

GALLIE, MENNA PATRICIA (1919-1990), writer

Name: Menna Patricia Gallie
Date of birth: 1919
Date of death: 1990
Spouse: Walter Bryce Gallie
Child: Edyth Gallie
Child: Charles Gallie
Parent: Elizabeth Humphreys (née Rhys Williams)
Parent: William Thomas Humphreys
Gender: Female
Occupation: writer
Area of activity: Literature and Writing
Author: John P. Jenkins

Menna Gallie was born in the mining village of Ystradgynlais, Powys, the youngest of three daughters of William Thomas Humphreys, a carpenter from north Wales, and his wife Elizabeth (née Rhys Williams, 1885-1974). Although she celebrated her birthday on 17 March 1920, she was in fact born on 18 March, 1919. Her early years in a caring, Welsh-speaking home were strongly influenced by Labour politics. Her mother's father Rees Rhys Williams had helped found the Labour Representation Committee in South Wales, and her uncle, William Rhys Williams, a collier who attended Ruskin College, Oxford, was a Labour county councillor. Apart from a brief flirtation with Communism in the late 1930s, Menna Gallie remained an active Labour supporter throughout her life.

A clever, witty child, she won a place at Neath Grammar School, her family having moved to nearby Creunant when she was ten, and then went on to University College, Swansea where she read for an English degree, and also studied Welsh under her uncle [Stephen J. Williams](#). It was there that she met her future husband, philosophy lecturer Walter Bryce Gallie (1912-1998). They married on 13 July 1940, one month after her final examinations and just five days before he left for the war, reaching the rank of major and winning the Croix de Guerre. In his absence, Menna Gallie based herself in Llandudno and London working for the Inland Revenue. When Bryce returned to his lecturing post at Swansea, the couple moved to Ystradgynlais where their two children Charles and Edyth were born.

Although Menna Gallie's father was not a miner, and therefore not directly affected by the 1926 strike, it had a profound effect on her politics. Her liminal position at her primary school, where she was among hungry strikers' children but whose suffering she could not fully share because she had no need of the communal meals served to them, generated a 'guiltless guilt' which she expiated in her first novel *Strike for a Kingdom* (1959). Set in a striking Welsh village, it is a deeply political novel masquerading as an innocuous whodunnit. The suspicious death of an unpopular mine manager investigated by a bullying, egoistic police inspector allowed Menna Gallie to expose the uses and abuses of institutionalised authority while disarming her readers by her engaging representations of harmless, often eccentric, Welsh miners. The central character, D. J. Williams, miner, poet, and J. P., is a particularly memorably portrait.

The novel was written in Northern Ireland where, after four years (1950-1954) at the University College of North Staffordshire (now Keele University), Bryce had taken up a chair at Queen's University, Belfast. Encouraged by the success of *Strike for a Kingdom* - it had been a runner-up for the Golden Dagger Award, and had won highly gratifying reviews both at home and in America - she produced two other novels in quick succession: *Man's Desiring* (1960) and *The Small Mine* (1962). A campus novel, *Man's Desiring* lightheartedly explores the differing cultures of Wales and England through Griff Rowlands's academic career at an English university. It was less successful than *Strike*, but she returned to form with *The Small Mine* set, like *Strike*, in fictional Cilhendre, although this time in the late 1940s. To get an idea of what actual mining was like, Menna Gallie spent two eight-hour shifts underground alongside miners.

Her years in Northern Ireland proved both formative and productive. She and Bryce lived in a beautiful house near a lough on the Castleward Estate outside Belfast, where her nearest neighbour was Viscountess Bangor. Given her socialist background and her strong sense of organic community, Menna Gallie did not find the gentry ideal informal friends nor, given Bryce's eminent position, being regarded as one of the gentry herself. Always a gifted raconteur combining wit with penetrating insight and an unswerving devotion to social justice, she found congenial company among the characters of her novels, and among members of the non-sectarian Northern Ireland Labour Party. Significantly, her writing enabled her to maintain her strong loyalties to Wales. Like many Welsh novelists, she found that viewing Wales from a distance gave her a clearer perspective both of the country itself and her own identity not only as a Welsh woman, but as a woman living in a world made by men.

