

## GWYNN, EIRWEN MEIRIONA (1916 - 2007), scientist, educator and author

**Name:** Eirwen Meiriona Gwynn

**Date of birth:** 1916

**Date of death:** 2007

**Spouse:** Harri Gwynn Jones

**Child:** Iolo ap Gwynn

**Parent:** Annie Williams (née Williams)

**Parent:** William (St.) John Williams

**Gender:** Female

**Occupation:** scientist, educator and author

**Area of activity:** Science and Mathematics; Education; Literature and Writing

**Author:** Deri Tomos

Eirwen Meiriona St. John Williams was born at 99 Shiel Road, Newsham Park, Liverpool, on 1 December 1916. (A family story tells that 12 December was recorded by her father, in order to avoid a fine for late registration of the birth.) Eirwen was the eldest of the two children of William (St.) John Williams (1886-1957) and his wife Annie (née Williams, 1885-1969). Her brother, Gwilym Gareth (Gari) (1924-1990), sadly suffered from severe epilepsy for most of his life. William Williams (originally from Blaenau Ffestiniog) was a successful dentist who had been trained by his two brothers, Jack and David, and during a period of in-service training in Amiens, France. (The 'St.' was an affectation from this period.) Welsh was the language of their comfortable Liverpool home and Eirwen was brought up to value it.

She attended Birchfield Road Council School (1923-1927) where she enjoyed performing on stage but also laid down a strong academic foundation that was to serve her well in later life. In 1926 Jack, Eirwen's uncle and her father's partner, took up the post of Regional Dental Officer for Wales in Cardiff, and William and the family decided also to return to Wales. Llangefni was chosen as the site for the practice, but the first winter of 1927 was spent near Annie's home at Bwlchtocyn, Llŷn. ('Gorwel' was to remain a summer home for the family for many years, and the relationship between the natives and the English summer visitors was to have a great influence on Eirwen's politics.) After a period at the Pwllheli County School, when the family migrated to the house and new practice at Llys Derwydd, Glanhwfa Road, Llangefni in 1928, she moved to the Llangefni County School. She had been successful in a wide range of subjects at school - the basis of her wide intellectual interests for the rest of her life, but it was to physics, mathematics and chemistry that she was primarily drawn, due to the influence of inspirational teachers and the support of her father. Experiences at school and the influence of her father were also responsible for her lifelong commitment to Plaid Cymru. The Anglesea Plaid Cymru committee met in Llys Derwydd during the late 1920s and early 1930s and her father had stood bail for [Lewis Valentine](#) following the burning at the Penyberth bombing school in 1936. Eirwen joined this new party in 1930.

In 1934, Eirwen won a scholarship to study physics at the University College of North Wales, Bangor. She claims in her autobiography that the prejudice of the external examiner against women in physics and engineering was the reason for

her failure to gain a first class degree in 1937. The same prejudice was to dog her career for many years and was the basis of her lifelong uncompromising feminist conviction. After graduating, Eirwen stayed on in Bangor to do research on the behaviour of X-rays, and in 1942 she became the first woman to receive a PhD in physics at the College. The foundations of her character - a multi-talented, determined, energetic, principled woman - were in place. She also possessed considerable beauty, and in Bangor found her life partner, [Harri Gwynn Jones](#) (1913-1985). In his obituary of Eirwen, Meic Stephens describes Harri as one of the most talented and debonair Bohemians of his generation. It was to be an interesting and fruitful relationship in many respects. They were married on New Year's Day 1942, bringing Eirwen's short period as head of the physics department of Rhyl Grammar School (1941-1942) to an end. She spent the rest of the Second World War in Warwick and London where she worked as an assistant accountant in the Government Exchequer and Audit Department. Their son Iolo was born in London in 1944. This was not only reason for Harri to give up his senior position at the Ministry of Supply in 1950, but also for a change in the family name. According to his autobiography, the only way to put the name Iolo ap Gwynn on the child was for their parents to remove 'Jones' officially from their names also. Between 1943 and 1950, the family settled initially in an apartment at Clapham Northside and then at 'Clyd', Clapham Park Road, London. During this period serious side effects of Eirwen's research on X-rays became apparent. An ovarian growth had to be removed, and this experience underpinned her suspicion of the use of nuclear technology in general and her opposition to nuclear power in particular, for the rest of her life. Eirwen and Harri failed to persuade the authorities to establish a Welsh-medium school in London, despite considerable efforts. So, to be true to their aspirations for Iolo and their own future, they decided to move back to Wales in 1950.

