comments on the state of Wales. His renowned radio lecture, *Tynged yr Iaith* ('The Fate of the Language') was intended as a call to Plaid Cymru to respond to the decline of the language 'through revolutionary means' rather than policy papers. It led, however, to the formation of a new movement, *Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg* (The Welsh Language Society), and made the old man into an idol for a new generation bred on the ideals of the civil rights movements in the southern United States and South Africa. The arch-conservative had become a symbol of revolution.

By the mid-sixties, much to his surprise, Lewis found himself fashionable: English translations of his plays were being performed on the BBC and on Hampstead stages. This was the decade of his dramatic work on contemporary Wales, *Cymru Fydd* (1967) and *Problemau Prifysgol* (1968), in which he depicted a degenerate and corrupt land. Wales's glory

belonged in the past, and Lewis's view of its Protestant (and particularly Nonconformist) heritage was much more positive than it had been half a century earlier. He described the Methodist Revival in 1974 as 'the story of the rebirth of our nation', and the Revival and its aftermath are the background to the play *Dwy Briodas Ann* (composed in 1962 and published in 1973), his second novel, the 'historical romance' *Merch Gwern Hywel* (1964), and the lecture 'Ann Griffiths: Arolwg Llenyddol' (1965), in which he sought to explain the unsentimental sincerity of the hymn-writer's conversion.

Lewis continued to publish as late as 1980, despite suffering a stroke the previous year. In 1983, at the age of 89, he was awarded the degree of Doctor of Letters by the University of Wales, which had dismissed him from his post almost half a century earlier. He died after a long illness at St Winifred's Hospital, Cardiff, on 1 September 1985. In his address at the funeral Bishop Daniel Mullins said this about his Christian faith: 'Belief was not easy for him. It would have been so much easier to accept that the world is to be judged on the basis of outward appearances and that the things of this world are all that there is. That would have allowed him to live according to his reason and the wisdom of the ages and to be responsible in the end to himself for his actions.' As it was, he added, 'the terrible contradictions of the Christian faith' had to be faced. It was revealed at the funeral that Lewis had been made a Knight Commander of the Order of St Gregory by Pope Paul VI. The medal was placed on his coffin and he was buried in the same grave as Margaret in Penarth Catholic cemetery.

## Author

T. Robin Chapman

## Sources

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Mair Saunders Jones et al (ed.), *Saunders Lewis: Letters to Margaret Gilcriest* (1993)

D. Ben Rees (ed.), *Ffydd a Gwreiddiau John Saunders Lewis* (2002)

T. Robin Chapman, *Un Bywyd o Blith Nifer: Cofiant Saunders Lewis* (2006)

## Further Reading

NLW Archives: [To the Electors of the University of Wales](#)

NLW Archives: [Welsh University Election, 1943. Letter of Support to Mr. Saunders Lewis. To the Electors of the University of Wales](#)

People's Collection Wales: [Fire in Ll n](#)

Swansea Council: [Saunders Lewis](#)

Wikipedia Article: [Saunders Lewis](#)

## Sound and Film

[Writing On The Line: Professor Gwyn A Williams on Saunders Lewis](#), 1992

## Additional Links

NLW Archives: [Saunders Lewis Manuscripts](#)

VIAF: [113487781](#)

Wikidata: [Q2420498](#)

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