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## JONES, MORGAN GLYNDWR (GLYN) (1905-1995), poet, novelist and short story writer



**Name:** Morgan Glyndwr Jones  
**Date of birth:** 1905  
**Date of death:** 1995  
**Spouse:** Doreen Jones (née Jones)  
**Parent:** Margaret Jones (née Williams)  
**Parent:** William Henry Jones  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** poet, novelist and short story writer  
**Area of activity:** Literature and Writing; Poetry  
**Author:** Tony Brown

Glyn Jones was born at 16 Clare Street, Merthyr Tydfil, on 28 February 1905, the younger son of William Henry Jones (1873-1957), clerical worker at the GPO, and his wife Margaret (née Williams, 1897-1966), teacher. An elder brother, David Tydfilyn (1901-1968) became an H.M.I. A paternal grandfather David William Jones (1832-1900) had been a Welsh-language poet, known by his bardic name, Lluch-Haiarn. Both parents were Welsh-speaking, the family attended Soar (Welsh Independent) chapel and both sons were bilingual as children, though gradually turned to English, the language of their education, the streets of Merthyr and ultimately the home. As a boy, however, Jones spent summers with Welsh-speaking relatives on a farm, Y Lan, in Llanybri, Carmarthenshire, an area for which he held a life-long attachment and which appears repeatedly in counterpoint to urban Merthyr in his fiction.

Jones received his secondary education (1916-23) at Cyfarthfa Grammar School, located in Cyfarthfa Castle, Merthyr, the former home of the [Crawshays](#), the local iron masters. Though he had shown an aptitude for drawing and painting, Jones resisted his mother's proposal that he go to art school and instead followed his elder brother to St Paul's College, Cheltenham, to train as a teacher. However, although he completed his course, he found Cheltenham to be 'entirely cold and alien'. During his two years of teacher training, his parents moved to Cardiff, where his father had a new job at the GPO and, on qualifying as a teacher in 1925, Jones took up a post as teacher at Wood Street School, Cardiff, in what was then known as Temperance Town. Knowing virtually nobody in the city, he lived with his parents in the Roath area and then in Cathays, and accompanied them to the Welsh Congregationalist Chapel in Minny Street, Cathays; while he later wrote that 'the only reason I came to chapel at that time was to please Mam', in the chapel he gradually befriended a number of young people, many of whom were studying at the University nearby.

This link with a Welsh-speaking community was in many ways crucial to Jones's future life; it not only reunited him with the religious faith of his youth - he was to remain a member at Minny Street for the rest of his life - but contact with friends who were studying Welsh brought to his awareness for the first time the riches of Welsh-language literature; he later wrote of being 'swept off my feet by the unfamiliar music' of the cywyddwyr, their brilliant imagery and 'their sharp response to the visual beauty of the world'. By the 1932 he was a member of an evening class taught by [Saunders Lewis](#) and, as he began to

find his own voice as a poet, he was already translating from Welsh poetry. However, Jones never fell under the spell of [Saunders Lewis](#) politically ('I doubt if he went on many of the Hunger Marches') and although several of Jones's friends became enthusiastic members of Plaid Cymru, he remained sceptical and throughout his life identified with Labour: 'I just couldn't understand how on earth self-government for Wales [...] was going to improve [...] the poverty that I came face to face with every day at School'. For though Temperance Town was near the city centre (adjacent to what is now Cardiff Central railway station), his pupils lived in some of the worst slums in Cardiff. Moreover, not only did they come to school ill-fed and ill-clothed, often bare-foot even in winter, but the area was also one of lawlessness and vice; many of the children, Jones knew, experienced abuse, physical and sexual. What he saw in the shabby streets around him not only shocked him but made him aware of the pain which human beings could inflict on one another and of what human individuals could suffer and endure. It was an awareness which he never forgot and marked much of his imaginative work thereafter.

Jones's literary education at Cyfarthfa Castle had, of course, been entirely in English literature and in his teens Jones had become besotted with the romantic poetry he found in Palgrave's *Golden Treasury*. Wordsworth, Keats and the Victorian medievalism of Morris, Rossetti and Tennyson. The influence of these poets, along with D. H. Lawrence and Manley Hopkins, is evident in the poetry he began to write at the end of the 1920s and early 1930s, as is his reading of the Mabinogion. The romantic beauty, often suffused with a note of lonely yearning, which characterizes these poems, shows nothing of the bleak reality around him, being rather an imaginative escape into a world of lyric beauty. Jones's early poetry was published in Seumas O'Sullivan's *Dublin Magazine* and in Harriet Monroe's *Poetry* (Chicago) before being collected in *Poems* (Fortune P, 1939). By this time Jones had met [Dylan Thomas](#) (April 1934). Jones's chapel background - 'I represented everything he was trying to get away from' - meant that he never understood [Dylan](#)'s bohemianism (and satirized it in his short story 'The Tower of Loss'). But Jones found in [Thomas](#)'s work an echo of his own fascination with the very novelty of English words - both poets kept notebooks in which they jotted striking words and phrases- and confirmation of the startling effects which could be achieved when incongruous words were allowed to flash together in unexpected and unconventional ways. 'I fancy words' Jones writes in one of his best known poems 'Merthyr'.