This was not a simple matter of a change of job, but total commitment to an alternative, self-sufficient life style, decades before the rest of the world took to the idea. With no farming experience (Eirwen and Harri were both 'city children'), they purchased a farm, Tyddyn Cwcallt in Rhoslan, Eifionydd, where the family were to live there until 1962. Some of the atmosphere of the early years is captured in Harri's book, *Y Fuwch a'i Chynffon* ('The Cow and her Tail', 1954). But the Alternative Life was not easy after being used to a civil servant's salary. As Harri turned to broadcasting, lecturing and writing, Eirwen gave lectures to the Workers' Education Association (WEA). This opened a new path in her life, and for the next fifty years Eirwen Gwynn was one of the most important interpreters of science and technology - and their implications - to the Welsh speaking community. She succeeded in a unique way in combining her broad scientific and artistic interests with her logical rigor and her patriotic social convictions. She wrote some 1,500 articles on science and social development in Welsh in magazines (including *Y Gwyddonydd*, *Barn*, *Pais*, *Y Wawr*, *Cynefin*, *Dan Haul*, *Trysorfa'r Plant* and *Y Dysgedydd*) as well as in English (*The Listener*, *The Observer* and *The New Internationalist*, for example). Alongside these, for thirteen years, she produced a weekly scientific column for *Y Cymro*, and for ten years a weekly column on nutrition for *Y Faner*.

With the exception of a relatively short time as a teaching organizer for the WEA (Anglesey, Llŷn, Eifionydd and Arfon) between 1970 and 1979, Eirwen's work was entirely freelance during this period. Remuneration was small, but she took advantage of being independent of any organization, or of one narrow academic expertise, in order to reach a wide audience. She became a national celebrity, extending her logical treatment to include holistic and 'political' issues such as nutrition and alternative medicine, the status of women in society and the threat of nuclear power. She became a role model for many women throughout the country. In gaining confidence to write, she produced a series of books. She wrote two innovative non-fiction books in Welsh, *I'r Lleud a thu hwnt* ('To the Moon and beyond', 1964) on space exploration, and *Bwyta i Fyw* ('Eating to Live', 1987), a source of advice on healthy eating. She was responsible for editing the book *Priodi. Cyfrol o gyngor a chyfarwyddyd* ('Marriage. A volume of advice and guidance', 1966) which included timely tips for young women during a period of considerable social change. She won the National Eisteddfod prize for the short story in 1977, and was very close to winning the Prose Medal on more than one occasion. She published a number of novels and essays as the result of these competitions: *Dau lygad du* ('Two black eyes', 1979), *Caethiwed* ('Slavery', 1980), *Cwsg ni ddaw* ('Sleep will not come', 1982) and *Hon* ('This Girl', 1985), as well as *Torri'n Rhydd* ('Breaking Free', 1990) and *Dim ond un* ('Only one', 1997) and an autobiography, *Ni'n Dau. Hanes Dau Gariad*. ('The two of us. The story of two lovers', 1999). In 1970 she won a BBC award in a drama writing competition (on a scientific topic) and in 1977 a painting of her work was exhibited at the National Eisteddfod Art and Crafts exhibition. Her main artistic interest was in painting portraits and landscapes.

By this time the family had left Rhos-lan and moved first to Isgaer, Upper Garth Road, Bangor (1962-1970) and then to Tyddyn Rhuddallt, Llanrug (1970-1987) before moving after Harri's death in 1985 to Tal-y-bont, Ceredigion (1987-2007) to be closer to Iolo and the family.

Iolo inherited many of his mother's values. A nationalist, he was a senior lecturer in Biology at Aberystwyth University. He has also been a pioneer in Welsh-medium science (co-founder of *Y Gymdeithas Wyddonol Genedlaethol* (The National Scientific Society), former editor of *Y Gwyddonydd* and *Delta* and, as his mother had been before him, winner of the National Eisteddfod Science and Technology Medal in 2008.

Eirwen was energetic and active in a practical way in *Plaid Cymru* and Welsh language issues for over 75 years. In 1999 she appeared for the last time, with her friend and fellow-campaigner [Dr Meredydd Evans](#), before the Aberystwyth Magistrates

for refusing to pay her television license in protest against the low standard of broadcasting in the Welsh language. She also promoted Welsh culture as a member of the Court of the National Library, the Central Advisory Council for Education (Wales), the University of Wales Court and the Guild of Graduates Standing Committee.

As recognition of her contributions to the nation, she was honoured as a Derwydd member of the Gorsedd of the Bards (1985), awarded a Bangor University Fellowship (2002) and the National Eisteddfod Science and Technology Medal (2006). She was President of Y Gymdeithas Wyddonol Genedlaethol until her death.

She died of a heart attack on 26 January 2007 and was buried, as she had wished, alongside Harri near Llanrug.

## Author

Deri Tomos

## Sources

Eirwen Gwynn, *Ni'n Dau. Hanes Dau Gariad (Llandysul 1999)*

Meic Stephens, '[Eirwen Gwynn. Welsh Nationalist and Writer](#)', *The Independent*, 30 January 2007

Personal information from lolo ap Gwynn

## Further reading

BBC Cymru Newyddion: [Medal wyddoniaeth i Eirwen](#)

100WelshWomen: [Eirwen Gwynn \(Formerly St John Williams\)](#)

## Additional Links

NLW Archives: [Papurau Harri Gwynn](#)

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