It was during this period of her life that she was struck by the force of what she called women's lib., although she never regarded herself as an ideological feminist. In her review of Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1970) for the *Cambridge Review*, she strongly criticised the book's strident tone, while also approving its willingness to challenge traditional ideas on gender roles. Her own advocacy of 'women's lib' was in a different register, and her ability to surprise, shock and amuse remained undimmed. In 1978, she declared in a St David's Day speech to an audience of medical doctors that she found her bra the most comforting of her garments. But, as so often with Menna Gallie, humour was a means of addressing serious matters. Despite their comic sides, both of her mining novels present radical alternatives to the macho narratives of industrialised south Wales. And she was equally provocative in her criticism of the male-dominated publishing industry which, she felt, failed to understand that women are psychologically better equipped than men to write novels because they perform so many different roles in their lives.

In 1967, the Gallies moved to Cambridge where Bryce Gallie took up the chair of Political Science and a fellowship at Peterhouse. A swift writer, Menna Gallie began work on her next novel and in 1968 published *Travels with a Duchess*, partly inspired by her visit to Dubrovnik in 1965 as the Northern Ireland representative at a PEN (Poets, Essayists, Novelists) conference. The story of two middle-aged women travelling alone to an exotic location and 'behaving badly', like all of Menna Gallie's fiction, works on several levels. The novel's interrogation of the 'respectable' behaviour expected of women but not of men is never crudely stated but woven into a diverting narrative.

Two years later, in 1970, she published *You're Welcome to Ulster*. The title is typical of Menna Gallie's love of double entendre, but the narrative itself was one of the first to address seriously the Northern Ireland 'Troubles'. Sarah Thomas, a middle-aged Welsh widow, worried that a lump on her breast might be cancerous, returns to Northern Ireland hoping to renew a former relationship with a married man. Her visit becomes the motor of a novel inspecting sexual liberation, religious bigotry, and political destabilisation. Set in July 1969, at a time when political tensions were rising in Northern Ireland, the novel fuses Sarah's personal journey with larger events when she is threatened by Irish nationalists, as Menna Gallie herself had been while canvassing there on behalf of the Northern Ireland Labour Party. The novel widens its topical inspection of violence as a political tactic by connecting extreme elements of Welsh nationalism with the IRA.

Menna Gallie's creative practice was to set novels retrospectively in locations of which she had direct personal experience. Cambridge, however, produced no such novel and suggests her lack of sympathy with a place she found pretentious and hostile to women. Instead, she turned to a novel set in south-west Wales. In *These Promiscuous Parts* (a quotation from Kipling's *The Elephant's Child*) tells the lighthearted story of Rosa Kendrew, who returns from her job in Oxford to her birthplace and becomes involved in politics, poaching, local gossip and intrigue. Menna Gallie's literary agent declined the novel because it did not fit into a marketable genre and would be difficult to place. It was subsequently published only in America in 1986. However, in 1973 she busied herself translating [Caradog Pritchard's](#) Welsh-language novel *Un Nos Ola Leuad* (*Full Moon*), the story of a young man growing up in a slate-quarrying village.

The Gallies left Cambridge in 1976 on Bryce's retirement. Settling in Newport, Pembrokeshire, Menna Gallie became a popular public speaker, famous for her trenchant views on politics, life in Wales, literature and gender equality, their seriousness always leavened by personal reminiscences and outrageous anecdotes. She died from a stroke in Newport on June 17, 1990. Her novels subsequently fell into critical neglect, but the growth of interest in Welsh Writing in English has seen four of them republished, and her reputation as a distinctive and original voice in the canon has been secured.

Author

John P. Jenkins

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Further Reading

Angela Graham, [A Welsh Novelist of Northern Ireland](#)

Wikipedia Article: [Menna Gallie](#)

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