Jones's circle of literary connections widened still further when he became associated with Keidrych Rhys's founding of *Wales* (1937). Jones advised Rhys as to the necessity for the new journal to be experimental and assisted with the selection of material in the early issues.

In 1935 Jones married Doreen (née Jones, 1910-1999) and they ultimately set up home at 158 Manor Way, Whitchurch, where they were to live for the rest of their lives. They had no children. At the same time there were episodes of unease: teaching had become unrewarding and he felt alienated from his 'comfortable middle-class world'; his journal shows his impulse to 'give up all these things-my house my bourgeois life - and go down to Bute Street to live simply, without bothering with neighbours [and] possessions'. A number of the early stories in *The Blue Bed* (published in 1937 to outstanding reviews) also show an impulse towards the 'unrespectable', to scruffy working-class homes, as more alive, more authentic, than his own bourgeois life and upbringing. There is relatedly, both in stories and the poetry of the 1940s an attraction towards the comradely life of workmen and miners, often described romantically, erotic tones being displaced into registers of deep compassion. Some of these same feelings are present in 'I was born in the Ystrad Valley', a story telling of a fictional Marxist armed uprising in south Wales. *The Water Music* (1944) includes stories of boyhood in a scruffy urban world akin to Merthyr, but the underlying emphasis (as in the title story) is again on community, with those figures who, though pride or aspiration, set themselves apart being seen negatively.

Jones's stories, some of which are amongst the finest produced in his generation, manifest, like his poetry, a complex tension between a celebration of natural beauty and a continuing awareness of human suffering ('blood in the bottom of everyman's cup', 'Machludiad'). Jones's deep humanitarian compassion drew him into active pacifism in the years leading up to the second World War; his registering as a conscientious objector in November 1940 resulted in his dismissal from his post at Allensbank School, Cardiff, and he had difficulty in obtaining a post anywhere in Britain. His eventual appointment to a post in Bridgend caused controversy in the press and he was shunned by many of his colleagues.

Glyn Jones's first novel, *The Valley, the City, the Village* (1956) is essentially a bildungsroman, following the growth and education of an artistic young valleys boy, Trystan. Experimental in its rhetorical techniques, especially in its third section, it is essentially a novel of ideas, especially about the relation of art (and by implication writing) to the wider world. Trystan and his university friend, Gwydion, can be seen as two aspects of their creator. Gwydion, who has a fascination with words, a subtheme of the novel, has a profoundly bleak view of human existence, having travelled in some of the world's grimmer regions and seen squalor and suffering; for him the world is 'a mixture of madhouse and torture chamber'. Trystan rejects Gwydion's view of art as divorced from life; for Trystan art must embrace the incongruities of the world's beauty and its ugliness and he dedicates his painting 'always to the prisoner [...] to the incurable [...] to the repressed'. Jones's compassionate vision is also present in the way in which the physical imperfections of some of his characters are described, both in his novels and stories, albeit the bizarre similes he uses create an effect that verges on the surreal; indeed Jones in 1937 had written a Welsh-language essay on Surrealism for [Alun Llywelyn-Williams](#)'s *Tir Newydd*.

Jones's second novel, *The Learning Lark* (1960) is his least successful, but was noticed in the press in Wales and in London in the light of its attack on the corrupt methods by which educational appointments were made in South Wales. Jones, who had moved to a post as teacher of English at Glantaf County School, Whitchurch in 1952, had experienced this at first hand. His 'radio ode', *The Dream of Jake Hopkins*, broadcast in 1953, drew on his disillusioning classroom experience and was the title poem in Jones's second collection of poetry (1954).

His finest novel, one which has become a classic of Welsh writing in English, is *The Island of Apples* (1965). It uses the technique of the naïve point of view of a child, Dewi Davies, growing up in a scruffy south Wales town like Merthyr, to tell of Dewi's attraction to the romantic but mysterious older boy, Karl. The subjectivity of the point of view makes the true nature of Karl uncertain and the book has been seen as an example of Welsh magic realism. Ultimately the story is about the dangers of escape into romanticism from the real world of suffering and mortality; Karl is ultimately a kind of a Welsh Peter Pan.

In 1968 Jones published *The Dragon has Two Tongues*, the first full-length study of Welsh writing in English and still a classic work, drawing on the author's first hand knowledge of a range of writers, including [Dylan Thomas](#). Later publications included a further collection of short stories, *Welsh Heirs* (1977) and two books of translations of hen benillion, *When the Rose-bush Brings Forth Apples* (1980) and *Honey on the Wormwood* (1984).

Glyn Jones was awarded the degree of D.Litt by the University of Wales in 1974, was awarded the White Robe of the Gorsedd in 1988, and in the year before his death he was elected President of the English-language section of Yr Academi Gymreig. Despite the amputation of his right arm in 1992, Glyn Jones was in his final years a man of remarkable serenity and generosity of spirit, though his incomplete long poem 'Seven Keys to Shaderdom', showing a failed artist in his attic, is still shadowed with a deep sense of human suffering.

Glyn Jones died at home on 10 April 1995. His funeral was held on 19 April at Minny Street Chapel and Thornhill Crematorium, Cardiff, and his ashes were interred in the churchyard at Llansteffan.

## Author

Tony Brown

## Sources

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Personal knowledge

## Further reading

Wikipedia Article: [Glyn Jones](#)

## Additional Links

NLW Archives: [Glyn Jones Papers](#)

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